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Enhancing Poetry Writing Through Technology: The Yin and the Yang

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This paper describes the outcome of an innovative mentoring program at a midwestern university that paired technology faculty and methods faculty in order to form partnerships to facilitate the modeling of technology for preservice teachers. Both faculty members concluded that topics in seeming juxtaposition such as poetry and technology could provide successful models of integration. Prior applications within poetry instruction mostly included incorporating visuals or using electronic postings. These applications treat technology as an addition rather than a true partner reaching into the actual writing of poetry. Conversely, this paper describes the creation of useful applications for enhancing poetry writing through technology for elementary school students.

AS PART OF AN INNOVATIVE mentoring program at a midwestern university, faculty members and technology faculty or doctoral students are paired together to create partnerships that would facilitate modeling technology for preservice teachers (Merkley & Schmidt, 1996; Thompson, Schmidt & Hadjiyianni, 1995; Zachariades & Roberts, 1996). The technology half of our partnership is the Associate Director of the Center for Technology in Learning and Teaching while the other half is a faculty member in reading and language arts methods. This paper is a slice of our story and concerns the mentoring experience which led to the creation of some useful applications for enhancing poetry writing through technology for elementary school students.

For some, the mere thought of combining technology and poetry is an abomination because of the historical contexts preceding these entities. Stereotypically, many educators envision technology with hard descriptors. As the partnership grew between the language arts instructor and the technology director, we generated Table 1 to show how historically our two fields have been labeled in completely opposite terms. By referring to Table 1, with these labels side by side, one sees the discrepancies rather than the possibility of poetry and technology becoming harmonious partners. Hence, we forged the idea of our seemingly opposite fields creating positive energy in the combination or the yin and yang.

Seeing the power of technology as a tool in our methods courses can be elusive to some teacher educators. Papert and Solomon (1971) noted early on that it is not technology's lack of relevancy, but our own prejudices and shortsightedness, which cause difficulty in seeing its many applications. These stereotypes result in technology and poetry being seen as apparent opposites. However, our mentoring partnership overcame the initial stereotypes and in the process uncovered a strong rationale for applications using technology and poetry writing for elementary school students.

Poetry Writing with Children

Some feel poetry is not genuine poetry unless it emanates from the soul and is placed on the blank page (Kreuzer, 1955; Rosenthal, 1987;

Simpson, 1988; Zillman, 1966). However, our experiences with elementary students, and even adults, reveal that the blank page often intimidates. Consequently, providing a starting place by using formulae allows students to begin poetry writing in a non-threatening structure (Grossman, 1991). Likewise, Tompkins (1998, p. 451) instructs preservice teachers that “students can have successful experiences writing poetry if they use poetic formulas.” Therefore, a respected and supportive route for teachers concerned about poetry writing is to introduce a poetry formula, share examples, review the formula, create a collaborative poem, and allow students to continue individually by following the writing process (Tompkins, 2000).

Table 1. Stereotypic Descriptors of Technology and Poetry

| Technology: the yin | Poetry: the yang |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Scientific / Hard | Unscientific / Soft |
| Objective / Analytical | Subjective |
| Impersonal | Personal |
| From the head | From the heart |
| Formulaic | Serendipitous |
| Without emotion | A distillation of emotion |
| Computational | Interpretative / Creative |
| Inflexible | Flexible |
| Artificial | Art |
| Functional | Traditional |
| Practical | Disconnected from practicality |
| Progressive / Forward thinking | Humanistic / Reflective in nature |

One assumption throughout this paper is that providing formula poems and teacher support allows students to explore and succeed in poetry writing. Tompkins (2000) notes that formulae are not meant to be rigidly adhered to, but rather to create a scaffold or organization for

enhancing meaning. Additionally, she adds that because of the formulae, many students experience success in poetry writing. Many, including Kenneth Koch, author of Wishes, Lies, and Dreams (1970) and Rose, Where Did You Get that Red? (1973), advocate using formulae which provide some structure, yet are open-ended and divergent enough to allow for a personal "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility." This quote is attributed to the famous poet, William Wordsworth, in (Brussell, 1988, p. 444). Therefore, many of the current technological applications discussed in this paper employ options, which include poetry formulae.

Technology Applications within Poetry

While many have made worthy technological applications within poetry instruction, most of these applications are related to visual presentations with poetry, such as laserdisc technology (Schneider, 1993); multimedia projects (Armstrong & Yetter-Vassot, 1994; Schneider, 1993); tele-conferencing (Polin, 1990; Krebs, 1994); electronic postings (Reiss, 1996), and distance education to write and edit poetry (Taylor, 1989). These applications treat technology as an addition rather than a true partner which reaches into the actual writing of poetry.

