

The Red Room Company presents: practical poetry for primary classrooms

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Poet Dr. Lindsay Tuggle with students from Marrickville High School. Image courtesy of Prudence Upton

While the Australian Curriculum clearly outlines 'what all young people should be taught through the specification of curriculum content', it provides space and freedom for educators to adapt and develop their own resources, in order to achieve these learning standards (The Australian Curriculum, v4.1). Accordingly, a concern often shared by English teachers during professional development conferences in Victoria, and across the country, relates to an awareness of and access to coherent, practical and creative resources for the teaching and learning of contemporary Australian poetry. Although there are a plethora of possibilities for teaching Australian poetry within classrooms—the challenge is finding the most suitable place to start.

By providing teachers with practical programs and resources, The Red Room Company's national poetry education program inspires students and engages teachers to read, view and write multimodal forms of poetry to enrich and achieve curriculum outcomes. The program transforms the way poetry is taught in schools and learning institutions by bringing living, breathing Australian poets into classrooms across the country to run writing workshops. In addition to these workshops,

The Red Room Company delivers professional development sessions and designs curriculum-based resources to enhance teacher and student understanding and interaction with poetry. Aligned with AusVELS priorities for primary levels 1–6 English teaching and learning, as well as the Australian Curriculum, this article introduces a variety of practical classroom resources and programs designed by The Red Room Company to support the teaching and learning of poetry within primary classrooms.

The practice of poetry

Before delving further into the role of poetry within AusVELS and The Australian Curriculum: English (AC:E), it would seem the most beneficial way to begin a practical guide to exploring poetry within the classroom is to actually practise poem composition. The following activity is taken from The Red Room Company's *Poems to Share* cards, featuring over 40 poems by contemporary Australian poets, each with an accompanying poetry exercise.

Activity 1 (see image on p4)

Read the excerpt and instructions, and see if you can construct your own 'found' poem.

This short activity demonstrates how *Poems to Share* activities can be easily adapted and incorporated into the classroom to complement reading, response and writing requirements within the three interrelated English curriculum strands of Language, Literature and Literacy.

An alternate version of this 'found' poem activity is to select a suitable full-length poem and project the text onto a whiteboard. After reading and responding to the poem as a group, students can be asked to rearrange individual words or sentences to create a new poem that re-appropriates the original text. This activity assists students to 'understand, interpret and experiment with a range of devices and deliberate word play in poetry and other literary texts' (AusVELS, Language, level 4) such as nonsense words, spoonerisms, neologisms and puns.

Activity 1 Resource

Lindsay Tuggle
From **Calenture**

pockets of decay
tinge border towns
sulphureous, balmy.
once more white lines
are revelations.
abandonment as a plaything
rustles toothless in the tall grass
adjacent vacant lots.

poems
to share

Construct your own 'found' poem using a word(s) from this extract, alongside other words that you see around you. Think about the ways the words mingle and speak to each other, and how that changes their meaning.

poems
to share

Activity 2 Resource

Gareth Jenkins
& St Mary's Public School
Hovering

Gravity has diminished and we are hovering.
Tree-houses in the sky drink of firework-auroras,
needle-thin buildings arc over lakes and parks.
Friendship floats in bubbles amongst United Aliens,
life is pretty simple in a world without alarm.

poems
to share

Draw two aliens and in speech bubbles have them write four-line friendship poems to each other.

poems
to share

Activity 3 Resource

Ian McBryde
From **Beyond Omerta**

8. Late calls. Hidden drawers, closed cars,
smoke in the rain. The shadow that moves,
and the shadow that moves away.

poems
to share

Write three lines that describe what happens to your street, garden or room as the sun goes down.

poems
to share

Reinterpreting poetry activities in the classroom

Another *Poems to Share* exercise aligned with language and literacy outcomes for Levels 2–4 stems from a Red Room workshop run by the poet Gareth Jenkins with primary students from St Mary's Public School. Designed to elicit child's-eye imaginings of the future state of the world in 2030, the workshop culminated in the creation of the collaborative five-line poem, 'Hovering', that was recorded and placed in a Red Room audio time capsule.

Activity 2 (see image on p4)

Linked to curriculum themes of Language, Literature and Social interaction, this 'speech bubble' poem activity suggests students draw two aliens and in speech bubbles have them write four line friendship poems to each other.

This exercise can be employed to 'create imaginative texts based on characters, settings and events from students' own and other cultures using visual features' (AusVELS, Literature, Level 3) as well as to encourage experimentation with 'sound devices and imagery, including simile, metaphor and personification' (AC:E, year 5). Through the use of speech bubbles, students learn about poetic dialogue, different character perspectives, as well as conventions of visual poetry.

Variations of the *Hovering* exercise include asking students to create a series of speech bubbles to extend the interaction. For younger levels familiar with the *Dr. Xargle* picture books series, students can also be asked to imagine the two aliens have just arrived from another planet and do not know how to describe the world around them. Using the poetic technique known as a 'kenning' students observe the world around them through symbols, for example, a window could become a 'looking-square' or a fan could be an 'air-chopper'. Traditionally, a kenning is a metaphoric compound word used to describe a noun in Old Norse, Old English and Icelandic poetry. Common examples of kennings include descriptions of a ship as a 'wave-steed', the sun as a 'sky-candle' or the sea as the 'whale's road'. This technique can also be used to introduce younger students to more complex concepts of metaphor, symbolism and analogy.

