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AASL PRECONFERENCE:

Poetry Alive! How to Energize Your Class Through Poem Performance

Rod Bowling

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9:00 A.M.-12:00 P.M.
David L. Lawrence Convention Center
Room 306



The Educational Benefits of Poem Performance

- **Accommodation of Multiple Learning Styles**

Students work in an open-ended group environment, honing their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. When properly facilitated, performance is a synthesis of these four modes of learning as well as kinesthetic learning. Also, poem performance accommodates each of the seven "intelligences" as defined in Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences: Logical/Mathematical; Musical/Rhythmic; Verbal/Linguistic; Visual/Spatial; Bodily/Kinesthetic; Interpersonal; and Intrapersonal.

- **Cooperative Learning**

When students work together as a class to perform a poem, they form a pool of knowledge, experience, and talent--a "performance co-op." When divided into smaller performance teams of two to four members, the students must work cooperatively and collaboratively to create a successful performance. While no *one* member bears the sole responsibility for the team's success, each student has an integral role to contribute.

- **Purposeful Learning**

Because their work culminates in an actual performance, and because the teacher assumes the role of facilitator rather than dispenser of knowledge, students feel a sense of purpose and empowerment.

- **Increased Engagement In and Understanding Of Poetry**

Students become engaged in and understand the poetry better because they become a *part* of the poem and the poetic experience.

Some Pre-Performance Questions and Activities

Poetry as Theater

Here are a few questions you might want to ask students who are attempting to script out and perform poems. They may need to be simplified if you present them to your younger students. Note that the questions are generated from a dramatic perspective rather than the traditional literary perspective. Use the parts of a play as the guideline: Cast of Characters, Setting(s), Lines of Dialogue, and Stage Directions.

Character: Who is the “speaker” of the poem? What specific characters (narrators, people, animals, things, etc.) appear in the poem? Sometimes non-human objects, like animals, plants, rocks, and furniture, are given human traits. This “personification” of the objects causes them to become characters too. Make a list of all the characters you can find in your poem whether you decide to use them or not. Discuss and demonstrate different ways you might act out the part of each character. Students will be looking for nouns and pronouns as a guide to their possible “cast of characters.”

Setting: Where might the poem take place? What objects make up the scenery surrounding the characters of the poem? What time of day is it? What time of year is it? What is the weather like? Does your audience need to know something about the time or place in order for the poem to make sense to them (context)? Not all poems have a specific setting. If yours does not, make one up. Equate this activity to the program or playbill that theatergoers receive before the play.

Action: Some poems have a lot of physical action. Other poems contain only thoughts, or “mental” action. What actions (physical and mental) occur in your team’s poem? Sometimes it is best if you and your partners simply say the poem to your audience. Sometimes you can add movements to make your performance more interesting. Discuss and demonstrate the movements you could add to your poem presentation. Look for clues in the text for movement and feelings that each character may demonstrate. Are there any clues as to the “mood”? Can changing the mood change the meaning? Students will be looking for verbs and adverbs for these and other clues to determine what to do. They should “brainstorm” various possibilities for each character listed. Equate this activity to the Stage Directions found in a play script.

Meaning: Does the poem contain a lesson or moral? Not all poems do, but if yours does, what do you think it is? Can the way your team performs a poem change what it might mean? Maybe meaning is not important to your particular poem.

These pre-performance questions were adapted from *It’s Show Time: Poetry from the Page to the Stage* by Allan Wolf (pp. 17-18).



Four Useful Performance Points

- **Use Your Confident Stance (Stand Up Straight)**

Ask one student to stand straight, without fidgeting, body weight held evenly on both hips, feet planted firmly about shoulder-width apart, hands hanging at sides. Explain that unless there is an artistic reason to do otherwise, all students should stand this way during performance. Perhaps discuss body language here.

