

# IN THE CLASSROOM

Carolyn Colvin, The University of Iowa  
Pamela Ross, San Diego State University

## The big advantage: Using big books for shared reading experiences in the classroom

Donna Norton Swindal

A powerful dynamic is created when students focus on a common text as they join in the shared reading of a big book. With the physical closeness of the group, the intensity of active student engagement and the joy of the experience are catching. As Holdaway (1979) found, a big book allows the teacher to offer the warm intimacy of the family reading experience while helping a whole class to see that the process is stimulated by print. All students from emergent to fluent readers can participate in the same activity. The teacher can see all eyes and, at a glance, gauge student attentiveness and degree of active participation.

### Read for pleasure and meaning first

The first goal of any shared text is the whole group's enjoyment. Therefore, the big book is almost always read aloud by the teacher on its first exposure. Students are able to engage in the pleasure of listening following a minimal introduction and some prediction contributions. To experience both the purposeful and pleasurable use of print is itself a very good reason to share a big book. The book may be read again and again with no other agenda in mind.

### Make other literacy connections

Following the lead of my second-grade students, I learned to use the shared reading of big books for purposes other than discussing the mes-

sage of the book. For example, I read *The Enormous Watermelon* (Parkes & Smith, 1986) intending that its story of cooperation among an ever-increasing number of characters trying to help pull a watermelon from its vine would help my students see the value of collaborative efforts and set the stage for a year of teamwork. The class listened as they watched my pointer move across the text. As soon as I finished, students voiced *their own* connections to the text:

"Hey, you never could have gotten that watermelon through that door!"

"What do you mean? Turn back to that page again and let me see."

"That's the same story as 'The Giant Turnip.' We read that last year."

"Why do some words get darker and some get bigger?"

"Did you see that they cut off parts of some pages?"

"That was for the nursery rhyme clues, to show who was coming next."

"Read it again, I want to see."

We reread the story many times in the next few days, elaborating on their observations, answering their questions, and posing new ones. The children spotted the repetition and spontaneously chimed in. They took turns leading our choral reading as we experimented with different inflections and volume for the larger and darker print. We learned and compared versions of the nursery rhymes alluded to in the text. And we discussed the importance of each individual in a teamwork situation. Their interest led us on a book search for other stories that showed teamwork or used cumulative segments of text.

### Teach a variety of skills

We read *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* (Smith & Parkes, 1986) at the same

time our focus was on how verbs influence reading and writing. Soon we were skimming ahead of the dialogue to find the verb that would direct our expression as we prepared a choral reading for another class. We discovered that correction tape would cover each verb so we could substitute new ones. We created a new version in which the troll mumbled and whined. The adaptability of correction tape also led to other cloze activities as we read.

Using big books to help cement the reading-writing connection evolved from our study of colonial times with the big book version of *Ox-Cart Man* by Donald Hall (1979). The children learned from the art work and the story, but they still had questions. They were uncertain as to the meaning of some of the sentences and felt that many others were too long. There was much speculation about why it was written that way. A small group decided to edit the book, but midway through they realized that they could not edit fairly unless they knew the author's intentions. This problem prompted the drafting of a letter to ask the author for clarification. The important lesson here became the inviolability of an author's work.

### Facilitate rereadings of the text

Texts may be reread numerous times as the teacher and children look for connections, patterns, or meanings. My favorite question has become "What did you notice that you want the rest of us to see, hear, or think about?" Students are quick to relate the ways in which the format or content of the story reminds them of another story or of something they have experienced personally. They discover rhyme, alliteration, repeated phrases, cumulative segments, plot patterns, or typographic variations in the print. Exam-

ining these elements provides authentic reasons to reread the text. These various readings provide opportunities to engage those easily distracted or least able readers by allowing each of them the power to direct our reading pace and phrasing through the use of the pointer.

Our use of *Time for a Number Rhyme* (Nelson, 1983) illustrates how important it is to experience several readings of a text. Each day we sampled a page or two of rhymes without ever seeing the cover. We reread to note what characteristics the pieces had in common and generalized to determine what kind of book it was. In addition to studying categories and specific details, we alerted our ears to rhyme. As we studied each page my students would request "overs" since some of them had tuned into the rhyme and others to the message. They needed to focus on the facet they had not noticed the first time. Fulfilling those requests provided many occasions for additional group oral reading experiences, a significant value for my emerging readers.

### Celebrate student growth and success

Every year I have students who consider themselves reading failures and avoid reading whenever possible. Because our use of big books for shared reading allows them to work as an integral part of the whole group, they become engaged, learn, and gain confidence in their own reading ability. Soon they are pulling in friends and strangers alike to witness their reading of a big book, a performance facilitated by our many shared reading repetitions.

Concomitantly, fluent readers develop new perspectives on texts. They become attuned to authors' styles and techniques of presentation. Their literary growth is reflected in discussions when we share big books and in their writing during writers' workshop.

The shared reading experience with big books promotes a high level of active engagement and learning because there is a simultaneous focus on common print and the spoken word. This, combined with the physical proximity of the group, creates a synergy that

I've never been able to duplicate in a multiple copy group exercise or in the reading of a regular-sized piece of literature.

*Swindal is a second-grade teacher at Hidden Valley Elementary School in the Barnsville Independent District #191 in Savage, Minnesota.*

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## Poem or paragraph?

Toni S. Walters

Because poetry was an unfamiliar genre for most of Ilene Nicholas's fourth-grade students at Alcott School in Pontiac, Michigan, she decided to share a number of poems with the children. Ilene began by reading poems she liked. As a teacher volunteer in Ilene's classroom, I sent the children a letter along with some of my favorites, and she read those as well. Gradually students began bringing in various poems they wanted to share. The children's interest ripened to the point that they wanted to write their own poems, and they did. When I visited, we would write together and share our creations.

However, Ilene and I noticed a problem. While the children were developing mental and visual images from hearing and reading poetry, many of them were having a difficult time, as writers, with the format. Their poems were written as paragraphs. These students felt they violated the rules of correct writing if they wrote their poems in a format other than a paragraph. It became apparent that the students were ready to expand their concepts of correct writing to include poetry, which was becoming a more familiar genre to them.

One day after a delightful morning session with Ilene and her students, I pondered the problem of devising a concrete example to help the children compare and contrast the format of a poem and the format of a paragraph without sacrificing their creativity in the struggle with format. The next morning when I met with the students, I showed them the following transparency I had written the night before.

When I write a poem  
I use a poem's special form  
My thoughts go down  
Line by line  
Line by line  
Line by line  
A capital letter  
Begins the first word almost  
each time  
Sometimes I use commas, when  
I want to pause  
But most of the time  
The only period I use  
Is after the last word  
On the last line.

When I write a paragraph, I use the special paragraph form. My thoughts are written as sentences. Each sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a period (.), question mark (?), or exclamation point (!). I must always remember, my paragraph has its own special form. To begin my paragraph, I must indent and capitalize the first word, as I did with the word *When* in this paragraph. I use paragraphs when I write stories, letters, and reports.

First, I read the transparency aloud to the students, and then we read it together. Next, we talked about what it said, how it looked, and why I had written it. The students were able to articulate why they thought the poem-paragraph transparency was presented. Ilene made sure a copy of the information was posted at eye level for the children to see at other times. The children continued reading, writing, and revising and eventually published a class collection of poems.

Here are a few of the poems from the classroom publication.

### Feelings

I have different feelings about people  
But most of my feelings are good