Snapshot poetry

Activity 3 (see image on p4)

This activity can be used to spark short poetic descriptions or observations that might be used at the start of a creative writing lesson or short story composition session. Using the card featuring an excerpt from Ian McBryde's poem 'Beyond Omerta', students can be asked to write three lines that describe what happens to your street, garden or room as the sun goes down.

Student sharing

Students can also work in pairs, swapping their poems and further rearranging lines to form new poems. This exercise deepens student understanding of 'features of text organisation' while simultaneously encouraging the creation of 'a range of imaginative, informative and persuasive texts including imaginative retellings' through the practice of poetic composition (AusVELS, Level 2).

Students can also be encouraged to design their own *Poems to Share* cards. Using an original poem, or in pairs, students can select an excerpt of a poem they have written or read then develop an activity to accompany it. Stimulus for the activity could include 'Write a poem activity for another student in your class, or for students at another school'.

Though the *Poems to Share* cards were originally created for audiences of all ages, it is primary and secondary teachers that have consistently reported positive learning experiences and improved literacy outcomes for students. As a teaching resource, the cards increase classroom confidence, understanding and composition of poetry as they guide teachers and students through strategies and examples for analysing and creating poetry.

Curriculum-based resources

As a staple text type within AusVELS and AC:E strands, poetry provides a unique opportunity to develop nuanced language, literacy and creative composition skills, yet the question for many teachers remains—*where* to source a range of multimodal Australian poetry resources and *how* to begin engaging students in reading, examining and writing poetry?

All of The Red Room Company's education kits are developed in close consultation with teachers, poets and education professionals, with the aim of being flexible enough to meet a number of English curriculum outcomes and to suit a range of learning abilities and classroom contexts across the country. The kits currently available through The Red Room Company's education program are *Toilet Doors Poetry*, *The Cabinet of Lost and Found*, *Sea Things* and *The Disappearing*.

The Red Room Company's *Toilet Doors Poetry* project published commissioned poems and accompanying artworks on toilet doors across the country in 2004 and 2006, seizing on a new, captive audience for contemporary poetry. Accordingly, *The Toilet Doors Poetry Kit* is based around the idea of guerrilla poetry, which involves publishing poetry in unconventional ways and unexpected places to engage directly with audiences. Rather than struggling to find publishers and traditional audiences for their poetry, guerrilla poets take things into their own hands. They self-publish small chapbooks and broadsides (larger format posters pasted in public places) or publish their poems as stencil or street art.

The Cabinet of Lost and Found was the second pilot kit for The Red Room Company's education program. The original project was created for The Sydney Writers' Festival in 2009 and consisted of an installation of poems and objects in a cabinet of curiosities that audiences could rummage through. Cabinets of curiosities, sometimes called *Wunderkammer* (German for 'wonder chamber'), date back to the renaissance, in which people collected rare and special objects to display in their homes. In this learning kit, students are asked to select a talismanic object with special significance to them to use as stimulus for a poem. They are also asked to create a personal cabinet of lost and found, in the form of an anthology of poems. It is suggested to students that they not only compose their own poems, but also collect poems from other writers that are special to them. A great example of this learning kit comes from Concord High School's project with poet, Bravo Child. Teacher John Turner purchased an old fridge from eBay: over a few weeks of poetry workshops with Bravo, the students drew text on the outside; on the inside, they filled the shelves to overflowing with eggs, vegetables and fruit, poetically labelled containers and mannequin body parts—all emblazoned with words to form the 'Fridge of Lost and Found'.

The *Sea Things* learning kit was piloted in 2011, and is The Red Room Company's first kit specifically designed for both primary and secondary students. This kit is based on the public project that, in 2009, sailed duffle bags around the east and west coasts of Australia, stopping at various ports and schools along the way to pick up poems and poetic paraphernalia from poets and students all over the country until both bags reached their destination, Thursday Island. As with all of The Red Room Company's public projects, *Sea Things* also commissioned four new poems related to the sea; these poems are featured within the kit. The *Sea Things* learning kit makes use of the play on words 'Sea Things/See Things', by encouraging students to reflect not just on their relationship with the sea, but also with different ways of *seeing things*. As such, students learn to use poetry as a periscope for encountering new poetic forms and for viewing the familiar in new ways.

The most recent education kit to be piloted by The Red Room Company in 2012 draws from the public project, *The Disappearing*. This is a new free app for iPad, iPhone and Android devices that geo-locates poems to place. It offers students an authentic publication mode for both poetry and descriptive writing that explores and maps ideas and memories of place. Workshops utilising *The Disappearing* learning kit allow participants to interact with this free live app and explore learning resources that address multimodal requirements of the AC:E.

By exposing schools to a range of Australian poets and their works, The Red Room Company encourages teachers and students to realise the transformative potential of poetry within the classroom. Through practical poetry resources and workshops, The Red Room Company's education program help teachers and students open portals into poetic observation, analysis, imagination, memory and the writing of worlds bright with marvel, making the learning of language, literature and literacy more enjoyable.

To find out more about The Red Room Company's poetry education program and resources visit <<http://www.redroomcompany.org>> or contact Education Manager, Dr. Tamryn Bennett, via email: education@redroomcompany.org.