Beyond "Pink Is a Rose"

When poetry writing proves to be a challenge for her second-graders, teacher Michele Fleer turns to the idea of group poetry writing. In a group setting, Fleer finds, her second-graders are less hesitant to explore their language and the many ways it can be put together—a natural first step in writing poetry.

MICHELE FLEER

My second grade students weren't much interested in reading or writing poetry. If the poem wasn't hilariously funny, they didn't care to read it, and they were hesitant to write poems of their own. I tried to expand their knowledge and appreciation of poetry by reading them more poems, choosing with them poems they could memorize, and encouraging them to copy into their notebooks poems they liked. We made some headway with reading poetry, but we were going nowhere with our writing.

"Pink Is a Rose"

I had hoped that by simply hearing more poetry my students would be inspired to change the way they wrote poems. But on those occasions when I insisted they try, I was still getting work much like this:

Pink is a rose.
Pink is the smell of candy.
Pink is a baby pig.

Pink is a rose? That's the best I could do? The best they could do? I didn't believe it

was the best, but I honestly didn't know where to go. There is an ancient belief that teaches, "When you don't know what to do, do nothing. Wait and watch, and the answer will make its way to you." I didn't have a better plan, so I decided to go with this approach. A few days later, the answer did come to me.

I happened to be reading an anthology of writing produced by South Dakota students. In it, there was a wonderful poem written by a group of students. An entire class had worked together to write one poem.

"That could be the answer," I thought.

Asking eight-year-olds to write together would certainly put less pressure on individual students, and I believed that the language produced in a group might be "richer" as we worked together to express our ideas. It was definitely a jumping-off point.

Looking for the Language

Part of what makes writing difficult for

some children is that they haven't yet developed strong language skills. It is hard to write about what you haven't yet spoken or thought. Before we could write a poem as a group, we needed to share the same language. Because we were in a thematic unit of study on oceans, I decided we could use the sea as the topic for our poem. As my students worked on an ocean collage, we talked about what it might be like to live underwater. I began a list of the descriptive language I was hearing in our conversation.

Next, I called my students to the front of the room, and we read through the list together. I asked them to look for ways we could make categories. In just a few minutes, we had categories for underwater plants, underwater animals, descriptive words, and a miscellaneous category. Next, I asked the students to think of words to describe movement underwater. They started out with the basics: *swim, crawl, paddle*. Then one of the boys, who had the entire ocean book bin at his desk, suggested the word *prowl*. He

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remembered reading about how predators in the ocean are always on the prowl for food. We agreed that *prowl* was a great word and perfectly described the action of a predator. I wondered out loud what would happen if we looked at our animal list and tried to find a perfect movement word for each one. The students quickly added *swoosh, weave, float, crash,* and *glide* to our list. I was beginning to hear some of the rich language I was hoping for.

"Let's see if you can start building some phrases," I suggested. "Try putting an animal word with a movement word."

"Crabs prowl," was the first suggestion we recorded. " Dolphins dance," and "whales float" came next. Due to repeated readings of *A, My Name is Alice* by Jane Bayer, my students were familiar with alliteration. In the poetry I had been reading aloud, we often noticed examples of alliteration. One of the girls excitedly pointed out "dolphins dance" was another example. Now my kids were off. At this point, my job changed from group guide to group scribe. The children had before them a chalkboard full of words and the alliteration suggestion gave them a direction to move. All I had to do was exchange chalk for a dry erase marker, switch boards, and try to keep up.

In the few minutes before lunch, I recorded phrases such as "silent waves wash into a cave," "crabs prowl peacefully," and "fish weave through waves." It was enough for one day, and, I thought, a pretty respectable beginning.

Putting Together the Pieces

The next morning, we gathered again in front of our work. The job now, I explained, was to turn our words and phrases into the thoughts and sentences of our poem. We decided four sentences would be a reasonable length and I asked if anyone had an idea to get us going.

"Crabs prowl peacefully searching for prey," offered the predator researcher.

"But *peaceful* doesn't really go with *predator,* because predators are usually hungry and mad," said another child.

It was a good point, but eventually it was decided crabs aren't really noisy animals, so the word *peacefully* remained. One of the girls wanted to do something with "fish weave through waves" but didn't know what to add.

"Where do fish weave?" I asked.

Twenty-four faces stared at the unbelievably stupid teacher as twenty-four voices called out "In the water!" So I wrote:

Crabs prowl peacefully searching for
*   prey.*
Fish weave through waves in the
*   water.*

"Add 'Sharks attack squid and sea serpents,'" said another.

Sharks led to whales, and after a quiet conference, two students suggested the sentence "Whales whisper to others as they slide through the water."

