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Research Monograph #52

How can drama be used to foster students' comprehension and appreciation of poetry?

Performing Poetry: Using Drama to Increase the Comprehension of Poetry

By Dr. Kristen Ferguson

Research Tells Us

- Using drama to explore poetry can result in higher comprehension.
- To perform a poem, students must use critical thinking and comprehension skills such as activating prior knowledge, questioning, visualizing, inferencing, summarizing and synthesizing.
- Drama is a particularly valuable strategy when teaching language to English language learners.

Poetry can be both challenging and intimidating to teach and learn.[1] For some students, poems are cryptic puzzles with secret messages to uncover. We want our students not only to enjoy the creative word play of poetry but also to comprehend the action, meaning or emotions of poems. But how can teachers teach poetry comprehension without falling into the trap of mechanically dissecting poems for form and "real" meaning?[1,2] Drama is one strategy, grounded in research, that fosters student comprehension of poetry and allows students to apply comprehension strategies.

There is a natural bridge between drama and language, as drama uses all forms of communication skills, including speaking, listening and non-verbal communication.[3] Drama is also motivating for many students, is multi-sensory and can bring language activities to life.[3,4,5] Re-enacting texts with drama moves beyond literal comprehension and gives students the opportunity to represent complex themes and symbolism through performance.[3,6] Drama may also be a particularly valuable strategy when teaching language to English language learners (ELLs), because it allows ELLs to practise both verbal and non-verbal language skills.[7]

Using Drama to Increase Comprehension of Poetry

Research shows that, compared with other activities, dramatic activities can be more effective for exploring poetry and can result in higher comprehension.[8] Dramatizing poetry helps students think deeply about poetic themes and content and helps to unlock the meaning of poems in a number of ways.[9] For instance, in hearing poems read aloud, students are better able to understand the meaning of poems.[10] Also, to perform a poem, a student must use critical thinking and comprehension skills such as activating prior knowledge, questioning, visualizing, inferencing, summarizing and synthesizing to explore both the literal and the unsaid within a poem.[3,4]

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Strategies for Performing Poetry

Poetry is a unique text form because of "its capacity to symbolize and communicate differentiated forms of thought and feeling"[2] (p. 89). Thus, enacting poetry presents challenges that may not be encountered when dramatizing stories or other texts. Dramatizing poems, which tend to be shorter and denser than stories, may require more unpacking of vocabulary and symbolism, and more thinking outside of the box. Strategies teachers can use to dramatize a text include readers' theatre, choral reading, finger plays, storytelling, pantomime and movement activities.[3]

Technology can also be used. Students can manipulate and extend texts by adding images, videos, sound and hyperlinks to create new dramatic interpretations of poems.[3,10,11]

Do poetry with a punch ...

O'Connor suggests that teachers guide students to use the poetry performance tools of punching, pausing and painting words.

Create tableaux (with a twist) ...

Tableaux are particularly useful for teaching poetry, because students use comprehension skills to capture a feeling or moment in a poem that may not be easily verbalized. To keep tableaux fresh and exciting, add a twist!

Implications for Classroom Practice

Some of my personal favourite dramatic activities for poetry are choral reading and readers' theatre, soundscapes and tableaux (with a twist). These strategies can be completed within a short period of time, require little extra preparation by the teacher, are well suited to the poetry genre, and can be modified to suit the needs of any grade level or class.

Choral Reading and Readers' Theatre

While commonly used in the primary grades, choral reading and readers' theatre are worth revisiting, as they are sound pedagogical strategies for all grade levels.

Choral reading

- Have students read a text out loud together, in groups or as a whole class.
- Divide a poem into sections; assign individual lines or stanzas to different groups of students.
- Rereading is key: In subsequent readings, vary assigned lines and groups to give students the opportunity to perform different parts of the poem.

Readers' theatre

- Consider using poems with dialogue, as they can easily be adapted into a script.
- Create (or invite students to create) a script that summarizes the poem.
- Guide students to focus on expressive reading using expression, intonation and fluency when rehearsing and performing.

O'Connor suggests that teachers guide students to use the poetry performance tools of punching, pausing and painting words.[12] For example, these tools could be used in a junior or intermediate class dramatization of Mary Howitt's "The Spider and the Fly."[13] This poem is suitable for either choral reading or readers' theatre as it can easily be divided into speaking parts. Students can make decisions about how they will use their expressive voices to tell the story of the conniving spider and the gullible fly and mark up their scripts to indicate how they will punch, pause and paint words when reading their part.

Have students mark up poems or scripts to indicate where they will:

- punch words, by adding emphasis
- pause to adjust the pace
- paint words, by using expression and tone.

