

**What's a poem good for?
Pedagogical connections between poetry and Social Studies**

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In this article, Dr. Wanda Hurren highlights eight pedagogical opportunities that arise when sharing poetry in social studies classrooms. These opportunities are discussed as: aesthetic ways of knowing, contemplation, creativity, embodied knowing, pleasure, pondering, protest, and spirit. Connections between poetry as a way of coming to know things, and the overall goals and rationales for teaching social studies are highlighted. An annotated list of poetry resources that hold possibilities for social studies teaching and learning is included.

*In September
I tried not to press too hard
on the tips of my freshly sharpened Laurentian pencil crayons.
Colouring the world
I saved my favourite colours for the big spaces...*

(Hurren, 2010, p. 76)

For the past 20 years I've been teaching courses in elementary social studies curriculum and instruction. Before the start of every term, I prepare my courses for the teacher education students I'll work with. Fine tuning assignments and required reading lists, arranging for upcoming fieldtrips, uploading the latest ministry documents and other materials to my online course management site. And, on the night before the first class, I choose the best poem to share with students in class the next day.

Yes, I begin every class by reading a poem. Well, actually, for the first class, I *end* with a poem instead of beginning with a poem, because I worry that if I start with a poem, students will be wondering *What the heck is this all about?* And they'll start checking their timetables to see if they're in the right classroom. Another reason I save the poem for the end of that first class is so I can provide students with some forewarning, and the pedagogical context for sharing poetry in social studies. And then for the rest of the term, students wait for the poem to begin our class together. Sometimes as the term progresses, students start writing down the titles of the poems and the authors, sometimes at the end of the term they ask for a list of suitable poems and poetry resources to share with elementary students, sometimes students bring poems they'd like to share. And every time, in course evaluation surveys, many students comment they enjoyed starting each class with a poem.

Some of the poems we share link directly to social studies concepts. Some are just favourite poems, and not necessarily suitable for elementary classrooms, but as adults we

can appreciate the sentiments in the poem. Some will be poems I have written, some will be poems written by others, sometimes students. Some of the poems are from current publications, others are of the time-tested, tried and true variety that I have come to rely on over the past 20 years.

Not many of the poems highlighted here rhyme; those that do rhyme are chosen for the opportunities they present to celebrate a playful approach to learning in social studies. Although offering students the opportunity to hear the rhythm and rhyme of a poem instead of standard prose is sometimes enough reason to share a poem, most of the poems discussed here invite deep, contemplative thought about the world and our places in the world. Not any of the poems highlighted here were chosen because of links to English Language Arts and potential integration across the curriculum, though language and its forms and uses is certainly a pedagogical factor at play.

All the poems provide pedagogical possibilities in social studies education, for myself and my students, and for their future elementary students. And all of the poems fall within at least one of the four overall rationales for social studies education, as outlined by Clark and Case (2016): social initiation, social reform, intellectual development, personal development.

The ideas and poetry referenced here elaborate on eight reasons for sharing poetry and what poetry is good for, specifically in social studies classrooms. John Steffler, one of the contributors to a volume of essays that explore how poetry affects knowing, describes poetry as a language that is “intimately mixed up with freedom and the ideas of change, discovery, growth, and invention” (1995, p. 47). These ideas all align closely with the subject area of social studies. Steffler also notes “poetry approximates, through the powerful use of language, our fundamental, original sense of life’s miraculousness, its profound and mysterious meaning” (p. 47). Poetry makes sense in social studies, because it is a form of language that enables access to ideas that might not otherwise be accessible through standard prose.

Social studies education is an area of study that encourages inquiry and developing understandings about the world around us and how we all live in that world. In her poem ‘Sometimes,’ Mary Oliver gives these simple poetic instructions for living a life: “Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it” (2008, p. 37). Poetry often opens the door to astonishment—about the tiny and particular and the large and generalizable in the world around us.