- **Face Your Audience**

Students tend not to be "audience aware" at first and will sometimes turn their backs to the audience either partially or completely. To help students become more aware of their audience, explain that the audience is like another person (who happens to be very wide and hard of hearing) whom they must include in their stage conversation and activities. Show them how to "cheat out" to the audience.

- **Fill Your Space**

Explain that performers must command their space by using it fully. Students should always give each other plenty of space on stage unless they are standing close for a specific reason (e.g., introducing a poem, taking a bow, or performing a poem that requires close quarters.) They should be aware of height (going down to the floor or up on a chair), depth (front to back) and width (side to side.) They should also work on making their gestures "big" enough for the back row, filling their personal space.

- **Project Your Voice (Use Your Outside Voice)**

Instruct one student standing at the front of the room to say "hello" to a student who is sitting in the front row. Explain that we use an "everyday voice" or "inside voice" for this. Then ask this student to say "hello" to someone sitting in the back of the room. Comment on how we must talk more loudly as our audience moves farther away. Finally, tell this student to say "hello" to an imaginary person outside the classroom door or window. Hopefully this will be the loudest effort yet. Explain to your students that this is the "show voice" or "outside voice." Students should use this voice when they perform in front of an audience. You may wish to use a tape recorder in the back of the room to check the volume of students on stage.

Memorization

Poetry Alive! feels that memorization is an integral part of the Poetry Performance Method because it allows for more focused performances and leaves the students with words of poetry which they can recall at will.

You may find it helpful to conduct a short discussion on memorization, especially if your students protest that there is “no way on earth we can memorize all that!” Put the following chart on the board to guide the discussion:

<u>Memorization</u>	
What?	How?
Why? (at bottom of the board)	

Begin the discussion by asking them to help you make a list on the board of all instances in which they must call upon their memories (What do you memorize?) The list will usually consist of ordinary everyday items such as phone numbers, song lyrics, locker combinations, etc. and should sufficiently impress on them that they already use their memories constantly — and effectively.

Then brainstorm the various strategies employed by people to help them memorize by asking, “How do you memorize?” This list might include such items as “study it”, “read it”, “write it”, “speak it”, “hear it”, “word association”, “sound-alikes” and so forth. Ask which method they think is best (*Answer: Whatever works for you regardless of what works for someone else!*)

Point out to them that there are two main types of “memory”: short-term and long-term. We use our long-term memories for many of the items they will list under What? We want to use our long-term memory for poem memorization.

Finally, encourage them to experiment with a variety of methods until they find the one (or combination of methods) that works best for each individual.

The answer to “Why?” above: we either “have to” (someone makes us) or we “want to” (the best reason.)

This discussion is adapted from *Something Is Going to Happen* by Allan Wolf (pp. 11-12).

Scripting and Scoring

Division into Speaking Parts, Adding Emotions and Motions

Sammy by Elizabeth Ripley

There was a young hopeful named Sam

Who loved diving into the jam.

When his mother said, "Sammy!

Don't make yourself jammy!"

He said, "You're too late ma, I am!"

Characters

Setting

Action/Feelings

Sample Script

Cast: Flea, Fly, Narrator 1, Narrator 2

Setting: Chimney flue. Use overturned chairs to represent the flue. Flea and Fly are “inside” the flue. Narrators are positioned upstage left and right on chairs, looking down on the action. All characters begin center stage.

Text

Fly: A Fly (*gestures to self*)

Flea: and a Flea (*gestures to self*)

Narrator 1: in a Flue

Narrator 2: by Anonymous

(all go to starting positions)

Narrator 1: A fly (*gesture towards Fly*)

Narrator 2: and a flea (*gesture towards Flea*)

Narrator 1: in a flue were imprisoned,

Narrator 2: so what could they do? (*shrug*)

Narrator 1: Said the fly,

Fly (*smells smoke*): “Let us flee!”

Flea (*excitedly*): “Let us fly!”

Narrator 2: said the flea,

Unison: and they flew through a flaw in the flue.

