

Poetry for Basics



Charlene Lowry

"The most important basic skill of all is the ability to create."

To the great concern of educators and parents alike, many school children in America today are borderline illiterates. Perhaps it is true, as many educational experts contend, that teaching children to read and write skillfully is becoming a neglected art.

Alarming deficiencies in literacy have prompted a re-evaluation of goals within the educational community and from it has sprung a nationwide "back to basics" movement. But rather than follow a dreary basic program, perhaps an important key to improved literacy is to blend basics with the humanities: as an example, to teach basics through poetry. Many authoritative studies articulate the importance of providing opportunities for creativity linked with communication for students.

Certainly there are no skills more necessary

and fundamental to the learning process than those that facilitate creative and effective communication. As a teacher, I realize that the mastering of writing skills includes the use of strong verbs, precise words, effective openers, and a wide range of syntax; elimination of wordiness; and the use of active instead of passive language. As a poet, I remain partial to the belief that the most important basic skill of all is the ability to create.

Pennsylvania's State Department of Education lists creative activities and feelings toward self and others as among the most important of its program goals. A statement of essential priorities by the Wisconsin State Department of Instruction refers to self-actualization and realization as well as creative and critical thinking. Wilmington's (Delaware) *Kindergarten Hand-*

book, *A Supplementary Bulletin* insists that experience with creative language prepares youngsters for later learning. The Bureau of Education for Handicapped Children lists the communication of ideas and self-understanding as two essential "life needs." With these goals in mind, an increasing number of schools use poetry workshops to stimulate creativity and increase literacy skills.

My own work, first in Oregon's Poets-in-the-Schools program and more recently with Portland Public Schools, Area II, has produced numerous instances in which barely literate students have improved dramatically because poetry composition provided them with the motivation to write. Since students quickly recognize that poems communicate their own feelings, they are

This photo is a poster designed by Janina Domanska for Poetry, a year-round reading program sponsored by The Children's Book Council, Inc., 67 Irving Place, New York, New York 10003.



anxious to write even though they may have experienced literacy as a problem before.

What happens to a disadvantaged student involved in a poetry workshop with college-bound students? Let me give a few examples that occurred recently at one urban, inner-city high school:

George—a senior, a serious black student, couldn't spell, had not done much writing. When he registered for my workshop, he also registered for a college prep course.

The first day, I asked the students to write a poem about what they'd like to write about. George couldn't write. He spent all period trying and finally handed me a page with two lines I couldn't read. He translated: "I don't know what to write. I just want to learn."

One assignment I gave George was to play like a child. He shyly laughed at me—I felt, at my ignorance. I persisted: "What did you do when you were little—make mud pies, swing on a swing in the park, roll down hills with your eyes closed?" "No, I didn't do any of those things," he said. "I fought in the street. I grew up in the ghetto."

During my nine-week stay, he wrote an "A" report for me and, with a little extra help in organizing from both myself and his regular teacher, finished a research paper.

George is writing poems now, and he's planning to "try" to go to college. With remedial help, maybe, just maybe, he'll make it.

The white horse looking down
the hill with its tail in the air.
Not moving at all—just looking
in the night. As he looks
into the night the wind begins to howl.—*George*

Susan—not "disadvantaged" (economically, anyway), but has dyslexia. I noticed Susan's problem the first day in class. She brought her poems to me, not terribly good, and apologized for not being able to spell. "That's no problem, Susan, I can't spell well either. Just write, and we'll correct later." I added the first and last letters to her words, and she left smiling.

Susan wanted to express herself. One day about three weeks into the workshop, she lit up. "I wrote a good one, I did it, I learned what you've been taking about!" I read her poem. Yes,



Cover of a folder designed by Robert Quackenbush for Poetry, a 1977 year-round reading program sponsored by The Children's Book Council, Inc., 67 Irving Place, New York, New York 10003.

simile, color, refrain, and it was creative! I looked again. Susan was talented, and she'd spelled all but one word correctly.

