



POETRY FOR SOCIAL STUDIES: *Poems, Standards, and Strategies*

Sylvia M. Vardell

Periodically, I work with classroom teachers to try out new books, techniques, and strategies. I discovered two important things while working with Kate Hunnicutt's class over a period of several weeks in Grand Prairie, Texas. We worked on several poems together, and the students asked to perform some of them again and again. I'm not sure whether it was the poems themselves or their unorthodox formats, or whether it was the way we performed them as a class. But it was a good example of two things: Number one, poetry has a place in social studies; number two, poetry reading should be active and involve students in the reading as much as possible.

The brevity, conceptual focus, and rich vocabulary of poetry make it a natural teaching tool for social studies. However, even the word *poetry* can put many people off. It reminds them of forced memorization, of searching for hidden symbolism, or of counting meter for iambic pentameter. Many teachers have had negative experiences that keep them from sharing poetry with their students. Students then develop a similar dislike or apathy for poetry. Yet every reader can find poems that speak to him or her, given the proper introduction. That is the key: providing open access to poetry

Above: A passerby adjusts poetry magnets on display at the University of Pennsylvania, Friday, April 3, 1998, in Philadelphia. To celebrate National Poetry Month, Philadelphia was one of about a dozen cities taking part in the Magnetic Poetry Wall Project.

AP Photo/Eddy Palumbo

without roadblocks of formal analysis. Opportunity for in-depth responding and understanding can follow when teachers create an environment for spontaneous pleasure in poetry. Poet and teacher Georgia Heard puts it this way: "Kids need to become friends with poetry as well. They need to know that poems can comfort them, make them laugh, help them remember, [and] nurture them to know and understand themselves more completely."¹

Poetry offers several practical benefits. Brevity of form is one. Poetry has the advantage of coming "packaged" in very few words, relatively speaking. Poems can be read and reread in very little time. And each rereading can be approached in a slightly different way, through choral reading or poetry performance. The length is less intimidating to students who might be overwhelmed by longer prose and streams of new vocabulary. Although poetry may also present new words and concepts, this shorter appearance provides a motivating advantage. The short format of poetry also means it can be added to a pre-existing social studies lesson without drastic readjustment.

The strong oral quality of poetry is another pedagogical plus. Poetry is meant to be read aloud. A poem's meaning is more clearly communicated when both read and heard. As poet Brod Bagert has said, just as songs are not just sheet music, poetry is not just text.² This helps students acquire correct word pronunciations and aids with their overall listening comprehension. In addition, the rhythm and/or rhyme of poetry can help students begin to get a sense of the sound of words and phrases using artful, yet natural language, especially for English as a Second Language (ESL) students.³ Learning the vocabulary of social studies is a constant challenge for students, but when students participate in choral reading, they have the opportunity to develop their own oral fluency, making the new words their own. Experimenting with various arrangements can also help with expression and builds student confidence.

Also, poems tend to be about one subject. This crystallized focus can aid students as they use their word knowledge to make sense of new content. A poem's context can help the reader or listener incorporate new vocabulary. When students read the poem, hear the poem read aloud, and participate in a choral reading of the poem, they have had multiple modes of reinforcement for meaningful language learning. As Sharon Gill found in her classroom use of poetry, "Poetry is written to be read again and again ... Repeated readings allow children to gain fluency and build sight vocabulary while having successful reading experiences. Poetry also contains elements of predictability such as rhyme, rhythm and repetition which make reading easier."⁴ Fairly abstract concepts such as patriotism, democracy, or identity, for example, can become more personal and real by reading and discussing a well-written poem.

Finally, poetry packs a punch. Poetry embodies emotion, imagination, and often both. It can help us see old things in new ways. It can make us laugh out loud, or stop and think. It is this element that often grabs readers and listeners first. It's a rich literary heritage that children should experience throughout the curriculum.⁵ And students naturally connect with contemporary poems when guided by an enthusiastic teacher. That's where we

SPEAK UP

BY JANET S. WONG

You're Korean, aren't you?

Yes.

Why don't you speak Korean?

Just don't, I guess.

Say something Korean.

I don't speak it.

I can't.

C'mon. Say something.

Halmoni. Grandmother.

Haraboji. Grandfather.

Imo. Aunt.

Say some other stuff.

Sounds funny.

Sounds strange.

