Poetry: What's the Sense in Teaching It?

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What's the sense in poetry,
You might want to know?
Read this article
And we will show
Benefit after benefit,
How knowledge may grow!

Poetry. A simple word for teachers that can be associated with countless attitudes and opinions. Consider *your* personal stance to poetry. Do you love it? Do you hate it? Or do you consider yourself somewhere safe in the middle? As researchers, we fell along this continuum. Our own diverse attitudes regarding poetry inspired the creation of our study. We began to wonder where our poetry attitudes came from and if they have any effect on our students. Can our attitudes toward poetry change, and if so, how do we make them change? Questions like these led us to consider, "What's the sense in teaching poetry?"

Concerns regarding teacher's poetry attitudes and poetry instruction have long been apparent. In 1978, Benton emphasized some of the same concerns within our "poetry spectrum" when he stated "poetry is an area of the curriculum where teachers feel most uncertain of their knowledge; most uncomfortable about their methods and most guilty about both" (p. 112). Wade and Sidaway (1990) investigated the attitudes of poetry teaching in middle schools and found that of the 40 teachers surveyed, there was a general lack of confidence and uneasiness "as to how to manage poetry; very few read poetry themselves; many were wary because there seemed to be no right answers and because feelings were likely to be exposed" (p. 77). This notion of students coming up with their own responses instead of the textbook answers has been a concern for many. Ray (1999) administered a questionnaire to 48 preservice teachers and also found "teachers are anxious that pupils should produce the model answer rather than expressing their own opinions, which might coincide with the accepted version" (p. 47). From the 1970s to the present, commonalities are noted across the board; teachers are hesitant when it comes to poetry (Benton, 1978; Parr & Campbell, 2006; Perfect, 1999; Wade & Sidaway, 1990).

If teachers are hesitant toward poetry, does that make students hesitant? Researchers like Benton (1978), Ray (1999), and Wade and Sidaway (1990) say yes. If a teacher has a positive attitude toward poetry, it is more likely that they will make poetry a priority and be creative in teaching it. If teachers have a negative view of poetry because of bad experiences, it is likely that they may teach it less (Linaberger, 2004; Nelson, 2005). We set out to discover what can be done to decrease teacher hesitancy for the benefit of the students.

The purpose of this study was to provide teachers with tools and strategies to integrate poetry into their classrooms on a more regular basis. We did this by focusing on using poetry to teach phonics, phonemic awareness, language development, fluency, comprehension, and writing. The supposition is that consistent professional collaboration of different strategies to teach poetry will improve poetry instruction in the classroom and, therefore, may increase the overall appreciation for poetry.

Why Is Poetry Important in the Classroom?

Phonics, phonemic awareness, language development, fluency, comprehension, and writing are recurring themes we consistently found in our review of literature. Poetry gives teachers an authentic text in which to work on phonics, phonemic awareness, and language development skills such as rime, word families, and alliteration (Cowen, 2004; Perfect, 1999; Rasinski, Rupley, & Nichols, 2008; Whitin, 1982). Poems provide a simpler context for students to practice these skills, using text that is at their interest and academic levels.

The shorter, rhythmic texts make poetry an ideal genre for daily read-alouds, through which teachers can model fluent reading (Rasinski & Padak, 2008; Rasinski et al., 2008). In addition to read-alouds, repeated readings of text often increase readers' fluency (Rasinski & Padak, 2008). Once this foundation of fluency is established, the length of poetry may better prepare students to tackle content and vocabulary within text more fluently, with deeper comprehension (Sekeres & Gregg, 2007).

Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading (Kulich, 2009), and poetry is a great tool for students to make sense of what they read (Sekeres & Gregg, 2007). The enjoyment children get from playing with the sounds, rhythm, and flow of the words is helpful in comprehension (Parr & Campbell, 2006; Perfect, 1999; Rasinski et al., 2008). Enjoyment of literacy is very important for all students, but it has an especially important role in creating motivation for struggling learners to comprehend what they read. Benton (1990) argues that reading poetry is different than reading any other type of text because it takes a much shorter amount of time for readers to digest poems. If readers can practice "making sense" of poetry, they may generalize this useful skill to other texts and genres. If educators make it a priority for poetry to be a natural and consistent part of the classroom routine, comprehension of literacy will increase (Sekeres & Gregg, 2007).