The seventh week of my residency, Susan's mother came reluctantly (I wondered why) to see me. "Susan talks about you all the time," she told me. "Thanks for making her relax about her spelling—(her brow furrowed) she has dyslexia." I showed her Susan's recent work—correctly spelled words and good poems too. She told me that Susan had wanted to quit school before she entered my workshop.

wings flying over
the sea
looking like doors
slamming
being high up
in the sky
landing in cold, cold
water
walking up on the beach
getting sand in your eyes—*Susan*

Kevin—(I use his pen name here.) His teacher told me he "wasn't making it. Average intelligence, can't write, can't spell, tries hard, but gets incompletes."

After his first poem appeared (with a pen

name used) on ditto and it turned out to be the one his classmates liked best (they didn't know who had written it), he became poet laureate.

Kevin turned in at least 30 out-of-class, extra-work poems during my nine weeks. He improved his spelling to the point of asking me about punctuation!

On the last day of my residency, Kevin announced his intention to publish his work in a book. His classroom teacher tells me he is reading a new poem each day to the class before they begin. He has completed two "incompletes."

Blackbird
As the sun blazes down my face
I day dream about loneliness
Looking over tops of trees and mountains,
I look upon a blackbird.
A bird of such beauty and grace.
Wind blows gently upon him.
The sun blazes down upon
his black feathers, shining in the sun.
He sits high in a tree
looking at the river
moving gently on its way.—*Kevin*

Poetry involves elements of discovery essential to the learning process. The poet designs a writing lesson in pursuit of surprise. Neither student nor poet knows what will be said until it is

scrawled on paper. As a result, students are often surprised at what they learn about themselves: "I live each day as if it were/ a tight rope/ but I am balanced/" or:

My life is like a
train, making only the
necessary stops to unload
and reload my questions
with answers.
Sometimes the wheels
that make my life move
in a straight line,
run off the track.—*Martisha, 15*

Poetry draws on our imagination, and our sense of rhythm: also, it becomes a challenging punctuation puzzle:

But God made me of the water of the sea,
green grasses, and gray pebbles of the ground,
and the red and yellow leaves of a tree.

Poets know the need to express feelings and ideas, but they also realize that students must not think and plan too much, or they may find themselves paralyzed before a blank piece of paper. An experienced poet understands that the mere act of moving pen across paper often triggers ideas.

The poet begins by eliminating fear: "Don't worry about spelling. I can't spell either. I correct when I revise"; or "Don't worry about 'correctness' in the first draft; you're not being graded, you can always revise."

I never let a student get too anxious over an idea. If he or she is having difficulty getting started, I make a suggestion or two until the light clicks on: "That one sounds good."

Students ask how long their poem needs to be. I answer: "As long or short as you wish. When you're satisfied that it is done, it usually is."

Students may ask how many poems they should write. I tell them to write as long as it's fun. When writing becomes work, they should stop, rest, and write later.

Once students have written something, positive reinforcement is essential. Marginal comments such as "good start," "great line," or "yes!" are helpful. Encouraging students to use their imaginations is not enough. They need tools, they need success.

John, a high school freshman, was illiterate but in love, so he took my workshop. The first

two days he labored over his paper and came up with three misspelled words sprawled across his paper that *meant* to say: "I know a woman." By the end of seven weeks (he had been absent two weeks due to the break-up of his romance), he had written four fine poems and was showing progress in his other classes.

The last poem John wrote was a sonnet; this was his first:

There's this
woman I want
to tell you
about whose lips
shine like the sun
her hair is dark
brown with
her cat-shaped eyes
and sometimes
she gives such
a frame. Her
teeth are as white
as a sink and
when men give
her compliments
she turns pink.—*John*

That poem came directly from John. It took him two weeks class time to get the words the way *he* wanted them, to get them spelled right, to say what *he* wanted to say. I did not help John. I did not change a word or a period. (I sometimes help students get ideas, but *never* change words or punctuation.) John's next poems came quicker.

Is it any wonder that poetry workshops conducted by published poets are in demand? That more and more administrators are recognizing poetry as an essential part of the "back to basics" curriculum?

Poetry depends on the use of strong verbs, precise words, effective openers, and a wide range of syntax; elimination of wordiness; and the use of active instead of passive language. Poetry depends on the ability of the writer to create. *FL*



Charlene Lowry is Artist-in-Residence, Portland Public Schools, Portland, Oregon.

Copyright © 1978 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.