



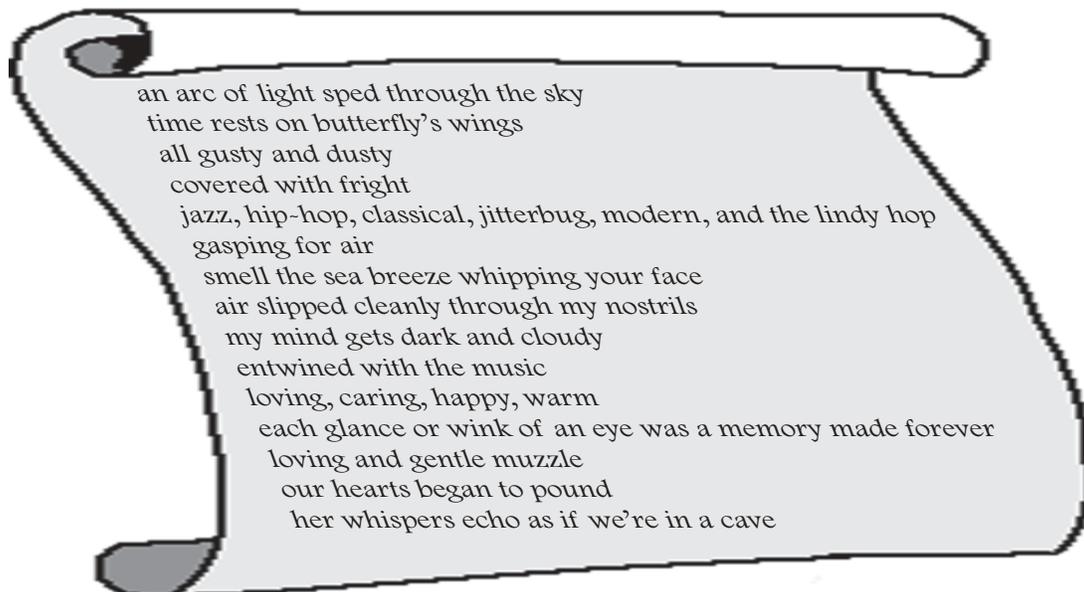
Susi Long
University of South Carolina, SC

Poetry workshop: Examining convictions about teaching and learning

To my favorite Hand Middle School poets:

Thank you so much for allowing me to spend time with you last week. You astonish me with the brilliant ways that you put words together. One of my favorite authors says that reading good writing is hearing the “sounds of wondrous words.” Her name is Katie Wood Ray and she wrote a book about writing called, **Wondrous Words**. That is exactly what I hear when I read your poetry – the sound of wondrous words.

Remember how we listened for lovely language when I read poems in class? Well, I took a sample of lovely language from each of *your* poems and printed them below. Read these wondrous words, then look through our book to find the poems from which they come:



The first half of this book contains your poems. The second half of the book contains poems that I read to you in class. I thought you might enjoy having copies of them to keep. The book ends with two new poems. They are my gift of thanks to you.

Sincerely,
Susi Long

Last March, I spent four mornings with a group of amazing sixth graders and their equally amazing teacher. This letter, written from me to them, accompanied a collection of writing that celebrated their work as poets. Spending time with Kevin Bockman and her students at Hand Middle School (a public middle school located in Columbia, South Carolina) was the result of a University of South Carolina initiative called, "Meet in the Middle." Through this initiative, university faculty members are encouraged to volunteer in middle schools. Prior to beginning a university career, my life as a classroom teacher included experiences with children from kindergarten through eighth grade. My current position in Early Childhood Education, however, rarely gives me the opportunity to interact with middle school students. "Meet in the Middle" was an opportunity to re-live the conviction that specific theoretical and pedagogical understandings are fundamental to teaching and learning for learners of all ages. This article is a tribute to the students and the teacher who made that experience possible. It details four mornings – our brief exploration of life and language through poetry, and reflects the impact of that experience on my convictions as a professional educator.

WHY WRITE ANOTHER ARTICLE ABOUT POETRY WORKSHOP?