Reading poetry in the classroom is simply not enough (Linaberger, 2004). In addition to reading, teaching students how to write poetry and having students practice writing poetry creates a better understanding of the genre (Gill, 2007; Linaberger, 2004; Oczkus, Baura, Murray, & Berry, 2006; Wade & Sidaway, 1990). According to Stickling (2009), "students make special connections with poetry when they write it. They comprehend it when it is their own" (p. 65). Students also learn that writing poetry is a way to share their feelings and experiences, and that it is enjoyable to read and to write (Gill, 2007). The success that struggling writers find with poetry makes other writing tasks seem more approachable.

Based on the research findings that poetry has the above benefits in the areas of phonics, phonemic awareness, language development, fluency, comprehension, and writing, we felt is was important to work to change teachers' perceptions of teaching poetry.

Setup of the Study

Our goal was to provide professional collaboration and support in the area of poetry to our grade-level teachers; in our case, this was kindergarten, 1st grade, and 3rd grade. Our participants included one male and ten females, ranging from six to 32 years of teaching experience. Two were kindergarten teachers, four were from 1st grade, and five were from 3rd grade. The kindergarten and 3rd-grade classrooms were in the same district in a suburban area, but in different K through 5 buildings. The 1st-grade classrooms were in an early childhood building in a rural district. The kindergarten classrooms were in a low to middle socioeconomic area where English as a Second Language students attend; the 1st-grade classrooms were in a low socioeconomic community with a high mobility rate; and the 3rd-grade classrooms were in a high socioeconomic area.

Our study was set up over a six-week period, and each week we supplied our grade-level teachers with resources for a poetry activity that was based on a specific skill or content area. We provided teachers with the materials and information necessary to implement the following activities in their classroom: *The Poetry Café* (Kovalcik & Certo, 2007), *The Poetry Getaway* (Nelson, 2005), *The Poetry Academy* (Wilfong, 2008), writing poetry, using poetry to support a content area, and using poetry to teach phonics and spelling. Prior to receiving these resources, teachers completed a pre-survey which communicated their feelings and experiences using poetry in the classroom. Each week, we e-mailed resources to our participants. Each e-mail included short descriptions of the proposed activity and appropriate attachments, such as poems and research articles, to provide support.

We made it clear to participants that it was not mandatory that they implement the activities in their classrooms but that their participation was greatly appreciated and could provide multiple benefits for their students. In addition to the digital resources, we naturally served as personal support as we interacted with our grade-level teachers on a daily basis. We also conducted mini workshops in order to have intentional collaboration and brainstorming experiences with our colleagues. We thought that if teachers helped create an activity, they would be more likely to implement it in the classroom. At the end of the six-week period, teachers completed a post-survey that included their feedback on each activity that we presented, as well as any changes concerning their motivation to use poetry in the classroom.

The pre- and post-surveys contained a series of questions which were answered on a 1 through 5 Likert scale, ranging from very negative to very positive, as well as a series of open-ended questions. We used the quantitative data from the Likert scale to determine a mean for each question to see how the group as a whole responded on both the pre- and post-survey. We

calculated an overall mean for each individual participant to compare their attitudes toward poetry and its use in the classroom before and after the study, looking for possible changes. We also looked for relationships between the answers the participants gave on different questions. For example, we looked specifically at the scores each participant gave for their *personal attitude toward poetry* and compared it to the score they gave for their *comfort level using poetry in the classroom*. On the post-survey (see Appendix A); the teachers also reported which, if any, of the strategies they planned to use in the future. We organized this data into a frequency count to see which strategies teachers would continue to use in the future.

