

2005

So Much Depends Upon the Teaching of Poetry

Kari Scheidel

Lake Michigan Writing Project, Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Scheidel, Kari (2005) "So Much Depends Upon the Teaching of Poetry," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 21: Iss. 2, Article 12.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1200>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

So Much Depends Upon the Teaching of Poetry

Kari Scheidel
Lake Michigan Writing Project
Grand Valley State University

Early in the school year I read my students a poem I intended to use as an invitation to write for the day. What happened could not have been planned. It certainly wasn't anywhere in my lesson plans. "Listen to this poem I found. I want you to think about how this poem reminds you of something in your life or what it makes you think about." I read the poem "The Dream Keeper" by Langston Hughes in my best teacher voice, with all of the intonation in exactly the right spots. After reading the poem a second time, I asked my fifth graders for a few thoughts about the poem and any connections they had made. Several of the students looked at me puzzled. Aaron finally raised his hand. "I thought you said that was a poem."

"It was," I replied.

"Well I thought poems had to rhyme and what you read didn't rhyme."

I looked around the room. Several children were nodding and murmuring their agreement to Aaron's comment. Was that all my students knew about poetry? Poetry is perhaps one of the most powerful genres. Every single word in a poem has been chosen by the poet specifically to convey just the right meaning to the reader. I wanted my students to see and feel that aspect of it. I hoped for them to see how the author crafts his poem using only the necessary words to reveal that meaning. I hoped the students would see how important each word was and how the author may labor over that one line until just the right word or combination of words was created.

My students actually thought all poetry rhymed. I began to wonder if this meant they thought all poetry was nonsense or humorous as well. I quickly went through my options for

approaching this situation. I could simply tell him no, poetry doesn't have to rhyme and stick to my lesson plans or I could value this comment and teach my students something new and adjust my lesson plans later. I chose the latter.

I went to my bookshelf and retrieved the basket of poetry books from it. I handed each table group a random set of books and asked them to look for poems like the one I read, poems that didn't rhyme. It didn't take long before I heard kids calling across tables to one another about the poems they were finding. "Look at this one." "I found one too." Statements like these were coming from all areas of the room.

After that morning, I read several poems to my students. Some of them rhymed, but many of them didn't. We used them as invitations to write often. Sometimes we just read them. I thought my students were really getting a handle on poetry. I was sure this would come to be tremendously helpful when we started our poetry unit.

I used the next few months to pull my poetry unit together. I had taught fifth grade once before, my very first year of teaching. I felt the poetry unit was the weakest part of our year. I wanted to make sure it was much stronger this time. I was constantly aware of and frustrated by my curriculum guide. My students were to put together a poetry booklet containing five different poems: a cinquain, a haiku, a limerick, a couplet, and a clerihew. How was I going to continue to see growth in my students with poetry if I was going to require only formulaic poetry? It took quite a while for me to realize what my curriculum was requiring was only a minimum. There wasn't anything that said this was *all* they could write.

After making our way through the MEAP (Michigan Education Assessment Program) test in early February, we were ready to begin our poetry unit. Because I teach in an elementary classroom and because I know integrated language arts teaching is most beneficial to students, I decided to incorporate Sharon Creech's *Love That Dog* and Jacqueline Woodson's *Locomotion* into our study. I felt my students needed to have some good poetry

mentors. I wanted them to have the opportunity to have an extended conversation with their peers about several poems. My hope was for them to see how the protagonist in each story used poetry to express himself. Using these books would facilitate my desire to incorporate all four aspects of language arts -- reading, writing, listening, and speaking -- in a natural and logical way. These two authors could show my students things that real authors of the genre use. My students would be able to look at word choice, line breaks, etc. They would come together with a group of peers to read, respond to, and write poetry. I wondered what would happen when my students did this. Would both their reading and writing of poetry be richer?

