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CPL Podcast: Teaching Poetry K-6

Host: Carly Boreland

With: Jenny Williams and Sandra Rowan

INTRODUCTION:

You are listening to the JPL Podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:

Welcome to this JPL podcast for the Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I am the Editor of the Journal of Professional Learning and the Assistant Director of the Centre for Professional Learning.

Today I'm here with Jenny Williams and Sandra Rowan and we've just been at a poetry CPL course and I'm talking to them about teaching poetry, K to Six, using the English syllabus.

Sandra, it might seem obvious to some people, especially to some passionate English teachers, but for K to Six, why teach poetry?

Sandra Rowan:

Well, culturally, all cultures have a history of writing poems and it goes way back to early man where they recorded on clay slabs. Over time, poetry has been a very important factor.

It improves vocab. We are using language to make meaning, which is part of the syllabus, and using the right words and choosing interesting words is part of developing a language that we all share. The other thing about poetry is it's a short text normally, that kids can manage because they can write briefly rather than long essay-type writing. Poetry also has a lot of interesting play with words so we were having fun with words. Let's see how we can rearrange it to make it interesting and novel and to engage the reader by being funny by limericks and all types of interesting things like that.

The syllabus is saying that we must teach poetry. We have a mandate as teachers to teach poetry in every stage.

Jenny Williams:

I think for me, Sandra, one of the most important reasons why is the fact that it's small, manageable chunks that are often about emotion and therefore, every one of us as human beings react to it. There were poems we read today, in the course, where people really had quite an emotional response to it, and that's the power of poetry and what poetry does.

When I think about poetry, I use the description, when I'm teaching it in my classroom, that poetry is the best words in the best order about something important. I think that means you've really got to think about the language that you use. When we read a poem, it doesn't have to be long for there to be something really powerful that it says. Because they're often not long, I think what you said about it being very accessible to students, even students who struggle to read, is very true.



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It's not like you've got pages and pages to read to get to the author's purpose. It might be several lines, it might be quite short, it might be quite easy to read, but the message of the poet can be very powerful and that's why they're such good texts to include.

Sandra Rowan:

In the course today, we did a three word poem and we had a noun, an adverb, and a verb. We got them to play around with three words. Now, even the simplest poem like that kids have access to and it's a good starting point. They're successful with a three word poem and then you could go onto a six word poem, and then you can go onto a sentence, cutting up the sentence. In terms of student engagement and differentiation in the classroom, everybody has access to these simple forms of poetry.

Carly Boreland:

I really love what you said about it being short and important. Could you maybe pick out some little couple of words, something tiny that you could read for us as an example of where would you start? A three word poem; a six word poem; something small?

Sandra Rowan:

The three word poem I did with Kindergarten, and which I used an example in the course, was "Snails slide silently". That choice of words describing what snails do; all children have seen that, they've got access to that.

Then they have choice. They say, "Well, let's brainstorm an animal/insect/thing that you want to write about and then think about choosing the best word, like Jenny said, choosing the best words, putting those three words together, and reading it aloud. How does it sound as you read those three words?"

Jenny Williams:

I think the interesting thing about the task like that, which was really evident today when teachers were doing it, is because the only rule you have - we have two rules. You have a rule that it has to be a noun-verb-adverb, and you have another rule that every word has to start with the same letter. When you do that, it's stretching the teachers today and the students in your classroom to really think about their choice of word. We found teachers using words that possibly they don't use every day, but they needed that final S-starting adverb. They had to stretch in their mind to find a word that would fit but follow the rules. That's a challenge but it's also the fun part of it.

There was a lot of silence in the room while teachers were really thinking, really working hard on. I wouldn't normally, perhaps, like a silent classroom, but they were engaged, they were focused, they were thinking. If students want to share and write their poem collaboratively great. I don't mind that either. There's a lot of power in the talk in creating a poem together.



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Carly Boreland:

That captures so much about great teaching, I think a lot of thinking and a little bit of writing, I think, can be such a powerful task in any setting. There's a couple of things that you hinted on there when you were talking about the why of poetry that move beyond poetry for the love of poetry, poetry for meaning. You mentioned vocabulary and how you can stretch your own vocabulary. Is there a place for poetry and vocabulary working together as a method of teaching?

