

Poems for Two Voices: An Interdisciplinary Activity

LESLIE PERFECT RICKLIN

The poem on this page is an example of a poem for two voices, two perspectives on the same subject or theme. It was written by two middle school teachers in a workshop that I led at the annual conference of the National Middle School Association. Teachers are quick to see that a variety of language arts skills readily apply to learning in the social studies. Reading, speaking, listening, writing, technology literacy, for example, can get plenty of practice through the learning of social studies content. Likewise, it is hard to imagine fulfilling the goals of social studies education without incorporating language arts. Social studies teaches citizenship by “preparing our people to identify, understand, and work to solve the problems that face our increasingly diverse nation and interdependent world....”¹ How can middle school students grapple with social studies issues found in current events, geography, or history without reading, writing, listening, and discussing the content? The two curriculum areas are inextricably connected, and a teaching strategy that combines them effectively is poems for two voices.

A Purpose for Poetry

One reason that a poem for two voices is such a powerful tool for learning is that it depends on two students collaborating closely. Developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky labeled this collaboration “the zone of proximal development,” which refers to the difference between what a child can accomplish alone and what that same child can accomplish with the assistance of others.² In addition, by teachers integrating social studies instruction, they “are unleashing the power of communications by introducing learning strategies that rely on social interaction. Oral modeling of

I grew up in a house
On Saturday, my mom made pancakes
My dad took us fishing
In the summer I went to camp and
my big sister wrote me letters
In gym class I was never any good at
kick ball
Life is pretty easy for me.

I grew up in lots of houses
I had to find my own breakfast
I never saw my dad
I went to summer camp and
no one wrote me letters
I was always the first picked for gym class
I know what the real world is like.

reading and writing, collaborative reading and writing, dialogue, and peer journals are just a few of these strategies.”³ A person does not become literate in a vacuum but in a social context.⁴ Social interaction is vital for students to develop into responsible and literate citizens. Here again, poems for two voices fits the bill for students to practice these skills on the road to responsible citizenship.

Joyful Noises

I learned about poems for two voices some years ago as a participant in a workshop for teachers about the quincentennial of Christopher Columbus, which was run by Bill Bigelow, an editor of *Rethinking Columbus*.⁵ He introduced me to the Newbery Award-winning book *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* by Paul Fleischman, upon which Bigelow based his activity.⁶ We had to think of a current social or historical issue and write a poem taking a view opposite from that of a partner in the exercise. Subjects for the poems could include the views of Spanish Conquistadors and indigenous peoples, Western settlers and Native Americans, Anglo-Saxon Americans and other immigrants, a homeowner and a homeless person, or a drug-free person and a drug user. We found this strategy

very powerful and effective in exploring a myriad of issues in depth in a fairly short time. The collaboration that led to the creation of the poem was the most meaningful part of the process.

Language Arts and Social Studies

As an example of a poem for two voices, consider a sixth grade geography unit that focuses on the physical features of Africa (see the example below). After studying landforms, looking at and making maps, etc., students will have gained a body of content knowledge from which to write a poem for two voices. The teacher organizes the activity by telling the class that each person will work with a partner, choose two landforms from the African continent, and write at least six lines each about their respective topic.

I have found that, initially, the teacher (rather than students) should choose the student pairs to be sure that no one is left out, and that one student will not dominate over another. Once students are familiar with how this writing activity is done, the teacher might allow students to select their partners. If there is an odd number of students in the class, one group can easily create a poem for three voices, as most topics have more than just two perspectives

(a thought for a third party in the example below might be to add the “voice” of the tropical forest of Central Africa or of the savanna in the south).

Because the choices for topics are so open ended, students may feel overwhelmed, even reluctant, in the beginning, and not know where to begin. To assist them, the teacher should brainstorm with the whole class to generate ideas for poems. By seeing lists of possible topics (as seen from two or more perspectives) on the board, students can start seeing the possibilities. Once they get an idea and begin to write together, they become engaged in the activity.

