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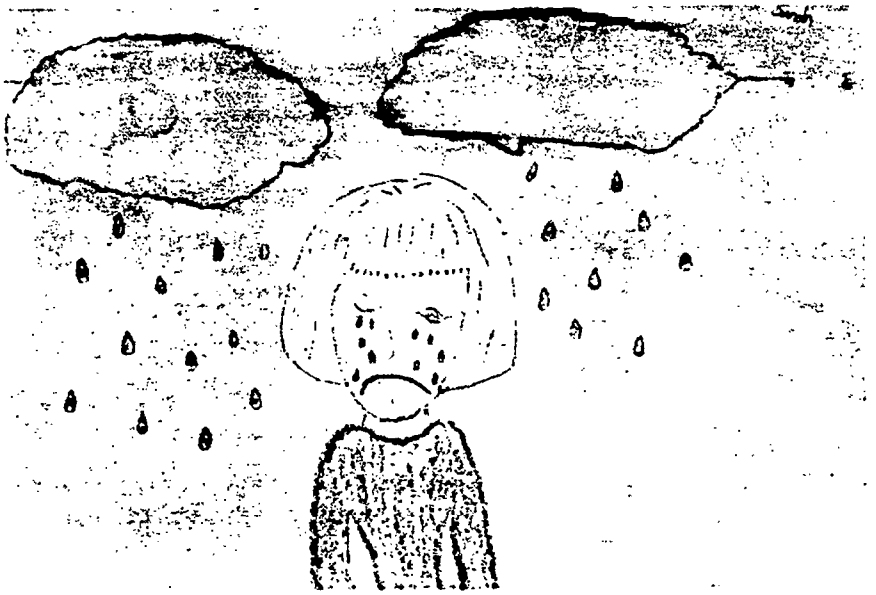
ABSTRACT

This issue of "Insights into Open Education" presents three short articles dealing with teaching poetry, English instruction, and the concept of time. The first article, "Teaching Poetry Tips" (Gem Reid), discusses the author's experiences conducting a week-long poetry workshop for a class of 30 second graders. The second article, "Teaching English without Desks" (Marlow Ediger), discusses a student teacher's implementation and evaluation of a unit on creative writing (using "learning stations") for a sixth-grade class. The third article, "A Brief History of Time and the 'Red Clock'" (Charles Martin), discusses using a student-managed time clock during student council meetings to help children learn the value of time and their part in learning to manage it. (RS)



Drawings by Sarah Solseng
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Teaching Poetry Tips
by Gem Reid

Teaching English Without Desks
by Marlow Ediger

A Brief History of Time and the "Red Clock"
by Charles Martin

[**Editor's Note:** *Occasionally we receive manuscripts that are too short for our* Insights *format. This month we are taking the unusual step of printing three of them in one issue. We hope that you enjoy these and that you find something thought-provoking or practice-inspiring in one of them.]*

TEACHING POETRY TIPS

By Gem Reid

Early in my first year as teacher educator in a small liberal arts college, I became involved in the local elementary school's attempts to raise standards in writing across the curriculum. I then understood that teaching poetry has terrors for teachers who do not think of themselves as poets. Mrs. Selby, the second grade teacher, told her principal, Mrs. Searby, she felt uninspired to teach poetry and troubled that she was not enhancing her children's interest in poems nor belief in their ability to write them. Mrs. Searby knew I was a practicing, sometimes published, poet and that I was looking for ways to be useful to elementary school faculty. I was approached, and I led a week-long workshop for a class of thirty second graders, whom I called "poets in residence."

Correction: *The last issue (Volume 26, Number 2) should have read October 1993 instead of September 1993 on the front cover. Sorry for any confusion this may have caused you.*

I offered to work with Mrs. Selby in class for five continuous morning classes (lasting approximately one hour each) on an animal theme. Mrs. Searby, Mrs. Selby, and I all imagined the possible. Mrs. Selby's knowledge of second graders, I imagined, could help me share my poetry, and Mrs. Selby imagined she could refine her poetry instruction. We sorted ourselves out in two planning sessions.

