By actually “doing poetry” individually and with their students, teachers will be best situated to teach it in the classroom.

In order to be truly effective teachers of literacy in the 21st century, educators often wrestle with what they need to know, how they can best learn it, and how they can most effectively teach it. In this article, we document a process that can be used to address each of these issues; it is equally effective for teacher professional development, teacher self-study, preservice teacher education, or classroom implementation. By actually “doing poetry” alone, and with their students, teachers will be situated to teach it in the classroom. Dewey (1966) emphasized that knowing is doing: it denotes “a practical attitude, a readiness to act without reserve or quibble” (pp. 296–297). What teachers and students need to know extends beyond simply knowing about poetry; they need to know how to write it and how to appreciate both its processes and various products (Leland, Harste, & Helt, 2000). Our goal is, therefore, not only to teach the theory behind poetry, the variety of poetic forms, and the benefits of poetry, but also to build “poetitude”: value and belief in the power of poetry as a teaching and learning tool for all students. We want students to become poets in practice and see themselves as practicing poets.

This article discusses the need to engage students and teachers in active poetry writing, to explore the potential benefits of poetry writing in the classroom, and to apply Cambourne’s (2000/2001) conditions of literacy learning to poetry writing. Poems written by preservice teachers are highlighted throughout the article and are provided as examples of engagement in the process of poetry writing.

More than just a little poetitude

Poetry. The mere word evokes a full range of emotions in students, regardless of whether they are elementary, secondary, or postsecondary students, and in preservice or practicing teachers. Regardless of the grade level, when poetry is introduced as a topic to explore in writers’ workshop, groans of disapproval and cries of anguish can often be heard ringing through our classrooms, telling us that these students are, for the most part, unsure, lack confidence, and don’t know where to start. Often this sense of “I don’t know how to do it” contributes to a self-fulfilling prophecy of “I can’t do it,” which in turn leads to apprehension and withdrawal from the task. Teachers themselves are often ill equipped to deal with the apprehensions of their students because many of them are still struggling with their own poetry experiences. Sweeney (1993) documented hearing teachers say, “I really want to teach poetry, but I had such horrible experiences with poetry when I was in school—I don’t want to turn my students off! I never know how to begin!” (p. 11). Many teachers have, throughout their educational careers, “crossed paths with a few teachers who saw poetry as a math problem with a solution to be derived from a set formula” (Manning, 2003, p. 85). Dispelling the poetry myth is not an easy task, and it must begin with the teacher. Initiating activities must be fun and ease apprehension; they must support students in their exploration of poetry and help them to experience poetry beyond the rhyme and the formula.

Robert Frost wrote that “poetry is what gets lost in translation” (Brooks, Warren, & Frost, 1961, p. 203). Unfortunately, poetry is often truly lost as a result of preconceived notions and negative experiences that are translated from one generation of teachers to the next and, as a result,
from one generation of students to the next. Poetry is often neglected in many classroom programs, except when mandated by standardized curricula or board initiatives. Many teachers and students recall experiences with poetry that led them to dislike or dread it—experiences that focused on “dissecting, analyzing, and meaninglessly memorizing poetry to death... [Poetry] was not something to be enjoyed—it was a test of endurance and memorization” (Hopkins, 1987, pp. 11–12). These attitudes must be addressed and dispelled before teachers can begin to recognize and come to appreciate the full value of poetry in the classroom and effectively incorporate it into their daily practice.

[This] is a journey we all must take—looking back at our roots and coming to know our origins as poetry users. When we confront our poetry past, rich or poor, full or empty, we can build our poetry future and develop programs and practices that will enable and empower children with this special art form throughout all their lives. (Booth & Moore, 1988, p. 11)

At the start of this journey, when asked about poetry, one group of reluctant preservice teachers responded through the use of an I Can’t poem, which effectively represented how they were feeling about writing poetry at the time it was assigned:

“I Can’t Write a Poem”

You want me to write a poem?
You must be crazy
My back is sore
My neck is wrenched
My wrists are twisted
My fingers are broken
And my head hurts!
My pencil is broken
My eraser is missing
My paper is ripped
And I’m tired
My brain must be broken
Wait!
I just wrote a poem?

