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Kathy Everts Danielson  
*University of Nebraska*

Susan Crites Dauer  
*Western Oregon State College*

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# **Celebrate Poetry Through Creative Drama**

**Kathy Everts Danielson  
Susan Crites Dauer**

Creative drama and poetry are often neglected, yet they are important aspects of a holistic approach to the language arts. Drama encourages children to use language for meaningful purposes by actively involving them and motivating them to read, write, listen, and speak. Poetry exposes children to expressive and descriptive language used in many creative forms. Poetry also involves children and motivates them to read and write poetry of their own.

Creative drama has other benefits as well. Henderson and Shanker (1978) found that students who dramatized stories answered comprehension questions better than did students who only read the story. Miccinati and Phelps (1980) suggested that drama allows teachers to determine children's comprehension. Graves (1983) also suggested creative drama as a way to enhance comprehension. The use of poetry also has many benefits:

*Poetry can work with any grade, any age level. It can meet the interests and abilities of anyone, anywhere, from the gifted to the most reluctant reader; it opens up a world of feelings for children they never thought possible; it is a source of love and hope that children carry with them the rest of their lives (Hopkins, 1987, p. 4).*

There are many fine poetry books written for children that invite participation. Because poetry must be read aloud to be fully enjoyed, creative drama is a natural way to get students further involved with poetry books. This article describes how poetry can be used with the different types of creative drama, including finger plays, pantomime and movement, Readers Theater, sensory awareness, storytelling, choral reading, action poems, role playing, and characterization.

*Finger plays.* Finger plays are short rhymes that when recited encourage the use of hand or body movements to act them out. Classic examples are "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" and "I'm a Little Teapot." Children not only chant the song or poem, but also add planned gestures and movement to enhance the rhymed story. Several poetry books provide examples of finger plays. *Hand Rhymes* (Brown, 1985), *Play Rhymes* (Brown, 1987), and *Finger Rhymes* (Brown, 1980), provide not only playful poems for finger plays, but also small drawings that suggest appropriate hand gestures or body movements. Through the use of finger plays, young children are encouraged to play with language, enjoy the humor of a poem, gain knowledge of rhythm and rhyme through active participation, and enhance eye-hand coordination. Finger puppets can accompany finger play poems. Children can make puppets out of felt or construction paper to put on their fingers as they act out the poems.

*Pantomime and movement.* Pantomiming situations or objects helps children to think about the nonverbal behaviors and attitudes that convey meaning without words. Children can pantomime action-filled poems while the teacher or another child reads them. For instance, the poem "Boing Boing Squeak," in *The New Kid On The Block*

(Prelutsky, 1984), tells of an energetic mouse loose in the house:

*It bounces on the sofa, on the table and the bed, up  
the stairs and on the chairs, and even on my head.*

Several children could silently, yet dramatically, act out the poem by pretending to be the bouncing mouse (on the sofa, table, bed, chairs, and up the stairs) while another child reads the poem.

Creative movement to music or poetry adds to the mood or meaning of the poem. In introducing children to the creative drama process, DeHaven (1983) suggested movement exercises that encourage students to make their hands as large as possible, as strong as possible, as small as possible, and so on. Another suggestion is to have children pretend to be leaves loosening from the branch in the fall and being blown by a strong breeze or a whirlwind.

Exercises of this kind could carry over into poetry reading. For instance, while another child or the teacher read the book *Sledding* (Winthrop, 1989), children could act out the poem by paying special attention to the creative movement possibilities of the rhymed story. After the sledders are finally bundled up to go out in the snow, they move vigorously:

*Bang and bump and slither and flop. Unzip, unclip,  
unsnap, pop! Hold tight, steer right, splash! (pp. 18-24)*

By adding actions and body movements to the poems, students better understand the content, theme, and possible mood of the poem. They have a hands-on experience with the text, rather than just reading it.

