

Desktop Poetry Project



**By Emily Scharf
and Judith Cramer**

Subject: Language arts, art,
typography

Audience: Teachers, technology
coordinators, teacher educators

Grade Level: 6–12 (Ages 11–18)

Technology: Internet/Web, desktop
publishing, word processing, type
utility software

Standards: NETS•S 1, 3–5; NETS•T
I–III (www.iste.org/standards)

Supplement: www.iste.org/L&L

The eighth-grade class of Trinity School in New York City worked together to write, design, and desktop publish an elegant anthology of their own poems, with impressive results.

How can a student publication be exciting and different? This is a question teachers often ask as they face the challenge of publishing an anthology of student work. Equally important: student motivation for such an endeavor. As an audience member asked at the NECC 2001 workshop on this topic, “How can you keep your students involved for 10 weeks?”

A key to success is technology. When students do desktop publishing, they become involved with a publication from the beginning to the end of the process and, therefore, assume ownership. Emily Scharf and Judith Cramer found ample evidence of this when they worked on a writing project at Trinity School in New York City. The two teachers saw that desktop publishing was a natural extension and melding of their units on writing and typography. And it allowed them not only to integrate technology into the English curriculum but also to create a model for collaborative learning on their school’s computer network.

Origins

Emily and her middle school English-teaching colleagues wanted to celebrate the achievements of their eighth-grade students as they finished middle school and moved on to high school. In the past, a literary magazine had been the vehicle for student publication. Interested students had submitted their work. Teachers had selected what they considered to be the best writing and then had faced the onerous tasks of typing, editing, and formatting the material for a professional print shop. Prob-

lems resulted. The teachers spent long (unpaid) hours on these chores and, when the literary magazine was published, they had to deal with the hurt feelings of students (and their parents) whose writing had been rejected. An alternative would have been to publish work from all students—an impossible task under the existing system.

Judith, the middle school computer specialist, came up with a solution. She proposed to use the school’s computer network to unite the 62 eighth graders as a community of writers and publishers. Together they would create an anthology. The English teachers and Judith selected poetry as the genre for the publication. It was a risky choice in these days when many students pour their creative energies into instant messages rather than into the daunting discipline of writing poetry. On the other hand, poetry had long been a part of the school’s curriculum. And the contributors were going to be intelligent, sensitive, self-centered adolescents: perfect poets!

Types of Poetry & Poetry of Type

Along with her colleagues, Emily began the poetry unit in a traditionally didactic manner. She chose poems for the students to read and had them study content and form closely. The students were exposed to many types of poetry, spending a considerable amount of time studying sonnets (see Selected Poems on this page).

After several sessions, the lessons shifted to a more constructivist mode. Each student chose a favorite poem to teach to the class. The student teacher

Selected Poems

Poems for Meaning, Structure, and Figurative Language

Auden, W. H. “Epitaph on a Tyrant”

Blake, William “The Tyger”

Browning, Robert “Porphyria’s Lover”

Frost, Robert “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”

Lovelace, Richard “To Lucasta”

Owen, Wilfred “Dulce et Decorum Est”

Robinson, E.A. “Richard Cory”

Roethke, Theodore “The Bat”

Free Verse Form

cummings, e. e. “In Just—”

Levertov, Denise “Six Variations”

Plath, Sylvia “Crossing the Water”

Haiku Form

Basho, Matsuo “Heat-Lightning Streak”

Ridland, John “The Lazy Man’s Haiku”

Sestina Form

Bishop, Elizabeth “Sestina”

Sonnet Form

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett “Grief” and “How Do I Love Thee?”

Frost, Robert “Acquainted With the Night”

Lazarus, Emma “The New Colossus”

McKay, Claude “America”

Shakespeare, William “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day?”

Other Forms

Dorthi, Charles “Concrete Cat”

Elbow, Peter students’ poems from *Writing with Power*

was in charge of duplicating the selected poem for the class members, asking questions and leading discussion, and addressing the form and “deeper layers” of meaning. A side benefit of this exercise was that students practiced public speaking skills—and learned that teaching is not easy! Emily graded their work generously, mostly for effort rather than accuracy of interpretation. She felt that as the students taught their poems, they began to own the project.