Another more optimistic and eager group, as part of an acrostic exercise, explored their feelings about poetry in the following way:

“POETRY”

People find it difficult to write
One line and then another,
Especially when you consider rhyme, imagery, and meter.
Try an acrostic, free verse, cinquain, limerick, or colour poem.
Remember poetry can come in many shapes and forms,
You just need to put a little creative thought into it.

When given the tools and support, these preservice teachers successfully used poetry to express their thoughts, opinions, and ideas in creative ways without a high level of stress; they were able to evoke a strong sense of feeling and imagery about poetry and share it with their readers. What was most important was that each budding poet walked away from the exercise with a sense of success. We want to foster this confidence in all students; this poetitude is what we want them to gain from a study of poetry. We want students to understand that

poetry is a way to see and express life...and [that] it needs to be rolled around in your mouth so you can taste it. It needs to float through the air to be heard properly. It needs to be twirled and danced with, laughed and cried with, to become part of you. (Swartz, 2003, p. 54)

Despite the fact that these preservice teachers were reticent at the start, they began to look forward to scheduled poetry-writing sessions; they came prepared with topics, and they engaged in poetry writing outside of class to share with their peers (often as part of other course assignments). The motivating and energizing aspect of poetry writing is not unique to teachers. Routman (2000), a seasoned poetry teacher, reflected that

of all the writing done with students in elementary school, teaching poetry writing [had] been the most exhilarating and successful. Kids love it; they are energized by the myriad of possibilities and the total writing freedom. Teachers love it too; it’s fun and easy to teach, and all kids thrive. (p. 22)

It is unfortunate that all too many teachers and students never come to this realization because they never move beyond the stage of dread, fear, and apprehension. Without taking risks and engaging in poetry writing themselves, they never have the
opportunity to discover what a useful and rewarding tool poetry can be in enhancing literacy.

Teachers and students need to understand and value poetry in order to explore and enjoy it, because much of what is taught in the classroom is grounded in this understanding (Graves, 1992). In order for children to enjoy and value the language of poetry, teachers must demonstrate and model their appreciation for this literary form (Wilson, 1994). Part of this understanding and value comes from knowledge about poetry and its many forms, but it is far more likely that insights will be gained by actually engaging in poetry writing both independently and in the classroom. Glover (1999) summarized the importance of approaching our day-to-day teaching practice in this way and reminded us that we are always learners at the same time that we are teachers. The more we are able to view our work as teachers this way, the more we will begin to discover the poetry of our lives, both in and outside the classroom. (p. xxi)

This requires us, as teachers, to share ourselves as poets in practice or poets in action and to view the action of teaching itself as poetry in motion. This poetics of teaching reflects the reciprocal nature of authentic and meaningful teaching and learning where “teaching [enriches] the life of the teacher, even as he or she seeks to deepen and to broaden students’ knowledge, understanding, and outlooks” (Hansen, 2004, p. 119).

Why poetry?

In our fast-paced, “instant everything” world, we need poetry. It helps children and adults to ponder, to observe, to ask questions, to discover sights, sounds, and feelings that otherwise might remain untapped. It brings balance and beauty to our increasingly complex world. Poetry can awaken our senses or bring the element of surprise into our lives. It makes us laugh, teaches us powerful lessons, and renews our souls. (Harrison & Holderith, 2003, p. 6)

The “motive for metaphor,” as Frye (1977) called it, is a powerful drive to connect the human mind with what goes on outside it, because the only genuine joy you can have is in those rare moments when you feel that although we may know in part, we are also a part of what we know. (p. 11)

The true motivation for learning poetry, then, is its many benefits. Poetry can build immediate success with students and allow them to focus on the fun and joy of writing unencumbered by grammar and punctuation. It encourages language and word play, connects reading and writing, demonstrates the importance of word choice and word order, and frees students to write creatively (Routman, 2001). To this, Harrison and Holderith (2003) added that poetry helps students to learn and apply important content in fun and interesting ways.

