The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat is committed to providing teachers with current research on instruction and learning. The opinions and conclusions contained in these monographs are, however, those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies, views, or directions of the Ontario Ministry of Education or The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat.
The Challenges of Teaching Poetry

Much has been written about the problems associated with teaching poetry. More than other genres, poetry seems to elicit the most groans from students. Often language arts teachers report feeling uncomfortable teaching poetry, either because they aren’t sure how to teach it effectively (owing to lack of pedagogical role models), or because they find it elusive themselves.

The dominant model of poetry teaching, particularly for older students, has been to teach poetry through print text and to focus on finding one meaning to be dissected. In contrast, poets emphasize the importance of hearing the poem read aloud (lifting the poem from the page), engaging with it, and probing for deeper meaning through discussion with others. If we want our students to understand how literature, and poetry in particular, brings them to a deeper understanding in life, we need to find meaningful ways to engage them with poetry.

Poetry’s Power to Improve Literacy

It is important for students to be able to read and write or construct texts in multiple genres. Moving beyond pen and paper and using a variety of representing strategies (including visual arts or drama, for example) provide students opportunities to express themselves and demonstrate their understanding in alternate ways.

A focus on oral language development through the reading and performing of poetry acknowledges that sound is meaning. When we hear the sound of the words in a poem read aloud, we gain a better understanding of the meaning of the writing. We can involve students in the dramatic exploration of poems in a variety of ways, including choral reading, readers’ theatre, dance drama, shared reading, or role play. Such approaches provide opportunities for students to play with the words of a poem and to experience it lifted from the page.

This kind of attention to the language and rhythms of a poem serves to expand oral and written vocabulary. Research tells us that children with well-developed oral skills are more likely to have higher achievement in reading and writing as well. It also helps evoke a sensorial response to the poem. Students should be encouraged to express the kinds of connections to feelings and senses that they experience, ideally in small or large groups where they can discuss these responses among themselves.

By involving their students in such performances and discussions, as well as in the reading and writing of poetry, teachers can support the multiple goals of literacy development, including making inferences, identifying the main idea, making judgments and drawing conclusions, clarifying and developing points of view, and making connections.

Poetry in a Digital Age

Literacy includes an understanding of how texts are constructed (taking into consideration the author’s assumptions, the targeted audience, and the medium used) and how a variety of forms of representation work together to convey meaning. Kress argues that very soon the screen (whether TV, computer, cell phone, or other emerging technology) will govern all of our communication practices. Students will understand language use within an electronic medium. In digital environments, different modes of expression or “modalities” – aural, visual, gestural, spatial, and linguistic – come together in one environment in ways that re-shape the relationship between printed word and image or sound. This change in the materiality of text – that is, the media that are used to create the text – inevitably changes the way we read/receive the text and has important implications for the way we construct/write our own texts.
Consider a group of students in an Ontario school who used Corel Presentations to create a Seuss-like poem for a class project. The students combined sound/music, text, and images to synthesize their ideas. In one student’s words, not only was the project “fun” but students were able to “see poetry differently” when they created their poems on screen. The use of new media adds multiple layers of meaning and interpretation of a poem in ways that are not available with a conventional textual format.

Exploring Poetry Through New Media

Our students come to school with literacy experiences and skills that remain largely untapped in the classroom setting. They are accustomed to reading texts that combine image, sound, and words, which are often found in digital spaces that are bound up in social practices. Consider how many hours students log on MSN, MySpace, Facebook, or Runescape. How might we help our students further develop their visual and digital literacy skills to think more critically about how images, sounds, and print text work together to communicate meaning?

Poetry is meant to be lifted from the printed page and explored in multi-modal ways (visually, gesturally, aurally). The use of new digital media for reading, writing, and representing poetry encourages an exploration of the relationship between text and image and how images and sound might be used to mediate meaning-making.

New media have an immersive and performative potential that encourages students to get inside a poem and play with it. Giving students opportunities to create poems or respond to and annotate existing poems using new media provides them with opportunities to use the technology in meaningful ways. Following are two examples of how teachers with even minimal technology skills might use new media to explore poetry:

• **Writing hypermedia responses:** Students can use HyperStudio or the hyperlinking function in PowerPoint or Corel Presentations to create links from key words or phrases in an existing poem or a poem that they have written. Students might create links that take their reader/viewer to a written personal response, to a definition of a poetic convention used in the poem, to an image that the student feels illuminates the poem, to an external link providing an oral reading or biographical information about the poet, or even to a video clip that shows a dramatic performance of the poem. Adding visual or auditory components to poetry opens up new ways of using language and experiencing literature.

• **Creating digital poetry:** Students can use PhotoStory3 or MovieMaker to create their own digital poems or to represent an existing poem through multimedia. These programs are very simple to use and provide students with simple instructions through the creation process. Students can use scanned or downloaded images or, even better, take their own photos with a digital camera. They organize their images and use the voice recording feature to read the poem aloud. They can add sound effects, a soundtrack of music they have created, or clips of music that come with the program. Most significantly for the study of poetry, these new media allow students to have oral readings linked with their print version of the poem, an approach that honours the multimodal nature of poetry and students’ multiple literacies.

Digital Poetry Performance

Poetry – the “screen-size art” – lends itself nicely to the kinds of digital explorations and applications outlined above. The emergence of new technologies allows us to expand our ideas about how poetry might be performed in the classroom. Performance, many would argue, is what is breathing new life into poetry in contemporary society. A poem accompanied by visual images and annotations can be seen as a new text, a different way of performing the poem. Creating poetry using new media views performance as a vehicle for exploration and learning, rather than as a fixed product to be rehearsed and delivered as a final event.
Our students are already immersed in new media and the question is no longer whether we should use digital technologies in the classroom, but rather how they are being integrated into the curricula. Although access to resources continues to be an issue, principals need to encourage and support classroom teachers in developing digital skills to improve literacy learning. In addition, teacher preparation programs need to ensure that teacher candidates are fully equipped to integrate new media in a classroom context.

References