Hey, let's listen to you for a change.

Listen to me?

Say some foreign words.

But I'm American, can't you see?

Your family came from somewhere else.

Sometime.

But I was born here.

So was I.

"Speak Up" from *Good Luck Gold and Other Poems* by Janet S. Wong. Copyright (c) 1994 by Janet S. Wong. Reprinted with permission of the author and Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division.

must begin. Enthusiastically sharing poems out loud with students for the pleasure of the words, sounds, rhymes, and meaning is our first poetic responsibility. And it can happen in any class. In social studies, it can add the novelty and variety sometimes missing from the traditional textbook-based curriculum.

Poetry is not just for reading, writing, and language arts. It's brevity, conceptual focus, and rich vocabulary also make it a natural teaching tool for the content areas, social studies, science, and mathematics. We have long recognized the value of children's literature for teaching social studies with the joint National Council for the Social Studies and Children's Book Council annual publication of the "Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People." But look closely at the "Essential Skills for Social Studies" (from the NCSS *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*) and consider the possible poetry connections.⁶

- Acquiring Information: Reading Skills: "Reading for literal meaning, main ideas, inferences, opinions, bias"
- Acquiring Information: Vocabulary: "Sight words, context clues, essential social studies terms"
- Organizing and Using Information: Thinking Skills: "Classifying, interpreting, analyzing, summarizing, synthesizing, evaluating"
- Interpersonal Relationships and Social Participation Skills: "Exploring personal convictions, beliefs, feelings; leading, following, cooperating, compromising"

NCSS's Curriculum Standards identify ten strands of study within the discipline. In brief, these could be summarized as focused on culture, history, geography, identity, institutions, government, economics, technology, global connections, and citizenship. Pile up the poetry books, invite the librarian or media specialist, challenge the students with a poetry "scavenger hunt." There are many examples of poems focused in each of these subtopics; the list below is just a beginning. The particular poems provided here have been carefully selected and piloted with many classes at the intermediate level (grades 4-6) with great success. They can be used to introduce the topic of a lesson, to supplement the content, or to extend the themes studied. Students can read them chorally using any of the strategies that follow. These poetry "nuggets" can help provide students with a "hook" for incorporating new information or as a follow up to review the objectives of the lesson. When integrated into traditional social studies lessons, they also provide motivation and variety.

❶ CULTURE

- "Speak Up" by Janet S. Wong (*Good Luck Gold*)
- "Jackie Robinson" by Lucille Clifton (*American Sports Poems*)
- "The Earth and the People" by Edward Field (*Magic Words*)
- "Observations; #16" by Jo Carson (*Stories I Ain't Told Nobody Yet*)
- "I Am a Jew" by Franta Bass (*I Never Saw Another Butterfly*)

❷ TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE

- "Napoleon" by Miroslav Holub (*This Same Sky*)
- "Not Anymore" by Kalli Dakos (*Don't Read This Book, Whatever You Do!*)
- "A Song of Greatness" translated by Mary Austin (*My Song Is Beautiful*)
- "Harriet Tubman" by Eloise Greenfield (*Honey, I Love*)
- "Crazy Boys" by Beverly McLoughland (*Hand in Hand*)

❸ PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS

- "Someday Someone Will Bet That You Can't Name All Fifty States" by Judith Viorst (*Sad Underwear*)
- "Classroom Globe" by Rebecca Kai Dotlich (*School Supplies*)
- "A Home Like a Hiccup" by Dennis Lee (*The Ice Cream Store*)
- "Geography" by Eve Merriam (*The Singing Green*)
- "What the Teacher Said When Asked: What Er We Avin For Geography, Miss?" by John Agard (*A Caribbean Dozen*)

❹ INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY

- "Blueprints" by Sara Holbrook (*Am I Naturally This Crazy?*)
- "So I'm Proud" by Jean Little (*Hey World, Here I Am*)
- "Face It" by Janet Wong (*A Suitcase of Seaweed*)
- "Mix-ups" by Kalli Dakos (*The Goof Who Invented Homework*)
- "Who Am I?" by Felice Holman (*My Song is Beautiful*)