“Poetry is the first genre that most children hear” (Manning, 2003, p. 86) and is rooted in oral tradition (Cramer, 2001). Babies hear lullabies sung to them, toddlers listen to nursery rhymes and finger plays, and emergent and early readers often have their first literacy experiences with poems such as those written by Mother Goose, Dr. Seuss, Jack Prelutsky, and Dennis Lee. Children experience poems before they enter school, during school, and outside of the classroom (Hopkins, 1987); they “are natural poets, and poetry surrounds them as they chant jump-ropes rhymes on the playground, clap out the rhythm of favourite poems, and dance in response to songs” (Tompkins, Bright, Pollard, & Winsor, 1998, p. 414). Chances are if children can sing it or recite it, they will soon be able to read it, and if they can read it, they will soon be able to write it. Poetry is fun and rhythmic; it engages and captivates students’ interest; they just can’t help chiming in with a familiar poem (Cornett & Smithrim, 2001; Heard, 1989).

Poetry isn’t just whimsical but contributes to increasing reading abilities. Lower primary teachers use nursery rhymes to develop phonemic awareness and one-to-one correspondence, and poetry helps children of all ages develop vocabulary. Reading poetry aloud over and over creates fluency with expression. (Manning, 2003, p. 86)

Awareness of rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration in addition to phonemic awareness are characteristics that often distinguish effective readers from readers “at risk.” The sad fact that some children enter school without the benefit of this rich background of language experiences makes it all the more imperative that we provide these opportunities throughout the school day. Routman (2000) observed that
students who struggled with forming letters and words and with writing sentences, and who found writing in school burdensome, blossomed in this genre. Free from restrictions in content, form, space, length, conventions, and rhyme, they could let their imaginations soar. Proficient writers also shone. For all children, their choice of words improved, and their joy in innovating surfaced. For some students who felt constricted by the requirements of school writing (journals, letters, and assignments), poetry writing freed them up. (p. 22)

From a more practical perspective, poems are often “short so it takes less time to draft, revise and edit a poem” (Manning, 2003, p. 86) than other genres; a poem can be written through the entire writing process—from prewriting to sharing—in as short a period as 45 minutes (Graves, 1992). As well, because poems are often published in anthologies, they are accessible to teachers as resources for modeled reading, shared reading, interactive reading, and guided reading.

**Engaging poets in practice**

Poems are “gardens of words” that might be either planted in neat rows or grown wild and free (Cecil, 1994, p. 3). Poetry “includes songs and raps, word pictures, memories, riddles, observations, questions, odes, and rhymes” (Tompkins et al., 1998, p. 414). Acknowledging that poetry is all this and more, we have reviewed a variety of poetic forms and have selected those that we feel ease writers into poetry, engage them in the process (Routman, 2001), and help them to realize the potential benefits of using poetry in the classroom, both in creative writing and writing in the content areas. We describe the process used with preservice teachers under the premise that all poets in practice need to experience poetry in the same way.

**Getting your hands dirty**

As teachers, we recognize the need to be willing to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty in the garden of poetry. This requires that we not only teach poetry, but also that we engage in poetry and live the poet’s life; it requires that we become poets in action. “If teachers want children to write poetry, they must first write their own poetry” (Cramer, 2001, p. 279); they must “know firsthand what it’s like to struggle to find a topic, to find the line, to select the words which exactly express what is in our hearts” (Glover, 1999, p. 37). Our teaching of poetry reflects Cambourne’s (2000/2001) conditions of literacy learning. The approach we describe is easily transferred into a regular classroom with elementary students or into professional development opportunities with teachers. Although represented here as a linear process, it is quite organic in practice.

Risk taking and demonstrating that we are writers, too, is consistent with Glover’s (1999) statement that “to teach poets we must be poets” (p. 37). Just as we tell our students that they need to go beyond simply knowing and talking about poetry, so, too, do we. Through the sharing of the following poems, we model our value of poetry as an effective and expressive teaching tool and accomplish the goal of never asking our students to do something that we aren’t willing to do ourselves.