Jenny Williams:

I think most definitely because even a short poem can use language that students might not be familiar with. We used a poem today called *The School Lunchroom* in which students eating in the lunchroom are compared to wild boars stampeding. Now, students might not know what a wild boar is or might not know the word stampeding. They'll be able to get a hint of that from the context of the rest of the poem.

But as teachers, we can help them to unpack that. We can add visuals. We can take them through the process of looking at the words they don't know like *stampeding*, like *wild boar*, and unpacking that for them in a way that it becomes part of their own oral repertoire and possibly later, their written repertoire of new vocabulary.

Sandra Rowan:

Adding to that, Jenny, if you are teaching children who have an EAL/D background, it's absolutely vital that you explain what the words mean on the text, and unpacking it and giving them a definition of the word *stampeding* that is child-friendly and then showing the visual. You can get meaning through the visual and meaning from the explanation you've given them. It's definitely crucial to everybody, but especially for those students who are learning English as a second language.

Jenny Williams:

The idea of reading a poem and usually, poems aren't particularly long. So, it's easy for readers to look at and be able to do, first of all, a literal retelling of that poem. Secondly, go deeper and talk about what's the message that the poet is trying to convey to the audience here? Because poems are often short, those elements become quite easy.

We can unpack poems and look at comprehending a poem both on a literal level and on a much deeper level as well in analyzing it, and looking at how the poetic devices that a poet uses help to impact on the message that the poet is trying to tell.

Then we've got the opportunity to read poems as a mental text, to read them like a writer and talk about the language that we love or the poetic devices that have been used that we like. And then to experiment with those in our own writing. So that reciprocity between responding and composing becomes very powerful in the teaching of poetry.



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Sandra Rowan:

In the course today, we were looking at *The Highwayman* and it is a classic poem that most people will have heard of. I'm just going to read a couple of lines from it:

*The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees.
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding--
Riding-- riding--
The highwayman came riding up to the old inn-door.*

Jenny Williams:

If I was looking at that poem with my class, that classic by Alfred Noyes, there are a lot of things I'd want them- my students to understand as they unpack that. I'd want them to recognize the very beautiful descriptive language that comes in those metaphors. "The road was a ribbon of moonlight". They're beautiful examples of the use of metaphor, but there are also some other elements there that I'd want students to notice.

The way that repetition has been used to give almost an echo of the hooves on the road, the pace of the rider. There's a rhythm there that reflects the highwayman riding down that moonlit road. We can use that beautiful language and unpack it and unpack what the poet has used it for, how it suits the style and purpose of that beautiful ballad.

We can also, talking about looking at texts in a sophisticated way, go to a much newer text that's called *The Highway Rat*, written by Julia Donaldson. Now, *The Highway Rat* is a picture book by the writer of *The Gruffalo*, that could be used with quite young students, and they might never have heard of *The Highwayman* poem. But if you have heard of *The Highwayman* poem, when you come to *The Highway Rat*, there's a whole layer of meaning, that comes from the original poem into the new text, that gives an added sense and purpose to that story because of the poem. I'll just read a little bit of *The Highway Rat* and you'll see the patterning:

*The Highway Rat was a baddie.
The Highway Rat was a beast.
He took what he wanted and ate what he took,
his life was one long feast.
His teeth were sharp and yellow,
his manners were rough and rude.
And the Highway Rat went riding--
Riding-- riding--
Riding along the highway and stealing the travellers' food.*



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Sandra Rowan:

You can see that that poem has the same type of rhythm and rhyme and the movement, but the language in it is more suitable for younger children because they have a cartoon character on the page that they can also see. And the thought of stealing food from a rat makes a whole lot of sense of meaning to that level of student.

Jenny Williams:

We can read *The Highway Rat*, without knowing that it has been appropriated from *The Highwayman*. But when we know that and can make the connection between the two, so much more is brought into that picture book text because of our understanding of how *The Highwayman* poem works.