While the stories in this article provide classroom descriptions that may be helpful to teachers and teacher educators, the implementation of poetry workshop in a middle school is not news. Our experience is reflective of the kinds of engagements and attitudes that are described across a rich body of professional literature about writing (Calkins, 1994; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Glover, 1999; Heard, 1999; Hindley, 1996; Ray, 2001; Routman, 2000): We talked about life's experiences; we listened to the language of other poets; we met in poets' circles; we read, talked, wrote, revised, and celebrated. In the current climate of high stakes testing, however, I believe that these stories cannot be told often enough. Fears related to standardized tests convince too many good teachers and administrators to push rich experiences with language and literature to the back burner. We have a responsibility to tell stories that remind us that thoughtful, purposeful transactions between text and life are essential to children's growth as readers, writers, and divergent thinkers who will make a difference in the lives of others. This article is written to share sixth grade poetry moments in hopes that it will contribute to the body of literature that supports this conviction.

THE STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHER

Kevin Bockman's students were already lovers of language long before I walked into their classroom. They enjoyed daily interactions with adults whose fascination with language and literature is a way of life. In the midst of the realities of high stakes testing, their teachers, administrators, and parents remain committed to the belief that thoughtful experiences with literature support the growth of passionate readers, writers, inquirers and changers of the world. The school's ultimate goal is to develop thinkers who will choose to read and write with passion and purpose for a lifetime.

During our four days together, the children's insights about the expression of experience through language were easily tapped because of the groundwork laid by their parents and their teacher. The love of literature that Kevin Bockman brings to the classroom was critical to their comfort with our exploration of poetry. I first met Kevin, not in the classroom, but as the mother of one of my daughter's best friends. Because of that mom-to-mom connection, I know that living and loving literature with sixth graders is only one aspect of her relationship with language. At home with her husband and three children, language is embraced every day through shared and treasured reading experiences. Ralph Fletcher (1993) writes that "passion remains the most important quality the mentor has to offer" (p. 17); Kevin's passion for and fascination with language as "a way of being" (Glover, 1999, p. 60) makes it possible for her to serve as a mentor in the classroom. It is her genuine support of children as lovers of words, books, story, and ideas that set the scene for my arrival at Hand Middle School.

WHAT WE DID

Getting ready

The work of educators and authors and my experiences with teachers and children shape who I continue to become as a writer and a teacher of writers. Educators who write about writing—Lucy Calkins (1994), Ralph Fletcher (1993, 2001), Donald Graves (1983), Shelley Harwayne (1992), Donald Murray (1996), and Katie Wood Ray (1999, 2001) greatly influence what I know. Mentors in the field of children's literature – particularly, Janet Hickman (1989) and Rudine Sims Bishop (Rogers, Soter & Sims Bishop, 1997), consistently push me to think about text and life in new ways. Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) work in transactional theory forms the basis of all that I

believe about how human beings make sense of text. And, of course, authors of favorite children's books place me in awe of what is possible.

I drew from all of these sources as I planned to implement a version of Writing Workshop with Kevin's sixth graders. Based on their topic of study at that time, the focus was poetry. To help the students better understand poetry, I chose to highlight the works of Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, Eloise Greenfield, and Langston Hughes. To enrich my understanding of poetry in a workshop context, I turned to Georgia Heard (1999) and Mary Kenner Glover (1999). The following pages provide a description of my plans in practice. Because these classroom engagements are inextricably tied to my beliefs about teaching and learning, each day's plans are prefaced with statements that reflect my theoretical and pedagogical convictions. The article closes with students' responses to the experience and a reiteration of my concern that we not neglect a focus on language and literature as basic to the education of all children.

The week before: The "Me Box" letter

Because I believe that valuing and using children's home and community knowledge are critical to further learning (Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Taylor, 1988) and because I understand that writers write well about topics that really matter to them (Ray, 1999, p.8), I asked the children to prepare for our poetry workshop by collecting objects representing stories from their lives. I wanted them to consider important moments in their own experiences, to "pay attention to the details of ordinary life" (Glover, 1999, p. 14). Building on the idea that "poetic material [is found] in the dayliness of living" (Murray, 1996, p. 111), I wrote a letter to the students asking each of them to create a Me Box or, as Short, Harste, and Burke (1996) call it, a "Shoebox Biography" (p. 462). In the letter, I described what a Me Box might look like:

A Me Box is a collection of artifacts (things) that help tell the stories of your life: who you are, what you love, what you dislike, what excites you, what confuses you, what brings back interesting memories, and so on. A Me Box doesn't have to be an actual box. It can be a bag or a basket or a backpack or a shoebox. Fill it with things that will help to tell the story of YOU. Examples of things you might put in your Me Box include: favorite books, photographs, CDs,

a letter from a relative or a friend, memorabilia from your ancestors, things that remind you of something that happened in your life (a special memory), things that represent your dreams for the future, and so on. Please think carefully about how each item in your Me Box represents something important about you.

