# Poetry in the Primary Classroom: Collaboration and Response

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*It was twenty minutes after nine on an October Tuesday morning in Patti Derksen's grade three classroom. Youngsters were seated in the carpeted teaching area facing the chartstands. They were focusing on the new poem of the week to which they'd been introduced the day before. "Remember how we tried this yesterday?" Patti asked. "Ready, and —"*

*"Some-thing Told the Wi-uld Geese by Ra-chel Fieuld," the children chorused, then paused, eyes on their teacher.*

*"Okay, girls," Patti cued softly.*

*The girls began reciting the poem, their quiet, high voices wavering only slightly: "Something told the wi-uld geese/It was time to go."*

*Patti smiled and nodded, and the boys took up the next lines:*

*"Though the fields lay gol-den/Something whispered, 'Snow.'"*

*Alex Argyle teaches grade three in the same school. He loves to read poetry himself and wants to engender this love in his students, but he also wants to help students understand and make sense of the poetry they encounter.    He decided to try to work poetry reading, both aloud on his part and on the part of his students, into the language arts units he planned for the school year.    Because he and Patti do a lot of their planning together, Alex was also using the Rachel Field poem. He liked choral reading but he wanted to do something more so he had decided to present it as a Directed Reading/Thinking Activity.    He placed a transparency of the poem on his projector, covering everything but the title.    "Something Told The Wild Geese," he read. "Now, put up your hand if you can tell me something about geese."   He fielded a few responses until someone mentioned that she'd seen a vee of geese in flight on the weekend.    "Something told the wild geese/It was time to go.   Where do you think geese would go?"*

*"South."*
*"Where it's warm."*
*"Somewhere warmer than here."*

*Alex nodded then asked, "What time of year do you think it is in this poem?"*

*"Winter."*
*"Almost winter."*
*"The autumn."*

*"Okay, let's take a look:   Though the field lay golden.    What time of year is it when fields are golden?..."*

Patti and Alex both value the poetry they share with students and both were dissatisfied with the limited number of teaching activities they knew of.   They were disappointed

with the limited way in which their students seemed to care about the poems:  although the students enjoyed the poems, their engagement with them often seemed trivial and super-ficial.  Both teachers wanted something more.  They both ex-amined the basal program they used to see how much poetry actually was integrated into the reading material and to see how poetry was handled by the series.  They found very little poetry in the series and very little emphasis on children un-derstanding the poetry they were asked to read (Durkin, 1981).  When they did find poetry, they found that it was handled in much the same way as other selections or that children did not focus on the meaning of the poetry they were asked to read.

Finding little help for the teaching of poetry in the basals, they searched the language arts methods texts they had used in university courses on teaching methodology.  Both felt that the suggestions laid out in the textbooks gave them very little direction in how to present and teach poetry, par-ticularly the meaning of poetry, to their classes.

## Background for the study

The most recent learning and literary theories are chal-lenging the ways in which practitioners are teaching reading and understanding.  In the past, the focus in teaching reading has been on the acquisition of a hierarchy of subskills and the mastery of a controlled vocabulary.  Comprehension was sep-arable from and dependent on the development of the lower level word identification skills.  Much of reading time was spent on isolated skills that were intended to improve, but did not include, the act of reading, particularly the reading of po-etry.  These skills were considered to be important steps in the process of enabling the reader to extract the correct and deter-minable meaning from text.

In more recent conceptualizations of reading, what readers bring to the act of reading strongly affects what they get out of the act of reading. Rosenblatt's transactional theory of aesthetic reading (1978) supports this view, as does Goodman's recent conceptualization of the reading process (1985). The transactional theory states that meaning is what is negotiated between the reader and the text; each response to the text is a process in which reading and text condition each other. It is a constructive process and the characteristics of the reader and the reading situation are as important as the characteristics of the text. Instructional theorists (Harste, Woodward and Burke, 1984; Straw, 1989; 1990) suggest that reading, because of its social and constructive nature, requires a supportive and collaborative environment, as children learn to deal with text and reading situations. Through interaction with peers and teachers children can develop the abilities to reflect upon their unique personal constructs and responses and thereby become active negotiators of meaning.

One aspect of reading that has received little attention in elementary schools is the teaching of poetry. In a review of the literature on teaching poetry in the elementary school, Amann (1986) found that there was a severe lack of experimental research in the field. In addition, Amann found no coherent theory in the literature on how to develop poetic intuition in children. She found little more than Mr. Argyle and Miss Derksen.