In contrast, Preckshot (1985) found that technological advances had not compromised the creation or production of modern poetry. She concluded that real poets had not lost the originality of expression that is a key component of poetry. Another researcher, Madian (1993), notes that student poets could discover their personal strengths using inquiry-based approaches such as an "I-search" in a model study of combining poetry with technology in a true partnership. Its singularity highlights the paucity of research reports of such collaborations.

Poetry Writing, Technology, and the Writing Process

When applying the stages of the writing process, the prewriting stage is often a recursive one. Never linear, prewriting becomes a way of gathering and ruminating ideas. Surely, paper and pencil allow for great prewriting experiences, but technology offers unique nonlinear links that are motivating and also enhance and support the way students think

about poetry. Technological applications abound that will create nonlinear databases and allow the author to collect writing ideas and elaborate on them in ways that will energize the drafting process. Student poets may use *Inspiration* to brainstorm ideas. Some teachers may prefer *Kidspiration*, which is specifically for K-3 use, and has pre-formed webs to use with the creation of story maps or character development. (See <http://www.inspiration.com>).

Likewise, *PowerPoint* may be used as a motivational sieve to catch great poetry ideas. Student poets can walk through a short *PowerPoint* presentation created by their teacher with empty text boxes designed to generate lots of ideas. For example, the major headings from the classic Wishes, Lies, and Dreams (Koch, 1970) can be used so that student poets can document all of their ideas.

Spreadsheets, such as *Excel*, can be used similarly to idea gathering formats for prewriting. For example, our students create sense charts prior to drafting using *Excel*. Using sense charts, students can start to recreate the particular subject or scene of the poem. Without even requiring them to do so, phrases and ideas from this chart find their way into their rough draft. We gave this example of a sense chart, which was from a family going through a divorce, putting away the Christmas decorations, and knowing they had had their last Christmas totally together. Prewriting activities such as these allow student poets to "step into" the scene as well as to use appeals to the senses throughout the first draft of their poems. (See Appendix A)

Another beneficial tool we have used with students has been *Filemaker Pro*. With *Filemaker Pro*, students can store and organize any number of configurations of information. The teacher or the user can create a template that will allow them to later sort and access the information. The language arts methods instructor had always kept an "author's idea file" using index cards, but the technology mentor shared some ways to store these ideas on *Filemaker Pro*. We created these headings: female names, male names, scenarios or subjects to write about, catchy phrases, thought-provoking quotations, and possible titles. Keeping a "technological" author's notebook (Roberts, 1999-2000) and

utilizing *Filemaker Pro* sorting function puts ideas for writing in a much more accessible and useable form.

One tool application that continues to attract many students and one that we found to help preservice teachers see the beauty and flexibility of poetry utilizes *HyperStudio 4*. By creating a *HyperStudio* stack with tutorial examples of poetry forms (Examples: haiku, diamante, biopoems, etc), students are extended invitations to both read and write original poems. Once students interact with the *HyperStudio 4* program by including some of their original poems, the final product consisting of various stacks can serve the same purpose as a class book. Previously, software formats such as *PowerPoint* and *KidPix* did not allow the kind of linking capabilities of *HyperStudio*, but newer versions offer the production of a slide show. *KidPix Deluxe 3* can produce a slide show with still or moving pictures and *PowerPoint* now has linking capabilities that allow students and teachers to use this software as their presentation medium.

Software Applications for Use in the Writing Process and Poetry

Cochran-Smith (1991) reported that, keyboarding and computer expertise alone does not appear to be significant factors influencing students' writing or strategies for thinking and writing. In much the same fashion, Russell (1991) cautioned that the relationship between technology and writing is complex. By performing a meta-analysis of 21 related studies, Russell (1991) noted that whatever increases in the quality of writing may very well be due to social interactions within computer labs rather than the actual word processing technology. Another study (Bangert-Drowns, 1993) reported small increases in writing quality with word processing and students using word processing generally wrote longer compositions than those pen and paper students. Also, less skilled writers tended to benefit more from word processing technologies than did either the medium or high skilled writers (Bangert-Drowns, 1993).

