



maggie and milly and molly and may – building courage and confidence

This is a tried and tested activity for a whole class encounter to build courage and confidence in a safe and supportive, fun and collective way. You need a single lesson. We've used this activity with a feisty class of year 10s, a little group of primary school children in a hospital education unit, and with 46 Dutch teachers! Every time, the energy was fantastic, we had fun and by the end the very different participants were well on the way to having a poem by heart!

Here goes...

The sounds, patterns and rhythms of names

I start by warming up voices, experimenting with the sounds, patterns and rhythms of words, activating the memory cells and breaking the ice about performance. This is done with a little fun activity around names.

I tell the class the members of my team are Julie, Tim, Lily, Tom and Mike. I make it easier to remember this list by using patterns of sound and rhythm to make it enjoyable to the ear and pleasing to say, like this: "Tim, Tom, Mike/Julie and Lily", and as I say this aloud I exaggerate the short sharp bursts of Tim, Tom, Mike, the long oo of Julie and the ly-ly of Julie and Lily. The class gets the idea and I ask them, in groups of 4 or 5, to come up with their own line, then they rehearse it, ready to perform.

I start. I say "My team is Tim, Tom, Mike,/Julie and Lily". The next group has to say "That was Tim, Tom, Mike,/Julie and Lily and we are....." and they fill the blank with their line. The next group has to start with the previous group's line and then give their own. And so on. We're five minutes in and already everyone has remembered a bit of wordplay and they have recited it from memory. Not bad! Applause!

'maggie and milly and molly and may'

I've loved e.e. cummings's poem 'maggie and milly and molly and may' since I first encountered it in an English lesson aged about 12 or 13. This activity works well with this poem because it's short, it's in couplets with one key image each, and though its rhythm is markedly varied in places there is a sing-song quality to parts of it too. But feel free to adapt this for any poem you like!

I get the poem up on the screen. It's on the Poetry By Heart 11+ anthology timeline on the website www.poetrybyheart.org.uk. Pupils could have a paper copy of it too.

Joining in

I tell pupils I'm going to read it aloud 3 times and I invite them to join in when they're ready. I start and I keep going, whatever my hesitations or stumbles, moving along briskly and adding a few actions to start 'fixing' the images. At the relevant moments, I hold an imaginary shell to my ear; I wave my five fingers languidly; I do a bit of walking sideways (though I don't blow bubbles); and I hold a stone that grows from small to large. The pupils I've done this with have always joined in, and surprisingly quickly!

What do you remember?

After the third time I stop, take the poem off the screen and ask pupils to turn over their paper. I ask them what they remember. A word? A phrase or an image? A line or a couplet? I've always been surprised by how much, as a class, they can recall after only a few minutes. Celebrate that!

Call and response

Then I challenge them to do it without the poem. Oh how they laugh – and then cry! Of course I'm joking – that's a big step, so we break it down. I read line 1 and they repeat it; I read line 2 and they repeat it; then we see if we can do that couplet together. We work through all 6 couplets like this and then celebrate – we did it without the poem text! (Or at least *they* did – teacher's prerogative is allowed to prevail in the interests of motivational success!)

Visualising the poem

Then we go a step further. I show them the structure of the poem using a slide deck of 6 pictures. First there is a picture of a beach, and this goes with the list of 4 girls' names. Then it's Maggie's solo stanza and there's a picture of a shell. Then it's Milly and the starfish, Molly and the 'horrible thing' (a crab), May and the smooth round stone, and finally it's finding ourselves in the sea. Then we give the poem a go, me reading/reciting and them using the picture prompts to join in as much as they can. Together we do it!

Learning our lines

Then we're ready for the final step – performance. Again, we break it down – I allocate lines to be learned by small groups. 6 groups might each learn a couplet each, or 5 groups a couplet each plus everyone learning the last one, or 4 groups learning a couplet each and everyone learning the first and last couplets. They learn their lines and if I have time I get them to rehearse a little so they synch their timing, rhythm and emphasis. Then we're ready to go.

Class performance

If I'm racing towards the end of the lesson I simply count them in and off we go, each group reciting their part in turn; if I have a little more time we might do that and then run through the whole poem all together, or vice versa. Whatever, we finish with a big round of applause and lots of cheery celebration of their achievement.

Next steps in Poetry By Heart

Maybe from this starting point some of your pupils will go off and master this poem ready to take part in a school competition; maybe you'll work it up some more with the whole class to enter the choral recitation competition; or maybe learning this much will help to inspire some of them to choose a different poem. Whatever happens, they will have had an experience of learning a poem by heart and performing it. And it will have been fun!