

Journey through the Stars

by Alan Bagnall

From *School Journal*, Part 4, Number 2, 2004

Overview

In this cleverly constructed, reflective poem, the poet takes the reader on a literal and figurative journey as he thinks about life. This poem is particularly suited to sophisticated readers who appreciate philosophical musings.

Suggested Teaching Purpose

Based on the information I have about my students' learning needs, what would be an appropriate teaching purpose for this session?

Examples of an appropriate teaching purpose are listed below.

•	To support the students in developing the comprehension strategies of inferring , making connections, visualising, or analysing and synthesising.
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Features of the Text to Consider in Context

What features of this text would support the teaching purpose?

•	The layers of meaning (the literal meaning of the poet's journey on a boat moving through the reflections of stars on the surface of the sea, his metaphor of life as a journey, and the implied journey of the poet's thinking as he explores a sequence of ideas)
•	The clever title that captures all the levels of meaning
•	The visual language that closely reflects the ideas in the text
•	the wavy layout of the text, which echoes the idea of the sea and of movement or of being on a journey
•	the background illustration in which the sea and the sky are merged and "all sense of earth is disappearing"
•	The use of imagery—the idea of movement and journeys ("pulsing deck", "anyone steering") and reflections (the reflection of the sky in the "polished sea")
•	The idea of the poet being surrounded by sky, sea, and stars, realising his relative insignificance and leading to his question at the end of the poem
•	The impact of the word "sky" in the first sentence that reverses the expectations of the reader (and requires them to infer what's really happening)
•	The question in the last line that links to the idea of being in a boat but that also provokes the reader to reflect on life
•	The gentle, reflective tone
•	The free-form structure of the poem and its occasional rhymes
•	The descriptive language, for example, "gently pulsing deck", "infinite depths"
•	The dedication to Norm.

What other features of this text might constitute challenges for my students? (For example, features that may require a prompt or a brief explanation.)

•	The words and concepts: "pulsing", "infinite", "all sense of earth is disappearing".
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What prior knowledge would support my students in reading this text?

•	Familiarity with free-form poems
•	Ability to visualise abstract concepts, such as life as a journey.

Sharing Learning Outcomes with Your Students (select one or two)

I will be able to:

•	read between the lines to infer where the author is, what he can physically see, and what he is thinking about;
•	think about how the poet has conveyed his ideas in the poem;
•	talk about how the text and visual language features work together to build meaning.

A Framework for the Lesson

How will I help my students to achieve the learning outcomes?

In the sections below, particular comprehension strategies, reading processes, and links to other aspects of literacy learning have been identified in brackets. Many of these relate directly to the highlighted teaching purpose, but others have also been identified where appropriate.

Before reading

•	If your students are unfamiliar with free-form poems, briefly review the features of poetry that they <i>are</i> familiar with and then explain that you have a poem for them to read that is different from what they're used to. Tell them that the writer of the poem is exploring some ideas and that the poem is like a collection of his thoughts. (Making connections)
•	If your students have come across Alan Bagnall's poetry before, you could reread a familiar poem together and draw out the idea that his poems often explore ideas in interesting and unusual ways. (Making connections)
•	Remind the students that poems often contain more than one level of meaning. (Making connections)
•	Introduce the title of the poem and ask the students to consider what this poem might be about. Briefly discuss the idea of a dedication in a book or poem. (Visualising; making connections)
•	Clarify the learning outcome(s) with the students.

Reading and discussing

Select from these suggestions according to your purpose for the reading and what you observe about the students' needs as they read.