We took the qualitative information from our colleagues' pre- and post-surveys and carefully analyzed it looking for recurring themes. Each researcher looked individually at the surveys from our building's participants and took notes summarizing the ideas that the teachers presented. Then, we shared the notes and grouped them with like responses. For example, one teacher stated that she uses poems to celebrate the holidays, and another uses poems for sight word instruction. We grouped these two together because they both showed ways that teachers are currently using poetry in their classrooms. Through this system of open coding, our individual codes were condensed into three major themes: (1) the aesthetic, (2) the strategies, and (3) the resources.

Findings

The Aesthetic

On both the pre- and post-surveys, teachers talked of their feelings regarding poetry, the personal connections it evokes, and the ways they have used it to create a mood in their classroom. We were pleasantly surprised that in the pre-survey, nine of the 11 teachers reported having a positive attitude toward poetry and its use in

the classroom. One teacher shared a neutral opinion of poetry, and the last, a slightly negative view. Comments ranged from, "Poetry has been my favorite thing since I was 4 years old," to "We use poetry occasionally; I am not very comfortable with it." On the pre-survey, the ratings teachers gave to describe their feelings toward poetry, and their comfort level using it in the classroom, were the same. For example, teachers who reported a *positive* attitude regarding their feelings also reported a *positive* comfort level using poetry in the classroom. The reverse was also found. The teacher who reported a *negative* attitude toward poetry also reported a *negative* comfort level when using poetry in the classroom. For this reason, the aesthetic side of poetry emerged as a major theme.

The post-surveys reflected the aesthetic experience of poetry for both the teachers and the students. Ten of the 11 teachers who completed the post-survey reported a positive aesthetic change for their students, for themselves, or for both. Several teachers reported that this research experience "revived their love of poetry" in some way or reawakened some strategies that they had successfully used with poetry in the past. A few went on to say that poetry had gotten squeezed out of their tight curriculum, and they were happy to bring it back. One teacher wrote, "I think we can become so bogged down with the book curriculum that we forget the fun words out there!" A teacher that initially reported a negative view of poetry said that this experience had impacted his classroom, and he wants to make more time for poetry in the future.

When asked how the students responded to the poetry activities, ten of the 11 teachers reported that the students responded "positively" or "very positively" to the use of poetry in the classroom. The one teacher who did not find her students responding positively to the activities did report that she, herself, found the strategies to be enjoyable and beneficial. She wrote, "I think that it depends on the climate of the kids. This group just wasn't very motivated." Other teachers remarked that the students were "very engaged" during these activities and that they plan to "make more time for poetry" because the students have enjoyed it so much. Several teachers also reported that their students appreciated working with another genre of literacy. The range of responses shows that everyone has an aesthetic response to poetry.

The Strategies

Our colleagues also discussed ways in which they have used poetry in the classroom, which we coded as *the strategies*. These techniques mentioned in the pre-survey varied from using poetry for shared readings, to using poetry for rhyme and word family work, all the way to using different forms of poetry in a Writer's Workshop. Post-surveys reflected more specifically on the six strategies that we presented in this study.

The pre-surveys reflected a vast difference in the ways that poems are used in the classroom, even within a single building and grade level. Some common techniques were to read poems with rhyme patterns or high-frequency words, to read holiday poems, and to write different forms of poems (e.g., haiku, acrostic, cinquain). However, we are sharing the findings of the six strategies that we presented, and the teachers' reflections of these activities.

In week one, the participants were given an annotated journal article and an Internet link to view a *Poetry Café* (Kovalcik & Certo, 2007). The link showed students in a 2nd-grade classroom performing poems that they had found or written. By presenting this in week one, we gave the teachers a taste of how far they could go with poetry in their classroom. Of the 11 teachers who completed the post-survey, two of them hoped to use a *Poetry Café* in their classroom in the future.

In week two, we asked the teachers to share with us a topic or unit that they were currently

studying so that we could find a poem to support this learning. For example, one class was studying about Martin Luther King Jr., and the content of the poem we supplied ("Martin Luther King, Jr.," Moore, 1997) gave a lot of good historical facts but shared them through narrative verse. All 11 teachers reported that they planned to use poems to teach the content areas in the future. Many commented that poetry was a great way to introduce a new topic of study or to enrich the learning in progress.