Social studies education is also an area of study that asks us to consider the ‘grey’ areas of life—those issues (past, present, and future) that reveal the uncertainties and ambiguities of living in the world responsibly. It is an area of study that asks students to think critically, to empathize, and to consider multiple perspectives. To step out of their shoes and consider what walking in another’s shoes (past, present, or future) might entail. Because poetry often ‘says’ things without saying them, it’s a way of expressing that leaves spaces for interpretation; spaces for opportunities to develop the above ways of thinking. In addition, poetic language offers opportunities, through calling up many of our

senses—sounds, sights, feelings, memories—even memories of smells, to engage in thinking about our world and our place in that world, ‘on the ground’ rather than from a more removed ‘bird’s eye view.’

What follows is an annotated, alphabetical list of eight pedagogical reasons for including poetry in social studies. Following the list, I include an annotated list of suggested resources for poetry that link directly to specific social studies concepts (e.g., change, significance, perspective taking, place, etc.), and/or encourage deep thinking about the world in general, and our place(s) in that world.

Some of the Things Poetry is Good For (in Social Studies Education)

Aesthetic Ways of Knowing

*In a storm
the wind talks
with its mouth wide open...*

Adrien Stoutenberg

I invite you to consider the notion of aesthetic as something that enlivens the senses, rather than ‘anaesthetic,’ which dulls the senses. Regarding aesthetics and knowing, Ellsworth (2005) notes, “the very possibility of thought is predicated upon our opportunities and capacities to encounter the limits of thinking and knowing and to engage with what cannot, solely through cognition, be known. Aesthetic practices and experiences provoke precisely such engagements” (p. 25). Similarly, curricular scholar and artist Rita Irwin (2003) advocates for the cultivation of “an aesthetic way of knowing, an aesthetic that values sensory awareness, perceptual acuity, attunement, wonderment, novelty, and emergence” (p. 63).

James Garrett and Stacey Kerr (2016) provide an in depth exploration of three theoretical reasons (aesthetic experience, aesthetic conflict, and relational aesthetics) for the use of aesthetic texts, including poetry, in Social Studies education. They note that “engagement with these and production of these aesthetic texts can promote critical thinking, foster empathetic thinking, and aid historical analysis” (p. 505).

In the opening lines from the poem ‘Storm’ by Adrien Stoutenberg (1990, p. 40), the words call up the sound and feelings of a strong wind in a storm. Poetry is a language that calls on aesthetic ways of knowing, and holds the possibility of waking up our senses, rather than putting them to sleep. Social studies is a subject area that often requires students to imagine another time or place or event, or to take on the perspective of someone else. Incorporating aesthetic ways of knowing through poetry in social studies education holds the possibility for deepened awareness and making connections between other times, places, and people.

Contemplation

*The moment of forgetting
is like
the moment of falling asleep:
you don't notice it...*

Stephen Scobie

The above lines are from Stephen Scobie's poem 'Forgetting (loubli)' (2003, p. 45). A simple thing like forgetting can be a topic for students to contemplate. A poem has the ability to slow our minds and encourage contemplation on all things philosophical and otherwise. Richard Wagamese, an Ojibway poet wrote "I don't know the word for it, that space between seconds, but I've come to understand for myself that's it's the punctuation of my life" (2016, p. 32). Sharing poetry is one way to emphasize taking time in our learning, recognizing moments, pausing in our thoughts. Thinking deeply.

Renowned curricular scholar and once-upon-a-time social studies educator, Ted Aoki, often invited educators to 'linger' a moment and to contemplate ideas without rushing forward. Tobin Hart (2004) recommends poetry as one way to encourage a contemplative mind in the classroom, and states that poetry has the ability to 'stretch out normal perception and [poetry] can open to surprising connections and unexpected depth even in young children" (p. 41). Using the example of haiku poetry, which calls for simple language and capturing brief periods of time (a moment, an image), Hart suggests inviting students to write a haiku poem "about their own life, or the world through the eyes of a terrorist or a historical figure that we happen to be studying" (p. 41).