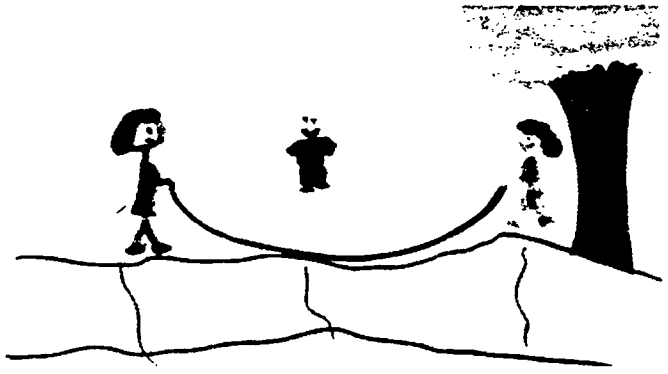
Despite Mrs. Selby's hesitation, her energy was unbounded. For the first morning, Mrs. Selby covered the walls with pictures of animals and played a record of animal sounds. After my introduction, I gathered children together in the center of the airy classroom on what I called "the magic carpet." We stood facing one another for a relaxing exercise. I showed how to catch a handful of air, draw it to one's self–holding it just above the waist, then very slowly bring it through a narrow tunnel through the chest and to the mouth–feeling its power, exhaling it like a cat's purr. I don't make this tunnel of air when writing poetry, but I wanted a way to mark the opening of these sessions, to help my poets clear their minds. I wanted to engage their bodies. With few words, it worked. This tunnel of air caught on. When stuck for inspiration or a word or inner peace, Jeff would stand in his place executing another tunnel of air.

The room was full of pictures and books of animals which we used to provoke lists of expressions children suggested could be used in a poem. The children wrote these words, in their own hand, on huge pieces of paper in each corner of the room and, miraculously, the next morning the words were redone, accurately spelt in the teacher's hand. On that second morning, with the excitement of lists of words to work from, we popped a pair of cardboard rabbit's ears on each pupil to encourage them to write, which they did freely, confidently, and with considerable absorption. Sitting quietly at their desks, they put pen to paper and could

move freely in the room to check words or look at pictures. This phase was all done silently.

One pupil, Jeff, had troubles. His face flushed with a cold, he came up to me declaring he couldn't think of anything to write. I asked if he'd pulled his rabbit ear. It hadn't worked. I responded very seriously, kneeling in front of Jeff. I said: "That's odd, Jeff. It has always worked before. Perhaps you should pull the other ear." He trustingly did so. I walked the hot child back to his desk, and his poem began to flow. It was about an angry grey cat whose mother had forced him to come to school when he felt so sick!

Mrs. Selby was ready for the next phase. As the poets completed their poems and read them to friends, they wrote them up in books especially designed and prepared in earlier classes for the purpose. We finished the workshop by reading our fresh poems for another class. One of the poets insisted the listeners should wear the ears, and everyone did a tunnel of air.



TEACHING ENGLISH WITHOUT DESKS

By Marlow Ediger

One spring semester I had the opportunity to supervise a student teacher who emphasized a rather consistent philosophy of teaching English. She was student teaching in sixth grade, and she discussed the following beliefs about teaching and learning with me:

1. Pupils are active, not passive, beings.
2. Pupils should have adequate opportunities to select, from among alternatives, what to learn.
3. Sequences for learning come from the self, not from the teacher, textbooks, or workbooks/worksheets.
4. Pupils should choose if individual or committee endeavors are preferred routes of learning.
5. English teachers serve as guides, motivators, and helpers, not as dispensers of information.

