

# Poets Alive!

*A unit featuring student and adult poets, readings and even a few costumes*

BY DIANE McCARTY

**I**'ve used poetry in every grade level I've taught, from kindergarten to sixth grade, but I didn't think it was "meaty" enough to stand as a unit by itself. Let me show you how wrong I was!

When I taught kindergarten, I was using poetry daily to teach lessons on listening, cleaning up, sharing and as a student-focusing device. It worked wonders! Then I moved to other grade levels and used poetry less and less.

During my first year as a fourth grade teacher, I stumbled upon poetry again. Early in the year, students were not responding. On my desk was a copy of Shel Silverstein's *A Light in the Attic* (HarperCollins, 1981). I picked up the book and just began reading. Within seconds, the students were mesmerized with "Monsters I've Met."

**A lost art?** The next day, they begged me to read more poetry. I willingly obliged – then and every day thereafter. This method allowed me to read three volumes of poetry that school year.

I began to think about creating a poetry unit. I knew my fourth graders loved the humorous poems I'd been reading, but how would students of the 90s relate to some of the older, more serious poetry? I feared those

poems had almost become a lost art, but I couldn't teach a poetry unit without the wisdom of the past speaking as well.

The first thing I did was call my mother, a former teacher. She had taught me the pleasures of poetry when I was a child. She said she would send me her "old" poetry book. In two days, I received my mother's 1957 edition of *Favorite Poems, Old and New* by Helen Tibbets. What a treasure!

**Four questions.** The thought occurred to me that maybe parents could help my students. That's how the "Poets Alive" unit started – with a newsletter and a questionnaire that posed four questions to parents: 1) "What is your all-time favorite poem?" 2) "What were some of the poems you memorized when you were young?" 3) "What forms of poetry do you remember using or writing during your school career?" and 4) "Are there any thoughts you'd like to share about poetry?"

Parents responded with their memories of poetry in school. All responses were read aloud. It was a great way to start each lesson with a couple of thoughts and occasional poems from the parents.

I decided since poetry could be a "personal" revelation, I'd start by sharing my experiences with poetry. I pulled out my old torn scrapbook and let the children see that I had won the Iowa poetry awards for our state when I was in first and second grades. Unfortunately, I didn't have the actual poems to share, but the students were intrigued anyway. I went on to share poetry I had written as an adult.

I read a poem I thought was humorous

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*What better model than our principal (top) who had written a poem about his father? One of our volunteer poets (bottom) dressed in character to read for us.*

when I was a child, "Eletelephony" by Laura E. Richards. It can now be found in *Sing a Song of Popcorn* (Scholastic, 1988). Let me add "Little Orphan Annie" by James Whitcomb Riley. It has an interesting refrain that students love to echo.

Then I turned to a more serious poem that had left a lasting impression on me as a child, "Little Boy Blue" by Eugene Field. A copy of it was given to groups of students to interpret what they believed the poet was saying.

By this time, the classroom was overflowing with poetry books and children were bringing home poetry books every night. The rest of the first week was spent reading poetry with partners or alone, copying titles of authors or poems they enjoyed into their poetry journal and reciting poetry. Students constantly wanted to share their "find of the day."

**Writing element.** Weeks two and three brought a writing element to the unit as I introduced certain types of poetry. Using Joyce Kilmer's poem, "Trees," I introduced couplets. Students looked for couplets in books they were reading. We analyzed the structure of couplets and defined the elements that made up a couplet. Then we wrote some. We went on to do the same with quatrains, shape poems, limericks, cinquains, haikus, chants and bio-poems.

I was so excited about what I was seeing with this poetry unit, I started telling people about the students' enthusiasm for it. Then the idea hit! Why not include more people? It would expose my students to poetry through other people's points of view.

I first invited family members to participate. They responded. Then my principal shared with the class a special poem he wrote about his dad, who had recently died. This was a great time to teach students about the sensitivity of some poetry and about appropriate responses to such intimate thoughts.

We found other adults to share their poems with us. Some of our speakers really got into the exercise and dressed up as the poem's characters. That year we had over 20

speakers share their favorite poems.

Poetry was being integrated simultaneously into the other subjects as well. "Arithmetic" by Carl Sandburg spun off a unit on affective responses toward math. Weather poems worked beautifully with our science unit titled "Weather in Action."

Poetry spilled over into a fourth week. The students wanted to end the unit by "publishing" a book of their best poems. This meant we had to rework pieces through rewriting and editing, which wasn't too difficult since the poetic forms were basically short. Then we needed to publish each individual piece in a fitting manner.

I added one last feature to our activities. The students were to choose two of their favorite pieces to recite – one humorous, one serious. One had to be memorized, but the other had to be read. These would be recorded and eventually put in a listening center. The students had no trouble finding a poem they wanted to record.

Our fourth graders have now become known as the poetry experts. They taught a poetry lesson to first graders; they've given a poetry book as a retirement gift to our librarian assistant; and they even submitted some poems to contests and poetry anthologies. Not bad for a unit that began with a chance reading of a Shel Silverstein poem. ↓

#### Diane McCarty writes...

"The beauty of allowing children to express themselves by reading and writing poetry is expressed aptly in the following poem by James Wainwright":

#### A Child's Poem

*Words dance on paper,  
exuberance well-served.*

*Perfect light reflected,  
magic is preserved.*

*Heart untainted painting,  
freedom dreams come true.*

*Beauty once forgotten,  
now unfolds to you.*

#### POETRY

EDUCATION WORLD – EVERYTHING POETRY

[http://www.education-world.com/a\\_lesson/lesson016.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson016.shtml)

Poetry unit with lessons and guide with related links for getting student work published. Learn how to write poetry from quatrains to sonnets. There is even a how-to for evaluation and tips for publishing student poetry.

POETRY UNIT SUMMARY

<http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~dstruitt/poetry1.html>

Rice School in Texas: Unit on poetry with lessons, excellent poetry links, activity pages for completing the lesson in your own classroom. Read the poems created by this class.

BOOK STACKS 1997

<http://www.poetry.books.com/>

Resources for everything poetry. Links to themes of earth, sky, water, fire...with literary links and a link to a Create-a-Poem online program for Poetry Month in April.

#### INTERNET CONNECTIONS