Creativity

*Be sharp.
Wear a slick yellow suit
and a pink top hat...*

Elaine Magliaro

As the above lines from Magliaro's poem 'Things to do if you are a Pencil' (2009, p. 23) illustrate, poetry asks us to slow down, to pay attention, and to think of things in new ways. Csikszentmihalyi reminds us, "[m]ost of the things that are interesting, important, and *human* are the results of creativity" (p. 1).

Csikszentmihalyi links creativity with change, yes, a major social studies concept! He maintains that creativity "is a process by which a symbolic process in the culture is changed. New songs, new ideas, new machines are what creativity is about...It takes effort to change traditions" (p. 8). Interviewing people who are considered creative—scientists and artists—Csikszentmihalyi makes the case for cultivating creativity as a necessary endeavor for the future of humanity. Attending to poetry, and learning from poets, he maintains, is one way to cultivate creativity. Change and creativity often go

hand in hand, thus, poetry can be an avenue for encouraging students to think creatively—one small step towards becoming change agents.

Embodied Knowing

The poem, like love, is consciousness made flesh. It quietly wakes us: across brain, across skin, the wet line of the tongue.

Anne Michaels

In the above passage, Anne Michaels (1995, p. 183) illustrates how poetry encourages embodied knowing. By embodied knowing, I'm referring to knowing that engages our senses; our embodied faculties: gut reactions, hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, emoting, intuiting. Poetry is like a "phenomenology of the body/mind/soul" (Hurren, 2000, p. 97).

Diane Ackerman (1990) explores the physiological effects of poetry on our bodies. She notes how the sound of poetry actually affects our breathing and heartbeat, especially poetry written in iambic meter, which mimics a regular heartbeat—"ba-BUM, ba-BUM, ba-BUM: It locks up the heartbeat in a cage of words, and we, who respond so deeply to heart sounds, read the poem with our own pulse as a silent metronome" (p. 180).

In Social Studies education, field trips or neighbourhood walks incorporate embodied knowing, and a similar kind of knowing can be called up even without leaving our classrooms. Sharing a poem about eating spaghetti (Silverstein, 1974), or having to get up at 3:00 a.m. to walk across a cold floor to go to the bathroom (Viorst, 1990) encourages students to engage various senses in learning, whether about foods and culture or growing up. Reading a poem about another place in the world along with learning about the trade lines and gross domestic product of that place has the ability to enhance student learning through embodied knowing.

Pleasure

*If we meet and I say, "Hi,"
That's a salutation.
If you ask me how I feel,
That's consideration...*

Shel Silverstein

Poems bring us pleasure in various ways: the pleasure of sounds, the pleasure of ideas, the pleasure of memories, the pleasure of imagination. In the above lines from Shel Silverstein's poem *Ations* (1996, p. 59) we are treated to a poetic look at civilization, and the rhyming scheme makes the poem enjoyable to read and hear.

Sharing a poem creates an opportunity to hear words in a different format; to break out of the expository prose mode. Rhyming poems and limericks are pleasurable for children and adults. Because poems often remind us of events and places that bring us

pleasure, including a poem at the beginning of the day or lesson holds the possibility of starting things off with pleasure, and attending to our own well-being as a necessary component for learning. Attending to the pleasurable parts of learning aligns somewhat with Walt Werner's social studies scholarship regarding teaching for hope (2016), and encouraging a hopeful attitude to learning and living in the world.

Pondering

*darkness
the only thing big enough
to hide an ocean*

Claudia Coutu Radmore

The above haiku verse written by Claudia Coutu Radmore (2011, p. 14) expresses something about oceans that would typically not be included in a study of the location of land masses and oceans or when labeling the oceans and seas on a map of the world, but what if it was? Or what if it was included as an introduction to the study of latitude and longitude and how these notions were developed over time, and how sailors needed the stars to chart their course? Starting a unit of study that has a focus on locating and mapping continents, oceans, and seas, with a poetic pondering such as Radmore's is an approach to curriculum that enlivens inquiry in a non-traditional way, and as well as accumulating facts, it provides an opportunity to think more deeply and ponder for example, the vastness of an ocean in darkness.