Kevin gave a copy of the letter to each student the week before my arrival. She talked through the notion of a Me Box and reminded the students to bring their Me Boxes to school in preparation for our first day together.

Day one: Me boxes, connections, and writing topics

The understanding that has had the greatest impact on my beliefs about teaching and learning is related to the power of valuing and validating learners' prior knowledge and providing opportunities for learners to make connections between what they know and what they are coming to know – between the familiar and the unfamiliar (Heath, 1983; Moll & Greenberg, 1990). In terms of reading and writing, that belief is strongly connected to the construction of classroom structures that allow learners to use existing schema as well as to deepen and broaden background knowledge as they create meaning through transactions with text (Rosenblatt, 1978). To enact these beliefs, I planned first-day strategies that I hoped would allow the students to use and extend life's experiences – not only to make sense of text and to learn from text but to create text. I planned for them to share stories based on Me Box artifacts and to use those stories to generate potential writing topics. We would also use published poems to prompt further connections that might become writing topics. In the process, each student would create a list of writing ideas from which he[she] would choose a topic that would become a poem.

Me boxes

I introduced myself by sharing my Me Box. I took one item at a time out of my wicker bicycle basket – photographs, artifacts from places I have lived, books I have enjoyed at various points in my life, CDs of favorite music, a yarn doll that my daughter made when she was four. I talked about how writing emerges from our own experiences – experiences like those represented in Me Boxes. I asked the students to share their Me Boxes with partners. Each student turned to a classmate, took

objects from his[her] Me Box, and told stories that the objects represented.

After everyone shared Me Box stories, I talked again about how Me Box memories could become seeds for pieces of thoughtful writing. I read from Eloise Greenfield's **Night on Neighborhood Street** and we considered how her poems could have been prompted by objects in a Me Box: a piece of sidewalk chalk, a bedroom slipper, a baby blanket, a sheet of music. For the same purpose, I read "Families, Families" from Dorothy and Michael Strickland's **Families: Poems Celebrating the African American Experience** and, from the same volume, I read, Nikki

Giovanni's "The Drum" and Langston Hughes' "Aunt Sue's Stories."

Then, I gave each student a Writing Folder. On the front cover was a list of thoughts about what writers/poets do (Figure 1). On the inside of the front cover was a lined piece of paper with the heading, "Writing Ideas." On the inside of the back cover was a structure for Poetry Workshop (Figure 2). I demonstrated the use of a Me Box to begin a list of writing ideas by talking through and listing topics prompted by my own Me Box stories. Then, I invited the students to begin their "Writing Ideas" lists by jotting down potential writing topics sparked by the contents of their Me Boxes.

Figure 1. Growing as a Poet

Pay attention to your experiences: Listen to the world around you.

Read a lot and pay attention to what other poets do:
Listen to the sounds of "wondrous words" (Ray, 1999).

Keep a journal or Writers Notebook of writing ideas and lovely language.

Elicit the thoughts and advice of other poets (friends, teachers, parents).

Read your poetry aloud and think about images:
Does your use of language make the listener/reader feel like he/she is THERE?

Revise, reflect, discuss, read, revise, reflect, discuss,
read, revise, reflect, discuss, read ...

And then read some more.

Ray, K.W. (1999). **Wondrous words: Writers and writing in the elementary school**. IL: NCTE.

Figure 2. Poetry Workshop: One Version

Experience the World: Pay attention to your experiences- to what people around you say and do. Your Me Box is one what that you capture and reflect your experiences.

Read a Lot: Read and read and read – and pay attention to how authors/poets use language to construct images (to make you feel like you're there, to bring a character to life, to make you laugh or cry) – read with a writer's eye and ear.