Appropriation is something that students in Stage Three are beginning to understand. And so there are lots of ways in which poems which are part of our culture, and which we reference in so many ways in everyday life, can give us another layer in our understanding of other texts.

Sandra Rowan:

Even though appropriation is in Stage Three, you can start a lot earlier by looking at phrases from poems or words and sentences and kids writing their own version of that sentence, rewriting it. That's the simplest form of appropriation at that level. All good writers do that. If you ask a writer to show you their writing notebook or journal, they will have lots of phrases and sentences and vocab that they have found in texts that they love, and they're keeping that to use in their own text. This is what we need to encourage students to do as well.

Jenny Williams:

It's that collection of language that may come from texts that you've looked at, or from things that people have said. Someone the other day said to me, "halfway to nowhere". That phrase, for some reason resonated in my brain and it's something I'll use as I come to write. We want students to make that same collecting of vocabulary and ideas that they will use in their own writing.

Sandra Rowan:

Therefore, it's important that students are exposed to a wide range of poetry, limericks, odes, ballads, all those ones that are mentioned in the syllabus, and nursery rhymes for the younger children as well so that they can build up their understanding of how language works in different forms.

Carly Boreland:

What about that sort of struggle, that joyful struggle and collection of phrases and words and things you save up to use another time? Is that something that students could observe of their teacher to watch their teacher crafting a poem or to trying, to dabbling here, adding word there, removing something else later?



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Sandra Rowan:

In the modelled section of your lesson on poetry, you would be demonstrating with your own poem or a sentence that you've taken from a poem and saying, what are the effective elements in here? What do you notice? What happens if we change this word, we take it out, we substitute it for a different word? How does the meaning change? How can we write our own sentence based on this sentence? In the guided, you might have little whiteboards and they're writing their own sentence that's based on that, but changing maybe the noun to something else.

Today, we made everybody write in the course. Part of that reason is, we're modelling to the students that when they write we'll write, and we'll share our writing because as a writer, we're all going to be expecting some feedback. I think in the classroom, that's exactly what you would do; you would model that whole situation. If you give me feedback, I will think about that and say, "Yes, I can change that to make my writing more effective."

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Carly Boreland:

Sandra and Jenny, I've heard a lot of stories about beautiful classrooms in primary schools that look fantastic, picture-perfect, really wonderful places if you stood from the door and looked in. But I've also heard that sometimes those are more aesthetic than effective classroom environments. Could you tell me some things about how you could make a classroom that really brings poetry alive, that people can use, that students can draw upon?

Jenny Williams:

It's so important that it is an inviting learning space, and that there's a sense of what students are learning as well as what they're doing with each room. It should be a welcoming environment. In terms of building a poetry-loving classroom, I guess, the first thing is to make sure that there is plenty of poetry in the room. That means that it's part of the independent reading that students can access and choose from. That poems are chosen as guided reading texts, or for all the students, perhaps, part of a reciprocal reading situation or of a literature circle. So that poems are valued as a text to be studied and analyzed within the class.

That can be very easily done even for the boys who might prefer tongue twisters, and riddles, and limericks, and annotations and adaptations of nursery rhymes that might not be the most beautiful language in the world but will appeal to their sense of humour, and capture them, and absorb them into loving language.



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Sandra Rowan:

I think it's important that students have opportunities to play around with poems. For example, in the early years, you cut up the poem into sentence strips, and they order that poem and then they read it, see if it makes sense. That's a very simple reading centre for Kindergarten or Stage One students to do. Also, writing their own poems and creating their own poems from editing and publishing so that they've got a book of poems that the class has written that those students can go to the bookshelf and pull off what other poems have been written by kids. It can be very simple. It doesn't have to be a whole page of poetry. It can just be, as we said, a six-word sentence.

So, access to poems that they've written so they own it, but also picture books that are poems so that you're getting meaning through the visual and through the words. They're using all the parts of the brain. They want to be able to read it and understand the language, have some visual literacy skills so they understand why the pictures were selected, and they are combining in that all together to get a bigger picture of what the poem means.