There have been no systematic studies that we know of that address how teachers approach the introduction and study of poetry at the elementary level. In an attempt to gain insight into how poetry is generally handled with students, we began by reviewing a number of popular language arts programs. Here we found that two fairly predictable patterns of dealing with poetry were presented. The first was to treat

poetry in the same way as any other selection, using an expanded Directed Reading Activity or Directed Reading/Thinking Activity format. This included the introduction of a poem through the pictures and title; some exercises around predicting what the poem will be about; a reading of the poem, either silently or aloud by the teacher; a group reading of the poem (chorally or individually by students); and some comprehension questions about the poem.

The other pattern was to deal with the poem by reading it and doing a set of activities that were designed to help students experience the poem. For example, students were asked to read the poem chorally, to identify the words and phrases they liked best, and to discuss the feeling represented in the poems. We also reviewed a number of language arts methods texts to find how the authors suggested that teachers deal with poetry in their classrooms. Our first observation was how few suggestions there were for the teaching of poetry. A number of texts did not even have the term poetry in their indexes, while others centered the discussion of reading poetry around the issue of what poetry to choose for elementary students.

Hoskisson and Tompkins (1987) are typical in their approach. Under "Response Activities," they suggest that a teacher have students do choral reading, have students compile a collection of favorite poems, and use activities such as "informal drama, art, and music activities" (p. 349). Similar activities are outlined in Burns and Broman (1983), Petty, Petty, and Salzer (1989), and Cox (1988). Ellis, Standal, Pennau, and Rummel (1989) spend one paragraph (eight lines) on "Guiding Children's Responses to Poetry." The typical dealing with poetry instruction in the elementary school is demonstrated in Temple and Gillet (1984): "We can help students enjoy and profit from poetry without necessarily analyzing a poem's meaning or structure. It is not necessary or even

desirable to study most of the poetry we share with children" (p. 166). These approaches assume three things. First, they assume that studying a poem's meaning or structure would be detrimental to students' enjoyment. Second, they assume that the possible meanings of poems are obvious to students. Third, they assume that the development of poetic intuition can emerge from the experience of poetry alone. Our own assumption is that when the study of a poem's structure and meaning is teacher-centered it can very well be detrimental, but if structure and meaning are considered by the students themselves, such consideration can enrich the experience of the poem.

In light of the emerging literacy theories and the dearth of theory and research on teaching poetic intuition in children, the following study was undertaken to investigate if strategies from reader response and transactional theories could be implemented with grade three children while they were encountering poetry. The findings of such a study could provide elementary teachers with some alternatives for exploring instruction in poetry.

Drawn from the theoretical bases of transactional models of reading and the notions around the social context of learning to read, this study involved students engaged in responding to poetry in small collaborative groups, through what Hannsen, Harste, and Short (1990) call "interpretive communities" (p. 264). Through dialogue with their peers, groups of students attempted to make sense of a series of poems. Dias (1979), in working with general stream high school students, compared the effects of a collaborative learning model to those of a teacher-centered approach in teaching students to read and interpret poetry. His results indicated that students involved in collaborative exercises scored significantly higher on the quality of their responses to sight poetry than students

who engaged in teacher-led activities. Dias concluded that the teacher-centered approaches short-circuited students' initial responses and prevented them from developing a "sure sense of their own response" (p. 206). Collaborative learning, on the other hand, facilitated the students' abilities to respond to a poem openly and confidently.

Similar studies with high school students were carried out by Bryant (1984) and Straw (1989). In the Straw study, for example, grade 12 students were given pre- and post-test sight poems and were judged on their maturity of response. The two groups in the investigation studied the same poetry under two different conditions: a collaborative exploration condition and a teacher-led discussion condition. The data from the study indicated that two-thirds of the students in the collaborative group responded in the upper range of the response assessment, whereas only 18 percent of the teacher-led group responded in the same range.

## Implementation of the present study

The purpose of the study reported here was to compare traditional instruction in poetry with collaborative learning in poetry with grade three students. Based on the results of other studies in response to poetry at the high school level, we hypothesized that student-directed small-group collaborative discussion would result in significantly better interpretations of poetry than a traditional teacher-led method. The research question generated for the study was: What is the relative effectiveness of independent small-group discussion compared to traditional instruction on the performance of grade three students when they are asked to respond to poetry.