Keep a Writer's Notebooks or Writing Ideas List: When you hear or read language used in interesting ways, write it down; when you overhear or participate in a particularly interesting conversation, write it down; when you see or experience something fascinating, funny, tragic – a snapshot that is memorable in some way - describe it.

Select an Idea/Topic: Using your Writers Notebook or Writing Ideas List, choose an idea or topic that you want to embellish into a more formal piece.

Prewrite: Jot down everything you can think of related to your idea: images, sounds, feelings, questions.

Construct a Rough Draft: Use prewriting to begin structuring your ideas into a poem. Read more poems to help you understand that form is dictated by what you want to say.

Meet in Poets' Circles: Meet with other poets in small groups. Share your drafts and ask for feedback in terms of : (a) Celebrating what they appreciate about your writing and (b) Asking questions that push your thinking as a writer: Could you tell us more about . . . ? I wanted to know what happened when . . . I didn't understand the part about . . .

Consider Mini-Lessons: Your teacher may want to teach a short lesson about something that will support your growth as a writer. Use that information when you revise your poem.

Look Again at What Published Authors Do: Take time to look again at the work of published poets. Consider what you learned from them as you revise.

Revise: Read feedback from poets' circles and consider mini-lessons and the work of published authors. Think about how you might (or might not) want to use those learnings as you revise.

Edit: Use an editing checklist and/or meet with a teacher to consider the mechanics of your work - capitalization, punctuation, quotations, spelling, etc.

Read Your Poem: Read your piece again to be sure that it says what you want to say. Take it back to a poets' circle or a peer or teacher conference if you want more advice.

Publish: Copy or type a final draft of your work. Consider adding an illustration.

Celebrate: Celebrate the completion of your poem by reading it to a group of supporters, contributing it to a class or group anthology, creating a display that presents it in some way.

Life and literary connections

I read Eloise Greenfield's poem, "Honey I Love," to encourage the students to expand their writing ideas lists and to help them think again about writing as grounded in personal experience. I read the poem several times to allow personal connections to emerge. During the second and third readings, I paused now and then to make time for the students to consider connections and to add those topics to their writing ideas lists. Similarly, I read Maya Angelou's poem, "Life Doesn't Frighten Me" and asked the students to talk with partners about connections to feelings and events in their own lives. Based on those conversations, they added further writing topics to their lists. Then, each student chose a topic from his[her] list to use as the basis for writing a poem.

Day two: Listening for expressive language, the six room poem, and first drafts

I believe that we learn language when we use it for a range of meaningful functions and that we learn the structures of language – its form – *while* we use it purposefully (Halliday, 1975). I also believe that writers use language in interesting ways because they pay attention to its use in those meaningful contexts (Hindley, 1996). Katie Wood Ray (1999) urges writers to notice words that "are so beautiful that they just melt in your mouth" (p. 81). She invites students to listen for "the beat of the words or the order of the words, [words that] you want to read over and over again" (p. 81). My goal for Day Two was to live these beliefs by providing engagements that would encourage the students read with a writer's ear – to notice language

use in purposeful contexts. I also planned to introduce a structure that would push them to think about their selected topics in new and interesting ways.

Paying attention to language

To encourage the students to pay attention to language used by other poets, I read Maya Angelou's "I Love the Look of Words" from Tom Feelings' anthology, **Soul Looks Back I Wonder**. We talked about how Angelou uses words in meaningful and engaging ways, for instance, her use of metaphor as she writes about being a reader:

When I have stopped reading
Ideas from the words stay stuck
In my mind, like the sweet
Smell of butter perfuming my
Fingers long after the popcorn
Is finished.

I read Karen Hesse's picture book, **Come on, Rain!** - once for uninterrupted enjoyment and a second time to listen for ways that language was used to express ideas, feelings and events. I stopped and savored my favorite lines, listening to them with the students:

grey clouds, bunched and bulging under a
purple sky
a creeper of hope circles 'round my bones
the smell of hot tar and garbage bullies the air

During a third reading, I asked the children to jot down lovely language - words that they found to be particularly expressive. They were drawn to phrases like:

sizzling like a hot potato
big drops plopping down
wet and wild-haired mammas

My plan to help the students pay attention to interesting language took a more purposeful turn when one of the students shared the news that her baby brother had been born the night before. We read, "Song for Two" and "Soft" from Eloise Greenfield and Jan Spivey Gilchrist's collection, **Angels**. This led to talk about how language might capture the new-life experience. We admired phrases like, "My mama holds me angel-soft" and "gentle arms and quiet smells."