Jenny Williams:

I think the other thing that I'd like to see in a poetry-loving classroom is lots of evidence of having fun with language. There'd be a list of words. There'd be a lot of talk about rhyming words, and homonyms, and breaking words into syllables, and playing around with language so that students are constantly thinking about how they can express themselves, their feelings, their ideas, in very effective ways to touch their readers.

Sandra Rowan:

The minute you give the pen to the students, they own the pen, they own the word, and they can find that word again on the chart. "I need to know where they are." They own it. So making sure that the writing is also done by the students in the room, not always by the teacher.

Jenny Williams:

The other thing, Sandra, that comes to mind, as you're saying that, is the value of using different mediums for writing. We've often set up a writing corner that has different coloured pens and different coloured paper. But today, with the teachers in the course, we experimented with writing three-word poems on bamboo spoons and drawing a little picture of what it might be that they were illustrating. Then it becomes a question of, "Well, is this an art installation or is this poetry?"

That variety, that novelty creates interest, sparks the brain to think, "Oh, this is a bit different; I'm enjoying these.", and creates a very positive approach to the writing of poetry.

Sandra Rowan:

The other thing about poetry classroom is I think it has to embrace the fact that poems have to be read aloud, and that students should be reading their work to the whole class or to a partner. It's through that reading aloud that they can understand the rhythm and the rhyme of the poem that they have



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created. Also, I think there's a great range of apps that you can use for students to record themselves on their iPad or whatever device you have. They can hear themselves back, which is important as well, and they can share that with other people. Remembering that we're using all that speaking, listening, writing, reading when we're doing poetry.

Jenny Williams:

In terms of exposing children to poems, there is such a range of poems, and songs, and raps. So if you're interested in songs, start with songs. If your interest is in raps, maybe start with raps as well. I'm just going to share a couple of examples of poems. A poem can be quite simple. We shared today a poem called *Fog* by Carl Sandburg, and this poem has 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 lines.

*The fog comes
on little cat feet.
It sits looking
over harbour and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.*

Jenny Williams:

Now, there are six lines, but it's an extended metaphor. The fog is being described as a cat. It talks about the way in which the fog moves like a cat. There's a lot of comparison and talk about the language that's been used for the fog and how that is replicated in the way a cat moves. It's six lines, but there could be such a lot of discussion with young students, but even with the older students, about how that poem is being constructed and what the meaning of it is.

Then I'm going to a far more complex poem, which is really for upper primary students. It's a poem written by Maya Angelou, who, I have to say, is one of my personal favourites, and this is a poem called *Still I Rise*. I'm just going to read one small part of it. She did name one of her poetry books *Still I Rise*. I'll just read the second half of it:

*Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear.
I rise.
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear.
I rise.
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,*



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I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise.

I rise.

I rise.

Jenny Williams:

Now, the language in that part of that poem is not particularly technical language, but there's a very powerful emotional connection that we can make to this African American poet as she speaks about her ancestry and what it's meant, historically, to those people who arrived in America as slaves, and poetry does that.

It is the best words in the best order about something important. Often, we make a very emotional connection with the words on the page. Sometimes, poems need just to be explored in silence as we reflect on the meaning and the way in which we've connected to the words and how wonderful that we can help students to get a sense of emotion and empathy so easily through a poem.

A novel; 120 pages maybe, to make its point. A poem; concise, compressed, and emotionally rich, as well as rich in the use of language and poetic devices.

Carly Boreland:

I love that phrase, "I rise". It stays with you, it lingers, doesn't it? And it's meant to.

Jenny Williams:

Well, a repetition is a poetic device. We spend so long thinking about the importance of metaphor and simile, but something as simple as the white space on a page, the line breaks, the repetition, are all key elements in what makes a poem a poem.

Sandra Rowan:

The other thing I'm noticing, Jenny, that the emotional connection to the poem by the author is really important. It's important that students have choice and that we're not deciding as teachers what they're going to write about. We can show them models of poems like that and say, "What would you like to write about? What speaks to you?" We've got to make sure that kids have choice. It's really important to get them engaged in the content and passionate about it in the same way as the author was that you just read.