During a unit on creative writing, the student teacher had a chance to implement her philosophy. She discussed her unit plan thoroughly with the cooperating teacher and with me as it was being developed. (This, by the way, was a completely new experience for the cooperating teacher.) The cooperating teacher was highly appreciative of new ideas being brought into the classroom setting. Encouragement and backing for the student teacher came from both of us.

Implementing the Plan

Diverse stations were set up in the classroom by the student teacher. Each had objects, illustrations, and symbolic materials. For example, at the Tall Tale Center a model Pecos Bill doll represented the concrete or object material, pictures of Pecos Bill emphasized the illustration, whereas library books of Pecos Bill stressed the symbolic. At this station, the student teacher listed characteristics of tall tales, such as:

1. A superhuman individual is the main character.
2. The superhuman being gets into some kind of trouble or difficulty.
3. He/she then gets out of the difficult situation.

In addition to the Tall Tale Station, the student teacher developed a myth writing station, a fairy tale writing station, a legend writing station, and a fable writing station.

Poetry stations included writing couplets, triplets, limericks, haiku, tanka, and quatrains. Considerable effort went into making each station attractive and appealing, and there were definite goals for student attainment in setting up each station.

To initiate the unit on creative writing, the student teacher provided readiness activities for students prior to interacting with any station. Readiness here consisted of motivating children to select and work at a station of their very own choice. Thus, for the Tall Tale Station, the student teacher read parts of two different tales so that children could discover that which makes for a tall tale. She introduced library books at the station so that students could read to further understand tall tales. Pictures of tall tale characters were discussed. Ultimately, each student who chose this station wrote a tall tale of his or her own. The model presented here for the Tall Tale Station was followed, in general, for the other stations. The student teacher attempted to guide learners to:

1. understand the content and skills presented,
2. attach meaning to the ongoing activity,
3. sequence experiences appropriately,
4. achieve success, and
5. expand on something of personal interest.

After readiness had been provided, students chose a station at which to work, either as individuals or as committees. Each selected that which appeared interesting, meaningful, purposeful, sequential, and achievable. The student teacher monitored learner progress. She helped individuals and committees as the need arose. Those who could not settle down to do a task were given special assistance. Much encouragement was given to children. The student teacher was no longer the center of the stage, but rather was a helper and resource person. I was especially impressed with the amount of effort that went into securing materials of instruction for the eight stations.

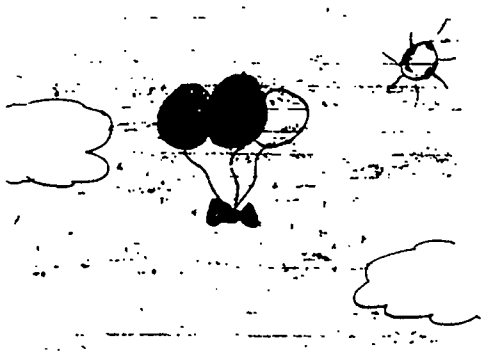
Evaluation

In a conference setting, the student teacher recommended the following pertaining to revising her learning stations approach:

1. Start with fewer stations initially.
2. Know pupils' characteristics well before implementing a learning stations methodology.
3. Begin with one committee of responsible pupils when using a learner decision-making approach. Additional committees can be formed when readiness by pupils and the teacher is in evidence.
4. Have as many materials at the stations as needed to guide learners to learn as much as possible. Only relevant materials should be placed at each station.
5. Establish important rules to assist each pupil to become as independent as possible in the decision-making arena.

Patience, too, is necessary when the student teacher moves from individual to individual, as well as from committee to committee, to clarify and motivate. Pupils can get noisy and restless when waiting their turn to obtain student teacher assistance.