Performing a poem using choral reading or readers' theatre can help increase comprehension because oral elements such as volume, emphasis and tone can impact and shape the listener's understanding of a poem.[4,11] When students perform poetry aloud, they actively use comprehension skills. For instance,

students make inferences about the narrator of the poem, adjust their tone accordingly and make connections to prior knowledge when deciding which words to emphasize in their reading. By incorporating the poetry performance tools of punching, pausing and painting words into choral reading and readers' theatre, teachers can help students move beyond performing poetry for decoding and fluency to performing to convey meaning.

Soundscapes

A soundscape is an audio visualization that allows students to create background noises, like a soundtrack, to accompany a text.[14]

- Have students create background sounds, using instruments, noisemakers, found sounds and sounds made with the body (e.g., clapping and stomping).
- Invite students to perform the poem twice. During the first reading, have the students perform the soundscape while one group member reads the poem as a narrator. For the second performance, have the group retell the poem only using sounds, while the narrator is silent.

Soundscapes give students the opportunity to move beyond the literal printed word of the poem and fill in the unsaid of the poem using their sense of sound. In order to create a soundscape, students must activate their prior knowledge and use comprehension strategies such as questioning, interpreting, visualizing and synthesizing. A variety of poems lend themselves to this activity.

- Primary or junior students can use simple sound effects to accompany George Cooper's "October's Party."[15] Students can explore the sounds of fluttering, falling autumn leaves, as "Miss Weather led the dancing / Professor Wind the band." In doing so, students will activate their prior knowledge about autumn to explore the sounds of autumn, ask questions (what might Professor Wind's band sound like?) and visualize and interpret how leaves sound as they rustle on the trees and fall to the ground.
- Intermediate students can create a soundscape for "The Highwayman" by Alfred Noyes.[16] Using instruments and sound effects, students can recreate the sounds of the gusting wind, galloping horses and marching soldiers.

Tableaux (with a twist)

In tableaux, students (usually in small groups) freeze and remain still to recreate a scene. Tableaux are particularly useful for teaching poetry, because students use comprehension skills to capture a feeling or moment in a poem that may not be easily verbalized. For instance, there are a number of tableau activities junior students could use to dramatize Leroy F. Jackson's "Away to the River":[17]

> *Away to the river, away to the wood,*
> *While the grasses are green and the berries are good!*
> *Where the locusts are scraping their fiddles and bows,*
> *And the bees keep a-coming wherever one goes.* (lines 1–4)

To keep tableaux fresh and exciting, add a "twist" when asking students to enact a poem using tableaux.

- Try a "What am I thinking?" activity where students, while frozen, make a statement or ask a question about what their animal, character, or object might be thinking while it is playing by the river.
- Have students create a chronological series of tableaux to sequence the beginning, middle and end of the poem.
- Ask students to act out or pantomime a line or two of the poem and then freeze to create tableau for that moment. For instance, students could pantomime being the bees at the riverside and freeze as they surround the narrator of the poem.

Explore the synergy …

Through the synergy between poetry and drama, students explore the words, meaning and emotions of poems. Performing poetry allows students to engage with a poetic text and apply comprehension strategies. As a result, dramatizing poetry sets the stage for students to improve comprehension and interpret and respond to poems in a holistic, active and engaging manner.

- Extend the poem using prediction and inferencing to create a prequel or sequel tableau. For example, students could explore the possible reasons for the narrator's trip to the river or what might happen as the narrator goes home.
- Have students activate their prior knowledge about playing outside, to infer who the narrator is, answer questions (such as "How can we recreate the flowers in the poem?), and create a visualization of the poem using their bodies.
- Guide students to use summarizing skills to create a tableau for each line or synthesizing skills to create one overall tableau to represent the poem.

Points to Consider When Dramatizing Poetry

Choose poems that have enough action and plot for a dramatization. While less action may be required for older grades, it is important to select poems with enough symbolism, emotion or possible interpretations to allow for student creativity.

- Consider which dramatic activities will best suit the poetry selected for a lesson.
- Plan the time, space, and materials for the dramatization. The strategies presented here require little extra preparation; however, teachers may wish to extend the activities or create more formal dramatic presentations for audiences outside of the classroom. Enacting poetry can take one class or several, depending on the purpose selected by the teacher.
- Consider extending the activity by integrating technology. Using movie-making software, students can record and enhance their performances, adding images, videos, and voice-over narration to create a digital performance of a poem.
- Plan the teacher's role in the drama. Teachers may choose to be a part of the dramatization, coach students from the sidelines, or be an audience member.

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