*Readers Theater.* Readers Theater is a dramatic reading of a script. Using Readers Theater with poetry allows students to transform a poem into dialogue form and to read it with great attention to oral expression. Since poetry is meant to be shared orally, many poems are appropriate for Readers Theater. *Joyful noise: Poems for two voices* (Fleischman, 1988) is such a poetry book. Written in two parts (one reader reads the left side of the page, while another reader reads the right side of the page), two readers can use much expression to convey the message of the poem. Students could be encouraged to write their own poems for two voices for Readers Theater, such as the one shown in Figure 1, written by a sixth grader.

**Figure 1**  
**"Colors: A Poem For Two Voices" by Blanca**

<b>Reader 1</b>	<b>Reader 2</b>
<i>Some colors make me feel happy</i>	<i>Some colors make me feel</i>
<i>full of joy.</i>	<i>moody</i>
<i>Other colors make me feel sad</i>	<i>Other colors make me feel</i>
<i>gloomy.</i>	<i>depressed</i>
<i>But still other colors make me feel sleepy</i>	<i>But still other colors make me feel</i>
<i>like staying home all day.</i>	<i>cozy.</i>

*Sensory awareness.* To encourage students to participate in creative drama activities, sensory awareness must be stressed. Through sensory awareness activities, students begin to recognize the importance of their senses as they become attuned to sounds, sights, smells, tastes, and textures. *Chocolate Dreams* (Adoff, 1989) encourages readers to experience chocolate through their senses. By reading the poems about different types of chocolate, students become aware of their heightened sensations evoked by chocolate. After reading some of these poems, students could be encouraged to write their own sensory poems about chocolate. They could examine a piece of chocolate and fill in a sensory chart. (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Senses Chart for Chocolate**

<i>SEE</i>	<i>SMELL</i>	<i>TASTE</i>	<i>HEAR</i>	<i>FEEL</i>
<i>dark</i>	<i>sweet</i>	<i>creamy</i>	<i>crunchy</i>	<i>smooth</i>
<i>brick</i>	<i>sugary</i>	<i>soft</i>	<i>melting</i>	<i>sticky</i>

Using some of the words together in two word phrases, two word poems about chocolate, such as the one shown in Figure 3, could easily be written.

**Figure 3: Two Word Poem About Chocolate**

*Soft brick*  
*Sugary dark*  
*Sticky soft*  
*Crunchy creamy*  
*Melting sweet*

*Storytelling.* Storytelling is an ancient form of our oral language tradition. It increases both language abilities and internalization of the characteristics of stories (Morrow, 1985). In addition to traditional tales, many poems can add to the interest of storytelling.

For initial experiences with poems and storytelling, familiar nursery rhymes can be used. "Little Miss Muffett," "Jack and Jill," and "Little Bo-Peep" all tell a story in poetry form. As students begin to feel comfortable with this genre, other more complex stories told in poetry form could be used. For example, *My Father* (Collins, 1989) tells of a father's dreams for himself and his young family. Although these dreams never come to fruition, the reader is carried through the verse by the musical quality of the text. Another recent publication, *This is the Bread I Baked for Ned* (Dragonwagon, 1989), tells, through verse, about getting ready for company. Students will understand that even an ordinary happening can come alive through the rhythm of poetry. Flannel board characters would be a welcome addition with this book, enabling students to understand how the verse builds as the party time nears.

*Choral reading.* Choral reading involves students taking turns reading a poem together. By using this strategy, students quickly learn to appreciate poetry through its rhythm, feeling, and magical quality by being actively involved with the text. Choral reading provides opportunities for students to collaborate because they must decide how to present the poem for maximum understanding and enjoyment. Making decisions of when to read in unison, in small groups, or individually, provides practice in cooperation.

