This article explores how integrating poetry and writing may engage English students, in particular in relation to the genre of poetry and the associated benefits for students across all year levels. Included are six suggestions for engaging strategies that may be implemented in classrooms, along with assessment tools to monitor student progress.

Integrating

Engagement with poetry may be as basic as a catchy tune heard in an advertisement, or the words of a favourite poem that compels children ‘to be enthralled with words’ (Brian, 2008, p. 22) with or without their teachers. As facilitator of children’s engagement with poetry, teachers expose students to varieties of poetry so they can enjoy its appeal, play with the language and have the opportunity to promote their own position (Knobel & Healey, 1998, p. 74) within the text.

Reading poetry aloud for pleasure inspires reluctant readers to feel confident when reading (Winch, Johnston, March, Ljungdahl, & Holliday, 2006, p. 509), while encouraging students to listen and share in an activity that allows the enjoyment of language as well as assists students in becoming attuned to the ‘natural rhythm of poetry’ (Brian, 2008, p. 24). Whitfield (2009) states immersing students in poetry means students can read and respond in meaningful and enjoyable ways, according to their needs and developmental levels, which can intensify the readers’ senses and imagination. This in turn motivates students to read and write poetry so they can share, connect and create enthusiasm without the benefit of the teacher (Willson, 2002).

My focus relates to level 4 of the Australian Curriculum: English (AC:E) in the areas of Responding to Literature, Reading and Viewing and Writing (ACARA, 2011) which centres on meaning and purpose where students are encouraged to create texts that show understanding of how images and detail can be used to extend key ideas, and create structured texts to explain ideas and understandings (p. 5).

Benefits of integrating poetry and writing

Poetry is a powerful medium for building on students’ knowledge and allowing for the connection to self, others, and the world because poetry encourages expression of emotions, can help to develop higher order thinking skills, and develop ways of knowing (Hughes, 2007, p. 1). Students begin to think outside the box (Sinclair, Neryl, & O’Toole, 2009, p. 15). Demonstrating understanding through personal expression enables students to develop an awareness of, and share, knowledge regarding ideas and emotions that relate to the poetry through varied media, as well as construct new understandings of language and its emotiveness (Sinclair et al., 2009).

Engaging literacy learners through poetry and writing

The language of poetry plays a part in students’ emotional growth (Hansen, 2011) because students experience real life connections and engage in deep thought (Brian, 2008). Teachers who challenge students’ thinking will explore literacy structures as meaningful, ensuring students discover important links between writing and poetry. Students learn how to read poetry as well as think critically about and within the text to understand not only the meaning of a poem but why the author wrote the poem. When students are able to verbalise, see, hear and feel the words they gain a better understanding of the author’s purpose and critique the writing and develop a sensorial response (Hughes, 2011, p. 2).

Developing poetic writing skills, inferencing, and connecting points of view add dimensions to young writers’ capacities for writing. Immersing students in a poem and engaging them in structured writing opportunities to respond creates new meanings that can be shared and enjoyed with others (Winch et al., 2006).

Below, I suggest strategies to integrate poetry and writing. These strategies are adapted from Hancock and Leaver (2006), Tompkins (2009), Eather’s (2010) Writing is Fun web site and Marzano and Pickering (2005).

Sketch to Stretch (Tompkins, 2009)

Sketch to Stretch connects visual meaning with written words. In small groups, students read a poem aloud, discuss it in relation to themes, thoughts, feelings and how these could be interpreted visually which is consistent with NEC
students can build on their academic vocabulary understandings and literal meanings of poetry, to develop higher order thinking skills, (Marzano & Pickering, 2005)

To develop higher order thinking skills, students may further develop ideas through focusing on connecting visual and written content rather than mechanical correctness (p. 92).

**Quickwrites (Tompkins, 2009)**

Ten minute Quickwrites can give students an opportunity to respond to the poem. In this uninterrupted time students write their perceptions connected with what they see and feel. Connecting poems, ideas and inferences in their own words would be a focus of this exercise. Students do not edit their work as this is a time for a free flow of thinking and construction of ideas where visual ideas combined with words may be beneficial in developing higher order thinking skills (p. 92). Students take turns reading their Quickwrites aloud. If used with Sketch-to-Stretch, the Quickwrite can be attached to the sketch so visual and written interpretations are combined. The interpretations of the poem can then be displayed.

