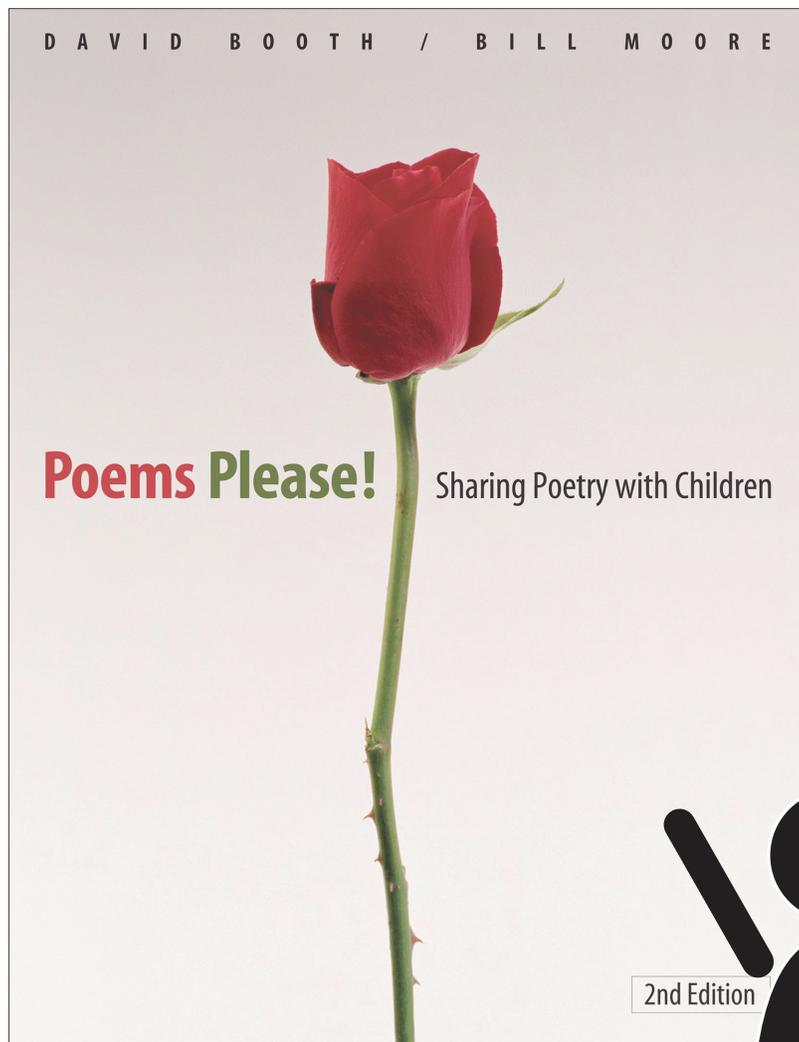


Giving Voice to Poetry

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Giving Voice to Poetry

The goal of teaching poetry is the exploration of words, ideas, roles, physical and verbal interactions, feelings, and attitudes. Just as in art class, the goal must not be the showing of the work. There may be reasons for sharing, but exploration and learning come first.

Sharing is the interaction that occurs when individuals or groups communicate with others. Through the free exchange of ideas, children discover and/or clarify what their assumptions are, see different points of view, become aware of their own, and begin to understand poems they are listening to, reading aloud, or dramatizing.

There may be times when children wish to take a particular activity out of the classroom environment to share it with a wider audience. When children are placed in performance situations, the point of view of the audience becomes the major consideration rather than the development of the children's own feelings and relationships. This type of sharing should occur only when the children are prepared and ready, and when the exploration and learning have been wholly satisfactory.

When planning to share the work of the children with others, the teacher must consider the following:

- i. the purpose for the sharing, and what impact the sharing will have on the poetry exploration;
- ii. the social health of the group, and whether the students wish to share the work (e.g., should beginners be encouraged to show work or should they concentrate on themselves and their own group?);
- iii. whether or not to explore informal ways of working with an audience (e.g., informal demonstration for discussion or observational purposes, on-the-spot spontaneous sharing during the lesson, or sharing work with others who are carrying on a similar exploration);
- iv. the advantages and disadvantages of setting up situations where volunteers can do the sharing, such as a group assignment.