One book that is well suited for choral reading is *Ho for a Hat* (Smith, 1989). By describing the myriad types of hats that can be worn, the author provides many situations for individual voices as well as a recurring refrain to which all can respond. Many types of hats could be used for props with this book. Another fine example of a text suited for choral reading is *The Missing Tarts* (Hennessy, 1989). Starting with the familiar nursery rhyme about the Queen of Hearts who discovered that her tarts were stolen, the book continues with various nursery rhyme characters helping with the search:

*'Let's look up the hill,' said Jack and Jill.*

Young children would enjoy meeting favorite characters through this choral reading opportunity.

*Action poems.* In the last few years, many fine books have been written in verse form, providing rhythm, through word choice and meter, to constitute action poetry. Because of the strong beat, no one can sit still when action poetry is read. Fingers snap, bodies sway, and toes tap to the rhythm of the beat. *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (Martin and Archambault, 1989) is a rhyme/chant of the alphabet letters as they try to climb up a coconut tree. This rollicking rhyme invites participation through its infectious rhythm. Another book that weaves a lilting rhyme is *17 Kings and 42 Elephants* (Mahy, 1987). The wonderful combinations of words and rhyme roll off the tongue of the reader, on this magical, musical trip through the tropical jungle.

Both of these selections could be enhanced with a rhythm band or simple dance, created by the students themselves. An exceptional collection of action poetry, best

suited for intermediate grade levels, is *Chortles* (Merriam, 1989). This small volume is packed with lively verse, including a poem called "The Ultimate Product" about a potato chip:

*Chomp, chew, munch crunch no-drip no slip easy-grip...*

*Role playing.* Role playing is defined as the literal interpretation of another person's actions, or taking the role of another person. Active participation in this format increases the child's understanding of others. For example, by reading *Old Henry* (Blos, 1987), students can examine how people feel in situations in which they are dealing with others who do not share the same values. This story in rhyme enables students to become not only Old Henry but also his neighbors. Another example of a story in rhyme in which students could role play is *Because of Lozo Brown* (King, 1989). Lozo Brown is the bully to end all bullies, and the book helps students realize how it feels to be the bully as well as the children that are picked on. Both books can be used as springboards for further discussions about positive, constructive relationships.

*Characterization.* When students begin to consider characterization, they focus their imagination and concentration on the characters themselves – what they look like, how they think and feel, and how they act (Hoskisson and Tompkins, 1987). There are poems that readily enhance these informal drama concepts. *The Pup Grew Up* (Marshak, 1989) is an excellent example of a poem that focuses on characterization. Not only does the text provide true glimpses of the characters in the poem, but also the illustrations are vivid portrayals of feelings and actions. Students could easily identify with the strong

characterization. In a softer vein, *The Fairies* (Allingham, 1989) identifies the whimsical characteristics of these "little people." This book provides many opportunities for students to think, act and feel like wee forest folk, a subject that often arouses curiosity in children.

## Summary

Integrating the language arts within a holistic framework should include the many possibilities offered by combining informal and interpretive drama situations with poetry and stories in rhyme. The examples given here will not only provide unlimited occasions for active participation in reading and reciting poems, but also enhance reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

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- Hopkins, L.B. (1987). *Pass the poetry, please!* NY: Harper & Row.
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*Kathy Everts Danielson is a faculty member in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska, in Omaha Nebraska. Susan Crites Dauer is a faculty member in the Division of Elementary Education, at Western Oregon State College, in Monmouth Oregon.*

## APPENDIX I

### Suggested children's poetry books for creative drama

#### *Finger plays*

- Brown, M. (1980). *Finger rhymes*. NY: Dutton.  
 Brown, M. (1985). *Hand rhymes*. NY: Dutton.  
 Brown, M. (1987). *Play rhymes*. NY: Dutton.