The six room poem and first drafts

To provide a structure for thinking and writing about their topic in new ways, I shared Georgia Heard's (1999) "Six Room Poem" (p. 67) as described in her book, **Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School**. Each "room" in Heard's six-room structure represents a different way of viewing the same idea, topic, memory, event, or character. Following Heard's model, the students thought about and jotted down words and phrases that expressed images, sounds, feelings, quality of light, and questions related to their topic. I asked them to use their "jottings" to create drafts of poems that evening at home.

Before the session ended, we discussed how poetry is sometimes written in rhyme and sometimes in prose but that the choice of form should be dictated only by what the poet has to say: If your message works best as prose, then write in prose; if rhyme seems more suited to your thoughts and purpose, then create rhymes. Drawing from Donald Murray (1996) who writes that "each poem, like each story, establishes its own rules" (p. 104), we talked about how the form of the poem would emerge and change through the writing process.

Day three: Poet's circles and revisions

I believe that we learn through meaningful interactions with other learners while engaged in activities that are meaningful to all participants (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999). Through our interactions, the acceptance of approximations and sensitive feedback promote further growth (Cambourne, 1988). On the third day, to put these beliefs into practice, I planned for the students to share and discuss their drafts in poets' circles. I wanted them to understand the value of conversation with other poets as integral to their growth as writers and as grounded in what we know about the social nature of learning. Using Lindfors' (1999) words, I explained that authors engage one another in "going beyond" (p. 2) prior understandings when they share and talk about their writing with one another; that through such interactions, writers stretch each other's thinking in ways that they could not do alone; and that writers continue to learn in new ways as they interact with other authors across time and context (Rogoff, 1990).

I gave the students copies of written guidelines (Figure 3) to support interactions in their poets' circles. Compiled from many sources (i.e.,

Figure 3. Poets' Circles

As you meet with your fellow poets in poets' circles, help to push each other's thinking in the following ways:

- 1 **Group Together:** Sit together in a circle or around a table.
- 2 **Choose a Director:** Choose one person who will be responsible for ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to read his/her poem and to receive sufficient feedback in the allotted time.
- 3 **The First Poet Reads Aloud:** The group's director calls on the first poet to read his/her poem aloud to the group. Ask the poet to read the poem twice.
- 4 **Group Members Listen and Write Down Feedback:** As the poet reads his/her poem for the first time, the other group members should simply listen and enjoy. As the poet reads the poem for a second time, the group members should jot down celebrations and questions using their Feedback Sheet.
- 5 **Take a Few Minutes:** After the second reading, take a few minutes so that the group members can jot down any other thoughts.
- 6 **Talk about the Feedback:** Using the Feedback Sheets, the group members should each have an opportunity to talk with the poet about what they liked about the poem and to ask the poet to clarify or elaborate on some aspect of the poem.
- 7 **Group Discussion:** After completing the written feedback, the poet initiates discussion. He/she might ask questions about a section of the poem he/she is struggling with or is unsure about. The poet could take notes so that the group's suggestions can be retrieved when it is time to revise the poem.
- 8 **Give Feedback Sheets to the Poet:** Group members give their Feedback Sheets to the poet.
- 9 **The Next Poet Reads and Receives Feedback:** The director designates the next reader and the group proceeds in the same way until each poet has read and received feedback.
- 10 **Use the Feedback to Revise:** After every poet has read and received feedback, each poet uses the Feedback Sheets and his/her notes to revise the poem. The poet does not have to use all of the feedback but he/she does have to read it and think about whether or not it is helpful in the revision of the text.

Calkins, 1994; Ray, 2001; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996), this structure included a feedback sheet (Figure 4) to allow the students to record responses to classmates' poems. In groups of three or four, the students took turns reading their poems aloud, responding to each poem by celebrating aspects of the poem that "worked" (what they liked) and asking for clarification or elaboration where they saw a need, writing responses on feedback sheets, and giving the feedback sheets to each poet. After providing and receiving feedback, the students began

to work on revisions. I explained that they were to consider feedback from poets' circles but that the ultimate decisions about what and how to revise were their own.