(Flea and Fly make “Keystone Kop” exit up stage between chairs. Narrators give each other a bewildered look, then turn to the audience with an “Oh, well” gesture. Flea and Fly return and all line up in starting position for final bow.)

Five Steps of Poem Presentation

Two chairs should be placed up stage, center, as a starting point for all performance groups. This is also the return point for the chairs after each performance. More chairs can be added if you know in advance that groups will use more than two chairs.

- **Arrangement of Stage Area**

If the group plans to use chairs as part of their performance, responsibility should be assigned to various members of the group to set the chairs in place before the Introduction, as they come up on stage.

- **Introduction**

The performance team should assemble at center stage in a line. At the very least, the Introduction must include the title and author of the poem. If the audience needs to understand a setting context for the performance piece, that context or setting explanation should be revealed at this time.

It is also important that the teams plan and practice the Introduction as they rehearse the poem. Point out to them that the title and author are part of the poem.

Note: when first experimenting with Poem Performance, we suggest that this uniform approach to the Introduction should be required for all groups. After some experience with Poem Performance, students may wish to be more inventive in the way the poems are introduced. This is perfectly OK and should not be discouraged.

- **Performance**

After the Introduction, students should proceed to their respective starting points for the performance. Whichever student has the first line in the poem should wait until all performers are in place and ready to perform before beginning the poem.

- **Closing**

At the conclusion of the performance, all students in the team should reassemble at center stage to take a bow. This lets the audience know that the poem is over and prompts applause. The teams should rehearse the bow as part of the performance.

- **Clearing of Stage Area**

Just as in the set up above, responsibility should be assigned to various team members to return the chairs to the pre-set starting position up stage, center. This gives each performance team an identical starting point for each presentation.



Steps in the Poem Performance Method

- **Model Poem Performance**
Demonstrate Performance Technique, Scripting, and Scoring
- **Select and Assign Poems**
Post titles on the bulletin board or else leave this up to your students. Go to your current curriculum, anthologies or poetry books already in your classroom.
- **Establish Performance Teams**
Assign students to groups of two, three, four or five. Any random method will usually work. Each team should have a blend of personalities so you may want to make adjustments. Consider larger teams for younger students, doubling/tripling up on lines to ensure volume and confidence.
- **Scripting**
Divide the words of the poem into speaking parts based on the characters chosen.
- **Scoring**
Determine **emotions** in the poem and their corresponding **motions**.
- **Blocking (Stage Directions)**
Determine where the performers will be on stage and their movements.
- **Performance**
It's Show Time! Don't forget to announce author & title. Take a bow!
- **Follow-up**
Students read poems in the original (unscripted) form. See below for other activities that you may want to try.

Follow-up Activities for the Classroom

(All of these activities may take place over the course of a school year)

- Ask students which poems they liked best and why? Which poems did they not like? Why?
- Which poems in the Poetry Alive! performance would the students have done differently? Why?
- Use the performance as an introduction to poems not familiar to the students prior to the show.
- Use the performance as a reference for poems that were familiar to the students prior to the show. Has their opinion changed about the poems?
- Have students research other poems by an author whose poem they particularly enjoyed.
- If the students enjoyed a certain “type” of poem, have them find others of the same genre in the library or textbooks.
- Encourage students to begin memorizing favorite poems. Have them identify movements or actions which help them memorize lines.
- Have the students discuss how changing the performance “mood” could change the meaning of the poem (e.g. makes it funny, sad, etc.)
- Have the students discuss different ways the body may move in order to respond to different emotions. How can these be applied to the poems?
- Have students act out their own poems for each other in the classroom.

Possible Pre-Performance Activities and Writing Tasks

- Before reading the poem, free-write for 5 minutes on what you think the poem might be about based on the title alone?
- Before reading the poem, write your own poem using the same title.
- After reading the poem, answer the pre-performance questions, explaining the character, action, and setting of the poem.
- If you were filming your performance (on an unlimited budget), what famous actors or personalities would you assign to play the roles within the poem? What location would you choose to "shoot" the film? Would your film title be the same as the poem title?

