

Songwriting with Sally: New words for a familiar melody

by Sandra Murray

Songwriting, for me, has always been shrouded in mystery. I have been in awe of those who magically pull lyrics and music out of thin air. However, after participating in a workshop with teacher and songwriter, Annette Coffin, I began to see that songwriting holds potential for everyone, not just a talented few.

In the beginning stages of learning to write songs, Annette places great importance on playing with language in familiar songs. As a primary classroom teacher, I already feel confident teaching children to create new ideas within a language framework. For instance, in the song "Mulberry Bush," we think of all the different things we do early in the morning. We sing and act out "This is the way we yawn and stretch, yawn and stretch, yawn and stretch. This is the way we yawn and stretch so early in the morning." The next person might replace "yawn and stretch" with "jump out of bed." Until I attended Annette's workshop, I had not realized that through this activity, we were taking our first steps toward songwriting.

Annette emphasizes that as we play, sing, and move within the framework of a singing game, we experience the language in the song that is used. Then as we play with the words, rhythm, melody, and accent patterns of the song, a feeling for the rhythm and stress patterns in the language begins to develop. This provides us with a musical framework upon which to place new words. The study of additional songs continually expands our music and language pattern repertoire in preparation for the time we actually sit down and write our own songs.

This year in Grade Two, the folk song game, "Sally Go 'Round the Sun," (Sweeney, 1994) provided the basis for our first songwriting experience. It was a well-known favorite, which made it easy to use as a writing lesson. The children had fun writing their own verses and making little books. Best of all, the process was simple and enjoyable.

Sally Go Round the Sun

Traditional



Sal - ly go round the sun.



Sal - ly go round the moon.



Sal - ly go round the chimney pot ev - ry af - ter - noon! Boom!



Game Introduction

Sing "Sally Go 'Round the Sun" for the class. Create an image of Sally on her magic carpet flying around the sun, moon, and chimney pot. With the students, discuss and explore the colors, designs, and patterns of her carpet, and all the things it can do.

Game

The class is standing in a circle. Thinking about the words, what do we need in order to play this game? (A sun, moon, chimney pot, and a "Sally") With eyes closed and one arm extended, pointing outward, the teacher sings the song and spins, stopping on the words, "sun." "moon," "chimney pot." The person to whom she is pointing as she stops is that character for the game. The sun, moon, and chimney pot stand randomly in the centre of the circle. A "Sally" is chosen from the standing circle. When the song begins, "Sally" goes around the sun, the moon, and the chimney pot, attempting to return to her/his original place in the circle by the time "boom" is sung. Play continues as each child in the circle takes a turn going around the sun, moon, and the chimney pot.

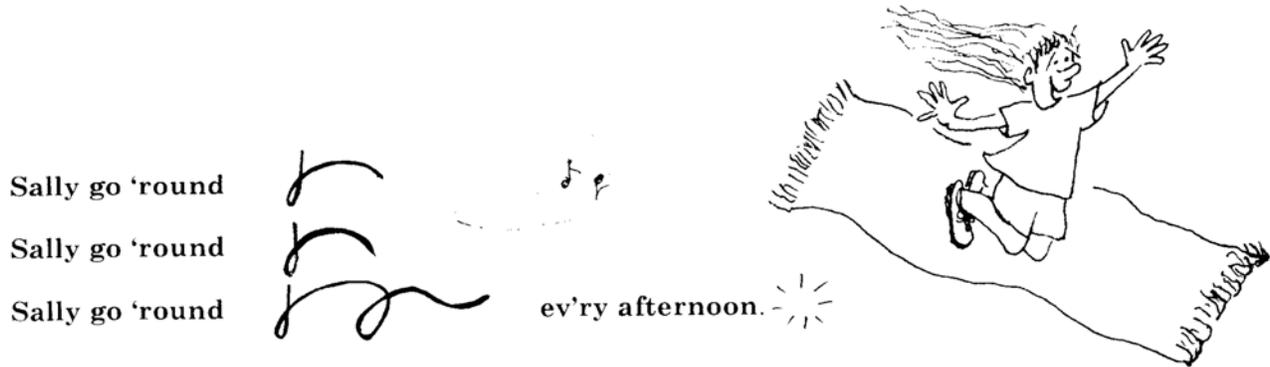
Name Game

Instead of singing "Sally" the leader (teacher at first) sings the name of the person who is to have a turn. "Becky go 'round the sun"....etc. This adds an element of surprise because the names are chosen at random,

Preparation for Writing New Words

Before writing their own verses for "Sally Go 'Round..." the children engaged in activities that helped them feel the rhythm and stress patterns in song.