My Resources and Poetry Mentors

Love That Dog is the story of a young boy, Jack. Jack is not at all happy about the poetry unit in Miss Stretchberry's class. He thinks poetry is for girls, not boys. This book is really Jack's writing notebook. The reader sees his responses to the teaching happening in Miss Stretchberry's class, as well as his responses to her comments in his writing notebook. Slowly Jack begins to see himself as a poet. After reading Walter Dean Myers' poem *Love That Boy*, Jack is inspired to write a poem about his dog Sky. Jack is very concerned that he may have "copied" too many of Walter Dean Myers' words in his poem and wants the poem to remain a secret during Mr. Myers' visit to Jack's school. Jack finally learns it is perfectly acceptable to use "real" authors as mentors, the same lesson I hoped my students would learn. Using a mentor is different from formulaic writing in that the students have the ability to choose their own subjects and words. They are not bound to a certain number of syllables or even words. *Love That Dog* would be our primary source as we practiced free verse poetry.

Locomotion is the story of eleven-year-old Lonnie Collins Motion. Lonnie is in foster care; his parents have both died in a fire and a woman only interested in having a little girl has adopted his younger sister. Lonnie's teacher is also teaching poetry to her students. She encourages Lonnie to

write about his feelings and experiences. Through his writing, Lonnie is able to find his voice and express his feelings in ways he hasn't been able to before. He grows and heals as he writes about his family, friends, experiences, and memories. Lonnie tries out various kinds of poetry, including Haiku and epistle poems. Since form poetry is discussed in this book, this would be read while we worked on our own form poetry.

I knew my remaining classroom budget did not allow me the luxury of buying sixty copies of each book; enough for the two different groups of twenty-nine students I teach language arts and social studies to everyday. I decided to purchase thirty copies of each book. This way I could have both groups read the two stories and write free verse and form poetry while reading them. This ended up working well anyway since the two classes would also be at different places in the text because of the MEAP test and our horribly unpredictable Michigan weather in January and February. We had had some snow days and delays the week prior. Due to the modifications made to our schedule, my afternoon class ended up two days behind my morning class.

A parent volunteer helped me to organize the supplies the students would need. She filled twenty-nine large baggies with a copy of *Love That Dog*, a response log, and paper for writing poetry while the remaining twenty-nine large baggies were filled with copies of *Locomotion*, a response log, and a reproducible booklet of form poetry with examples and room to write. My morning class would read *Love That Dog* while my afternoon class would read *Locomotion* first. I would have the students read the second book after completing the first. The students were very excited to each have a copy of the same book. So far that year, we had had different books for our literature circles based on personal choice. This was a book they would all have in common other than ones I read to them.

Introducing *Love That Dog*

Love That Dog is set up with the Jack's response journal in the front and the poems his teacher uses to teach her class in the back as a type

of appendix. We started to read the book together in my morning class, me reading the poems Jack was writing in response to Miss Stretchberry and the poetry she was teaching in class.

“When I first read this book a few years ago to my fifth graders as a read aloud, we didn’t know the poem about the red wheelbarrow,” I explained to my students. “We were confused. Are any of you a little confused right now about exactly what Jack is writing about?” Several students nodded. “Well I noticed after looking at the book for a while that Sharon Creech had tried to help us out. She knew we might not know this poem so she put this poem and several others at the back of this book. Wasn’t she smart to do that?” My students nodded some more.

“I found it,” came a voice from the far side of the room. “It’s right after a page that says ‘some of the poems used by Miss Stretchberry.’” The students all quickly turned to this page. We looked at the “The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams, together.

The Red Wheelbarrow

by William Carlos Williams

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

My goal here was two-fold; I wanted to, of course, hook my students, but I also wanted to show them how to use the book because it is set up differently than most books they had read. I wanted them to see how Creech had placed the poems of published authors at the end. My students agreed with Jack when he wrote:

SEPTEMBER 27

I don’t understand
the poem about
the red wheelbarrow
and the white chickens
and why so much
depends upon
them.

If that is a poem
about the red wheelbarrow
and the white chickens
then any words
can be a poem.
You’ve just got to
make
short
lines.

Why did so much depend upon this wheelbarrow anyway?

“I don’t know why so much depended upon that red wheelbarrow,” was my response.

This completely floored my students. If our teacher doesn’t know, how in the world are we supposed to figure it out? At this point in the year, I was able to tell this was exactly the thought going through several of their minds. “Close your eyes. I want you to make a picture in your mind as I read this poem to you again. What happened this time when I read the poem to you?”

“I saw the red wheelbarrow while you were reading. It was cool how the picture changed while you were reading,” answered Alexa.

“What do you mean the picture changed?” I asked.

“It was like I could see more and more detail when you read each line.”