•	Tell the students that it will help their understanding of the poem if they try to visualise where the poet is and what he can see and then imagine that they are there too. Explain that you are not going to give out the journals until the students have had a chance to visualise the text for themselves. (Inferring; visualising; making connections)
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•	The opening verse of this poem provides a great opportunity for students to practise unlocking meaning. Write the first four lines onto the board, line by line, so the students can gradually connect the ideas and build up a picture of where the poet is (on a boat, looking down, at night). They may be disconcerted by the word “sky” in the fourth line. “If you were looking down into the sea at night, what would you be able to see?” Draw out the idea of the sky (moon and stars) being reflected in the water. (Making connections; visualising)
•	Once they’ve worked out the meaning of the first four lines, distribute the journals and have the students read the rest of the poem. Note that the second verse confirms the idea of the reflection of the stars in the water. (Confirming)
•	“How does the poem change on the second page?” Encourage the students to visualise the experience of lying on a boat surrounded by stars (in the sky and the sea). They could connect it to any experiences they have of lying on the ground and gazing at the vastness of the sky. Check that they understand that it’s so dark that the poet can’t distinguish between sea and sky and can’t see any land, so it’s as if he’s adrift in a big black sea-sky, like the blackness of space. Note how the background illustration strongly supports this idea. (Making connections; visualising)
•	Help the students work in pairs to track the sequence of ideas—“What is the meaning of the last line?” Encourage the students to share their ideas and how they reached their conclusions. (Inferring)
•	“How do you feel about this poem? Is it a believable experience?” (Inferring; visualising; making connections)
•	Have the students read the poem out loud. Draw out the idea that it has a “gently pulsing” rhythm that supports the idea of someone being in a peaceful situation and having thoughts pop into their head. (Making connections; analysing and synthesising)
•	Prompt the students to consider whether the poem would be as effective if it were not written in wavy lines. Compare the journal text layout with the straight lines you wrote earlier. Draw out the idea that the wavy lines support the idea of the rocking of the boat and a gentle journey through the starry sea. (Analysing and synthesising)
•	“What was the big idea the poet came up with as he wrote this poem?” “What did he want us to think about?” (Identifying the main idea)
•	Return briefly to the dedication. “Now that you know more about the poem, what do you think Norm’s link to the poem might be?” (Inferring)

Reflect with the students on how well the learning outcome has been achieved and note any teaching points for future sessions.

Links to further learning

What follow-up tasks will help my students to consolidate and/or extend their new learning?

•	Have the students practise the strategy of making connections and inferring on other <i>School Journal</i> poems by Alan Bagnall. Many of his poems ask questions, have layers of meaning, and offer new perspectives, for example, “Reflecting on Housekeeping” in SJ 3.2.05.
•	Read the poem “Dogs” in SJ 4.2.05 and compare the way the writer has conveyed his ideas.

To the Circus

by Alan Bagnall

From *School Journal*, Part 4, Number 2, 2004

Overview

This historical report describes the mysterious and frightening disappearance of Stan, a four-year-old boy, at a circus in 1894.

Suggested Teaching Purpose

Based on the information I have about my students' learning needs, what would be an appropriate teaching purpose for this session?

Examples of an appropriate teaching purpose are listed below.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">To support the students in developing the comprehension strategies of making connections, inferring, and forming and testing hypotheses. |
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Features of the Text to Consider in Context

What features of this text would support the teaching purpose?

<ul style="list-style-type: none">The historical content (in the text, photographs, and illustrations) that provide opportunities for the students to make inferences about life in New Zealand in the 1890s
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The layout of the text in columns, like a newspaper article, which reinforces the realism of the recount
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The vivid descriptive language that creates a mysterious, threatening atmosphere, for example, “growls”, “pinched”, “crept”, “shakes, shivers ... screams and catcalls”, “long, sharp shadows”, “flickering light”, “leaping flames”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The sentences that begin with “But”, indicating a change or heralding a key moment “But Caroline is tall”, “But the light is fading”, “But where is Stan?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The deliberate clues that suggest something is going to happen to Stan and that encourage inference and predictions, for example, “Look after him, Caroline!”, “Look after each other, calls Nan”, “I so hoped you’d be coming”, “He smiles. What has he seen?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The indications in the text that the circus folk aren’t entirely honest, “They’ve pinched every ripe plum off my tree ...”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The use of ellipses on page 31 to indicate pauses and to imply uncertainty “Have you seen a little boy ... ?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The strong contrast between the main illustrations on pages 30 and 31, which suggest a change in mood once the family realise that Stan is missing
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The epilogue on page 32 about the rest of Stan’s life.

Readability

Noun frequency level: 9–10 years

What other features of this text might constitute challenges for my students? (For example, features that may require a prompt or a brief explanation.)

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">The inclusion of unattributed dialogue |
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•	The historical vocabulary: “buggy”, “bridle track”, “electric telegraph”, “boils a billy”, “cottage”, “silver coin”, “candle lantern”, “cart”
•	The circus concepts, such as a ringmaster, circus hands, “catcalls”, a “sawdust” ring, juggling fire sticks, and of using people with unusual characteristics as exhibits.

What prior knowledge would support my students in reading this text?

