The value of including creative writing in a language-arts curriculum is underscored by the United States National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In their manual created for parents entitled Imagine!: Introducing Your Child to the Arts, the author says:

“A child who becomes a confident and creative writer will reap the benefits in countless ways. In school, children who write well find that they excel in almost every subject. . . . Becoming confident writers makes it possible for children to grow into active, critical participants in our culture and society.”

As I reflect upon the importance of exposing students to creative writing, I am compelled to share a story about a young writer I met while teaching a creative-writing workshop on poetry.
at an elementary school. This writer seared into my imagination the importance of children having a classroom experience in creative writing.

The Story: I'll call the young writer Penelope Poetry. Penelope Poetry evokes meaningful educational memories for me. The class had written a group haiku. I asked for a volunteer to read the poem. Penelope volunteered. When she finished reading the poem, she said, “I feel like my brain is getting bigger.” Indeed, a child’s brain can expand by adding neurons and internal connections as a result of learning how to write poetry, and for this reason it is imperative that creative writing, in general, and poetry more specifically, be included in the language-arts curriculum.

Writing creatively and writing poetry, specifically, do help students grow into confident human beings because the discipline of writing inspires critical thinking; it is a “challenging cognitive task. A poet must first have a basic understanding of a concept or emotion and then transform that understanding into meaningful creative expression by exploring and distilling complex ideas into the brief format of a poem.” This understanding may be literal or visceral. Poems do not evolve in just one way. Ronald L. Cramer says that “[p]oetry is a bridge between the inner and outer worlds of childhood. Writing poetry enables children to transmit their internal experiences to the outer world—to symbolize their experiences in words.” And because children have myriad mental, physical, and spiritual experiences as they grow, their poems will evolve in unique ways. Let me explain.

A Practical Example of the Poetry Experience

Once I was teaching a poetry workshop in a 6th-grade middle school classroom with a multiethnic/multigrade population. I asked the students to write a haiku. During our sharing circle, one young man recited his 17-syllable poem using the rhythm of a rap poem. One of his cultural cues was rap music, which he brought into his poetic experience. That’s what often happens when one is writing poetry: The whole being of the person is translated into words.

Now about Penelope Poetry: While working as an artist in residence, I was assigned to facilitate a week-long poetry workshop for children between the ages of 7 and 11. I refer to Penelope Poetry as my friend, incidentally, because a good way to engage students in an authentic and positive learning relationship is to reach out to them in affirming ways that build friendships. I shared a bond with Penelope and her peers; our mutual journey toward learning to use poetry to express thoughts and ideas served as the foundation of our friendship. When teachers serve as friendly facilitators within the learning environment, this creates a non-threatening atmosphere. The teacher becomes the guide who encourages and inspires students to think freely and spontaneously, not just the commander of the ship.

The objective of the residency was for me to guide students through the journal writing process and to introduce them to the art of writing poetry. I chose to teach them a traditional poetic form, the haiku. It is important to expose young writers to traditional poetic forms such as the haiku, tanka, and sonnet in a creative writing class/workshop because this introduces them to other cultures. The tanka and haiku, for example, are poetry forms introduced to the literary canon by the Japanese. Learning to create a haiku teaches one “to do something small in a meaningful way.”

In addition, subliminally, an awareness of poetic forms teaches students how to develop strategies for writing all kinds of poetry, even poetry traditionally referred to as free verse. When using traditional poetic forms, the student must stay within the syllabic or line requirements. For example, a student writing traditional haiku must keep within the poem’s 5/7/5 syllabic pattern. This attention to syllabic and line structure fosters a respect and honor for words, as the student must be attentive to the connotative and denotative meanings of the word as it relates to the overall theme of the poem. They also must keep in mind the word’s syllabic count.

Teaching poetic forms, moreover, can also increase a student’s awareness of how to follow instructions and work within the limits of an assignment. This may be helpful with longer writing assignments like essays and research papers. Further, teaching poetic forms can also, to use Penelope Poetry’s own words, help students experience the feeling of their brains “getting bigger.”

The brain growing bigger. Metaphorically speaking, Penelope Poetry is right; a child’s brain can grow bigger when exposed to and involved with the arts. Having young writers participate in writing games and exercises is one way of developing creative consciousness and poetic sensibility.
Games and exercises help young writers acquire focus and discipline. The craft of writing is certainly a type of discipline. Some may argue that talent can’t be taught; however, it is possible to create an intellectual and visceral understanding of the creative process, and to provide inspiration.

**Poetry Writing Games**

One fun and instructive game is the *Poetry Ball*. Students are asked to sit in a circle. The ball is a metaphor for a word, and a piece of paper is a metaphor for the person. The goal of the game is to keep the “word” ball or balls on the page (with young children [Grades K-4], I use four words. With older students [Grades 5-12] an unlimited number of words can be used). After placing the students in the circle, I tell each one to throw the ball (word) to another person (a metaphor for a piece of paper). That person becomes the paper; the ball is the word. Therefore, each child must throw a ball (word) to one person (piece of paper). This forces the writer to focus. The student must focus on the person from whom he or she is receiving the ball (word) and to whom he or she subsequently throws the ball (another person). The objective, thus, is to keep the balls (words) off the floor and in the laps of the students (on the page).