**Venn diagrams (Hancock & Leaver, 2006)**

Completing a Venn diagram allows students to develop higher order thinking skills. Students may compare similarities and contrasts that relate to characters, setting, plot, or themes. The teacher gives students with a copy of a Venn diagram template and a copy of the poem the students have previously read for reference; students can work individually or in groups. Students fill in topic heading at the top of each of the circles; similarities are written in the overlapped middle section of the circles. The differences are written in the outer two circle sections.

Students may summarise and explain their findings to the class. Further Venn diagrams could be completed later to compare and contrast other contextual features of poems. Hancock and Leaver (2009) explain this is important so students are able to think more critically and graphically categorise information (p. 68).

**Text graphic representations (Marzano & Pickering, 2005)**

To develop higher order thinking skills, understandings and literal meanings of poetry, students can build on their academic vocabulary (Marzano & Pickering, 2005) by compiling a resource of academic terms to keep in their poetry writing notebooks, a valuable reference as particular terms may need to be used in future poetry writing. The teacher provides copies of a sample notebook page to serve as a model for the students' writing. Using dictionaries, students can look up the definition of the term and spend time thinking about what the term means to them and discuss this with a partner. Following discussions students can write the unfamiliar term at the top of the notebook page. Students work with a partner or the teacher to clarify or further develop understandings (Marzano & Pickering, 2005). Students then construct descriptions, examples and understandings with the dictionary definition. After this is completed the students are encouraged to draw a graphic representation of the chosen term. This will create deeper levels of contextual understanding (Marzano & Pickering, 2005). Hughes (2007) suggests this is important so students are able to understand and see the poem differently and how printed text works to communicate meaning (p. 3).

**Poetry Writing**

Poetry can be written as rhyming, rhythmical, dialogue, or action sequences. Writing poetry based on themes allows students to explore and deepen their feelings, understandings and how the sounds and rhythm of words are a part of meaning and as Winch et al. (2006) suggests, is a fundamental element of the poetic experience (p. 510).

Jenny Eather's (2010) web site has a number of poetry example types, poetry text organisers and structured templates to assist with constructing and writing poems. After choosing a format, the teacher provides students with a hard copy of the structure so students gain an understanding of the specific format. The teacher and students then log onto Eather's (2010) site on the class white board, individual notebook or class computers to enter the poetry section of the site. Students can spend time exploring the poetry section. To scaffold the students’ knowledge, they may take time to share and read some poetry examples.

Following discussions students commence the planning phase of poetry writing. Students may brainstorm and discuss with other students words that relate to their poem that can be used to form new words. In subsequent poetry writing sessions students move into further writing phases and finally complete their poems. Students may choose to explore other poetry forms to transform their poem in imaginative ways so as to embed newly developed higher order thinking skills (Brian, 2008). The poems may be shared as a whole class or in small groups. Displaying the published poems in the
classroom showcases the learning and progress the students are making.

Possible discussions may revolve around characters, setting, impact on the reader, and author purposes. Freebody and Luke’s (1990) reading roles may also be explored. They describe these four roles as being intertwined; understanding and employing these four roles while reading encourages students to respond to the poetry they engage in to effectively access, use, reflect on and respond to the text (Winch et al., 2006, p. 45).

Narrative writing
Adapting the poem into a narrative where the students have the opportunity to transform the characters, themes, plot or setting into other forms is another writing activity. Students choose from many narrative types such as a drama, mystery, adventure or a classical recreation. Using their knowledge and creativity, students learn to explore narrative text writing while engaging with poetry at the same time (Glasswell & Parr, 2009).

The teacher provides students with a copy of the narrative text organiser and log onto Eather’s (2010) web site entering the narrative section. Students explore and deepen their knowledge regarding narratives. The teacher works through specific features of the narrative section, the text organiser template, and the poem that is going to be adapted into narrative story form, with the children. In small groups, students refer to previous lessons and discussion in formulating ideas on which to base their narrative writing. Students will be working as text participants as they will be encouraged to relate their personal and cultural experiences show how a new text can be constructed (Winch et al., 2006, p. 47).