Judging from the benefits of using various word processors with writing in general, we were confident that word processors could successfully and specifically be used for poetry writing. We found that

various software packages were equipped to support students in their poetry writing. In general, software such as *Microsoft Word*, *AppleWorks*, and *The Student Writing Center* offer an appealing and friendly vehicle for children's writing. Both *Kidworks2* and *KidPix Deluxe 3* can be even more motivating particularly for the primary grades because they not only offer standard word processing that is accessible to children, but they include options for stamps and rebus as well. While preservice teachers may choose a variety of software, many were drawn to the specific supports for poetry writing in *Amazing Writing Machine*. Originally produced by Broderbund, but now in publishers' limbo, *Amazing Writing Machine's* main menu presents options for several different genres of writing; including essays, stories, letters, and, of course, poetry. Once a student has chosen the genre of poetry, the option of either writing with or without prompts is selected. As one might expect, students also have the means available to enhance their poem with paintbox capabilities or with imported graphics. Should students decide to request prompts or aids in writing a poem, a variety of ideas (such as quotations, random ideas, synonyms, and antonyms) as well as formulae (such as haiku, cinquain, and limerick) are available. No doubt, these software packages allow for drafting as well as revising and editing capabilities in order to support the complete writing process.

Using CD-ROM and DVD Sources with Poetry Writing

Not only do various software packages offer support for poetry writing with children, but also we found that CD-ROM resources often invite students to integrate poetry writing across curricular areas. For example, the CD of Jack Prelutsky's *New Kid on the Block* visually presents poems to students who can then create similar innovations. Prelutsky's poem, "When Dracula Went to the Blood Bank," goes like this:

When Dracula went to the blood bank,
 He thoroughly flustered the staff
 For rather than make a donation,
 He drew out a pint and a half.

By using Prelutsky's poem, preservice teachers in methods courses are inspired to create model poems such as the following:

When the librarian went to the bookstore,
She smugly looked at hundreds of books.
She browsed and perused and lifted
Interesting titles from their nooks.
Even though she promptly replaced them,
She felt a bit like a crook.
Writing down the names of her favorites,
Knowing that she will always have
Access to wonderful and FREE books.

With its huge storage capabilities, CD-ROM and DVD technologies can store and search voluminous anthologies of work that give both our preservice teachers and their elementary school students access to a plethora of knowledge. Electronic encyclopedias, such as *Compton's Encyclopedia 2000 Deluxe Edition* CD-ROM or *Encarta Reference Suite 2001*, open up worlds of information for creating accurate poems that span the curriculum. *Encarta Reference Suite 2001* DVD edition holds seven CDs' worth of information on one DVD disk and has one hundred and five percent more videos than the CD version for display. Many teachers show their students how to write biopoems about themselves or classmates, but with the easy access of information in CDs or DVDs, students may research various animals, places, or notable people to create a biopoem. The language arts instructor supplied preservice teachers with information about skunks from *Encarta* online [<http://beta.encarta.msn.com/find/Concise.asp?z=1&pg=2&ti=76157719>] as well as additional links to skunk myths, skunks as pets, and a *QuickTime* video with an appropriately gross visual of a genuine skunk spray sure to enamor any school age kid [<http://granicus.if.org/~firmiss/m-d.html>]. *Encarta's* search even provided a link to a poem about a skunk at night read by poet, Robert Lowell [<http://beta.encarta.msn.com/find/MediaMax.asp?pg=3&ti=761560988&idx=461544775>]. The model biopoem that follows, written by the language arts instructor (Roberts), was used to show preservice teachers how poetry writing fully utilized information on the web as well as integrated content, such as life sciences.

Mephitis,
Stinky, striped, black and white, musk spraying,
Relative of the otter, weasel, and badger.
You love to eat insects, rodents, and bees with your honey.
You feel alone, threatened by suburbia, and misunderstood.
You need nocturnal walks and lots of personal space.
You fear humans, cat food, and unhealthy leftovers.
You give life to a litter and a strong warning shot to stay away.
Roaming in the night, you would like to see moonlit nights, your
Ecosystem restored, and the safety of your nest.
Mephitidae

Other CD-ROMs that have proven helpful to us in integrating poetry throughout subject areas have been the *Imagination Express* series including *Ocean's Below*, and The Learning Company's (formerly Broderbund's) *Living Book* series. One CD that always inspires and motivates upper elementary students, as well as intermediate students, is entitled *In My Own Voice* from Sunburst Technologies. This CD is aesthetically unique, in that it includes great poetry written and read by people of color. The CD also provides the special treat of hearing and viewing interviews with the poets themselves.

Internet Sources and Poetry Writing: A Powerful Partnership

Just as CD and DVD technologies provide a wealth of information for teachers and students, so does the World Wide Web. Iannone (1998) noted that websites in general should be categorized into teacher/student resources, interactive writing sources, and student publishing. As our partnership and our preservice teachers explored the synergy between poetry and technology, we categorized the use of poetry websites into three categories: informational power, inspirational power, and publishing power.