Prior to week three, teachers were contacted regarding their upcoming phonics or spelling patterns of study. We used this knowledge to collect poems that would support each individual skill. Teachers were provided with a poem and ideas for using the poem. These ideas included word hunts, word sorts, shared reading, and choral reading. On the post-survey, all 11 reported that they plan to use poems to support their phonics and spelling instruction in the future. Some teachers (mainly those teaching in the primary grades) reported that they had been using poems in this way for quite some time and that many of the phonics-based poems were found in their basal. However, several of the 3rd-grade teachers shared that this was a new experience for them.

In week four, teachers were encouraged to have their students try out the writing technique, *onomatopoeia*, in a poem. Teachers were provided with sample poems containing onomatopoeias to serve as models for the writers, a list of onomatopoeia words to get them started, and several ways in which the students could practice onomatopoeia and poetry as a class or as center work. They were also referred to their copy of the article we had given them on *The Poetry Café* (Kovalcik & Certo, 2007) because it has a section on writing onomatopoeias. Four of the 11 teachers stated that they hoped to use this strategy in their classroom in the future. A teacher who was not in favor of this strategy reported not having enough time for this type of writing, while another wished

her students could be more creative with this type of activity.

In week five, the teachers were provided the materials to take a *Poetry Getaway* (Nelson, 2005) with their class. In Nelson's activity, the teacher shares a love for poetry by connecting poems to objects that were packed in a suitcase. As the teacher shares captivating poems, the props are revealed as a visual representation of the poems with which the students could not help but be motivated and actively engaged. In our study, we provided our grade-level teachers with an entertaining poem and a suitcase full of related props which was passed from classroom to classroom. For example, we used a poem about Abraham Lincoln and put pennies, a top hat, and a picture of a log cabin in the suitcase. Another poem was about Valentine's Day and specifically named objects such as flowers, candy, doilies, and twine in the poem, so we collected each object and put them in the suitcase. Six of our 11 teachers reported that they would like to take a *Poetry Getaway* with their class in the future because the creative nature of the activity caught the attention of many students. All three of us were surprised by the level of curiosity that peeked in students and adults alike as they watched us walk the halls with a suitcase in hand.

In week six, we invited our grade-level colleagues to meet with us to discuss our final strategy, *The Poetry Academy* (Wilfong, 2008). Wilfong created this strategy to use repeated readings of poems to increase the fluency and comprehension of a targeted group of struggling readers. The procedure is simple. Students meet with an adult (teacher, assistant, or volunteer) each week and are given a new poem for practice. The adult reads the poem aloud once to model fluency. Then, the student(s) and the adult read the poem together for guided practice. The student is then encouraged to try the new poem one time independently. The poem is added to the student's poetry folder to go home for repeated readings that week and to be

returned the next week. Each subsequent week begins with the rereading of an "old" poem to further encourage repeated reading and allow for an opportunity to praise students for their increased fluency. We chose to meet with our grade-level peers to share this strategy because the amount of information was too great to share effectively in an e-mail. As presenters, we were pleased with how the meeting went and hopeful that we had encouraged a few teachers to take on this long-term strategy. When surveyed, six of the 11 teachers stated that they hoped to use the *Poetry Academy* in their classrooms in the future. Many had begun to brainstorm details of how the *Poetry Academy* could be successful for their students and how it might be adapted to fit within their curriculum.

When we looked at the strategies the teachers are most likely to use again in the future, we saw that every participant is planning to continue to use poetry to support phonics and spelling instruction and content area learning. These two activities were presented as lessons that can take place in a single day. Teachers report they are less likely to continue the use of strategies that are more long-term such as the *Poetry Academy* or the *Poetry Café*.

The Resources

The final emerging theme we have is termed *the resources*. The findings under this theme include the time, the books and anthologies, the lessons, and the specific poems that lend themselves to teaching through poetry.

In the pre-surveys, the teachers reported using a variety of resources to bring poetry to their classroom. Large charts and big books were popular; music and nursery rhymes were often used, especially in the primary grades; and sources for poems were often the basal reader or popular poets like Shel Silverstein. Just as teachers in the pre-survey reported using many different strategies with poetry in their classroom, their resources were also quite varied. No

teachers mentioned a lack of time or resources for poetry instruction in the pre-survey.