Consistency in philosophy and practice is nice to see, especially at the very beginning of a career.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME AND THE "RED CLOCK"

By Charles Martin

Time. It is an integral element of existence as we know it, but it is one of those things with which we have great difficulties throughout our lives. As we get older time seems to fly, and we find ourselves lamenting the fact that we do not have more of it–or that we did not use more wisely the amount we had. Which one of us has not wished he or she had a little more control over what was happening? A couple of years ago, with that thought in mind, I approached Steven Hawkings' book, *A Brief History of Time*. I hoped to find some answers, some secrets to help me have a better understanding of time and, thereby, make better use of it.

* * * * *

I sometimes miss that here-now-and-forever orientation that marks the child's perception of time. Children see their lives as existing primarily in the present. It is a glorious cycle, and it spins like the wheels of their favorite bike until history, like the earth's gravity, forces itself upon them as they grow. Kids don't need calendars. They "almost" know when Mr. Martin's assignment is due. They "kind of" know when their favorite TV show is going to be on. They "sort of" have an idea of how far away the weekend is. They have a definite notion of birthdays and other 'gift" days, maybe even a remote vacation date, but they don't really know how far away those times are. Their understanding of time lacks a certain depth perception. Every parent knows that the only possible answer to the question, "When are we gonna be there?" is a meaningless but reassuring "Soon."

Kids need to be given some control over time in order to be able to appreciate it. It is our growing self-awareness of time that enables us to assess and evaluate ourselves, to acquire a personal history. In a sense, much of what we do as teachers and parents is to draw children out of the present and introduce them to this idea of history. At Crow Island School, children develop this sense of time themselves in several ways. One particularly effective way in which children begin to understand and compose themselves is to examine and compare their accomplishments over time by means of portfolios and archives. In this way children begin to learn about the idea of progress over time. Next they must learn to discipline their use of time in order to be able to make the most of it. The best way to achieve this is to give them the opportunity to manage small units of time. Success in accomplishing an objective within a specific time frame can be a very satisfying experience (that's what we all keep trying to do each day).

Once again I turned to Dr. Hawkings, but I couldn't find the answer for which I was looking. He mentioned red shifts and black holes, and I came away feeling less empowered than before. I needed something more concrete to make it possible for students to take control over small segments of time so that its value would be understood by them in the very moment that it was passing.

One day I stopped in an antique trivia shop. There it was. A large, round Sunbeam wall clock, circa 1958, the kind you'd see in

diners. I carried it home and went to work outfitting it with two red lights at the top of the clock and a red button situated directly between them. If I punched the button "on," the bulbs would light up and the clock would start, second hand racing or creeping (according to your perception) on its cyclical journey. If I pushed the button again, the red lights went off and the Sunbeam stopped. At last I had discovered a way that we could control time down to the very second! The children took to it right away and dubbed it the "red clock."

The red clock makes its appearance at every student meeting. Here's how it works. Each meeting of the student council is an open one. All ages and grade levels may attend this town meeting of sorts. The challenge at such meetings is to create order from an inherently chaotic event.

An entire meeting lasts 25 minutes. At the start, one child is chosen to be the time manager. Throughout the meeting children may address their peers at the microphone, but otherwise they must not speak. If the time manager sees or hears talkers, he or she turns on the red clock. When the violators stop talking, the clock stops ticking and the children save their time. In this way they have the opportunity to decide for themselves just how valuable their time is to them.

If the clock has "gulped" five minutes off the end of their meeting, then the group leaves with the knowledge that this was their time and that some members of the group decided to use group for personal time. Their actions enhance or diminish their meeting and hence their ability to achieve goals.

These are some of the early lessons by which children learn about the value of time and their part in learning to manage it effectively. It is a struggle that is always with us. Perhaps if we had a red clock to remind us when we were getting off the track, we'd close each day with a greater sense of fulfillment.

And then again, maybe not. There are some answers concerning time that we will probably never have. I looked at Dr. Hawkings' book and heard my mind asking, "When are we gonna be there?" I could have sworn I heard him answer, "Soon."

Reference

Hawkings, S. (1988). *A brief history of time.* New York: Bantam Press.

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