**“Snow”**

white, shimmering flakes
floating gracefully from the sky
blinding those who care to watch
nourishing those who dare to taste
silently blanketing the earth
crunching beneath the weight of those who tread so softly
tender footprints beckoning to be followed
cleansing the ground with a fresh white pallet
on which to paint tomorrow’s dreams
and sense anew the wonder and beauty of each new day.
(By M. Parr)

Sometimes
The snow comes silently
Sometimes
The snow comes storm loud
Today
The snow comes stealthy
In the quiet dark
A white awake dream.
(By T. Campbell)

Writing poetry must be relevant to students. In our preservice teaching program, students know
that they will need to teach poetry, which provides a real-life purpose for them; they know that they have to be capable of teaching their learners about poetry in motivating and stimulating ways. This sense of purpose and motivation naturally engages them in the process. Without this need, we would simply be providing our students with theoretical information that would likely “wash over [them] and pass [them] by” (Cambourne, 1988, p. 51).

Without actually writing poetry, we would simply be introducing our students to forms and structures that would be stored away but not necessarily appreciated or actually learned, and quite likely not implemented in a classroom. Teachers in classrooms need to make this connection as well and engage students with meaningful and relevant purposes to write. This may be accomplished by asking students to write riddles, songs, poems, and raps; they may be encouraged to summarize content in rhythmic, easily memorable ways; or they might write about real-life experiences.

Immersion with poetry should be evident throughout the year; students need to be exposed to poetry in oral language contexts on a regular basis through choral reading, shared reading, Readers Theatre, drama, and so on. Ample opportunity must be provided for the exploration and reading of poetry at a range of levels relevant to students’ needs and interests, before, during, and after writing. Regardless of grade level, reading in the room might involve a variety of poems, morning messages might follow a highlighted poetic form, or students might be encouraged to store their favorite poems in their pockets, available on demand for reading.

Despite initial apprehensions, most students respond well to the expectation that they can all be effective poetry writers given the right conditions; they are eager to rise to the challenge of being poets in practice. Practice at the primary level could be a class anthology, with each student contributing an exemplar of a type of poem. Practice at the junior level could involve a small-group anthology that requires a description of the selected forms, a published example, and self-created exemplars. Marks should be assigned for participation only, to “keep the enjoyment of poetry away from grades and assignments as much as humanly possible” (Swartz, 2003, p. 54).

Students should be given the responsibility to plan the organization and presentation of their poems. Depending on the grade level of students, teachers can provide as many resources and as much support as they feel are needed. Junior-level students are responsible for the basic assignment but can extend it in any direction they choose. In their small groups, they must set guidelines, establish timelines, and make decisions regarding how the poems will be written, revised, edited, and published. Students or groups who require more support can engage in conferences during the scheduled writers’ workshop.

Mastery is not required for this assignment, but we expect students to explore and play with poetry. We want them to engage in poetry writing for the fun of it—for the mere joy of the experience itself. With a focus on process, reviewing poetry anthologies is quite an enjoyable experience. As facilitators, we consistently observe the connections made between students, other texts, and the real world (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). As students rehearse, draft, revise, edit, and publish, approximations are evident. Students come to understand that it is not all about getting it right the first time—it is about taking risks, trying it out, and then trying again (Cambourne, 1988, p. 69). One group of pre-service teachers eloquently described the poetic process in the following poem:

“Just a Poem”

Quick as a bunny
I do this assignment
And just like my car
It will need re-alignment
For I’ve hit some potholes
And a few curbs
Just as I’ve butchered
These phrases and verbs.

Many preservice teachers make use of their developing awareness of poetry in a range of teaching and learning situations—a goal that is reasonable and attainable by elementary students as well. Poetry should be a vehicle to represent learning and an outlet to express feelings of stress and pressure, especially as assignments and deadlines loom:

“Looking Ahead”

I can’t keep up,
I can’t get over all of the assignments,
I can’t manage my time,
I can’t do any more energizers,
I can’t go any further without a break,
I can’t do this forever,
I can’t wait till this is all over,
I can’t wait till I get a job,
I can’t wait till my first day in September.