In the post-surveys, resources were a more apparent theme. As researchers who were sharing lessons and strategies for teachers to try in the upcoming week, we often sensed how busy they were. Time was often a concern; and on a few occasions, a teacher(s) reported liking an idea but not having tried it in class due to time constraints. This resource of time was mentioned by several teachers after the study, but the results were somewhat contradictory. Two teachers reported wishing that they had more time to incorporate poetry (specifically writing poetry), and another claimed to be making poetry more of a priority by finding the time to incorporate it. Three others remarked how quick and easy it was to bring more poetry to the classroom. One teacher stated that, "Poetry is back in my week at a fuller pace!" This variance shows us that it is the stance of the teacher on their time and academic priorities that affect how much poetry is integrated in their classroom.

In addition to the resource of time, the post-survey revealed that teachers were more aware (or at least reminded) of the multitude of resources available to them for poetry instruction. Some of the resources mentioned in the pre-survey were repeated in the post-survey such as basal reader poems and holiday poems. However, the post-survey also mentioned new resources that were provided in the study, as well as others that the teacher had either newly learned of or had been reminded of over the course of the six weeks. A few new examples included sight word poems, fluency folders, and seasonal poetry packets. In any case, the majority of the participants shared immense gratitude for the resources (e.g., lesson ideas, poems, copies, overheads, journal articles, electronic files, audio recordings, props, and suitcases) that we provided for them to use in trying out the suggested strategies. See Table 1 for a list of poetry resources to use in the classroom.

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Table 1. Poetry Books for Classroom Use

Author	Title
Shel Silverstein	*Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1974)
	A Light in the Attic (1981)
	Falling Up (1996)
Jack Prelutsky	*Random House of Poetry for Children* (1983)
	New Kid on the Block (1984)
	A Pizza the Size of the Sun (1996)
	Raining Pigs and Noodles (2005)
Betsy Franco	*Messing Around the Monkey Bars* (2009)
Alan Katz	*Oops!* (2008)
Carol Diggory Shields	*Almost Late to School* (2003)
Douglas Florian	*Insectlopedia* (1998)
Sharon Creech	*Hate that Cat* (2008)
Karen Hesse	*Out of the Dust* (1997)

Professional Collaboration

When asked how interested they would be in receiving ideas for using poetry in their classrooms, all participants replied "positively" or "very positively" on the pre-survey. Because of the way our survey was designed, the teachers reported very little that was specific to our professional collaboration methods other than this initial question. Therefore, the findings in this section reflect our analysis of the responses they gave with respect to the study as a whole.

Table 2. Post-Survey Question: What is the likelihood that this strategy will continue in your classroom?

Strategies	Yes	No
Poetry Cafe	2	9
Content Area Poems	11	0
Phonics and Spelling Patterns	11	0
Writing	6	5
Poetry Getaway	6	5
Poetry Academy	6	5

In the post-survey, teachers shared which of the six strategies they were likely to continue using in their classroom (see Table 2).

Participants unanimously agreed to continue using poems to support content area learning, and phonics and spelling patterns. Both of these activities were single lessons that could be done in about 20 minutes. The remaining four activities with which we presented our colleagues were more long term. This led us to discover that in professional collaboration, it is beneficial to start small, giving teachers something they are more likely to experiment with in a single lesson, and then build to more long-term goals.

Along this same line, we found that teachers were much more likely to teach a lesson if they received support; this included not only the physical resources we gave them, but also our personal discussion and collaboration. It was incredibly beneficial that we were not only in the teachers' buildings, but at the same grade level, and we saw them on a daily basis. The post-surveys showed the benefits, as we received many sincere "thank you"s from teachers for our ideas and support.

One component we came to realize is that professional collaboration in this manner could be effective in any area of curriculum, not just poetry. The discussion, excitement, buy in, and preparation that occurred during multi-teacher collaboration brought fresh ideas that benefit students. In our case, the teachers at our grade levels were especially interested in strategies that benefit students of all skill levels. The collaboration truly supported teachers in their day-long instruction, and it was more useful than a daylong training may have been. The teamwork

that was created through this collaboration was valuable during our study, and it built stronger connections for collaboration in the future.