First, using websites for informational purposes to verify ideas or concepts necessary to capture in our poems was stimulating and easy. For example, after a visit to the Grand Canyon, one wanted to write a poem about the mysteries and the majesties of the Grand Canyon in the spotlight of the full moon. Questions arose such as "Just how grand is the

likely, elementary students will enjoy the freedom that magnetic poetry allows [<http://members.aol.com/Bvsangl/pocket.html>] and will yield positive results such as the following poem made by moving the magnetic words by clicking and dragging.

The following annotated chart provides additional websites for the purposes of reading and interacting with poetry before drafting or for creating innovations on similar poetry. (See Appendix B)

Third and likely the most powerful, the Internet gives our student poets a perfect outlet for creating quality work that can be published on the web. Having the capacity to reach an interested audience certainly satisfies the notion that authenticity increases the quality of work (Graves, 1994). Grandparents and friends across the nation and the world can read and show off the works of student poets. Indeed the partnership between the Internet and poetry writing is strong when one considers the publishing power generated from having so many websites specifically for children to post and publish their works. No doubt, the wide readership of these poems enhances the quality of the poems submitted and stimulates students to do a professional job of revising and editing their work. An annotated listing of websites that publish children's poems follows. (See Appendix C)

Conclusions

Technology and poetry are dissimilar partners, but when technology is used to support poetry writing, the results are exciting and authentic. Research generally supports the notion that technology can improve the quality and length of the writing product (Bangert-Drowns, 1993). From our experience with preservice teachers, CDs, DVDs, software, and Internet resources can intervene at all stages of the writing process in poetry writing. The technology half of our partnership was knowledgeable enough to provide technology options; the language arts methods instructor was able to narrow the selections to find the most apropos technology that could influence elementary students in constructive ways to produce their own poetry.

Indeed, through a technology-mentoring program, the original partnership formed by a language arts methods instructor and technology faculty member pushed beyond the notion that technology and poetry are stereotypic opposites. In fact, one might consider them opposites in the same way that yin and yang are opposites. That is, Taoism notes that from the existence (Tao) of any one of ten thousand things, form two powers, yin and yang, which are both opposite of each other, yet are always filling each other (Lao Tze: *Tao Te Chiang*) [<http://www.religioustolerance.org/taoism.htm>]. Without overdoing this powerful analogy of the yin and the yang, our mentoring partnership found that synergy occurred as these two dissimilar backgrounds came together. Sheingold's (1991) article in the *Kappan* discusses the potential for synergy when technology becomes an ingredient. Just as Taoism notes that the opposite powers of yin and yang bring a power and a fullness to the process, so our partnership found that technology and poetry were able to create a useful, motivating, nonlinear, and synergistic model of technology integration to preservice teachers.

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- Excel* [computer software]. Microsoft Office. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation.
- Filemaker Pro* [computer software]. Santa Clara, CA: Filemaker Inc.
- HyperStudio 4* [computer software]. Torrance, CA: Havas Interactive and Knowledge Adventure.
- Imagination Express* series [computer software]. Redmond, WA: EdMark.
- In My Own Voice* [computer software]. Pleasantville, NY: Sunburst Technology.
- Inspiration* [computer software]. Portland, OR: Inspiration Software Inc.
- KidPix Deluxe 3rd Edition* [computer software]. Novato, CA: The Learning Company.
- Kidspiration* [computer software]. Portland, OR: Inspiration Software Inc.

- Kidworks2* [computer software]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation.
- Living Books* series [computer software]. *Living Books* formerly of Broderbund. Novato, CA: The Learning Company.
- Microsoft Word* [computer software]. Microsoft Office. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation.
- Ocean's Below* [computer software part of *Imagination Express*] Redmond, WA: EdMark.
- PowerPoint* [computer software]. Microsoft Office. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation.
- Prelutsky's New Kid on the Block* [computer software]. Part of *Living Books* series formerly of Broderbund. Novato, CA: The Learning Company.
- QuickTime video* [computer software]. Cupertino, CA: Apple Publishing.
- Storybook Weaver Deluxe* [computer software]. Novato, CA: The Learning Company.
- The Student Writing Center* [computer software]. Novato, CA: The Learning Company.