❺ INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS

- "They Put Me in the Stupid Class" by Douglas Florian (*Bing Bang Boing*)
- "If Kids Were Put in Charge of Schools" by Kalli Dakos (*Don't Read This Book, Whatever You Do!*)
- "Sing a Song of People" by Lois Lenski (*The Random House Book of Poetry*)
- "The Noise of the Village" by Ki'miwun (*Earth Always Endures*)
- "What Is a Family?" by Mary Ann Hoberman (*Fathers, Mothers, Sisters, Brothers*)

❻ POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE

- "When I Am President" by Felice Holman (*The Song in my Head*)
- "Ode to the Mayor" by Gary Soto (*Neighborhood Odes*)
- "The Loneliness of Lincoln" by X. J. Kennedy (*Hand in Hand*)
- "To Meet Mr. Lincoln" by Eve Merriam (*Sing a Song of Popcorn*)
- "John Hancock" by Lee Bennett Hopkins (*Hand in Hand*)

❼ PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION

- "How Things Work" by Gary Soto (*Fire in My Hands*)
- "Lunch Money" by Carol Diggory Shields (*Lunch Money*)
- "I Once Tried to Steal from Charlie's Market" by Gary Soto (*Poetry After Lunch*)
- "Accounting for Friends" by Sara Holbrook (*I Never Said I Wasn't Difficult*)

- “Money Order” by Janet S. Wong (*A Suitcase of Seaweed*)

VIII SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIETY

- “Plugging In” by Shel Silverstein (*Falling Up*)
- “A New Song for ‘Old Smoky’” by Eve Merriam (*A Poem for a Pickle*)
- “Parking Lot Full” by Eve Merriam (*Click, Rumble, Roar; Poems About Machines*)
- “I Think My Computer Is Crazy” by Jack Prelutsky (*A Pizza the Size of the Sun*)
- “Headphone Harold” by Shel Silverstein (*Falling Up*)

IX GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

- “Wars” by Jean Little (*Hey World, Here I Am*)
- “The Last Good War—and Afterward” by Isabel Joshlin Glaser (*Hand in Hand*)
- “Enemies” by Charlotte Zolotow (*Hand in Hand*)
- “Brothers” by Langston Hughes (*Listen Children*)
- “I’d Like to Go Alone” by Alena Synkova (*I Never Saw Another Butterfly*)

X CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES

- “Pledge” by Carol Diggory Shields (*Lunch Money*)
- “Put Something In” by Shel Silverstein (*A Light in the Attic*)
- “My Pa Was Never Slave” by Harriet Wheatley (*Listen Children*)
- “I, Too” by Langston Hughes (*Singing America*)
- “Border Towns” by Roberto Duran (*Here Is My Kingdom*)

Poetry Performance

When many of these poems were shared with Hunnicutt’s fourth and fifth graders, they expressed surprise that the poem topics were still part of social studies class. They had so much fun reading the poems out loud in different group configurations that they were easily engaged in learning important concepts and often followed up the reading with questions and discussion. How do we involve students in reading aloud poetry in social studies without putting them “on the spot” or taking too much class time orchestrating the oral reading? What follows are seven strategies for making poems “come alive” with students. They are provided in order of difficulty, beginning with more teacher involvement and ending with greater student involvement.

The first step in inviting children into the oral world of poetry is simply reading poems aloud to the class. Modeling is always the best place to start. Cullinan, in fact, recommends that we read a poem at least twice, although children may often ask to hear it even more times.⁷ Reading poems out loud to students helps children attend both to the sounds of the words and lines, as well as to their meaning. It sets the stage for student participation in the read-aloud process. It familiarizes them with what the words of the poem should sound like and engages their listening comprehension in making sense of the poem’s meaning. By sharing poems out loud, the teacher subtly extends an invitation to students to follow his or her lead in trying on poetry. Once invited to participate, students can be creative in inventing their own methods of choral presentation.

1. Teacher modeling

As the teacher/model, we begin by choosing poems we enjoy personally; then we share them with expression and enthusiasm. Beware of the tendency to read lines, especially rhyming lines, in a sing-song voice. Chatton recommends studying the line breaks to determine how the poem should be read.⁸ Don’t rush the lines; look around the room. If possible, display the words of the poem on the chalkboard or with an overhead. Seeing the words while hearing the words is additionally beneficial. Here are two examples from the previous list that are particularly effective for teacher-led read alouds.