The main goal of this professional collaboration was to increase the use of poetry in elementary classrooms, and based on the surveys, this did happen. One teacher said of poetry, "I am using it more because I see how much my students and I are enjoying it." Another said that as a result of the study, he was "getting more comfortable" with poetry. One participant said exactly what we wanted to hear: "I think my own comfort level affected my use of poetry, and now I am ready to use it and have fun with my students." That was our goal!

Conclusion

The word *poetry* certainly carries with it a spectrum of attitudes and opinions. We each have our own "poetry attitude" that has been influenced by our past poetry experiences. Some love it, some think it's okay, and others strongly dislike it. As teachers, we have the tendency to present poetry in a way that reflects our personal experiences. In an attempt to decrease negative poetry experiences and to avoid the negative carryover to our students, we reiterate the response to this question: "What's the sense in teaching poetry?" Poetry provides a list of benefits for both teachers and students. Poetry provides teachers with an authentic text to teach different literacy skills such as phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and writing. Poetry is fun. Both students and teachers really do enjoy it. Poetry activities in the classroom can be quick and easily implemented. Also, teaching with poetry can help struggling readers and writers by motivating them to embrace poetry at their level.

Our professional collaboration method revealed some interesting findings. Teachers are more likely to implement new strategies in their classroom when the activities are presented in smaller, more manageable pieces.

We also found that sharing and co-planning encouraged more professional dialogue among teachers. Our findings regarding the sharing and co-planning between professional peers led us to believe that collaboration is not strictly confined to the topic of poetry. It may also be beneficial and applicable to other areas of the curriculum. The preexisting level of collaborative relationships and building climate affect the successfulness of the professional collaboration method. Quick and easy activities with little extra preparation time make a difference in what activities are carried into the classroom from a professional collaboration session.

In conclusion, we hope that our teacher participants gained a taste of the aesthetic and academic benefits of teaching poetry as well as the unlimited resources that are available for poetry instruction. With their gains, we are hopeful that they will incorporate poetry activities on their own and realize there is great sense in teaching poetry.

We hope these words
Have helped you see
How influential
Teaching poetry can be.
Please reflect
On what you've learned
So in your mind
Ideas may be churned.

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Appendix A: Poetry in the Elementary Classroom – Survey

Grade Level _____   Years of Experience _____   Date _____

	5 Very Often/ Very Positive	4 Often/ Positive	3 Neutral	2 Little/ Negative	1 Very Little/ Very Negative
1. How do you personally feel about poetry? Comments:	5	4	3	2	1
2. How often do you feel poetry should be used in the elementary classroom? Comments: How many days a week? _____	5	4	3	2	1
3. How often do you use poetry in the classroom? Comments: How many days a week? _____	5	4	3	2	1
4. How comfortable are you with using poetry in the classroom? Comments:	5	4	3	2	1
5. How interested would you be in receiving ideas for using poetry in the classroom? Comments:	5	4	3	2	1
6. In your opinion, how have your students responded to poetry? Comments:	5	4	3	2	1
7. Do you feel poetry instruction is beneficial to students? Comments:	5	4	3	2	1

8. Has your *personal* attitude/comfort toward poetry changed in any way during this study? Please explain.
9. Has this experience impacted your *classroom practice* or *thoughts* about teaching in any way?
10. Which (if any) of these practices do you hope to continue to use in the future? Please elaborate.
    Week 1 – *The Poetry Slam* (video clip)
    Week 2 – Using poetry in the content areas (MLK poem)
    Week 3 – Using poetry to support phonics/spelling (rhyming patterns, sight words)
    Week 4 – Writing poetry (using spelling words and/or onomatopoeia activities)
    Week 5 – *The Poetry Getaway* (suitcase)
    Week 6 – *The Poetry Academy* (poetry fluency folders)
11. Please share other thoughts (both positive and negative) regarding this experience.