Presenting poetry involves sharing work with others who have not been engaged in the process of exploring and learning. It might involve showing the work to another class in the same school or to students working on similar activities but at different times and places. It should be remembered that different classes work differently and need different evaluation criteria; the teachers of both the spectators and the participants must take this into account in any type of presentation.

Some polishing and refinement may be necessary, because the emotional risks to the children are greater in more formal situations.

Performing is a formal event, a way of sharing work with an audience that is outside the creative process and that sees and evaluates only the finished product. Therefore, the material must be polished and practised for the sake of the audience. Children who are growing and learning at various stages of development should not be put in the high-risk position of trying to please an audience.

Poetry is meant to be enjoyed. It might have some other uses, but the main thrust is pleasure, as in music and the other arts. One way we can enhance this pleasure is by sharing poems with others.

This can be done in several ways. The following is one example:

1. The teacher finds a poem he or she particularly likes and simply reads it to the children.
2. The child finds a poem by A.A. Milne in a magazine or a book, likes it, and reads it, either to the teacher, alone, or to the whole class.
3. Working in pairs, children read their poems to each other.
4. After we have read and studied several poems by A.A. Milne, we have an in-class concert. Some student acts as chair person, the program is arranged, and everyone takes part. Some read whole pieces, while others simply read lines they have liked, and tell why they made that particular choice.

Another part of this kind of performance could be a short reading by one or more students about A.A. Milne. Once we have 30 or more of his poems we become interested in his biography — not before. We have a television-style interview of the poet, with one child playing Milne, and another the interviewing announcer. Poems inspired by Milne and written by the class are included in the program.

5. This kind of program could easily be exported to another classroom within the school.
6. A Grade 4 class could build a similar type of program for the Grade 1 children to see and hear. This could include poems that particular Grade 1 class likes.

All Gone Away

They are all gone away.
The house is shut and still,
There is nothing more to say.

Through broken walls and grey
The winds blow bleak and shrill;
They are all gone away.

Nor is there one today
To speak them good or ill;
There is nothing more to say.

Why is it then we stray
Around that sunken sill?
They are all gone away.

And our poor fancy play
For them is wasted skill;
There is nothing more to say.

There is rain and decay
In the House on the Hill;
They are all gone away;
There is nothing more to say.

Edwin Arlington Robinson

A Model for Presentation

The program is well-rehearsed beforehand and involves the whole class. If there happens to be a piano player; an accordionist, a guitar player in the class, by all means involve them. Children are used to background music in television, and background music can often help the poem have a greater impact upon the listener.

The whole class can be on stage, at various levels. Use platforms and boxes to create interesting patterns — some seated on the floor, others on the platforms, or on chairs at different levels. The backdrop could be a mural, done by the children and indicative of the theme of the performance. Music plays (if you have no musicians, use tapes). Chairperson (or two or three, as you wish) introduces the program and tells the audience how much this class has enjoyed the poems they are about to present, etc. Begin with a choral-speaking number. Keep it light and amusing. (Later, we can do some mysterious and serious material.) Then have two or three single readers. They introduce their poems, tell why they chose them, talk a little about them, then read. Sometimes this can be accompanied by music.

For variety, the children can sing a couple of songs. Good songs, after all, are poetry. Do more choral speaking with more solos. You could include some “interviews” with poets. Include poetry written by the children themselves. Many of the “readings” will have been memorized.

The poems could be projected on an overhead. This gives the listeners a visual aid as well. This might be very important when the children are reading poems they have written.

Lighting can make a difference. if you have colored lights, they can be used to suggest moods — blues for sadness, reds and oranges for joy, etc. A spotlight on a speaker is good. A film-strip projector can be used as a spotlight. It can also be used to create mood backgrounds. Draw a colored design on a blank slide, then project it — out of focus — on the back wall. This can give all kinds of interesting effects.

The whole program should be smoothly organized, and should not be longer than 15 minutes. In this way, the interest is sustained, and everyone goes away wanting more.