Students may spend time brainstorming, thinking about where, when, who, what and a complication to include in their narrative. In subsequent narrative writing sessions students move into further writing phases to complete their narratives. It is at this time that students will be encouraged to think about how they position themselves as text users (Freebody & Luke, 1990) when interacting with the text and learning how the structure of the text contributes to its meaning and social purposes (Winch et al., 2006, p. 47).

Students may be encouraged to design a diagram to complement their narrative to add contextual meaning and develop their literal and imaginative thinking skills. Possible class discussions could revolve around the choice of characters, settings, complications, solutions, time and place, impact on the reader, and author and reader understandings. The teacher may work through the text analysis processes with the students, encouraging thinking about the author’s purpose, how ideas are expressed, and if the structure of the text contributes to the way the texts ideas and issues are portrayed (Winch et al., 2006, p. 47).

Narratives may be displayed in the classroom. The narratives could be bound into a class book so that students could take turns in borrowing the book, to experience the enjoyment of sharing their, and others’, work with their families and friends.

This is designed to showcase ways in which their engagement with literature positions them as authors. They explain ideas, events and actions, referring closely to selected detail by engaging in problem solving during narrative writing processes to understand what is expected of them, and to work out how well they are meeting these expectations (Glasswell & Parr, 2009, pp. 333–335).

Assessment strategies
Assessment should be valid and reliable (Winch et al., 2006). Poetry and creative writing are processes where personal thoughts, reflections and interpretations are required (Knobel & Healey, 1998). My assessment suggestions are designed to be authentic and relate to real life, with a view to promoting an overall view of student achievement (Winch et al., 2006, p. 144). I have focussed on observation and monitoring including self-assessment and scaffolding students learning(141,194),(854,808) in modified or extended ways (Glasson & Parr, 2009) to ensure the learning experiences provided are based on what students know, can do and will be effective in moving students on (Winch et al., 2006, p. 136). This assessment is consistent with the NEC (ACARA, 2011) outcomes, that can be used at all learning levels.

Devising an appropriate poem rubric and a narrative writing rubric can demonstrate how students are able to self assess which is useful for teachers to gain an understanding of how students rate their own performances and ways in which they have engaged the tasks (Glasson & Pickering, 2009). Pre- and post-journal entries, Quickwrites and notebook entries are other ways to assess learning outcomes. These assessment strategies are useful in examining what developing writers know and can do (Glasson & Parr, 2009) as well as informing teachers of what needs teaching next, and ways in which this can be done in further engaging students, and when (Glasson & Parr, p. 354).

Discussions and anecdotal records taken from individual and group writing conferences provide evidence of the writing phases. This allows teachers to ascertain how the students handle integrated poetry and writing tasks and would also be a beneficial way to gain understandings of how students interpret the text they are reading and
writing as well as the meaning that is conveyed (Winch et al., p. 295).

Self-reflection, peer feedback and discussions are assessments that may be implemented. Providing constructive feedback on students’ individual portfolio entries, encourages students to achieve individual success criteria in regard to lesson goals and to develop perceptions as poetic writers and their attitudes associated with this (Winch et al., 2006). This important feedback is consistent with the NEC (ACARA, 2011) requirements in assisting students and teachers in monitoring progress and ascertaining further teaching to achieve learning outcomes. The strategies I have suggested are only a few that are practical in assessing writing, poetry activities, and learning strategies. Teachers should, as a matter of professional practice and consistent with the NEC (ACARA, 2011), constantly reflect and question the varieties of assessment strategies they are using in relation to their effectiveness in differentiating instruction and assessment to suit all learners (Glasson & Parr, 2009, p. 353).

Conclusion

I have described methods to integrate poetry and writing. Students should reap the rewards through learning how language can resonate with them in a more satisfying manner (Brian, 2009, p. 25). As Hughes (2007) says, paying attention to the language and rhythms of poetry helps connect and build oral language skills (p. 1); children who have well-developed oral language skills are more likely to experience higher achievements in reading and writing (p. 1). Immersion in poetry and writing that is enjoyable, purposeful and meaningful assists students in being able to express themselves, treat others with respect and take on others’ point of view. I contend this will progress the multiple goals of literacy development supported through true learning which is not a fixed product to be rehearsed and delivered (Hughes, 2007, p. 3).

References


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