

Preface

Is poetry important? Does it serve any practical purpose? Absolutely. The study of poetry builds vocabulary. It develops critical thinking skills. It promotes rich discussions, rewards close readings, and elevates the rhetorical effectiveness of student writing. Finally, the study of poetry creates a forum whereby the often neglected oral language skill (the stepchild of the language arts) is included as a natural by-product.

Are stories important? When many cannot find the time in a day to do what one must to survive, is it worth our time to read and discuss stories? Absolutely. Time spent reading rich text forces us to consider the questions collectively termed “the human dilemma.” These questions, based in philosophical stances and largely rhetorical in nature, have been asked since the beginning of time. We would all agree that there are no simple answers to these questions, just as many times there are no simple answers to the questions raised in real life. In the end, we each are given options and choices. We compare the stories with experiences in our own lives, make judgments, and come to conclusions. In this way, we learn something new from every story we read, and that new knowledge translates into a greater realization of who we are and where we belong. What could be more important?

What about raising test scores? How do the lessons contained in this book address this very real and valid concern of the classroom teacher? Almost every standardized test used in the secondary language arts classroom contains questions that require higher level critical thinking skills. For example, almost all reading comprehension tests ask students to read short passages and then respond to questions about those selections. In almost every case, there are one or more questions that ask the student to make judgments (e.g., What is the best title for this story?) or inferences (e.g., What word best describes the character’s feelings?) about the text. Often, when we review a child’s test scores from year to year, we find that he or she is missing the same types of questions, questions that require higher level thinking skills, year after year. To be of service to our students, to offer them opportunities to experience success, we must prepare them, even those who still struggle with basic reading skills, to answer those questions by providing them with lessons that challenge the student to go beyond a literal interpretation of text. The poetry and fiction lessons contained in *Inspired English* do exactly that.

Finally, how do the lessons in this book affect writing effectiveness? Most veteran teachers know, and new teachers will soon learn, that a good reader is

a good writer. The lessons in *Inspired English* were not designed specifically to teach the nuts and bolts of essay writing, but to provide students with pieces of literature that are models of writings that convey messages in a powerful, creative, or eloquent writing dynamic. Additionally, the pieces contained in *Inspired English* and other examples of rich literature provide students with new syntactical structures and sophisticated vocabulary. Invariably these skills transfer into their own compositions, and young writers move into another rhetorical dimension, a dimension that can never be reached without exposure to and higher level interaction with rich literature.

Chapter 1 of *Inspired English* details my pedagogical philosophy. Chapter 2 outlines the design, purpose, objectives, and materials needed to build effective units of study. Chapter 3 elaborates on the objectives and offers instruction on how to teach two procedural lessons. Chapter 4 contains twelve fully developed lesson plans ready for classroom use. Chapter 5 offers some suggestions for putting the final touches on a poetry unit.

If you are a new teacher, or one unfamiliar with lesson design, I would strongly recommend that you read Chapters 1 through 3 before teaching the lessons contained in Chapter 4. The beginning chapters lay the foundation for these lessons; they enable the teacher to remain focused on the objectives, and they present a rationale for instruction, often a critical factor when speaking with parents and administrators.

My goal has been to present a practical, commonsense approach to the teaching of fiction and poetry. I have made every attempt to present my ideas clearly and succinctly and to make the lessons as reader friendly as possible. *Inspired English* is a book for both the novice teacher and for the veteran teacher. It is a book designed for the classroom teacher and the home-school teacher. It is a book for all teachers who find that there is never enough time in a day. It is a book written by a teacher, for a teacher.

The ideas and lessons presented in this book are not based on empirical data. Rather, they are based on my experience in the classroom. My curriculum never stopped evolving; each year I set aside some ideas and pulled in others. What we teach from year to year should always, in some way, change because we, as well as our students, change. It is what makes teaching so challenging and fulfilling at the same time.

The lessons presented in Chapter 4 contain all the materials necessary for implementation in the average classroom. I have provided sample text to serve as concrete examples. Teachers should draw on the resources in their classrooms to provide further examples.

I would like to add a final word about teaching poetry. Not all language arts teachers are completely comfortable with the genre. I would encourage you to begin with those lessons with which you feel most comfortable, and then discover others together with your class. It has been my experience that this unit will touch and ignite a genuine talent in some of the most unlikely students. Many of these young adults, as much as we try to avoid it, are often lost in the sea of mediocrity. They are not particularly stellar students nor are they great athletes, but they most certainly are poets—and this unit allows them their moment in the sun.