Protest

*...Why can't we live in peace
But the hands of the have-nots
Keep falling out of reach...*

Gordon Lightfoot

The above lines from Gordon Lightfoot's song, *Black Day in July* (1968) illustrate the power of poetry to wake up not just our senses but also our sense of justice. This song was about the Detroit riots in July 1967, and was actually banned from radio play in the United States, because of a fear of inciting more riots. Poetry has been the language of dissent in societies from ancient times to the present day. Poets have been imprisoned for the real or imagined results of their poems and dissidents have even written poetry in prisons.

Poetry and song carry close links, and David Levitin (2008) writes about how human nature is informed by six basic categories of songs or poetic stories, songs of protest being one of those categories. Examples of poets and songwriters who use their inspiration to protest injustice in the world: Pablo Neruda, the Dixie Chicks, the Russian girl band Pussy Riot, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Salman Rushdie, Gordon Lightfoot, John Lennon, Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Janet Rogers, Louise Bernice Halfe. The poetry and/or songs from each of these artists/groups could be studied within an inquiry about

forms of protest in society, while focusing on the social studies education goal of social reform.

John Steffler (1995) writes that “poetry has always been a means of expressing human ambitions and aspirations: dreams of immortality and dominion as well as of wisdom and harmony....Poems of war and conquest may influence a culture’s endeavours” (p. 50). Just google the words “all we are saying” and see what comes up—most likely the words from John Lennon’s desire/chant to “give peace a chance.”

Spirit

*The sky is rose quartz amethyst
Over dark hills, dark trees, dark roofs
Say dark so long it has no meaning...*
Ursula Le Guin

There is something about a poem that can inspire the listener/reader to think differently, to be amazed, to have courage, to celebrate and honour life in its particularities and largeness. Ursula Le Guin’s poetic lines about how the sky looks at sunset and resigning ourselves to enjoy the beauty of the failing light, rather than admonishing ourselves for falling short of doing more in the day, calls up the perfection and imperfection of life in the same moment.

Poetry is a language that both inspires us and reminds us there is a spiritual aspect to being human—and here I am not referencing organized religion, but spiritual in the sense that recognizes the presence of mystery in life. Being human requires an attention to spirit(s) in teaching and learning. Social Studies is an area of study that inquires into the human condition writ large, and poetry is a language that offers opportunities to consider things that are inspiring and inspiring about being human.

After the reference list you will find an annotated bibliography of suggested sources for poetry with links to social studies curriculum.

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APPENDIX:
Suggested Sources for Poetry with Links to Social Studies Curriculum

The following collections are examples of poetry sources to share with elementary students. Whether of the time-tested, tried and true variety, or more recent publications, they are all accessible through Amazon or similar online sites. Some of the poems/collections listed here link to social studies concepts and big ideas, and some were selected because they encourage further thinking about life in general, or they offer pleasurable things to think about and ponder. Enjoy!

Brown, Margaret Wise. (1999). *The important book*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

This is a book length ‘pattern’ poem that explores various concepts, and the overall social studies concept of ‘significance.’ Provides an excellent template for teaching about significance and students can write their own concept poems. This book provides a great template for Mother’s Day and Father’s Day poems. (*The important thing about my mom is that...*)

Brown, Margaret Wise. (2006). *Another important book*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Similar to *The Important Book*, this patterned book explores, through simple rhyming, what it’s like to be one, two, three, four, five, and six. Even though this book stops at six, it holds possibilities for exploring identity at various age/grade levels.

Carter, Terry Ann. (2011). *Lighting the global lantern: A teacher’s guide to writing haiku and related literary forms*. South Frontenac, ON: Wintergreen Studios.

This teacher’s guide offers background information and selected haiku poems to illustrate aspects of this literary form. Excellent hands-on activities for using haiku and related literary forms in your classroom are included, along with examples of student work.

Heard, Georgia (Ed.). (2009). *Falling down the page: A book of list poems*. New York, NY: Roaring Brook.