**Subjects and conditions**. The subjects in this study were eight- and nine-year-old children in a third grade classroom

in a predominantly white middle class area of Winnipeg. Twenty-one students took part in the study — ten girls and eleven boys. Only those students in the class who wrote three sentences or more successfully were included in the analysis, though all students in the class were included in the instruction. This resulted in two students being excluded from the analysis. This particular class was selected because the teacher, like Patti and Alex in the scenarios at the beginning of this paper, was searching for a way to help students respond to poetry in a more sophisticated fashion.

The study was carried out in the school library under the direction of the teacher-librarian. The children were all relaxed and at ease with the teacher-librarian since she had worked with them on implementing a writing workshop in their classroom earlier in the year. The children participated in four trials for the purposes of the study: two teacher-directed experiences and two collaborative experiences. The teacher-directed experiences were modeled on the suggestions made by current language arts methods texts for the teaching and experiencing of poetry. The collaborative experiences were modeled loosely on the suggestions made by Dias (1987). The treatments were repeated to attempt to control for the effect of any one poem on the results of the study.

Four poems were chosen, all of similar length and complexity. A pilot study established that students at this level wrote the same length of responses to the four poems. After the four poems were chosen by the teacher-librarian, they were drawn randomly and assigned to trials to be used in the study. Each trial was carried out between 11:00 a.m. and noon over a period of two weeks. In all four trials, the children spent 25 to 30 minutes engaged in activities focusing on the poem and 15 minutes writing a response to the poem.

The teacher-led activities were generated from activities suggested in language arts textbooks and attempted to parallel the most commonly suggested activities for dealing with poetry. In the first trial (A), the students were introduced to the poem "The Waves of the Sea," written on an experience chart in the library. The whole group was instructed using a teacher-led format with the following procedures:  1) the teacher read the poem aloud; 2) the children read the poem aloud with the teacher; 3) the teacher drew attention to patterns in the poem (rhythm, rhyme, repeated words or phrases); 4) the teacher explained any difficult words and asked students to explain what was taking place in the poem; 5) the teacher and the class clapped the rhythm of the poem; 6) the teacher and the class discussed organization of the poem for choral reading; 7) the group practiced suggestions and did a final choral reading of the poem.

This lesson was followed by asking the children to complete an evaluation sheet on which they were asked to write what the poem meant to them. This pattern was followed again in the second trial (B) with the poem "Don't Eat Spiders." The instructional pattern was identical to the first trial. In the third trial (C), students were introduced to the poem "The Kitchen Witch" in student-centered small-group discussions. Children were assigned to heterogeneous groups of four or five. Each group was given multiple copies of the poem and was instructed to choose a reporter and then talk about the poem with the other members of the group. After fifteen minutes, the small groups were called together into a single group and each reporter shared the group's ideas about the poem. During the group discussion, the classroom teacher and the teacher-librarian monitored the students' activities, but did not take part in any of the discussions. During the reporting back session, the teacher acted as facilitator, but did not comment on any of the groups' responses except to

assure them that everyone's ideas were valid.  This was followed by each child again responding in writing to the poem's meaning.  This procedure was repeated in the fourth trial (D), using the poem "The Ants at the Olympics."  The children remained in the same groups as in the third trial, but chose a different reporter.

## Evaluation of the responses

The children's responses to each poem were evaluated using the following criteria:  3 = interpretive response, 2 = inferential response, 1 = retelling, 0 = no response or nonsense.  The following definitions were used for each of these levels, and each is accompanied by a response which would be typical for that definition.

**Interpretive**.  Responses were considered to be interpretive if they showed insights into a theme for the poem as a whole: *The poem says children should listen to their parents or else they could be in danger; this poem shows how the ocean got the kid because he didn't listen to his mother's advice; so kids should listen or else they could drown.*

**Inferential**.  Responses were considered to be inferential if they drew some conclusions based on parts of the poem, but did not make an interpretive statement about an overall meaning of the poem: *It's about how the little girl didn't listen to her mom so she drownded; the biggest wave got her; because she went too close.*

**Retelling**.  Responses were considered to be retelling if they related the events of the poem: *The boy can play at the beach; play in the waves; they are big and green.*

**Nonsense**. Responses that indicated little or no under-standing of the content or the events of the poem were considered to be nonsense.