Writing Follow-up Activities

- Once students have memorized and performed a poem, have them try to write a poem similar to the one they have memorized.
- Have the students write about the characters in the poem.
- Have each student answer, “Who is saying what to whom and to what effect?” for each poem studied. Answering this question sets in motion ideas for other poems that they can write and aids in the student’s rendition of the poem.
- Encourage students to emulate the writing style of poems that they like. This can provide them with structured models while they apply their own creative modes of expression.
- Have students write what they think happened both before and after the “time” of the poem.
- Have students exchange poems they have written with another student - a poetry “buddy” - and ask them to act out each other’s poems. This allows students the opportunity to see and hear the words they have written. The students can then assess their own writing by asking “Was this what I wanted to say?”
- Have students become the “Director” of their poem with another performance group.
- After students have submitted writing assignments, remove the student authors’ names and distribute the poems to the performance groups already established. The anonymous authors can now make revisions based on how the performance team handled their work.
- Create a 3-Column Performance Chart answering What, How, and Why?
- Answer the Performance Questions on Character, Setting, Action, and Meaning.
- Pick one favorite line from the poem you have chosen to perform, and include this same line in a poem that you write yourself.
- Write a short biographical statement about the poet of the poem you are performing. Include this information in your presentation.
- Write an assessment of what you learned during the poem performance experience.
- Keep a journal of all the activities involved your poetry exploration. Include responses to readings, free-writes, pre-writing, reflections, and poems.

Notes and Questions

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Other Poetry Alive! Offerings

- **Books:** *Something Is Going to Happen* and *It's Show Time* by Allan Wolf. These books help guide the classroom teacher through the Poem Performance Method using lesson plans, sample scripts, Questions to Consider, and directorial suggestions. *Something Is Going to Happen* is for grades 6-12; *It's Show Time* is for grades K-5.

Linking with Literature and *Hook and Loop Method of Writing* by Cheryl Bromley Jones. *Linking with Literature* has minimal focus on pedagogical theories and maximum focus on ready-to-use classroom activities with models, methods, and materials for immediate use. *Hook and Loop* help students find new commitment to writing while retaining their unique voices. It is a springboard for teachers who want to bring excitement to the writing process and get their kids "turned on" to writing.

- **Audio Tapes, CDs:** *Act 1* and *Act 2*. Each full-length audiotape or CD includes a selection of popular poetry presented only as Poetry Alive! can. Each is studio-produced with poems scripted for multiple voice presentations. The general listener as well as the classroom teacher wanting examples of poetry and reader's theater can enjoy them.
- **In-Service Training:** Poetry Alive! provides comprehensive on-site training for school districts, reading associations, creative writing programs, etc. as part of our on-going staff development program. These daylong (or more) sessions are designed to provide hands-on classroom activities and to introduce teachers to our methodology and energize the language arts curriculum. A senior staff member (with an actor partner, optional) presents.
- **Poetry Alive! Institute:** Since 1990, Poetry Alive! has conducted a weeklong Institute in Asheville, NC. This intensive program is approved for 3 hours of graduate credit. Beginning in 2006, the institute will be offered on-site to school districts around the country. Graduates are trained in the poem performance method, teaching strategies, and creative writing strategies. Ken and Nadine Delano and Cheryl Bromley Jones direct the residency. The Delanos have been with Poetry Alive! since 1994 and are seasoned performers and workshop leaders. Cheryl is a Lucretia Crocker Scholar and a veteran classroom teacher. She is Past President of the Massachusetts Council of Teachers of English.
- **Conference Key Note and Workshops:** Poetry Alive! has been active in providing keynote addresses, special performances, and instructional workshops for a multitude of national, regional, state and local organizations (and affiliates) such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the International Reading Association (IRA), Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL), the American Library Association (ALA) and the National Middle School Association (NMSA) plus numerous Literacy conferences, Arts-in-Education conferences, library events, arts festivals, etc.