Students should have enough time (at least 20 minutes) to collaborate on their poems. Teachers may use writing workshop time, for example, or part of a double period with language arts. Once students have completed their poems, they should practice reading them aloud together before sharing them with the class. They do this by alternating speakers line by line, so that each thought is contrasted with a different thought, as if the poems were a conversation. (For example, while reading the poem below, student A would say, “I am the Nile River.” Student B would say, “I am the Sahara desert.” Student A would follow by saying “I am the longest river in the world.” And the pattern would repeat.)

Practice time is important in order to help students feel confident as well as prepared. I believe that they should come to the front of the class to read their poems. Students need many opportunities to make oral presentations so that they feel comfortable and learn to speak clearly. This venue offers the support of a partner. The class should applaud after the presentations to acknowledge the creative effort and demonstrate respect for each pair of students.

Assessment

Poems for two voices can be used as an assessment tool. The poem on this page

reveals how students have integrated what they have learned. In this example, students personify the traits of the Nile River and the Sahara Desert, thus adding a dimension of empathy to their descriptions, making the landforms more understandable and memorable. The teacher, then, can quickly determine what the two students understand about the characteristics of different landforms, even as they read their poem.

I am part of Africa
I am the Nile River
I am the longest river in the world
I overflow my banks to make the land fertile
My headwaters begin in Lake Victoria in the south
And I flow north to the Mediterranean
Humans try to control me
I am part of Africa.

I am part of Africa
I am the Sahara Desert
I am the largest desert in the world
My lands are dry, dusty, barren
I extend from the Mediterranean in the north
To almost the Equator
Humans cannot control me
I am part of Africa.

Controversial Aspects

In other curricula areas, students have written poems that look at two views of economic concepts (capitalism vs. communism), political science (Democrats vs. Republicans during a campaign), and sociology (urban vs. rural life). Given the opportunity, students are quite capable of seeing the dichotomies in what they are studying and coming up with interesting subjects for poems.

What if some of these topics reflect a controversial issue such as the war in Iraq, affirmative action, gay rights, access to abortion, or stem cell research? Teachers may feel that the administrators or parents will object to such inquiry as being too political or that it encroaches on moral aspects of personal matters.

Middle school students, in my opinion, should be encouraged to learn, think about, and discuss the issues surrounding current topics in the news. In a few short years, they will be voters and will make decisions on these and other such issues. In order to make reasoned decisions in our democracy, they should be exposed to different sides of these issues and learn to discuss them in class in a logical, respectful way. As social studies

teachers, it is our responsibility to create an atmosphere in our classroom that fosters student engagement in a healthy exercise of democratic principles. Each teacher must decide what topics are appropriate for his or her students considering their age group and their social setting, although colleagues and principals can often help in these matters. Poems for two voices are an excellent way to help students not only look at different sides of world problems, but also to apply their knowledge to develop their ideas and express them in a thoughtful way.

Conclusion

Middle school classrooms should be communities where learning is ongoing, collaborative, meaningful, and

stimulating. Assigning students to work in pairs to create poems for two voices is a powerful way to help students think deeply about what they believe, know, and want to express about all sorts of knowledge. Such poems can bring together the best in social studies and language arts by integrating skills with content. The teacher’s role is to provide (or point the way to) content and background, facilitate student pairs in their work, advise where needed, assess student knowledge, and enjoy watching the creative process unfold. 📖

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, “In Search of a Scope and Sequence for Social Studies,” *Social Education* 53, no. 6 (1989): 377.
2. Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1962).
3. D. G. Hennings, *Communication, Language and Literacy Learning* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2000): 8.
4. Pamela J. Farris, *Elementary and Middle School Social Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2004): 33.
5. Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson, eds., *Rethinking Columbus* (Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, 1998).
6. Paul Fleischman, *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1988)

LESLIE PERFECT RICKLIN is a professor in the Department of Education at Eastern Connecticut State University in Willimantic.