“Now that you saw the picture, can you imagine why so much may have depended upon that wheelbarrow?” I questioned further.

“I think maybe the wheelbarrow belonged to a farmer and that’s why he says so much depends on it,” hypothesized Mitchell.

“Maybe he was using it [the wheelbarrow] to do something around his house,” guessed Hunter.

“You’re all doing some very smart thinking here. I want you to remember that strategy of closing your eyes and listening to someone else read

a poem when it doesn't make sense to you. See if that helps. We still don't know for sure why so much depended up that wheelbarrow because it obviously is personal to the author. It's okay not to know for sure. I want to show you a poem about something that is personal to me." I showed them a poem I had written, using Williams as a mentor.

Kissing Baby Doll

so much depends
upon

a kissing baby
doll

dressed in all
pink

on the top
shelf.

"If you saw her, you'd wonder why I kept her around," I explained to my class. "She certainly isn't very pretty any more. Her brown hair hangs like straight brown strings. She doesn't even work anymore. She blew me her last kiss many years ago. She's special to me because she is the first gift my grandfather gave to me. My grandfather's never been a man of many words. It's his actions that show how he's feeling. My grandparents had seven children. My mother was their only daughter. I was the first female born into the family since her. My grandpa was pretty excited about that. He went out and looked for a special gift for me to have. This doll was that gift. She will always be important to me because I know how much thought he put into this special gift." I could tell my students were starting to understand.

"Will all of you help me to write a poem about our classroom using this same poem as a mentor?" My students were eager to try, responding with "sures" and "yeahs."

"I think I'd like to start out the same way Williams did and the way I did with my poem about my doll." I wrote the first two lines on the board. "This poem has a repeating pattern," observed Mark. "What do you mean?" I asked. This poem has three words on the first line and one on the second and just

keeps repeating that until it's done," he answered. "Good for you Mark. That's a very smart thing for you to notice. I see that I followed that same pattern in my poem. Do you think we all have to follow that pattern every time we write a poem using "The Red Wheelbarrow" as a mentor poem?" Several students answered no at once. "You're right. If I need more or fewer words, I'll change the pattern. That's a decision I have to make as an author." This is where the students would be able to make decisions based on what would work best for their writing. This is completely different from formulaic writing. Using a poem as a mentor piece still allowed them the freedoms and choices all authors need.

We made a quick list of things we could mention in our poem about our classroom. We spent time discussing how the words should be arranged. After a couple of revisions we came up with a poem we all agreed upon.

Room 315

so much depends
upon

a large square
room

decorated with student
work

at the end of the
hall.

Finally the students were able to work on drafting their own poems using Williams as a mentor. They found so many personal items to write about. Things they hadn't thought about writing before. Hunter wrote about how so much depended upon his fishing boat. Brooke wrote about how so much depends upon her older brother. Shelby went in still another direction, writing about how so much depends upon her Betty Boop doll, mixed in with her other China dolls. My students were thinking like poets. They were paying attention to their own craft of writing, as well as that of Williams and myself. I could hardly wait for my afternoon group to finish their MEAP tests so I could see what they could do using *Locomotion*.

I was so proud of myself. Here I was making a difference in my students and the way they go about reading and writing. I observed them in their groups discussing some of the poems in the book. I listened as students shared personal poems about their important possessions. They were looking critically at published authors' poems, their own poetry, as well as that of their peers. Our next day began with a reminder about using other poets as mentors. We talked about how we could look at what they had done and write completely different poems with the same general form or how they might even spark some other kind of interest or memory.

The second day of our poetry unit would be spent looking at the next chunk of the book. I assigned the students the number of pages to read in the group. They also needed to write one more poem by the end of that day. Kelsey was very disturbed when her group finished reading their last page for the day. The story had grabbed her. She needed more. She wasn't ready to write. "Do we have to stop?" she asked. I'd like to say I rethought everything right there on the spot and changed my mind. The truth is I didn't. "Yes, you need time to write your own poem," I answered her patiently. She let out a heavy sigh and found some paper and a pencil for her writing. I could tell she was disappointed, but she did as I asked.