However, what happens if a student writer drops or doesn’t catch the ball (the word)? Traditionally, he or she would be banished from the game, but eliminating players is not the goal in this game. If the ball (word) is dropped, the challenge for the writers is to work together so all balls (words) can stay on the page (off the floor).

The objectives in the Poetry Ball game are to teach poetry writers the importance of focus in writing, and to understand that writing is work. In order to keep the ball (the word) on the page, i.e., in order to develop poems, essays, and plays, the writer must work until every word on the page contributes to the message he or she seeks to convey.

Another game teachers can use to help early elementary writers develop the spontaneity a writer needs is *Story in the Round*. The students are asked to sit in a circle, either on the floor or in chairs around a table (in this case, the items used in the game are placed on the table). The teacher must be an enthusiastic participant, not just the “one in charge”; this means that he or she must sit in the circle also. The key is for each writer to feel comfortable. Teaching students to write spontaneously can be stimulated by bringing a variety of items into the class that inspire writing activity.

**Writing Activity**

One useful type of writing activity is *The Writer’s Sensory Experience*. What would a mathematical equation describing the writing of poetry look like? Perhaps something like this: 

**Poetry = feeling things and seeing pictures.** A reader might not be able to linguistically articulate the meaning of a poem like this:
Cross-disciplinary Writing

One of the easiest ways to include creative writing in the language-arts curriculum is to incorporate another subject area in the assignment. For example, students could write poems using the subject matter of a historic moment. This type of cross-disciplinary poetry writing offers a way of helping them understand the relationship between poetry and lived experiences.

Cross-disciplinary creative writing is also a way of satisfying curriculum goals. This works especially well for students in Grades 4 and above. Below is a sample poem written on the American Civil Rights Movement. The subject of the poem is the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 that took place in Montgomery, Alabama:

A Hymn for Montgomery 55
Holy, holy: a hymn of praise
For prophets framing freedom
In Montgomery 55:
Strange fruits marching—some
Walking, some crawling—Americans: black and white;
hand in hand
Saintly sighing a freedom song of praise
Holy, holy, holy—the march raises
Into victory: freedom swells;
The flag: separate and Unequal shreds into the face of anxious
Soldiers—black and white jumping the broom
Into a new day—the Civil Rights Movement begins.8

Creating a Workshop Environment
When teaching creative writing, it is important for teachers to develop a workshop environment. In order to accomplish this, classrooms need to contain creative writing tools. In small classrooms, these tools can be placed in a Creative Writing Box. The following items could be included in the box:

• Books on the subject of creative writing (see Sidebar 1);
• Teacher’s journal;
• Students’ journals (A traditional black-and-white notebook is a good beginning; it is also inexpensive);
• Pens or pencils;
• Scratch paper of various colors;
• Dictionary;
• Thesaurus;
• Sensory items: cotton, lotion, perfume, artificial flowers, small balls.

Children’s poet Kristine George suggests many exciting ways of celebrating poetry and keeping it as an

Sidebar 1. Creative Writing Resources

Books
• Moore, Ellen Jo. Writing Poetry With Children (Monterrey, Calif.: Evan-Moor Educational Publishers, 1999).
• Neubauer, Bonnie. The Write Brain Workbook (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer’s Digest Books, 2006).
• Ross, Bruce. How to Haiku (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2002).

Websites
• Kristine O’Connell George’s Website provides helpful resources on teaching and writing poetry: http://www.kristinegeorge.com.
• Poets and Writers provides resources for writers: http://www.pw.org. Poetry.Org offers several poetry resources for various age levels.
It is important, moreover, to create an environment in the classroom that fosters creative writing. Generally, a writing community, says Hal Blythe, “creates groups of writers with similar interests and uses group energy and skills to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.” The writing community concept works well with students in the upper elementary grades. Ideally, each writing community will include four students. Students may form their own writing groups based on interest or be assigned to a writing group by the teacher. During the creative writing period, members of writing communities can help one another revise poems and develop ideas for poetry activities. Ideally, the writing community will also help participants feel comfortable talking about their writing and underscore the idea that writing is a process, not a finished product.

Final Thoughts

In addition to helping children grow intellectually and emotionally, creative writing is fun. Children enjoy hearing themselves read from their own work; therefore, after a lesson on creative writing, have a poetry reading, create a classroom journal to share students’ poems, or bind poems together in a class book that includes all of the students’ poems. Although most students are excited about the possibility of publishing and sharing their poems with a wider audience, teachers should be prepared with alternate publication options for those who may prefer not to have their work shared in public. If a school would like to publish a book of poetry, Bookemon is a user-friendly site that can be used to develop and published a collection of poetry (https://www.bookemon.com/). Whatever approach is used, the goal is to encourage young people to write. They need the opportunity to hear the sound of their own voices and visually experience their thoughts on a printed page.

Facilitating creative writing workshops in language-arts classrooms is not an extravagance; it is a necessity. Penelope Poetry reminded me that creative writing for young people is an imperative; students have a right to experience their brains “getting bigger” by creating literary gems.

This article has been peer reviewed.

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Recommended citation:

NOTES AND REFERENCES
1. Although written for parents, this manual contains approaches that could easily be integrated into the classroom setting. For more information, see National Endowment for the Arts, Imagine: Introducing Your Child to the Arts (2004): https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/imagine.pdf.
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