At the same time, Judith used her computer classes (twice a week) to deal with words in a complementary way. Like Emily, Judith began in a teacher-centered manner to introduce a unit on typography and design. One of her goals in teaching the unit was to show the students how, with desktop publishing software, “anyone can be a Gutenberg.” They compared some of the ways movable type changed Gutenberg’s world with some of the ways the computer has already changed ours. The publishing process was once divided into separate functions, with different people handling editing, typesetting, layout, and printing; now one person can handle all these tasks, thanks to desktop publishing programs such as PageMaker.

Another goal was to show how the art of typography repays lifelong study. Before teaching computing, Judith was a graphic designer. Using that expertise, she compiled a collection of fonts for the students to study and work with. She used the font utility Master Juggler to set up a “type library,” with the fonts arranged in groups (see the Selected Type online supplement at www.iste.org/L&L). She chose fonts that reflected the history of type (from old-style Renaissance fonts to 20th-century sans serifs), asked the students to identify characteristics, and even assigned the children to spot examples as they traveled through the streets of New York.

After the students became sensitive to the nuances of type forms, they cre-

THE ARTIST

Mr. T

bareheaded

in a soiled undershirt

his hair standing out

on all sides

stood on his toes

heels together

arms gracefully

for the moment

curled above his head.

Then he whirled about

bounded

into the air

and with an enfeeblat

perfectly achieved

completed the figure.

My mother

taken by surprise

where she sat

in her invalid's chair

was left speechless.

Bravo! she cried at last

and clapped her hands.

The man's wife

came from the kitchen:

What goes on here? she said.

But the show was over.

-- William Carlos Williams

~Typography By Kyle McKean~

Figure 1. A poem poster made with ClarisWorks 5.0.

ated poem posters with ClarisWorks (now AppleWorks, Figure 1). The students at this point worked more or less intuitively, choosing fonts and working with size and space—sometimes vertical, sometimes horizontal. This exercise illustrated that type is eloquent and can enhance the verbal art.

Judith then designed a challenging exercise to teach typography in detail. She divided the students into small teams to work on an alphabet primer about typefaces. Each team was given a particular typeface or category of type to research—from “A” (Avant Garde) to “Z” (Zapf Chancery). The students did library and Internet research on typeface designers and other history relating to the subject. They then used Adobe PageMaker to publish their findings. A consistent two-page spread was employed: on the left, the letter; on the right, the text (Figure 2). Text information had to fit within the layout. The students experimented with either one horizontal or two vertical columns, using variations of leading and point size to create an attractive spread. With this exercise, they mastered basic features of PageMaker, including the use of guides, rulers, and the View and Type menus. Judith then displayed the alphabet primer on the bulletin board, with students becoming enthusiastic advocates of the fonts they had studied closely.

In English classes, the students began to write their own poems, using three or four homework assignments to write at least seven poems. One had to be a sonnet and at least three other forms had to be represented.¹ On the day the poems were submitted, Emily invited students to read one of their poems aloud. It is interesting to note that, though they tended to choose short, entertaining poems to share with their classmates, students later chose more serious, self-revealing poems to publish in the anthology.

Evaluation of creative work is always a sensitive issue. Emily chose not to grade the poems, but she did write extensive comments, thus aiming for the strongest entry from each poet.

A Work of Many Hands

The time had come for desktop publishing. Judith and the English teachers came up with three guidelines for the process.

1. Students were invited to submit one and only one poem.
2. To avoid errors, students were not permitted to edit or typeset their own poems.
3. Students had to “earn” their copy of the anthology by participating in its design, printing, and binding.

¹ The anthology eventually included several types of poems, but a variation of this project could concentrate on one form (e.g., sonnet or haiku)—a practical decision when dealing with large numbers of students.

Although the students originally thought they could design their own pages, as are often seen in yearbooks, they were quickly dissuaded of that notion. The anthology was to be a “whole” effort, with the entire grade working together. The students embraced this idea and soon strolled into computer class asking, “What needs to be done today?”

The 62 eighth graders used their talents in many different ways, performing tasks simultaneously—sometimes as individuals, more often in small groups, but always in a collaborative manner. Perhaps the easiest activity was typing and editing the poems. Because of the machinations of the school schedule, students regularly met for computer class in cohorts different from those of their English classes, but that did not matter. The Desktop Poetry Project was housed on the school’s local area network (LAN) and therefore could be pulled up by any student at any time or in any place. Poems were typed and edited in ClarisWorks to take advantage of its word processing functions. Even though, as mentioned before, the students avoided many errors by working on poems other than their own, the manuscript passed through three successive editing cycles before it was ready to be digitally pasted into PageMaker layouts.