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Appendix A

Excel example

OUR LAST CHRISTMAS

| | |
|---------|---|
| SMELL | fast food; stale Christmas smells; full ashtrays |
| SIGHT | dead pine needles; no one want to take down the Christmas tree; disorganization |
| HEARING | very quiet; no conversations; short bursts of yelling; muffled crying |
| TOUCH | the slam of doors and cabinets; mom's cat; the sticky kitchen floor b/c Mom's on strike |
| TASTE | cold cereal; Kentucky Fried Chicken or frozen lasagna; any fast food eaten alone |

Appendix B

Websites to inspire poetry writing

| | |
|---|--|
| Poetry Pals http://www.geocities.com/EnchantedForest/5165/index1.html | Poetry categorized by form for you to enjoy. |
| Children's Haiku Garden http://www.tecnet.or.jp/~haiku/ | Haikus written and illustrated by kids around the world. |
| Semantic Rhyming Dictionary http://rhyme.lycos.com | Thesaurus, other word references, and finds rhyming words. |
| Poetry for Kids http://www.poetry4kids.com/poems.html | Poems with illustrations. Links to poets and "how to" write poems. |
| KidzPage http://www.veecelet.com | Award winning site has links to famous poets' works, such as Ogden Nash. |
| Dr. Seuss http://www.randomhouse.com/seussville/ | If you want to use Dr. Seuss's work as an example of poetry, this website is for you. |
| Kristine O'Connell George Poetry http://www.kristinegeorge.com | Comprehensive site with fantastic writing hints and inspiration. Includes help for teachers. |
| Fun Poetry http://www.fizzyfunnyfuzzy.com/forKids | Loaded with humorous poetry. Students sign in a guest book and rate poems from 1 to 5. This creates a top ten list of fun poems. |
| Autumn Poems http://comsewoguke.k12.ny.us/~ssliverman/autumn/index.html | Poems by student poets around the U.S. and Canada. Click acrostic or couplet poems which can be very inspiring for beginning students. |
| Magnetic Poetry http://www.magneticpoetry.com | Commercial magnetic poetry kits that lets you play online. |
| Magnetic Poetry http://home.freeuk.net/elloughton13/scramble2.htm | Children can rearrange words to make poetry, just like magnets. |
| Giggle Poetry http://www.gigglepoetry.com | Collection of funny poetry and poetry contests for children to enter. |
| Teachers' Guide to Poetry | Guide to poetry with Jack Prelutsky is for |

| | |
|--|--|
| http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/poetwit/tguide.htm | grade levels 2-6. |
| Grandpa's Rhymes and Tales http://www.night.net/tucker/ | Grandpa Tucker shares with us some of his own rhymes. |
| Bruce Lansky's Website http://www.poetryteachers.com/index.html | Lansky models and walks student poets through the process of writing great poems. |
| Haiku Writer http://www.familygames.com/feature/humor/haiku.html | Computer-generated website offers a wide variety of haikus. |
| Magnetic Poetry Bat Board http://members.aol.com/bats4kids/magnet/magpoem1.htm | Allows students to create poetry about bats over and over again. |
| A Pocketful of Rhymes http://members.aol.com/bats4kids/magnet/magpoem1.htm Bvsangl/pocket.html | Different poetry activities, such as writing the last line of a given poem or guessing the topic of a riddle poem. |
| Kid News http://www.kidnews.com/creative.html | Publishing site with lots of great poems. Click on My Sister or Tigers and other poems. |

Appendix C

Useful sites for publishing children's poetry

| | |
|--|--|
| Young Writers Clubhouse http://www.realkids.com/club.shtml/ | Publish children's stories and poetry. |
| Zuzu http://www.zuzu.org/ | Directions on what to send to publish. |
| Kids' Corner by Oasis http://kids.ot.com/yourturn | Publishes poems, stories, and art as well as offering puzzles and games. |
| Poetry Pals http://www.geocities.com/EnchantedForest/5165/ | Each month a different form of poetry is high-lighted. Individual or class sets of the featured form of poetry may be submitted. |
| Cyberkids http://www.cyberkids.com/ | Children 13 and under may submit poems and stories. |
| Kidstuff http://www.kidstuff.org | Writing for children including poetry written by children. |
| Kid Pub http://www.kidpub.com | Great site for teachers and students. Publishes students' work including poetry. |
| Midlink Magazine http://www.ncsu.edu/midlink/poetry_goals.htm | Includes an International Poetry Exchange, aims to involve children 8-18 in writing. Submissions are e-mailed to the site. |
| KidzPage http://www.veecept.com | Children's poems with eye-catching graphics. Submissions are e-mailed to the site. |
| Positively Poetry http://home.HiWAAY.net/~emedia/kv/poetry1.html | Created by a 15 year old and designed for kids 5 -15 to share poetry. Accepts poetry for publication each summer. |