For the rest of the day and that evening, Kelsey's comment continued to come back to me. What was I doing? Why was I making her stop? I decided I was doing what we traditionally think teachers are supposed to do. It is our job to break up our teaching, our students' learning, so it is in manageable chunks and pieces. I was making up a formula for teaching so to speak. No wonder she was frustrated. I wasn't giving her or my other students credit. I was taking too much choice away from them. I knew this was a mistake. I believe firmly in giving children choices. After all, we all have different needs as learners. Children are more actively engaged in their learning when they have some control over that learning.

I started class the next morning explaining to my students how I planned to modify my teaching based on Kelsey's comment. "Kelsey was quite upset about something I did yesterday." Kelsey's bright red face and slightly hung head showed just how mortified she was by my comment. She had no idea what I was talking about. Kelsey is an extremely bright student. She does just about everything by the book. She likes to please the adults in her life. I know she was afraid she let me down. "No Kelsey, I'm glad you did it. Kelsey didn't want to stop reading *Love That Dog* yesterday. She wanted to know more about Jack. She wasn't ready to write a poem quite yet. Did any of the rest of you feel the same way?"

A few of my students raised their hands, others still weren't sure where I was going with this and were afraid to commit to anything at this point. "Well I thought a lot yesterday about Kelsey's frustrations and how I could help her and the rest of you not be so frustrated. I want this to be fun for us. I thought about what each of us needed to have in order to finish this book and be successful. We each need to read the book and discuss it with our group members. We also need to have a response log to the book and group discussions. Then, of course, we each need to have poems we have drafted, revised, edited, and published. I'd like to have at least five of these poems from each of you." My students and I took a look at the calendar and agreed upon a deadline before I sent them off to work in their poetry groups.

Introducing "Locomotion"

By my morning class' third day of poetry, my afternoon class was finally ready to begin the unit. I had decided to go about starting the poetry unit, with this group, without the book in front of them. I instead passed out the lyrics to the song "Locomotion" by The Grand Funk Railroad. "I'd like you to read over this poem I found. Take a few minutes and read it over and over again in your head until I tell you to stop." By asking my students to read a short piece over and over again silently, I am able to accommodate all learners in my room. My

students know they may raise their hands if they have tried all of the strategies they can think of for figuring out an unknown word. I will come around and help them. This strategy also provides the necessary time all readers in my room need to finish the piece at least once without the pressure of several sets of eyes on them while they finish or pretend to finish.

My more capable students have time to reread and look at the piece in more depth, noticing things they hadn't the first time through. I had chosen to use this method for this lesson because I was afraid my reading of the poem would give away the song. It didn't take very long before some of my students started saying just that. "This is a song," one said. "No, I just told you it's a poem," I replied with a small smirk. "Well what did you think of the poem I just gave you?" I asked after I felt my students had all had sufficient time to complete at least one reading of the piece.

"It's not a poem. It's a song," answered Jerome.

"What makes you think that? It looks like a poem to me," I replied.

"I've heard it on the radio station my mom listens to sometimes," said Jerome.

"Do you think there's any possible way this could be a poem and a song?" I asked. Students started murmuring "maybes" and "I don't know" to one another.

I walked over to my CD player, a satisfied smile on my face. Making sure the audio system that pipes sound through my room was on, I pushed the play button to the CD player and waited anxiously. Immediately the room was filled with smiles other than my own. I watched as my students tapped their feet, smiled at one another, and followed along with the lyrics as the song was sung.

"Play it again," was a request that filled the room after the song ended that first time.

"Why do you want me to play it again?" I asked.

"It was fun."

"What made it fun?"

"I liked the music," answered Elizabeth. "It kind of made me want to dance."

"The character in the book we're going to start reading next week was named after this song. His mom named him Lonnie Collins Motion because "Locomotion" was her favorite song. Let's listen to the poem again on the CD. Think about why Lonnie's mom might have wanted him to be named after this song. After the song finishes, you're going to tell your eye partner what you think."

We listened to the song again. I noticed a lot more foot tapping this time. I observed as some of my students wrote down notes about the words they were hearing. The room was filled with conversation when the song finished playing the second time. I heard students talking about how much Lonnie's mother must have loved to dance. Many felt she must have been a person who liked to have fun. As I heard these comments from my students, I asked them what made them feel this way. "You just can't not smile when you hear that song," replied Meghan.