Response to poetry should involve constructive feedback for growth during scheduled conferences and class workshops. All poets in practice are invited to share their favorite poem at a Poetry Café, thus becoming poets in action. Poetry anthologies are welcome additions to literacy portfolios as demonstrations of personal learning and engagement in poetry writing. Finally, as facilitators, it is important that we respond by discussing the process, refining the assignment criteria for future use, and making the connection to the regular classroom with our students.

**Free verse poems**

Poetry is a secret kingdom. If you engage all your senses—seeing, touching, listening, smelling, and tasting—the gates open. Seemingly unimportant things begin to speak: salmon-colored geraniums, a smooth beach stone, your mother’s voice when she calls your name, the diesel smell of the school bus, and that first bite of a [candy] bar. Details are the beginnings of poetry and the doors to your kingdom. (C. Hemp in Janeczko, 1999, p. 12)

Free verse poems using the five senses are those in which the senses act as the framework for a poem that examines and engages the use of the senses. Poets in practice should be encouraged to explore the use of their five senses in ways that create vivid, real-life images that enable readers to connect with the poem and experience it in the same spirit in which it was written.

Writing free verse poems using the five senses is a simple structure to begin with—one that students can easily relate to. It bridges the gap between familiar and unfamiliar. These poems allow students to explore poetry, engage their senses, and represent mental images with words. Older students can be encouraged to make use of literary devices in their poems, such as similes and metaphors. What often results are vivid representations of the ordinary and the familiar—novel and interesting ways of observing the world.

“Ocean”

As blue as the night sky
As green as the meadow grass
Fresh like the blowing breeze
Rumbling like thunder in the distance
As cool as summer rain
Blue, green, fresh, rumbling, cool
Ocean

“The Roller Coaster Ride”

Stomach in my mouth.
Blood surging in my veins.
Rules of gravity no longer relevant.
Like a rocket we shoot through the sky.
As quick as a jet we flip the loop.
Rumbling along like thunder.
Mouth, dry like the Sahara
Dizzy we exit, white as a ghost.
Let’s do it again.

**Shape and color poems**

Poetic still life is “painting” and positioning an object or idea with words or decorative letters. Shape poetry is a picture painted with words and looks like the thing it represents. Its meaning comes from the arrangement of letters and words as well as the words themselves... [A shape poem is] an artful arrangement that dazzles and bestows beauty on words. (Piazza, 1999, pp. 35, 38)

Shape poems “are strongly visual, breaking away from any and all traditional poetic forms—poetry to be seen and felt as much as to be read or heard” (Hopkins, 1987, p. 163). Experimenting with the shape, format, and size of words provides a different approach to poetry—one that often extends beyond the imagery of words but actually enables students to see the effect of visual images. “The visual positioning and representation of words in certain contexts can create emphatic meaning, contrast, and even metaphors for ideas” (Piazza, 1999, p. 27). Without the outlined image in the following poems, one might simply read them as prose or statements, whereas the visual representation provides a framework in which to read the poetry. With the outline, the poems come to take on a meaning that extends beyond the words.
Once students have experimented with shape poems and used concrete outlines to create images, it is important for them to realize that they can use words to paint images. “Poetry splashes the page in a rainbow of words and images” (Cramer, 2001, p. 302). We want students to manipulate words in a way that evokes “sensuous mental images through the concrete language of smelling, touching, hearing, tasting, or seeing” (Gangi, 2004, p. 95). In the following poem, the students chose not to focus on one specific color but instead wanted to represent the rainbow and the myriad feelings and sensations experienced when they find one.

“Rainbow”

Red as a fiery ember
Orange and tangy
Yellow like the sun
Green as blades of grass
Blue, a feeling of sadness
Violet as the skin of a plum

While we do not want students to rely solely on structured, formula-based poems, they do have merit when introducing poetry and building confidence. They provide valuable opportunities for creative and expressive wordplay and exploration of grammatical concepts.