#### *Pantomime and movement*

- Cole, B. (1985). *The slimy book*. NY: Random House.  
 Duncan, L. (1989). *Songs from dreamland*. NY: Knopf.  
 Hersom, K., & Hersom, D. (1989). *The copycat*. NY: Atheneum.  
 Martin, B. & Archambault, J. (1988). *Up and down on the merry-go-round*. NY: Holt.  
 Prelutsky, J. (1984). *The new kid on the block*. NY: Greenwillow.  
 Westcott, N.B. (1988). *The lady with the alligator purse*. Boston: Little, Brown.  
 Winthrop, E. (1986). *Shoes*. NY: Harper & Row.  
 Winthrop, E. (1989). *Sledding*. NY: Harper & Row.

#### *Readers Theater*

- Fleischman, P. (1985). *I am phoenix*. NY: Harper & Row.  
 Fleischman, P. (1988). *Joyful noise: Poems for two voices*. NY: Harper & Row.  
 Lewis, C. (1987). *Long ago in Oregon*. NY: Harper & Row.  
 Martin, B., & Archambault, J. (1988). *Listen to the rain*. NY: Holt.  
 Martin, B., & Archambault, J. (1989). *The magic pumpkin*. NY: Holt.

#### *Sensory awareness*

- Adoff, A. (1989). *Chocolate dreams*. NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.  
 Bennett, J. (1989). *Spooky poems*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company.  
 Cole, W. (1981). *Poem stew*. NY: Harper & Row.  
 cummings, e e (1988). *In just-spring*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company.  
 Fleischman, P. (1988). *Rondo in C*. NY: Harper & Row.  
 Frost, R. (1988). *Birches*. NY: Henry Holt.  
 Hopkins, L.B. (1989). *Still as a star*. Boston: Little, Brown.

#### *Storytelling*

- Collins, J. (1989). *My father*. Boston: Little, Brown.  
 Dragonwagon, C. (1989). *This is the bread I baked for Ned*. NY: MacMillan.

- Field, R. (1988). *General store*. Boston: Little, Brown.  
Gerard, R. (1989). *Rosie and the rustlers*. NY: Farrar Straus & Giroux.  
Nerlove, M. (1989). *Just one tooth*. NY: McElderry Books.

### Choral reading

- Archambault, J. (1989). *Counting sheep*. NY: Henry Holt.  
Hennessy, B.G. (1989). *The missing tarts*. NY: Viking Kestrel.  
Kennedy, X.J. (1989). *Ghastlies, goops and pincushions*. NY: McElderry Books.  
Siebert, D. (1989). *Heartland*. NY: Crowell.  
Smith, W.J. (1989). *Ho for a hat!* Boston: Little, Brown.

### Action poetry

- Baer, G. (1989). *Thump, thump, rat-a-rat-tat*. NY: Harper & Row.  
Hayes, S. (1988). *Stamp your feet: Action rhymes*. NY: Greenwillow.  
Mahy, M. (1987). *17 kings and 42 elephants*. NY: Dial.  
Martin, B., & Archambault, J. (1986). *Barn Dance!* NY: Holt.  
Martin, B., & Archambault, J. (189). *Chicka chicka boom boom*. NY: Simon & Schuster.  
Merriam, E. (1985). *Blackberry ink*. NY: Morrow.  
Merriam, E. (1988). *You be good and I'll be night*. NY: Morrow.  
Merriam, E. (1989). *Chortles*. NY: Morrow.

### Role play

- Blos, J.W. (1987). *Old Henry*. NY: Morrow.  
King, L.L. (1989). *Because of Lozo Brown*. NY: Viking.  
Livingston, M.C. (1989). *Up in the air*. NY: Holiday House.

### Characterization

- Ahlberg, J., & Ahlberg, A. (1986). *The jolly postman*. Boston: Little, Brown.  
Allingham, W. (1989). *The fairies*. NY: Henry Holt.  
Goffstein, B. (1989). *A house, a home*. NY: Harper & Row.  
Marshak, S. (1989). *The pup grew up*. Translated by R. Pevear. NY: Henry Holt.  
Prelutsky, J. (1988). *Tyrannosaurus was a beast*. NY: Greenwillow.  
Steig, J. (1988). *Consider the lemming*. NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