We finished the day by playing the song one final time. I explained to my students that you'll often hear this song at wedding receptions and you'll see people form a kind of chain or train. They dance around to this song in one whole group. My paraprofessional and I proceeded to show the students what I meant. I started the CD player this one last time and the real fun began. By half way through the song, every student was up and out of their seats, dancing with me to "Locomotion." My principal walked through my classroom door just a few seconds before the song ended the final time. "It's okay," Cory called out from the back of the room, "Miss Scheidel's just teaching us about poetry." The students giggled and walked back to their seats chattering to one another and slightly out of breath. We were all feeling very happy about poetry.

"Those of you who thought songs were poems are exactly right. Your homework this weekend is to listen to poetry. I want you to think about how the poem or song makes you feel. I'll pass out your books on Monday."

Teaching Poetry Using *Love That Dog*

I made the same deal with my afternoon class as my morning class. I would not tell them how many pages they had to read each day or when they needed to write a poem. They would need to have the five form poems by the end of the study of *Locomotion*, a response log, and have finished reading the book. I wanted this group to have the ability to read or write as they felt the need as well. After all, this is what “real” poets do and my students were becoming poets.

Although I started each day in much the same way, my lesson looked quite different depending on the book the students were reading. My conferences with my students reading *Love That Dog* always started with some type of mini-lesson based on what I’d noticed happening during the previous days writing time. We looked at line breaks, conventions, word choice, and topics to name a few. We continued to use “real” authors as mentors. I would use poems from the book or poems I just enjoyed or thought my students might enjoy. I was proud of the progress I was seeing in my students’ writing.

First 10-15 Minutes

Mini-lesson with students seated on the floor in front of the white board.

30-40 Minutes

Reading and writing time provided for students. I would visit with each group at least every other day, assisting learners as needed.

Final 10 Minutes

Opportunity given for students to share their work with other students in the room.

The *Locomotion* group would also have a mini-lesson, but this was usually based on one of the form poems they were to write. I noticed my students seemed to enjoy the form poem lessons. They seemed to like the silliness of it all. They were eager to help me write form poems as examples or models for the class.

The students would then join their reading/writing group. I’d join the students as they worked. I’d listen to them read and discuss the poems they were both reading and writing. The students were very insightful when it came to reading the books. They observed how the characters were changing and growing. They related to several of the experiences the characters were having. They even made connections to other books they had read.

While meeting with a group reading *Love That Dog*, this conversation took place. “I like poetry now,” Aaron admitted during one of his group meetings.

“What do you mean you like poetry now?” I probed.

“I don’t know. I guess I can write about what I want and it’s quick. It has a lot of description too.”

“Why don’t you think you liked poetry in the past?”

“I thought poetry was for girls,” he answered. Demi let out a small giggle when she heard this comment. Immediately all of our attention was on her.

“You’re just like Jack in the book [*Love That Dog*],” she told him.

“Yeah, I guess I am,” Aaron acknowledged with a smile.

While meeting with another group as they worked through some of their free verse poetry I listened to this exchange. I was awed by the conversation I heard taking place. This group was made up of four students. Two of the students were very outgoing, social students, but only one of those two was achieving high academic marks. The remaining two students were quite shy, but one had been drawn to poetry all year.

Hunter started with, “I think I need some help with a poem I’ve started writing. I can’t think of a title.”

“What’s it about?” asked Cassandra.

“Fishing, here I’ll just read it,” he answered. He read a very rough draft of a poem that also used Williams as a mentor.

"I don't get it," said Kelsey. "You don't tell us why it's so important. What would happen if you tell us where you are?"

Hunter made a few more revisions and read it to his group again. "I think it would sound better if you started with fishing for bass," advised Sam.

"I think you should try putting the time at the end," offered Cassandra. "I wouldn't wake up at six in the morning to do anything."

Hunter willingly accepted their advice, but did stand up to the girls when he felt they were making suggestions he didn't care for as the author. At the end of the discussion a small smile came over his face. "I have the title now," he said. "I'm going to call it *In the Morning*."

In the Morning
so much depends
upon

fishing for
bass

at 6:00 on
Wabasis Lake

in a Nitro
boat.

My favorite part of the day was when I joined groups as they wrote. I noticed the students writing free verse poetry often composed alone and then shared their writing with the group, while the form poems were almost always composed as a group. When I asked a group reading *Locomotion* and writing form poetry why they were working together to write their haiku poems, Ray simply stated, "I can't think of words with the right number of syllables on my own." The free verse poems were usually very personal. The form poems seemed silly and contrived. I was disappointed with the quality of the form poems. I noticed their word choices were simply based upon the number of syllables or rhyme needed, not on words that conveyed the meaning they were trying to get across to their reader. I wondered what would happen once the students

exchanged books. Would I notice the same things with the different children?