**Cinquain and haiku poems**

Both cinquain and haiku poems enable students to explore word counts, syllable counts, and parts of speech. Students must use only a limited number of words and ideas to represent and convey a concise and succinct message. Because of their length, they are logical choices for introductory or summary activities. They are also easily incorporated into literature study and other curricular areas.

Cinquain poems can range from simply describing something (as in “Capturing Time”) to telling a story (as in “Monsters”). The structure of the cinquain poem requires students to explore syllabic counts and words that describe subjects, actions, feelings, observations, and synonyms.
“Capturing Time”
photographs
vivid images
capturing, reminiscing, feeling
fading with time
memories

“Monsters”
monsters
big and scary
hiding under my bed
I crawl into my blankets tight
I’m scared!

Haiku is a Japanese poetic form that contains a total of only 17 syllables. These poems “often deal with nature and present a clear single image” (Tompkins, 2003, p. 307) as seen in the following examples.

“Harvest”
In the fresh garden
the vegetables grow and bloom
until harvest time

“Metamorphosis”
A caterpillar
once a being in a shell
now a butterfly

Preposition and found poems
On a different note, the following preposition poem (shaped only by the preposition that begins each line) demonstrates a student playfully combining the poetic form with a riddle (the answer to this one is snow), playfully extending an awareness of prepositions and their use in painting pictures with words:

To dance is all I dream of...
Under the tender clouds
Above the inviting Earth
With grace, I dance
On whispers of air, I float
To gravity, I surrender
From the clouds, I fall.

Found poetry is a natural link to reading because its foundation is in text. Students choose direct quotes, random phrases, or words from a variety of genres, texts, and formats to create an original piece of work. Students manipulate these phrases and words and piece them together in a novel way that creates a strong and powerful image. “Found poems give students the opportunity to manipulate words and sentence structures they don’t write themselves” (Tompkins, 2003, p. 310). Found poetry often provides a scaffold to poetry writing that allows students to explore literary devices and vocabulary in a nonthreatening way. It also actively engages problem solving and critical thinking because students must review their text source with a specific purpose and message in mind. They need not rhyme or take any particular structure.

“The Kissing Hand”
I want to stay home with you.
I don’t want to go to school.
You’ll make new friends,
And play with new toys.
Leaning forward, she kissed Chester
Right in the middle of his palm
And wrapped his fingers around the kiss.
The warmth of the kiss filled his heart with special words...
I Love You.
(Based on The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn, 1993, Child & Family Press)

It is often in the construction of found poems that true collaboration and active engagement in cooperative writing find their expression. Typically, one student becomes the scribe or recorder while the group members contribute their favorite poetic lines from a picture book they have read together (content books are fun, too). Another student might reread what has been written as others search for themes, adjust the sequencing, identify lines for effective repetition, and, finally, reach a consensus on the final form.

One of the primary goals of language is to encourage poets in practice to explore, play with, and learn to love language; “writing poetry gives you the chance to fall in love with language again and again” (Janeczko, 1999, p. ix). As teachers, we
want our students to develop and acknowledge the power of language and word choice to evoke strong images and emotions. Students need to understand that rhyme can interject an element of humor into poems and can reinforce their message when used appropriately. The preservice teachers in our classes decided to imitate the rhyme and rhythm of a Dr. Seuss poem to convey their feelings about dishes, possibly as a result of the way they left their sink that morning on the way to school.

“DISHES”

Dishes, dishes, here and there,
Dishes, dishes, everywhere,
Dishes piled to the top
Dishes! Will they ever stop?
Dishes in the morning,
and in the afternoon.
Dishes in the evening
We only have one spoon!!!
No cups, no plates, they’re ten feet tall.
No forks, no knives, we’ve used them all.
Dishes, dishes, they won’t go away
Dishes, dishes, they’re here to stay.
I guess there’s only one thing left to do...
I’ll do the dishes, but can you help too?