- “How Things Work” by Gary Soto
- “A Home Like a Hiccup” by Dennis Lee

2. Everyone reads the poem in unison

Now that the stage is set for hearing poems out loud, invite students to join in unison read alouds (if they haven’t already jumped in). Choose shorter poems with a strong rhythm, and read the poem out loud first as a model. Even nonreaders can participate in reading aloud poems because their voices needn’t carry the whole poem alone. Some examples that work well for unison oral reading include the following:

- “Headphone Harold” by Shel Silverstein
- “The Noise of the Village” by Ki’miwun

3. Students join in on a repeated line or refrain

This third strategy for choral reading requires that students learn about timing, and jump in only when their word or line comes up. However, they still participate as a whole class group, with no pressure to perform individually. As always, the teacher reads the poem out loud first. Then in repeated readings, students join in on a line or refrain that pops up repeatedly in the poem. Many poems are particularly effective for this performance strategy, including the following:

- “Napoleon” by Miroslav Holub
- “Harriet Tubman” by Eloise Greenfield

4. Two student groups: call and response

Once students are familiar with poems read aloud in parts, try dividing the class in half to read poems in a “call and response” method. The best poems for this poetry performance strategy are those whose lines are structured in a back and forth manner or those with two clearly different points of view. Here are two appropriate examples:

- “Face It” by Janet S. Wong
- “Wars” by Jean Little

5. Multiple groups; multiple stanzas

As these strategies become familiar, the students will be eager to try even more challenging choral reading methods. Using multiple small groups is the next step in bringing poems to life with oral presentation. Obviously, this puts the focus on fewer students; thus, it may take more practice. But when students have participated in unison and large-group read alouds, this is not usually a problem. Take the following poems and look for

natural stanza breaks to assign groups for various lines.

- “When I Am President” by Felice Holman
- “So I’m Proud” by Jean Little
- “Money Order” by Janet S. Wong

6. Individual solo lines

Some poems are list-like in their structure; these work well for what is sometimes called “linearound” choral reading in which individual voices read individual lines. After students have participated in group variations, most are usually eager to volunteer to read a line solo. However, be sure the poem is familiar before students volunteer for individual lines. ESL students can feel especially vulnerable about mispronouncing words or messing up the timing. With practice, this interplay of group voices and individual ones can be very powerful for bringing the poem to life. Brod Bagert advises students to think about “What face should I make when I say these words?” to help them create appropriate facial expressions, voice inflections, and even body movements.⁹ Try “Pledge” by Carol Diggory Shields and have individual voices alternating with the whole class in this mock recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. [Be sure to clarify what the correct Pledge of Allegiance should sound like beforehand.] Or for older students, the poem “Observations; #16” by Jo Carson deals with stereotypes we often have of people.

7. Singing poems

One final strategy for performing poetry is singing the poems. This is not a particularly complex method, and it is irresistibly fun. Students of all ages love the connection between music and poems. Basically, you match poems to song tunes that contain the same meter. It seems to be most effective with tunes that have a strong, rhythmic beat such as “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” or “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” The appeal of music is undeniable, and this musical connection with poetry makes these poems especially memorable. Judith Viorst’s poem, “Someday Someone Will Bet That You Can’t Name All Fifty States” is a hilarious poem to sing to the tune of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” while teaching the state names at the same time.

Other Creative Alternatives

Once the invitation to share poems chorally has been extended, students can generate their own creative alternatives. Poet and teacher Georgia Heard reported, “One first grade class performed a poem using silent movements, and the rest of the class guessed which poem they were performing.”¹⁰ Barbara Chatton challenges us to consider adding pantomime, sound effects, and background music and to consider inviting students to translate their favorite poems from English into their native languages or into American Sign Language.¹¹ Students may want to adapt their favorite poems to rap, chants, yells, puppetry, props, gestures, or clapping. Alma Flor Ada and her coauthors of the poetry program *A Chorus of Cultures* suggest that “physical involvement puts children at ease and encourages listening comprehension” and that “representing the actions of a poem, the feelings in the poem, allowing even for silent participation,

especially for children acquiring English” is essential to their language learning.¹² An excellent resource for more creative presentation ideas is Caroline Feller Bauer’s *Poetry Break*.¹³

Responding to Poems

“Passive listening isn’t enough Understanding can deepen enjoyment Show them how to uncover the subtle nuances of meaning and what poets do to forge an emotional connection with the reader ... go far beyond a passive or superficial acceptance,” stated Amy McClure in her year-long study of actual poetry sharing in elementary classrooms.¹⁴ The teacher lays the foundation for understanding poetry by first providing enjoyment through an emphasis on oral presentation. Thus, students incorporate the heard and spoken word into their vocabularies before attempting to read and write these words. The same could be said for the follow-up response to poetry in social studies teaching. As we invite students to dig deeper into the meaning or story of the poem, we need to begin with oral discussion and small-group sharing to help students articulate what they see. How do we proceed without butchering the poem?