Four markers were involved in the evaluation task. Responses were distributed among the markers randomly; each response was evaluated independently by two markers. If there was a disagreement between these two markers, a third marker was asked to arbitrate; all three markers had to agree on the final score awarded the paper. Scores for the two trials under each condition were summed in order to arrive at a total score for each student (Trial A + Trial B = Teacher-led score; Trial C + Trial D = Collaborative score). The largest score possible was, therefore, a score of 6; the lowest possible score was 0.

## Results

The data from the study were analyzed employing a Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test, a repeated measures non-parametric statistic that tests the hypothesis that scores under one condition (the teacher-led condition) will not be significantly different from the scores under the other condition (the collaborative condition). The results are summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

In examining the frequency of scores under each condition, we found that a majority of the students (13 of the 21, or more than 60 percent) scored between 1 and 3 under the teacher-led condition, while only 5 students (or less than 25 percent) scored in that range under the collaborative condition. On the other hand, only 8 students (less than 40 percent) scored between 4 and 6 in the teacher-led condition, while 16 students (more than 74 percent) scored in that range under the collaborative condition.

## TABLE 1
### Wilcoxon Analysis of the Change Under Two Conditions: Teacher-led vs. Collaborative

| Comparison | Frequency of students |
|---|---|
| Teacher-led higher than collaborative | 2 |
| Teacher-led lower than collaborative | 14 |
| Teacher-led equal to collaborative | 5 |
| Total students | 21 |

$z$ = 2.7923, $p$ = .0052 (two-tailed)

## TABLE 2
### Frequency of Scores Under the Two Conditions: Teacher-led and Collaborative

| Score-Explanation | Frequency Teacher-led | | Frequency Collaborative | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 - both responses nonsense | 0 | (00.0%) | 0 | (00.0%) |
| 1 - 1 response nonsense/ 1 retelling | 2 | (09.5%) | 0 | (00.0%) |
| 2 - both responses retellings | 9 | (42.9%) | 3 | (14.3%) |
| 3 - 1 response retelling/ 1 inference | 2 | (09.5%) | 2 | (09.5%) |
| 4 - both responses inferences | 3 | (14.3%) | 6 | (28.6%) |
| 5 - 1 response inference/ 1 interpretation | 0 | (00.0%) | 6 | (28.6%) |
| 6 - both responses interpretations | 5 | (23.8%) | 4 | (19.0%) |
| TOTAL | 21 | (100%) | 21 | (100%) |

In general, the results of this research warrant the conclusion that the collaborative learning strategy led students to more mature responses to poetry than the teacher-directed strategy. This finding is consistent with the previous findings

of Dias (1979), Bryant (1984), and Straw (1989). The collabora-
tive learning strategy in which children were encouraged to
talk to their peers about their ideas seemed to be an effective
way to foster students' interpretive skills.

From the poem "Ants at the Olympics" come these ex-
amples of interpretive responses under the collaborative con-
dition: *I think it was about, no matter how small you are you
should never give up because eventually you will win; the
moral of the poem is never be a poor sport, just keep trying;
you should always be prepared and always keep trying; there's
always a next time.*

One of the things we found interesting as we observed
the students interacting in their groups was the amount of
time spent relating things in the poems to events in their
own lives. This would certainly support the reading response
theorists who state that a reader's interpretation of a text de-
pends on what the text evoked within that reader. Students
can learn a great deal through small-group interactions with
peers and this type of instruction can be a valuable strategy to
employ in the classroom, especially when higher-level think-
ing skills such as inferencing and interpretation are desired.
Teachers will need to re-evaluate their role in the classroom,
especially when presenting literature. From this and the re-
lated research in cooperative learning, it is apparent that
teachers need to step aside from the role of information-giver
to that of process-facilitator. Classrooms need to be set up to
provide more student talk time, more student interaction
around literature, and less teacher talk.

The students in this study interacted for 25 to 30 minutes
in their groups before the whole-class sharing sessions.
Varying the time limit might prove illuminating for teachers.
Although specific times and sequences of activity will vary for

different students and for different poems, it is possible that longer periods of time would result in richer interactions. A sufficient period of time is essential for the children to 1) reread/review the poem after the teacher has read it, or to read it and reread it if the teacher has not read it; 2) discuss surface details of the poem and to clarify vocabulary; 3) connect the poet's ideas to their own knowledge and experience; 4) question whatever does not 'fit' their initial understanding.