We ended each day with chances for students to share their writing or observations with other students. I wanted the children to have the opportunity to hear from other students than the ones in their reading/writing groups. This also gave them the chance to share poems with some of their best friends (and subjects of their poems) assigned to different groups. I noticed several students using their friends as mentors in addition to the mentors in their books.

Teaching Poetry Using *Locomotion*

I had not anticipated the frustration my morning students would later experience when we started the second book. I introduced *Locomotion* the same as I had the previous time. My morning class was extremely excited after listening to and talking about *Locomotion*, much the same as their afternoon counterparts had done. They liked the idea of looking at songs as poetry. They were much quicker to accept that songs were poems.

I also did not anticipate the frustrations my afternoon students and I would experience from the beginning of *Love That Dog*. Again, I introduced the book the same way. I showed my students *Kissing Baby Doll* and asked them to help me write a poem about our classroom using this poem and *The Red Wheelbarrow* as a mentor. "I don't get it," Michael called from the back of the room. This would come to be the phrase for the rest of our unit in the afternoon class. I did everything I could to try and get my point across to this class. More than half the class just didn't understand how they had to come up with a subject on their own and then figure out the best words to use to help the reader understand what it was you wanted to say about that subject.

My first mini-lesson with the morning class was the haiku poem. We looked at a few examples and tried writing one of our own as a class, just as the afternoon class had done a couple of weeks prior. "That's it?" Jonathon asked.

"Yeah," I thought, "that's it." I answered instead with, "What do you mean by that?"

“We just have to count syllables and they [the poems] usually have to do with nature or something like that?”

“That’s what this kind of poem is like, yes,” I answered him. “We had a lot more freedom when wrote free-verse. We were able to choose our subject and how we wrote about it.” The afternoon class had never questioned the format. They just accepted it and did it. What was different with this class? As the unit continued, several students wanted to know if it would be okay if they wrote some more free verse poems in addition to their form poems. While meeting with Samantha’s group she brought up a problem she was having. “My mom bought a red tulip plant over the weekend. I want to use that for a poem. I can’t make it work in one of these poems we’re writing. It just doesn’t sound right.”

“So what I hear you saying is that these form poems just aren’t working for you with this subject,” I repeated. Samantha nodded. “Have you tried writing about the tulip using free verse?” I asked.

“I guess I thought I was done with those,” she answered.

“Well you’re sort of right. We were working on just free verse the last couple of weeks. We’re looking pretty closely at form poems right now. This certainly doesn’t mean we can’t ever write free verse again. There’s a time for form poems and a time for free verse. You have to make that decision as a writer.” Samantha went on to write a free verse poem about that red tulip. She struggled with it, but she asked her group for help and met with me. She wrote a poem that wouldn’t have had the same effect had she been constrained to a form.

Red Tulips

Red as strawberries,
Smells like spring breeze,
Blowing past my clean face,
Laying outside,
Petals soft like a feather pillow,
I’m in heaven.

My mini-lesson with the afternoon class the second day was to teach the students about choosing topics for poetry. We took out the picture lists we

had made at the beginning of the year from a project titled *All About Me*. The students had brought in 10 – 12 different items showing us who they were and what was important to them. We then made a picture list of these items to help us choose topics for writing in writing workshop. I showed them how poetry wasn’t any different than the other writing we had done earlier that year. They still needed to find a topic that was meaningful to them. The students tried writing poems using Williams as a mentor. A few more students understood, but I was still left with a number of students who simply did not get it.

After the Poetry Unit

I was aware of the difference in quality of free verse poems I was seeing my two classes write as we worked through the unit. I felt like we were all spinning our wheels writing free verse in my afternoon class. My students never really understood how they could write poetry using free verse. They were frustrated with me when I couldn’t provide them with the formula they wanted. During a one of my conferences with Michelle, she slammed her pencil down on the desk and said, “I just want a book that tells me how to do this.”