Georgia Heard, who is often a poet-in-residence in the schools, says, “Rather than standing up in the front of the room and asking questions about a poem I already know the answers to, I want to put my students in the position of learning about the poem for themselves. The key to learning how to enter the door of a difficult poem is to teach our students how to unlock the door themselves, and for them to find pleasure in this process.”¹⁵ In Amy McClure’s work in the schools, she found that “the children still seemed unsure of what was expected and were more concerned about offering ‘correct’ answers than exploring alternative possibilities.”¹⁶ How do we avoid this trap, this conditioning from our own past? McClure suggests using one or two of these facilitating questions:

What did you think?

What did you like about this poem?

Does this remind you of anything you know about?

What is the poet saying here?

Any comments about that?

Let’s discuss what is going on here.

What is this about?¹⁷

Alternative grouping may be more helpful than asking the right questions. Ask students to turn to a partner and talk with her or him about “what the poet is saying here.” Students are often more comfortable sharing their opinions with one classmate, rather than with the class as a whole. One teacher, June Jacko, used art projects in small groups to help children explore multicultural poetry. Each group had a different poem, and after all the poems had been introduced, read by the teacher, and performed by the class, each group created a mini-mural to illustrate its group’s poem. Then they explained their murals to the entire class. This kind of response activity helped students think deeply about a poem, talk critically with classmates about the words and ideas, make connections to the lesson’s content, and express themselves creatively regarding their own interpretations of the poem’s meaning.

Conclusion

Connecting poetry with the social studies offers so many opportunities for teaching information, encouraging interaction, and providing inspiration. Hunnicutt's students found poetry to be a natural way to learn, participate, and express themselves. They learned about social studies, they learned about language, they learned about themselves, and they learned about others. As poet Naomi Shihab Nye so aptly reminds us, "We have no borders when we read."¹⁸

Notes

1. Georgia Heard, *Awakening the Heart* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1999), 20.
2. Brod Bagert, "Act It Out: Making Poetry Come Alive," in Bernice Cullinan, ed., *Invitation to Read: More Children's Literature in the Reading Program* (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1992).
3. Sylvia M. Vardell, Nancy L. Hadaway, and Terrell A. Young, "Choosing and Sharing Poetry with ESL Students," *Book Links* 11 (2002): 51-56.
4. Sharon Gill, "Shared Book Experience with Poetry," *The State of Reading, Journal of the Texas State Reading Association* 3 (1996): 28.
5. Bernice Cullinan, Marilyn Scala, and Virginia Schroder, *Three Voices: An Invitation To Poetry Across the Curriculum* (York, Me.: Stenhouse Publishers, 1995).
6. "In Search of a Scope and Sequence for Social Studies," *Social Education* 53 (1989): 376-385.
7. Cullinan, Scala, and Schroder.
8. Barbara Chatton, *Using Poetry Across the Curriculum* (Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx Press, 1993).
9. Bagert.
10. Georgia Heard, *Awakening the Heart* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1999), 13.
11. Barbara Chatton, *Using Poetry Across the Curriculum* (Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx Press, 1993).
12. Alma Flor Ada, Violet Harris, and Lee Bennett Hopkins, *A Chorus of Cultures: Developing Literacy Through Multicultural Poetry* (Carmel, Calif.: Hampton-Brown Books, 1993), 32.
13. Caroline Feller Bauer, *The Poetry Break: An Annotated Anthology with Ideas for Introducing Children to Poetry* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1995).
14. Amy McClure, *Sunrises and Songs: Reading and Writing Poetry in the Classroom* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1990).
15. *Ibid.*, 43.
16. *Ibid.*, 49.
17. *Ibid.*, 47.
18. Naomi Shihab Nye, *The Tree Is Older Than You Are* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), iv.

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