Poetry continued on page 50.

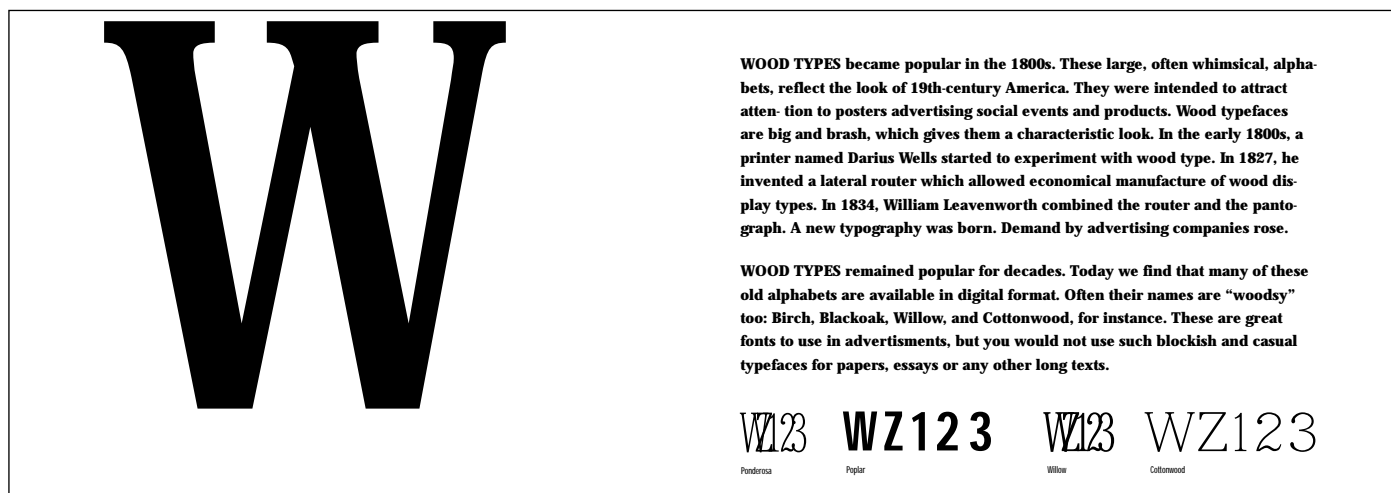


Figure 2. A spread from the A-to-Z type primer.

Materials List

Hardware

Computers with 32 MB RAM or more to run several applications simultaneously (e.g., 17 Mac G3 all-in-one models + teacher's workstation=18 total)

Laser printer for proofing draft work (e.g., Hewlett Packard LaserJet 6M)

High-end laser printer for production/binding run of finished copies (e.g., Elite XL 20/1200 from GCC Technologies: info@gcctech.com)

High-end scanner (e.g., UMAX Power Look II, UMAX Technologies, Inc., Fremont CA; 800.562.0311) Video projector, which is optional, but useful for demonstrations (e.g., InFocus: www.infocus.com)

Software

Adobe or other Postscript font collection (with Oldstyle, Modern, Sans Serif, & Decorative fonts; also scripts and Zapf Dingbats or other symbolic fonts)

Adobe Type Manager (ATM) & Adobe Type Reunion. These organize fonts and display them in WYSIWYG format

Professional-level type utility (e.g., Master Juggler or ATM Deluxe, Suitcase, Font Reserve). These allow you to create groups of fonts that can be opened and closed together

Professional-level desktop publishing or page design program (e.g., Adobe PageMaker: www.adobe.com/products/pagemaker/main.html; or QuarkXPress: www.quark.com/products/xpress)

Scanning & retouching software (e.g., Adobe Photoshop) on teacher's and computers cabled to scanners; Adobe PhotoDeluxe and Color It! on other student computers

Equipment and Supplies

Metal Coil Binding Machine, coils, and wire cutters (e.g., Wire-O Punch Bind EB/32 Binding Products, 225 Varick St., 4th Fl., New York, NY 10014; 212.727.2292)

Decorative laser papers (24-28 #) & acetate sheets, cut to size (available from Paper Access, 23 West 18th St., New York, NY, or by mail order from their catalog: 800.PAPER-01)

Poetry continued from page 31.