Day four: Poets' celebration

I believe that we are motivated to move in new directions – to learn - when we feel good about who we are as learners, when we see ourselves as competent and successful. Capitalizing on this belief, my fourth day in the classroom would be a cel-

Figure 4. Feedback Sheet

As you listen to each poet read aloud, think about and jot down notes about:

- 1 Celebrations: What did you hear that really “worked”? What did you appreciate about the poet’s writing? Perhaps the poet used a particular word or words in an interesting way. Perhaps the poet described a person or place in a way that made you feel as if you knew that person or that you were there in that place. Perhaps the poet arranged words in a way that was particularly effective.

Write down what you really liked about the poem.

- 2 Questions: What do you want to know more about? Were there any parts that you would like for the poet to explain in more detail? Do you want to know what happened next? Do you want to know what happened prior to the events in the poem? Ask questions that will help the poet think further about his/her poem.

- 3 Crack Open Words (Heard, 1999): Are there any words that you think the author might try to “crack open”? Remember that means thinking about what you’re REALLY trying to say and saying exactly what you mean. Instead of “it was fun,” crack open the word, “fun” and describe exactly what happened that caused you to think it was “fun.” Let the reader conclude that it was actually “fun.”

Write the poet’s name at the top of the Feedback Sheet. Sign your name at the bottom in case the poet needs to come back to you with any questions. Give the Feedback Sheet to the poet.

From: Heard, G. (1999). **Awakening the heart: Exploring poetry in elementary and middle school** (pp. 67-73). NH: Heinemann.

celebration of the students’ work. Prior to that day, the students worked with their teacher to revise and prepare final drafts of their poems. I typed the poems, photocopied their illustrations, and made copies of a class anthology for each student. I returned to the school with anthologies in hand and ready for a celebration of poets. It was a Byrd Baylor, **I’m in Charge of Celebrations** sort of day. The students’ reactions reveal a Baylor-like “standing on top of a mountain” sense of celebration:

When I read my poem aloud, I was amazed at my own work and how good I did when I thought that I wouldn’t be able to develop a good poem about the subject I chose.

I felt nervous at first but once I got a fourth [of the way through] my poem, I noticed that everyone was focusing on me and [they] weren’t going to laugh.

I think [my classmates’] poems were just as exciting as mine but I couldn’t wait to read mine.

I felt like this wasn’t a sixth grade class. Though we’re smaller than tenth graders, our work sounded like what a tenth grader would write.

WHAT THE KIDS THOUGHT ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE

Several weeks after my four days in the sixth grade, I asked Kevin if she thought the students would mind voicing reactions to the experience. She kindly made time for her class to respond in writing. Their words extended my learning, helped me understand what I could have done differently, and confirmed my convictions. The students were articulate and profound.

The Me Box experience

Overall, the students found the Me Box experience to be supportive and validating. They wrote:

The part I liked a lot was when we shared ‘Me Boxes.’ It seemed like everyone in the class-

room took a step on knowing each other better. [Me Boxes] show that every little small thing can at least have a poem.

My Me Box helped me conjure a fabulous idea for writing my poem.

I liked sharing my Me Box because I had the opportunity to relive my memories with someone else.

I always write poetry about other people and other things as a way of being humble. It showed me that people are interested in my life too.

Paying attention to language

When asked what they thought about the engagement that encouraged them to notice the use of language by other authors, the students expressed a sophisticated understanding of its significance in their lives as writers:

Paying attention to expressive language helped me think about my own writing because I knew what to reach for.

Paying attention to language made me think about how I could push my writing even farther than before.

It pushed my creativity to my limits allowing me to think out of the box.

It helped us by seeing the way other people think and how they describe it, creating a new flow of creativity in our own writing.

The six room poem

Almost every student expressed the view that the Six Room Poem provided a helpful structure for thinking about their topic and for seeing it with new eyes. Typical comments were:

[The six room poem] idea helped me write differently because I included details allowing my poem to sparkle.

[The six room poem] made me think before I wrote anything.

I never thought about explaining my surroundings just my feelings. The six room poem idea helped me explain.

I wouldn't have written about the quality of light without my six room poem.