I was frustrated with my students for wanting such a formula. The evidence of all of this came when both groups turned in their “books of poetry” at the end of the unit. When I had the final drafts of both groups in front of me, I could see just how different they were. The poetry from my morning class was much more thoughtful and developed. I could see how much time they had spent revising their work. They had carefully crafted the pieces they had decided to publish.

I remembered how specific students had labored over particular words and lines. I recalled how groups had helped one another make their poems richer. I saw how much these poems had changed for the better. The final drafts of the afternoon class looked much like the early drafts of the morning class. They had not put the same amount of effort into word choice or revision. Several of the poems didn’t even make sense. Our workshop conversations were not evident in their

writing. The students were able to write exactly what was required of them with little revision using form poetry. Why and how had this difference writing free verse shown up between my two classes?

The cinquains, haikus, limericks, couplets, and clerihews from both classes were of equal quality. Both groups had been able to follow the forms as they were given with very few exceptions. Based on this portion of the unit alone, most of my class would have received very high marks. 94% of my students earned a proficient marking on their report cards for this outcome.

I had a few guesses as to why I had found these findings, but decided to see what my students had to say. I simply asked both groups whether they liked free verse or form poetry better and why? I had my students answer this in writing on a half sheet of paper so that peers would not influence one another. The students were unbelievably honest. About half of my morning students chose the free verse poems over form poetry. Jonathon wrote about liking the freedom to choose what he wanted to write a poem about. Mitchell felt he could create a better picture of what he was trying to show using free verse, but did enjoy having the chance to be silly using the form poems. Shelby and most of the other students choosing free verse agreed that topic choice was the deciding factor for them, but that form poetry was good when you were stuck. All but one of my afternoon students chose form poetry as their favorite. Anthony's comment pretty much said it all, "I didn't have to think very much when I was writing form poetry, half the work was done for me."

As I look back over my lesson plans and notes, I taught the books very much the same to both classes. Until this unit, both groups have produced writing of about the same quality. I believe I unintentionally stifled my afternoon group by teaching them form poetry first. Poetry quickly went back to a "plug and chug" method of writing. They had forgotten everything we had seen in poetry throughout the year. They came to expect "half the work to be done" for them as Anthony put it.

My morning class, however, did not forget

about the free verse poems once they learned some form poems. They continued to go back to this type of poetry as we learned form poetry. They had experienced the power their thoughts and words had using free verse. They didn't want to lose that power. These students saw how excited their classmates and teacher became when a poem finally came together. They heard the praise from peers and loved it. The way their faces lit up when a classmate said, "That is so cool," showed how proud they were of their work. There's power when a classmate pays you that type of compliment.

I wonder who learned more during the poetry unit, my students or me? I will never again teach form poetry before free verse poetry. Students must experience the struggles and rewards of writing and revising free verse poetry before trying their hand at writing form poetry. They will be much more likely to go back to free verse after experiencing success with it. I want all of my students to experience the power of their thoughts and words using poetry. I have already decided this is an important enough discovery to allocate enough money from next year's classroom budget to buying another class set of each book.

As I think about everything that I have learned, I am left to wonder whether or not I would find the same results with students who were taught some type of form writing, like the five paragraph essay or Power Writing, rather than nurtured in a writing workshop classroom. Would students have the same difficulties with this type of transition?

I believe students would rely upon formulaic writing in expository text just the way they did with poetry. They would have difficulty moving toward writing where they needed to decide how to best convey their information. In short, they would be looking of the teacher to provide them for the framework that would work for them each time with every subject. They wouldn't have the knowledge of creating a lead that grabs a reader, making that reader want to find out more. They wouldn't have the ability to create essential, vivid images for their readers. Their writing would be stuck in that "plug and chug" model with little or no creativity.

After looking so closing at my poetry unit and the work my students did within that unit, I am convinced more than ever that students need to use writing in ways that make sense and have meaning to them. My students will be stifled if I teach writing with too much of my own formula in mind. I need to be constantly aware of their success and struggles in writing. We need to celebrate that success. We need to work together to turn those struggles into successes. My students show me everyday what they need to be taught about writing. I, as their teacher, need to keep my eyes and ears open so that I can seize these teachable moments. My students will become better writers because of it.

About the Author:

Kari Scheidel is a fifth grade teacher at Woodview Elementary in Belding, MI. She also co-directs the Lake Michigan Writing Project at Grand Valley State University.