Narrative poems

Narrative poems are poems that tell a story—typically something that has happened to the poet in practice. Narrative poems are most often an extension or transformation of the poet’s lived experience; they often reflect the place where he or she truly lives. Narrative poems are a record of experiences, thoughts, images, or memories that authors feel are worth sharing; they provide “the chance to capture in words the significant incidents in your life as well as the feelings that go along with them” (Janeczko, 1999, p. 76). Writing narrative poems focused on memories may help the writer to understand a memory or how to deal with it; they may enable the reader to take comfort in a poem or connect to the author and offer consolation. As Booth and Moore (1988) indicated, “poetry encourages thought of a special kind—poetic thought” (p. 31). The following poem draws us into the memory of a student and evokes strong emotion through her creative and imaginative use of language and imagery.

“My Love”

You make me smile with everything you say
Just to be with you can make my day
It’s hard being away from you, I hate being apart
Knowing I can’t hug you sometimes breaks my heart
I couldn’t believe it when you were taken from me
My eyes filled with tears so I could not even see
I want you back into my life so bad
I’d do anything I can to get back what we had
I know I’m grown up, I’m thirty-two but I don’t care
My mom should have never taken you away—
Teddy Bear.

When read aloud to students in our class, this poem held great suspense until the final two words. Then students shared their own memories of a childhood treasure. This was truly a poem that engaged its readers and helped them to make connections to their own lived experience. Poetry has a knack for doing this; it is a natural, authentic, and meaningful way to engage in the poetics of teaching and learning.

Encouraging students to write poems based on personal experience helps them to “view poetry as something that is connected to them and their everyday lives” (Sweeney, 1993, p. 71). Only
through the actual reading, writing, and sharing of poems such as these, will teachers fully understand their power in the regular classroom and their potential to engage students in authentic and meaningful poetry writing as an extension of real life. Livingston (1990) reminded us, as teachers and learners, to remember that Poets, after all, are human beings. They just happen to be sensitive to their world; they have something to say about their experiences in and relationships to this world, so strongly that they must share it with others in the hope that others, too, will feel what they are saying as it applies to their experiences and relationships. And they capture it in what they believe to be the most suitable and appealing means—words, the eternal and intuitive sense of and need for rhythm, music. (p. 19)

Livingston (1990) reminded us, as teachers and learners, to remember that Poets, after all, are human beings. They just happen to be sensitive to their world; they have something to say about their experiences in and relationships to this world, so strongly that they must share it with others in the hope that others, too, will feel what they are saying as it applies to their experiences and relationships. And they capture it in what they believe to be the most suitable and appealing means—words, the eternal and intuitive sense of and need for rhythm, music. (p. 19)

Living fully in the poet’s garden

When writing poetry with or alongside our students, it is critical that it becomes part of our literacy experience in a way that fills students with potential, possibility, and opportunity to explore, to recognize, and to respond (Booth & Moore, 1988). In order to do this, we must first examine our own apprehensions, preconceived notions, and perceived abilities as poets in order to include more space for poetry—both our own and that of our students.

Clearing a space for our students’ poetry requires that we first clear a space for our own. Even if we never choose to share our poetry with others, we still need to step through the door and make ourselves familiar with the poet who will be charged with the task of bringing other poets, especially young ones, along. It requires that we get our hands dirty and remove the overgrown weeds and dirt clods of our lives, knowing we may receive a few ant bites in the process. We must each reflect on our own journey as a poet if we want to be the best guide we can be for those who will depend on us for assistance. In doing this, we will be wiser and more attuned to what lies before us as teachers, opening up a wealth of possibilities for seeing our lives from a new perspective—through the eyes of young poets. (Glover, 1999, p. 7)

This “taking stock,” as it were, appears to be no less of a precursor for the poets in practice we encounter in our professional programs than it is for any other student engaged in poetry writing, be it in primary, elementary, secondary, or postsecondary classrooms. With this precursor in place, no longer will we hear groans of disapproval and cries of anguish from our students. Instead we will hear enthusiastic and energized cheers.

Parr teaches at Nipissing University. She can be contacted there at 100 College Drive, North Bay, ON P1B 8L7, Canada. E-mail michelap@nipissing.ca. Campbell teaches at the same university. E-mail terryc@nipissing.ca.

References


Copyright of Reading Teacher is the property of International Reading Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.