Poets' circles

The students rose to the occasion as they met in Poets' Circles. They took their responsibility as "responders to text" very seriously. They demonstrated sensitivity to one another and to the need to provide feedback in constructive ways:

The people in my poets' circle gave me ideas of what I could improve on in my writing. One person said that a part was confusing. I knew what I meant but the readers needed a better understanding.

Poets' circles helped me hear other peoples' ideas and how I could make my writing better. People told me to 'expand my vocabulary.'

[In Poets' Circle], I 'put myself in their shoes' to understand more about their writing. I felt great about learning from others.

[Poets' Circle] made me think harder and deeper on the subject I was writing about.

Looking back at the overall experience

I asked the students to note their thoughts about the experience in general including their frustrations. They wrote:

[I was frustrated because] it was hard for me to write about such a sensitive subject. It frustrated me to put my feelings into words. Next time I should express myself deeper.

I wasn't a poem kind of person and I don't like to write but you and this group helped me become a poet and a better poet.

It helped me by making me believe that I can do anything.

I felt like I had put all my effort into my poem and I felt like it really meant something.

WHAT I WOULD DO DIFFERENTLY THE NEXT TIME

A four-morning period is a short amount of time to implement any version of Writing Workshop but teachers face these constraints every day, particu-

larly in middle schools. Rather than justify the lack of engagement with language and literature because of time constraints, it is critical that we figure out ways to work within them. If I had the opportunity to do this again, I would slow down the process so that we could examine connections between life, language, and literature with greater care and thought. The next time I would:

- ✓ Talk less and demonstrate and engage students more.
- ✓ Fill the room with many texts (informational books, poetry books, picture books, chapter books, newspapers, magazines, brochures) and provide opportunities for the children to notice, talk about, and share life's experiences, language and ideas as they are represented in poetry and prose.
- ✓ Provide better demonstrations of specific structures: the Six Room Poem, Poets' Circles, using feedback to revise.
- ✓ Live the process of the Six Room Poem by creating text together before sending them to consider it on their own.
- ✓ Move from the Writing Ideas List to a Writers' Notebook (Hindley, 1996) and encourage the students to use the notebooks to record images, sounds, quality of light, questions, feelings, conversations that they notice not just in books but in the world around them.
- ✓ Engage the students in drafting poems in class rather than at home so that their peers and I could provide resources and further feedback as needed.
- ✓ Include time for Editing Conferences in which students could meet with me to talk through the mechanics of their writing before creating a final draft.

My ultimate goal would be to wean the students from dependence on specific structures like those that supported their introduction to Poets' Circles and to the Six Room Poem. Such guidelines provide important scaffolds when writers are first learning to think in new ways and as they learn how to interact helpfully with one another. Formal structures become less useful and more constraining, however, as talk about language, life and text become a way of life in a classroom.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT FOR KIDS?

Where does all of this fit into the realities of a society in which teachers, parents, and administrators are concerned, confused, and overwhelmed by a testing craze that too often causes them to doubt what they know and to prioritize in unfortunate ways? My answer is that thoughtful experiences

with language and literature belong at the forefront of every child's education and must be woven meaningfully and joyously in and out of every classroom day. It frightens me to consider what might happen if, with a misguided emphasis on the production of proficient test-takers, we no longer provide support and opportunities for students to grow into thinkers like Mary Morgan who uses language beautifully as she writes about her horse:

Sun peeps through white sleepy clouds
to touch soft velvety brown.
I ride my beauty
while soft whinnies drift through the swirling
wind
hooves plodding softly,
softly.

Or Christi as she expresses memories of her grandmother:

She is staring at me
with her deep, pretty eyes
I stare back
sometimes I hear her whispers
they echo as if we're in a cave
but in reality, they're echoing –
in the dark silence of my room.

Or A.C. as she writes about a grandparent's death:

The sun once thrilling and turning
from the darkness. Now the
darkness swallows and gulps the sunlight
away from me.
My dark gloom yet to pass away.

Or Michelle who writes about times gone by:

Each glance or wink of an eye was a memory
made forever
Things that were yesterday or even years before
that
Was a memory, every day, every minute, every
second.