Carly Boreland:

What a powerful thing for very young people to do, seven, eight, to feel something and to express that deep feeling that they have. Talking to both of you, it seems like the question is less why poetry and more why not poetry? Why would you do? But for some people, perhaps it's daunting for all kinds of reasons. A little bit too far for them to tread. Are there any suggestions you can provide for people starting out? Where to make a start? What they could do first?



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Jenny Williams:

I think, as we were sitting and writing this course together, one of the things that really struck me is just how available poetry is on the internet. The poems you remember from childhood, you might only remember a line, you can Google that and find the poem, and then find the YouTube clip where someone's reading that poem, et cetera. Actually, finding poems to use is not hard.

I understand the reticence of teachers who may not feel they have the metalanguage for poetic devices or an understanding of the rules of poetry. We're so lucky with this syllabus that there's a glossary in the back and that that glossary is a very useful glossary. But again, it's very easy to Google what is a limerick, and to find out what the rules are for writing a limerick, or to put in haiku and see those steps that you might take to write a haiku and the teaching procedures you might want to follow.

So I think my advice would be, start small. Add a poem to your text set for each unit that you're preparing and planning for. Add at least one poem and start by talking about the things you feel comfortable about. Maybe you want to talk about the line breaks, or the white space, or repetition. Maybe you busily read up on metaphors and similes, and rhythm and rhyme, and slip in some of that information as you feel confident about doing that.

But in my experience with poetry, students will find things there that even you haven't seen and you'll find that, in fact, we're all learning from each other.

Sandra Rowan:

The thing about poetry is that it's easily accessible to all students in your classroom. So in terms of differentiation, students will write what they're comfortable about and if they have a choice, what they're interested in. Now, if you have students that are struggling, they can write short simple text and have great success at that, and get that published and read by others, and feel like they've achieved the same as everybody else in the classroom.

If you have students who are EAL/D, then you would have to scaffold the vocab and language for those students and doing poems by appropriating other poems and copying the model of that, they also can have success. For your students that are gifted and talented, they can just fly in terms of their sophisticated understanding of concepts and language and that becomes quite evident. Therefore, poetry is a simple thing to do in your classroom where all students can achieve at a certain level, at the level they're working at.

Jenny Williams:

The nice thing about students learning to read, we can be using poems to support learning to read. We perhaps ask a student to describe something that's important to them. We take that down, scribe for them, and then publish it so that now they've got a text they own that becomes a text they can read. There is huge value in exposing everyone to poetry, from the most reluctant to the most gifted student in our classroom.



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Carly Boreland:

You've been listening to the JPL podcast for the Teachers Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the Editor of the JPL. I've been speaking with Sandra Rowan and Jenny Williams from Trio Professional Learning, and if you'd like to find out more about our podcasts or to listen to further podcast, you can go to our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts.

CONCLUSION:

The JPL podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organizations. The host was Carly Boreland; technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

Sandra Rowan was previously a Deputy Principal in an inner west Sydney school. She is an experienced K-6 classroom teacher and school leader. She has been a literacy consultant in western Sydney and a teacher mentor working with beginning teachers to develop best practice. She spent four years working in New York schools as a maths and literacy consultant. In New York she supported schools as they prepared for school reviews.

Sandra has published eight teacher resource books that provide explicit units of work across the key learning areas. She provides teacher professional learning at a school level as well as having presented at conferences on literacy and maths.

Jenny Williams has extensive teaching experience including secondary English and primary K-6. In addition she has worked as a support teacher learning difficulties. Her enthusiasm for early literacy and working with students whose literacy is at risk led her to train as a Reading Recovery teacher and subsequently work as a Reading Recovery tutor.

As an educational consultant she has worked in Western Sydney and New York supporting teachers as they developed their literacy practice, quality teaching pedagogy and mathematics instruction. She has supported whole school improvement in a number of schools in Australia and overseas, working with school executive teams and school staff to invigorate teaching practice leading to whole school change.

In recent years she has presented at several literacy conferences and co-authored literacy-teaching resources.