•	An understanding of the historical context, including the challenges of long distance travel and communication in the 1890s
•	Awareness of the differences between a modern and a historical circus.

Sharing Learning Outcomes with Your Students

I will be able to:

•	make connections between the clues and historical information in this text to infer what has happened.
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A Framework for the Lesson

How will I help my students to achieve the learning outcomes?

In the sections below, particular comprehension strategies, reading processes, and links to other aspects of literacy learning have been identified in brackets. Many of these relate directly to the highlighted teaching purpose, but others have also been identified where appropriate.

Before reading

•	Explain to the students that this is a story set in a small New Zealand community in the 1890s. Probe the students’ understandings of what life would have been like in New Zealand at that time, for example, regarding communication, transport, clothing, and domestic tasks. If they don’t have much background knowledge, don’t overload them with information at this point but plan to spend more time on drawing out this information as needed during the reading. (Making connections)
•	Mask the italicised introductory paragraph on page 28 with sticky notes. Explain to the students you have done this because the introduction includes a key piece of information that you want them to infer for themselves. Reassure them that they’ll be able to read the masked text and check their inferences later.
•	Have the students preview pages 28 and 29, including the photographs and illustrations, and infer whether this is a true story. Prompt them to look for clues while they are reading to check their inference. (Inferring)
•	Clarify the learning outcome(s) with the students.

Reading and discussing the text

•	Have the students read to “There are hugs and kisses all round” on page 29. “What information have you been able to infer so far?” (For example, information about the family, their plans to attend the circus, and about the historical setting.) “What parts of the text helped you make those inferences?” (Inferring)
•	Review their earlier inferences about the authenticity of the story. (Inferring, cross-checking)
•	If it hasn’t already arisen in the discussion, ask the students how the children are feeling about going to the circus. “How did you infer that?” For example, “Everyone is up early”, Stan wants to go, too, and they’re prepared to face a long and difficult journey to get there. (Inferring)

•	“What punctuation features has the writer used to make sure the reader infers this feeling of excitement?” (Analysing and synthesising)
•	Have the students read to the end of page 29. “What ideas about the circus people has the writer introduced?” The suggestion of dishonesty and theft becomes significant later in the text. (Inferring)
•	Have them read page 30. “There’s a lot of foreshadowing happening on this page ... I wonder what the ringmaster has noticed ...” Have the students think, pair, and share their thoughts about how the writer has indicated that something significant is about to happen, for example, with the use of the word “But” and the three sentences about the ringmaster at the bottom of the third column of text. (Inferring; analysing and synthesising; forming hypotheses)
•	Have the students read page 31. “How have things changed?” Help the students notice the change in atmosphere and of the feelings of the family as well as the more obvious aspect of Stan’s disappearance. “How has the writer made the situation seem different and scary?” The students may notice the use of the word “But” (“But the light is fading”, “But where is Stan?”), the descriptive language (“long, sharp shadows”, “In the light of the leaping flames, the circus faces look fierce”), the way the circus hands shout at Nan and scare her with thoughts of taking her to Australia, and the contrast between the main illustrations on pages 30 and 31. (Inferring; analysing and synthesising)
•	“Where <i>is</i> Stan?” Discuss how the family must be worried about him being lost, then ask them to suggest why this is really serious. Give the students a few minutes to reread the previous pages, looking for clues about Stan’s disappearance (his six fingers and toes, the information about the audience throwing coins to the dwarf and fat lady, the way the ringmaster stares at Stan, the suggestion on page 29 that the circus people are not very honest, the ringmaster taking Stan by the hand). If the students don’t manage to infer that Stan has been kidnapped, take them through the clues again one by one, prompting them to make connections and solve the mystery. (Making connections; inferring; forming hypotheses)
•	Clarify the seriousness of the situation. “How would we act if this happened today?” Remind the students of the difficulties of long-distance travel in the nineteenth century, as described in the previous pages. Check that they understand that it would be almost impossible to get Stan back if the circus left for Australia. (Making connections)
•	Have the students read to the end of report and ask them to explain what happened. (Summarising)
•	Have the students remove the sticky notes and read the introduction to check and confirm their inferences. (Cross-checking, confirming)
•	Ask them to explain the effect having the introduction covered had on the way they read the text. (Inferring)

Reflect with the students on how well the learning outcome has been achieved and note any teaching points for future sessions.

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