**Poetry from Daily Life: As a teaching tool, poems let kids build confidence, creativity**

By Mary Jo Fresch

*My guest today is Mary Jo Fresch, PhD, who lives in Dublin, Ohio. She began publishing in 1995, taking research data and turning it into actionable ideas for classroom teachers. Mary Jo’s favorite published writing are academic books that assist educators in literacy teaching. I’m pleased to say that I’ve worked on nine books with her, including our mutual favorite, "Empowering Students’ Knowledge of Vocabulary: Learning How Language Works, Grades 3-5." A little-known fact about Mary Jo is that the man who sat behind Rosa Parks in that famous photo was her uncle! ~ David L. Harrison*

As a former classroom teacher and professor of teacher education I have always been a proponent of getting poetry into the hands of children. I’ve used this genre in the classroom to allow students to read and reread, gaining confidence and fluency in their literacy skills. I’ve asked students to write poetry, often being surprised how young minds can be so profound with such few words. Kids know how to pour their hearts onto a page, but they also have a knack for comedy — evidenced by the first-grader who described her sister’s attributes, then ended with “I love my cat.”

I love putting resources into the hands of students that can lead to poetry writing. I’ve explored content and vocabulary with middle school students. We talk about the author’s way into the topic and what we already knew and what new content surprised us. Books such as "Math Poetry" (Franco, 2006) that offers poems about every conceivable math topic and "A Crossing of Zebras: Animal Packs in Poetry"(Maddox, 2008) that provides a collection of collective noun poems (a crash of rhinos, a leap of leopards) get students excited to try their hand at poetry. After sharing "A Crossing of Zebras" I’ve challenged students to find their own ”pack.” Oh, the joy one Halloween when a student discovered a pack of bats is called a cauldron!

Sometimes I’ve used the not so obvious. I provided fifth-graders with plant identification books. They searched for a plant of personal interest, adopting the Latin name as their "botanical pen name." They took notes and used the information to compose a poem. The most essential words were used, thus creating a different way to utilize and learn the content vocabulary. For the student who chose *Zea Mays* (corn), part of her list included *tassels; stalks; ear; kernel; shucks*. Her poem wove her memory of riding past rural Ohio cornfields, while incorporating new vocabulary. Another student chose *Oryza Sativa* (rice), using both botanical information and his cultural experiences with Indian food.

Finally, there’s another angle to immersing young learners in poetry. For those who find reading challenging, poetry is approachable. The text is often short, using words that zoom in on a feeling or idea. Sometimes they rhyme which is an important support for newbie readers. Sometimes they are written for two voices (thank you David Harrison for your work in this!), which provides reading support buddies. Imagine the look of accomplishment for students who read and performed a poem they practiced together. It is, indeed, “a thing of beauty” (thank you John Keats).

Poetry has the power to be singularly intimate or can connect a community of learners. I share my own unpublished poetry with students. They love learning something unknown about me (my four grandparents who immigrated from Italy, my experiences living in Australia for three years) and I think it makes them braver to try their hand at writing. Perhaps there is a child in your life for whom YOU could do the same? Write that poem!

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