Or Anna-Grace or Job or Lindsay or Molly or Ariel or Ebony or Whit or Mary Catherine or Alysha or Jenni or Brittany or Shadow or Drew who, as their teacher writes, "found themselves recalling, for the rest of the school year ... the work we had all done together." To borrow Lucy Calkins' (1994)

words, these students created poetry that “beg[an] in delight and end[ed] in wisdom” (p. 369).

Four days in the sixth grade allowed me to examine beliefs and to solidify understandings about teaching and learning. The students’ work and words reinforce my conviction that we must continue to tell classroom stories to remind teachers, administrators, parents, and policy-makers that thoughtful engagements with language and literature are basic to the education of all children. Relegating those experiences to the category of “enrichment” destroys the very engagements that support students’ growth as thoughtful inquirers who will ultimately make our world a better place.

REFERENCES

- Calkins, L. (1994). **The art of teaching writing**. NH: Heinemann.
- Cambourne, B. (1988). **The whole story: Natural learning and the acquisition of literacy in the classroom**. Auckland, NZ: Scholastic.
- Fletcher, R. & Portalupi (2001) **Writing workshop: The essential guide**. NH: Heinemann.
- Fletcher, R. (1993). **What a writer needs**. NH: Heinemann.
- Glover, M. K. (1999). **A garden of poets: Poetry writing in the elementary classroom**. IL: NCTE.
- Graves, D. (1983). **Writing: Teachers and children at work**. NH: Heinemann.
- Halliday, M. (1975). **Learning how to mean**. London, UK: Edward Arnold.
- Harwayne, S. (1992). **Lasting impressions: Weaving literature into the writing workshop**. NH: Heinemann.
- Heard, G. (1999). **Awakening the heart: Exploring poetry in elementary and middle school**. NH: Heinemann.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). **Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms**. NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Hickman, J. & Cullinan, B. (1989). **Children’s literature in the classroom: Weaving Charlotte’s web**. MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Hindley, J. (1996). **In the company of children**. ME: Stenhouse.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). **The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children**. CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lindfors, J. (1999). **Children’s inquiry: Using language to make sense of the world**. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Moll, L. & Greenberg, J. B. (1990). Creating zones of possibilities: Combining social contexts for instruction. In Moll, L. (Ed.). **Vygotsky and Education: Instructional Implications and Applications of Sociocultural Psychology**. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Murray, D. M. (1996). **Crafting a life in essay, story, poem**. NH: Heinemann.
- Ray, K.W. (1999). **Wondrous words: Writers and writing in the elementary school**. IL: NCTE.
- Ray, K. W. (2001). **The writing workshop: Working through the hard parts (and they’re all hard parts)**. IL: NCTE.
- Rogers, T., Soter, A., Sims Bishop, R. (1997). **Reading across culture: Teaching in a diverse society**. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Rogoff, B. (1990). **Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context**. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). **The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work**. IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Routman, R. (2000). **Conversations: Strategies for teaching, learning and evaluating**. NH: Heinemann.
- Short, K. G., Harste, J. C. & Burke, C. (1996). **Creating classrooms for authors and inquirers**. Second Edition. NH: Heinemann.
- Taylor, D. (1988). **Growing up literate: Learning from inner-city families**. NH: Heinemann.
- Vygotsky, L. (1987). **Mind in society**. MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wells, G. (1999). **Dialogic inquiry: Toward a sociocultural practice and theory of education**. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

CHILDREN’S BOOKS CITED

- Angelou, M. (1993). **Life doesn’t frighten me**. NY: Stewart, Tabori, & Chang.
- Baylor, B. (1986). **I’m in charge of celebrations**. NY: Aladdin.
- Feelings, T. (1993). **Soul looks back in wonder**. NY: Dial Books.
- Gilchrist, J. S. & Greenfield, E. (1998). **Angels**. NY: Hyperion Books for Children.
- Greenfield, E. (1978). **Honey, I love and other love poems**. NY: Harper Collins.
- Greenfield, E. & Gilchrist, J. S. (1991). NY: Puffin Pied Piper Books.
- Hesse, K. (1999). **Come on, rain!** NY: Scholastic Press.
- Strickland, D. S. & Strickland, M. (1994). **Families: Poems Celebrating the African American Experience**. Honesdale, PA: Wordsong, Boyds Mills Press.