Our poem so far:

Crabs prowl peacefully searching for
*   prey.*
Fish weave through waves in the
*   water.*
Sharks attack squid and sea
*   serpents.*
Whales whisper to others as they
*   slide through the water.*

Suggestions for Writing a Group Poem

1. Choose a topic. The topic should be general enough so that everyone in the group will have some knowledge to share. In a classroom, it helps to use a recently studied topic.

2. Take time to build and expand language. Having plenty of time to talk about the topic before writing helps bring out knowledge and language. Doing an art project isn't necessary, but it is a good way to stimulate the talk that becomes the basis of the poem.

3. Make lists of words that are appropriate to your topic. Include lists of appropriate nouns and verbs, as well as descriptive words.

4. Use the word lists to begin creating phrases.

5. When several phrases have been recorded, begin combining phrases or adding to phrases to create the sentences that will become the poem. Talk about things like movement and rhythm and how you can use the number of words and syllables in a line or sentence to give the poem the desired form and feeling. Experiment with moving lines or changing existing lines. Don't forget about a title.

6. Finally, walk away and leave the poem alone for a day or two. When the group comes back together; decide if everyone feels comfortable with it. Does the poem express what the group intended it to? How does it sound when read aloud? Edit as necessary and display.

One of the students who hadn't yet contributed to our discussion suggested it would look more like a poem if the last line weren't so much longer than the others. I asked if anyone else had other thoughts. Another girl thought the line about sharks attacking didn't really fit because it wasn't as quiet as the other lines. I could see by the looks on their faces that many of the students agreed this was a problem, but only because it had been pointed out to them. What they probably would not have individually discovered was apparent because of the experience with the group.

At first, I worried the students were getting carried away with alliteration. I was concerned our work would be closer to a tongue twister than a poem. But as the poem began to take shape, I could see their search for words beginning with the same letter actually kept them very focused, and forced them to look for just the right words. It also gave them another chance to talk out loud, once again expanding the language available to them.

By recess, the poem was finished. We experimented with shortening the last line, but no one was happy with any of our attempts. Eventually, I suggested we leave the last line as it was and lengthen the others. This led to a brief review of syllables, which we counted in each line of the poem. We pulled more words from our word lists and concentrated on keeping the quiet tone. The "sharks attack" line was removed and the sentence "And silent waves wash into a dark cave where an octopus is sleeping" was added as our final line. We gave it a simple title and then took a collective deep breath. It had been hard work, for the students and their teacher. I asked them to close their eyes and listen to their words. (See "Underwater," in box

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Underwater

BY MS. FLEER'S SECOND GRADE CLASS

Crabs prowl patiently along the ocean floor
searching for prey.
Fish soundlessly weave their way through
slippery seaweed.
Whales whisper to others as they slide
through the salty water.
And silent waves wash into a dark cave
where an octopus is sleeping.

Figure 1.

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above.) It was quiet for just a minute. I was looking at big smiles and tall, proud postures. Then someone said, "Wow. That sounds just like a real poem!" It sounded that way to me, too.

Conclusion

I was pleased with the process and the final product. The rich language I was hoping to hear was evident. As a group, my students were able to put together words in ways I don't believe many of them could have done on their own. They learned a poem can be good, even if it isn't funny. I learned that working so hard in a large group formed a new sense of community among my students. No one student could claim this poem as a personal success. Everyone had a voice in it so it belonged to everyone.

Does that mean each and every one of my students joyfully and eagerly participated? I wish. I still had a few children I had to encourage to share. It's easy to hide in a group, so I needed to keep my eyes open for the kids who wanted to be left alone. I also had to keep my thumb on two of my

girls who believed they were already very talented, skilled poets. They did have some incredible skills for second-graders, but their volume level matched their confidence, and I needed to keep them from overwhelming the others.

I also wish I could say after our successful group poem that my students were writing more and better poetry on an individual basis. That is true for some of them, but one group poem did not change the behavior for many of them. We wrote several group poems before I saw some of those students feel confident enough to work on their own.

Since this first experience, I have repeated this process with several groups— children and adults, with group sizes ranging from eight to twenty-four participants. The problems I faced with children I also faced with adults. Like the children, many adults felt uncomfortable writing poetry, and some needed coaxing to participate. But the results have been amazingly similar. Each group has been impressed with their final poem, surprised at the quality they have produced.

I'll continue to use group poems as a way to encourage reluctant writers and to build the language base of my second grade writers. On the days when I struggle and wonder if it's worth the hard work, I'll pull out "Pink Is a Rose" and I'll know—I have definitely done better.

References

Bayer, J. 1984. *A, My Name is Alice.* New York: Dial Books.

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