The above activities happen recursively within the group activity. For example, after making a tentative connection a student will reread a line to double check a word. When a classmate wants verification of the connection, both may reread an entire stanza. The entire group may check the connection against the group's first interpretation. In spite of this recursiveness, the major questioning of meanings, looking at the whole poem in a different light, does not usually happen until after some preliminary decisions are made, and questioned, and discarded. In early grades, re-evaluation of this nature might be a teacher's goal for only a few of the more able readers in the room. Nonetheless, the heterogeneity of cooperative learning groups is a critical feature: though at times a teacher may want to encourage the more able readers/responders to work together, the teacher must not lose sight of the fact that these students' contributions are essential to the entire group. Not only do they provide catalytic ideas, but they also provide models of higher-level thinking. As students gain increased practice at unstructured response and gain security with the activity, the time periods for discussion may be sustained somewhat beyond 25 to 30 minutes, the writing time may be sustained beyond 15 minutes, and longer or more complex poems may be attempted. Of course, as with any other activity, the time allocated must take students' interests into account.

It is important for teachers to realize that they must also gain security with the activity: teachers accustomed to being in full control may, at first, feel awkward not orchestrating events or having even a small degree of input into the discussions. Similarly, they may need time to trust the students to engage seriously in response to poetry. With young students or those unaccustomed to working in groups, some basic group skills (e.g., turn taking, attending to the speaker) should be introduced before expecting the type of engagement evidenced in this study. The results reported here provide limited but continuing support for the effectiveness of collaborative learning, the power of dialoging, and the role of interpretive communities in developing students' ability and maturity in responding to poetry at an intuitive level.

What advice should teachers like Patti and Alex draw from this? Should they give up ever asking students to experience poetry and substitute at all times small-group explorations of poetry? Should they focus on the meaning of poetry and forget the other aspects of poetry such as rhythm, rhyme, and meter that make poetry a unique form of language? Of course not! On the other hand, it seems that small-group explorations of poetry can have a powerful effect on students' ability to focus on the meanings derived from poetry. We advise that teachers spend more time reading poetry to and with students. We also advise that such activities as choral reading be continued in an attempt to make students sensitive to the language aspects of poetry. We also suggest, however, that small-group explorations of poetry be systematically included in the poetry activities planned for children. Children bring an immense amount of experience to the act of reading; they should be given the opportunity to employ that knowledge and experience in making sense of the literature they read. They should also be encouraged to see the understanding of poetry as a collaborative activity. By sharing

their experiences, they can become better readers and respon-
ders to poetry.    Perhaps next autumn a group of Miss
Derksen's or Mr. Argyle's students might sound like this:

*Ryan:  So what is this poem anyways?*
*Jesse:  It's a question.*
*Melissa:  A question?*
*Jesse:  Yeah, like who told them to go.   Who said
it's time to go?*
*Melissa:  Oh, I see.*
*Ryan:   Well, like their mother, I think.   I think it
would be their mother, for the little ones anyways.*
*Jesse:  And their father.   Your father can tell you to
do  something.*
*Melissa:  But geese don't talk so it's not that.*
*Ryan:    They  can  sort  of  talk.    It's  called
'communication.'    Animals  communicate  with  each
other.*
*Melissa:   But it says here, "something whispered."
Well, geese don't whisper, now do they?*
*Jesse:  Maybe real geese don't but poem geese could.*
*Ryan:  I think it's something else.*
*Melissa:  Like what?*
*Ryan:   I don't know.   Like something inside you
that tells you what to do.*
*Jesse:  Yeah, it's your conscience.*
*Melissa:  Or your unconscience.*
*Ryan:  No, that means you're nearly dead.*
*Jesse:  I know!  Maybe it's Jesus!  Jesus and God
telling the geese the right thing what to do.*
*Ryan:  You mean like it's a commandment?*
*Jesse:  Yes.*
*Melissa:    No,  geese  don't  have  commandments.
They just know what to do.*
*Ryan:   Like I know if it's cold I should put my
sweater on.*
*Melissa:  But sometimes your mom has to tell you.*
*Jesse:  Or your dad!*

*The following poems were used in this study:*

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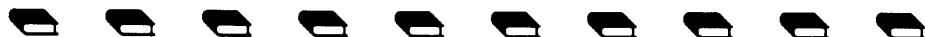
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