Figure 3. The '03 Poetry cover design.

The student poets decided to organize their anthology by poetic forms. They made "printer's dummies," experimenting with paper sizes accommodated by the LAN's best laser printer. The students rejected folios, opting instead to use various colored and textured papers to define the anthology's sections (see Materials List on this page). The hardest task was the design. Using all they had learned in their poem posters and A-to-Z primer, student designers determined how a poem should look on a page—what typeface should be used for each poetic form to best match literary and visual meaning.

Artists created illustrations to separate each section, and writers wrote introductions to explain the origin and rules of particular forms. Students held a light-hearted contest to come up with a title for the anthology. " '03 Poetry," a suggestion made by one member of the class of 2003, was fashioned into cover art by another (Figure 3). Inside front and inside back covers were also designed, and a general introduction and a colophon were written and then designed (Figure 4). After printing, all pages needed to be folded by hand carefully, collated, and then punched and bound with metal coils.



Figure 4. The anthology's colophon.

A Group Portrait

In the end, the eighth graders created a beautiful book. Each student had a self-revealing page; but better than a yearbook, the anthology was a reflection of all the students collectively. It opened with the following passage, written by one student on behalf of all:

Anne Frank said, "I write to bring love into the world, but more than that I write to bring out the things buried in my heart." Doing just that, the class of '03 at Trinity created a book of their dreams and nightmares. ... Here is the output of our toil after we had recorded the many demons and loves hidden in our souls.

And their book was about a subject, teaching the general reader about the forms of poems and their visual representations.

The teachers knew the project was a success when, at the closing ceremony of the year—a day when summer beckons, books, papers and even diplomas are often strewn all over the place—not one poetry anthology was left behind.

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Resources

Poetry

- Elbow, P. (1981). *Writing with power*. New York: Oxford University Press. See especially chapter 11, "Poetry as No Big Deal."
- Heaney, S., & Hughes, T. (1982). *The rattlebag*. Boston: Faber and Faber.
- Kennedy, X. J. (1994). *An introduction to poetry*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Koch, K. (1990). *Rose, where did you get that red? Teaching great poetry to children*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Koch, K. (1970). *Wishes, lies and dreams: Teaching children to write poetry*. New York: Harper and Row.

Desktop Publishing

- Smith, I., & Yoder, S. (1995). *Lookin' good: The elements of document design for beginners*. Eugene, OR: International Society for Technology in Education.
- Williams, R. (1994). *The non-designer's design book: Design and typographic principles for the visual novice*. Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press.

Typography

- Bringhurst, R. (1997). *The elements of typographic style*. Point Roberts, WA: Hartly & Marks, Publishers.

Cavanaugh, S. (1995). *Digital type design guide: The page designer's guide to working with type*. Indianapolis, IN: Macmillan Computer Publishing.

Ginger, E. M., & Spiekermann, E. (1993). *Stop stealing sheep and find out how type works*. Mountain View, CA: Adobe Press.

Haley, A. (1976). *Typographic milestones*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, Hurtwood Press.

Kelly, R. R. (1977). *American wood type: Notes on the evolution of decorated and large types and comments on related trades of the period*. New York: DaCapo Press.

Meggs, P. B. (1983). *A history of graphic design*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company.

Nesbitt, A. (1957). *The history and techniques of lettering*. New York: Dover Publications.

Web Sites

- Melbert B. Cary, Jr. Graphic Arts Collection: <http://wally.rit.edu/cary/>
- Adobe Type Library: www.adobe.com/type/main.html
- ARType Fonts & Art on CD: www.ragnarokpress.com/artype/
- Counterspace: <http://counterspace.motivo.com/>



Emily Scharf (ferdem929@aol.com) recently retired after 27 years as a teacher and administrator at Trinity School in New York City. A member of the English faculty at Trinity, she also served as middle school principal for 14 years. Scharf received her BA from Brown University and her MA from Teachers College, Columbia University. She now divides her time between journalism and travel with her husband, a national champion bicycle racer. Emily drew the caricatures accompanying these biographies.



Judith Cramer (cramer@exchange.tc.columbia.edu) is the educational technology specialist at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she works with faculty on technology integration. Her early training as an English teacher and graphic designer led her to fall in love with desktop publishing. She worked as a technology specialist at the United Nations International School and Trinity School in New York City. Cramer holds degrees from Cornell, Yale, and Parsons School of Design.

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