This is a collection of poems about everyday life at home and school, using a list as a starting point for a poem. List poems are an easy introduction to writing poetry, and these poems serve as great examples for teaching the form of list poetry. (e.g., ‘Things to do if you are a Pencil,’ p. 23; ‘Under My Bed,’ p. 41).

Leggo, Carl. (1999). *View from my mother’s house*. St. John’s, ND: Killick.

A collection of poems about everyday life, from a Newfoundlander’s perspective. Some are suitable for elementary classrooms, e.g., ‘Grade 4 Geography,’ p. 39.

Nickerson, Billeh. (2009). *McPoems*. Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp.

This collection of poems is based on Nickerson’s part-time job at a fast food restaurant during his teen years. The poems are organized within the standards promoted through the restaurant as the recipe for success: Quality, Service, Cleanliness, Value.

(e.g., 'Diet,' p. 16; 'Your Favourite Washroom Graffiti,' p. 54; 'The Chicken Truck,' p. 57).

Oliver, Mary. (2008). *Red bird*. Boston, MA: Beacon.

This collection of poems has a focus on the natural world, and Oliver has a way of recognizing the beauty in simplicity and everyday things. Many of the poems express gratitude and wonder, and several poems invite readers to ponder the world in all its immensity and its particularities in the same moment. Oliver's love for her dog Percy adds a quiet touch of humour to many of the poems. The poems in this collection are suitable for inspiring middle years students. Examples: 'I don't want to live a small life,' p. 67; 'Percy and Books,' p. 29; 'Mornings at Blackwater,' p. 57; 'Sometimes,' p. 35; 'Watching a Documentary...,' p. 45.

Scobie, Stephen. (2003). *The spaces in between: Selected poems 1965-2001*.

Edmonton, AB: NeWest.

There are at least two poems in this collection that are suitable for sharing with elementary students: 'The Spaces in Between,' p. 6; and 'Forgetting (*L'oubli*),' p. 45. These two poems also encourage deep thinking, mindfulness, and asking the big questions about life.

Silverstein, Shel. (Various poetry collections)

Silverstein published several poetry collections (some are listed below) and many of his poems are suitable for sharing with elementary students. Some of my favourites that also link to social studies concepts: 'Alice' (*Where the sidewalk ends*, p. 112); 'Ations' (*Falling up*, p. 59); 'Spaghetti' (*Where the sidewalk ends*, p. 100); 'Yesees and Noees' (*Every thing on it*, p. 65).

Woodson, Jacqueline. (2016). *Brown girl dreaming*. New York, NY: Puffin.

This memoir is written in verse form, each chapter beginning a new poem. The author writes about growing up as an African American in the 1960s and 1970s, and there are links to social studies concepts such as notions of family, identity, community, and change. The recent history of social change in the western world and a social justice imperative are strong themes running through this poetic story. This collection of poems illustrates the social studies rationales of social reform and personal development. Recommended for ages 10 and up.

Xiong, Gu. (1997). *The yellow pear*. Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp.

This is a collection of poetic vignettes about everyday life in a new place, and figuring out new ways of living in a new place. The author shares his experiences of moving to Vancouver, British Columbia, from China, and how he and his family adjusted to what he calls the 'culture shock.' Each vignette is presented in Mandarin and English, and includes beautiful charcoal on canvass drawings (e.g., Zipper, Washroom Hand Dryer, Toilet, Telephone, Water Fountain).

Themes of place, identity, cultural differences, and change are prominent and make this collection applicable to social studies.

**Zola, Meguido (Ed.) (1988, 1990). *Poetry plus Collections I, Collections II*.
Mississauga, ON: Copp Clark Pitman.**

These are poetry anthologies for children ages 8-12 (many of the poems are suitable for younger children, e.g., the Knock-Knock jokes). Each section of poetry (called a 'collection') has a theme, for example, 'Look at it This Way.' Each section/collection starts with questions to consider before reading the poems in the collection, and then questions for after the poems have been read. Several of the collection themes are particularly applicable to social studies concepts and big ideas, such as: *School Daze, In Trouble, Who Am I, Growing Up, Songs of Protest, Lest we Forget,* and *Look at it This Way*.