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Using Serendipity to Dramatize Poetry

by Lillian H. Heil

Serendipity is the "faculty for making desirable discoveries by accident." Last year, six elementary teachers and one university professor discovered we had that "faculty" as we carried out plans to dramatize poetry with primary grade children. For teachers and parents who never have sufficient time to plan perfectly, perhaps our discoveries will give you both the desire to try the untried, and the courage to believe that serendipity will work for you. What follows is a narrative account of what happened to us.

In September, the seven of us agreed that our grandiose plans for correlating poetry with the total curriculum were too-grandiose. We had neither the time nor the energy to do such a project; however, I had proposed (and been accepted) to present our "grandiose" project at a convention and I felt obligated to submit an alternative proposal to my professional organization. In choosing a smaller focus, we followed two of what one famous psychologist (B.F. Skinner) called his four informal rules of research.

(1) If you find something interesting, drop everything and focus on it.
(2) Choose the easiest project and the easiest way to do it.

(I'll explain the other two as I describe our experience.)

With my recommendation, we chose the most interesting and easiest project we could think of--dramatizing holiday poems. That may not sound interesting, or easy, but let me explain why, for us, it was both. The previous year, I had asked my six elementary school colleagues how the BYU teaching assistants could help them achieve their goal of teaching more about poetry. They asked us to produce a video of holiday poetry dramatizations for second and third graders to use as a model to imitate. The TA's (teaching assistants) agreed, because I asked them to do the project, but the fun we had soon convinced them that dramatizing poetry was a creative endeavor to which we all looked forward. We had only one fifty-minute seminar per week to spend on the video, so we discovered an addition to Skinner's informal rules--practical constraints can be very useful. (I should let Skinner know his list has been expanded.) The time constraints made us pick minimal props and
participant and child-audience interest, and I had learned how to produce a dramatization in forty-five minutes or less. That know-how, plus a binder of actable poems, made the choice of dramatizing poetry an easy one for us.

We scheduled time in each of the six classrooms and started our adventure into drama with Halloween poetry. Since I was the "experienced director," I took charge while each classroom teacher became the camera operator. We discovered the third of Skinner's informal research principles, and, for us, one of the most productive--

(3) Some people are lucky.

We were lucky because the poetry activity we had chosen was universally liked by children and their positive response never slackened from October to June. Their desire to see themselves on camera and to have a turn at manipulating the video equipment far outweighed any inclination they might have had to misbehave. The only discipline problems came from trying to contain their desire to be on camera (and a few did require a cooling-off period). When children learned what color my car was, I would occasionally be greeted in the hall with, "I knew you were here today," or "Are you coming to our room?" One teacher reported her whole class being angry at her when the poetry session was cancelled. During the last two weeks of school, the number one, second grade wiggler repeated his query about dramatizing poetry next year every time he saw me--in the office (which he spent quite a bit of time in), the library, the halls, and the classrooms.

We were lucky, too, because second and third graders were so eager to be actors. With adults, I had to ask, plead, and occasionally beg; with children, I had to use large groups or ask them to take turns because there were so many volunteers.

We were lucky that I had learned to live with time constraints, because inexperienced child actors are not able to sustain long periods of practice (neither were the young adults inexperienced actors).

We were lucky to live in an age of instant replays because seeing themselves in action was both a faster way of learning about effective acting and a reward that made any other material reward of points or privileges unnecessary.
We were lucky that dramatizing poetry required children to read poems aloud. Because of its rhythm and word sounds, poetry is an oral form. To read poetry silently is comparable to reading music silently—it makes no sense at all unless you have enough expertise to hear the sounds in your head. Children need to hear the word-music of poetry, and dramatization requires that the poem be introduced aloud, read aloud again while planning actions, again for rehearsals, and again for performances. Many children had the poems memorized by the end of the video taping. We realized this even more dramatically in May when we asked each child to rate the poems dramatized from poor to excellent (1=poor, 2=fair, 3=good, 4=excellent). As we watched the class video performances, children spontaneously began chanting the poems. It was like hearing and seeing old friends. (They also noticed with pride and amazement how much they had grown since the beginning of the year—another fringe benefit provided by serendipity).

Dramatizing poetry luckily provided children with an opportunity to think critically. When I first asked them to critique performances for good qualities and ways to improve, most responses were positive, but too general to be useful to the actors. I supplied a few specifics, and gradually, the children began to make more thoughtful, creative, specific suggestions. I realized how involved all of them were becoming in the critiquing process when I started checking their ratings of the video performances. I belatedly used Skinner's rule number one about "dropping every thing to pursue what was interesting." About a month after children had rated the videos, I "dropped everything" to ask individuals whose ratings differed from the rest of the class the reason for their ratings. I wasn't at all sure any of them would remember the video, but most of them did, and all gave specific reasons related to the performance. Only one child said she did not like the poem.

I got responses like:

"The rabbits almost tipped over the tree."

"The camera operator kept showing desks and people that weren't in the poem."

"He forgot to put the blanket in the trash."

"Jonathan was putting the coal in too slow when the train was supposed to be going fast."

"James stuck out his head from the blanket when he shouldn't."

"The sign fell off and the girl went to pick it up."
"The mother forgot to stick to the brother because of the glue."

Serendipity taught me another lesson--weeks after they had watched the video and given their rating, most children we interviewed knew precisely why they had given that rating. It made me realize how strong the impact of the dramatizations was in their memories. I wish all of my teaching could be that memorable.

In February, serendipity came to our aid again. One of the third grade teachers was absent during poetry time. When I asked the substitute if she knew how to operate the camera, she looked dismayed and shook her head. I asked for a third grade volunteer, got about 20 hands, made my selection, gave the child some brief instructions about jerky camera movements, and held my breath. I needn't have; he did a very creditable job. Thus, another accident had helped us discover that young children could handle the camera, loved doing it, and in the process, learned more about filming techniques.

When the camera tripod broke in April, we discovered Skinner's fourth and final informal research principle.

(4) Apparatus sometimes break down.

Our child operator became much more conscious of the need to hold the camera still because it was so hard to do. Properly held cameras became very much a part of the critiques given by the children.

Finally, we were lucky because we had found a way to increase children's vocabulary in an indirect and exciting way. Poems often have unusual words in them like "queasy," "vale," "balderdash," "cavernous," and "ravenous." Such words demand understanding if children are going to act them out, so we explained and acted out words like "sash," "brocade," "cinch," "shrieks," and "wending." Informal vocabulary tests showed that in the two third grades, 80% of the children chose the correct meanings for 23 out of 30 words. In the second grades, 80% of the children knew 16 out of 20 words. What we don't know is how many children knew the words before we dramatized the poems, but, until next year when we give pretests on unusual words, we will naturally take credit for their being so bright and intelligent. We also discovered a few notable failures. One example was my "teaching" the wrong meaning. Children said "striding" means "walking with little steps," or "hopping," but not its actual meaning of "walking with long steps."
So, at the end of a rewarding year of acting out poetry, we assure you that dramatization is a highly motivating way for children to:

1. discover for themselves personal meaning in poetry,
2. engage in critical thinking,
3. learn to use video equipment,
4. get the sound of poetic language where it belongs--in their ears, and,
5. increase their vocabulary without realizing how hard they are working.

Take heart, adults who enjoy working with children. Life is a process of discovery, and each individual (including young children) has to discover the personal meaning of literature for himself or herself if that literature is to be of any value to the individual. Dare to try the inquiry process inherent in creative drama, and make serendipity work for you as you make personal discoveries with and about children.