We began with a reading experience that combined words with a map of the song. The following was presented on a large chart.



The mapped chunks represented the words that the children would eventually rewrite. It is very important that the children feel the flow of each phrase with physical movement. So from our seats we sang and tracked the words and map with our fingers.

We obtained more reading practice by thinking of different ways to track the map. (With the nose, foot, or shoulder), for example.

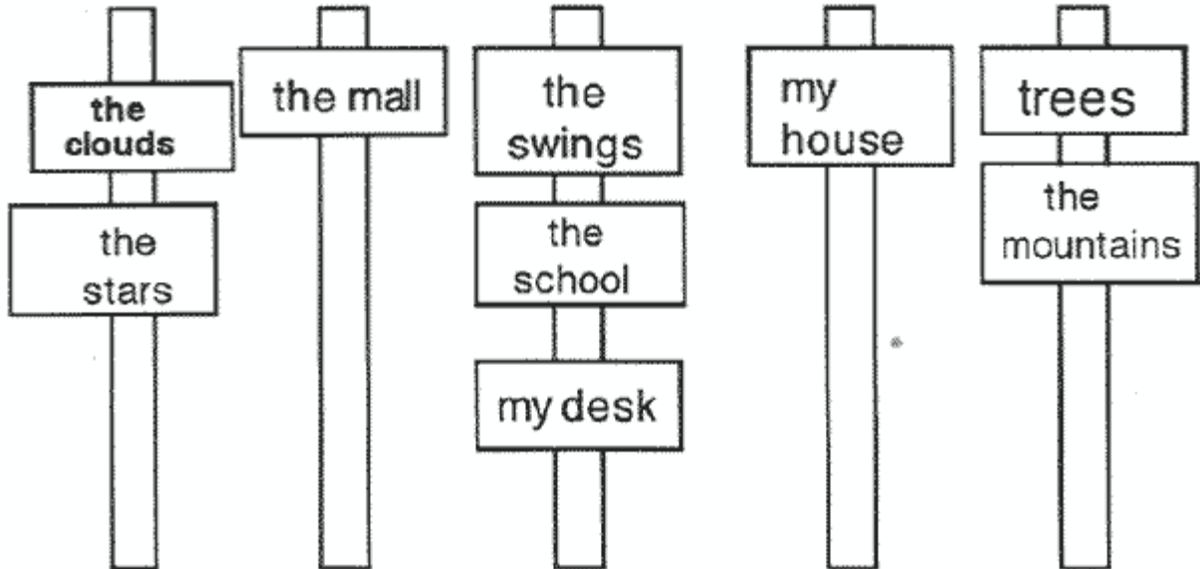
Using antiphonning activities, the language phrases and patterns were further highlighted. (We sang the written section aloud and the mapped parts inside our heads; in our inner hearing).

We also sang the words "Sally go 'round" and chinned (using nonsense syllables) the mapped sections. Observations were made about each chunk. (The first two chunks sound the same and the last chunk is longer).

Next, we brainstormed other things that Sally could go around. Students offered all kinds of ideas such as a desk, a car, a tree, the yard, the swings, the school. I recorded their ideas on the chalkboard, divided the board into four sections, and designated four to copy each word onto a 4x6 card. Each of the four students was responsible for copying the words in one section.

Five strips of masking tape, sticky side out, were placed vertically on the blackboard. The word cards were distributed to the class; each student had two or three cards. We then sorted and classified the word cards. Each student put her or his word cards onto a strip and then explained why the words belonged in that particular category. (Brownlie, Close, and Wingren, 1998)

Categories

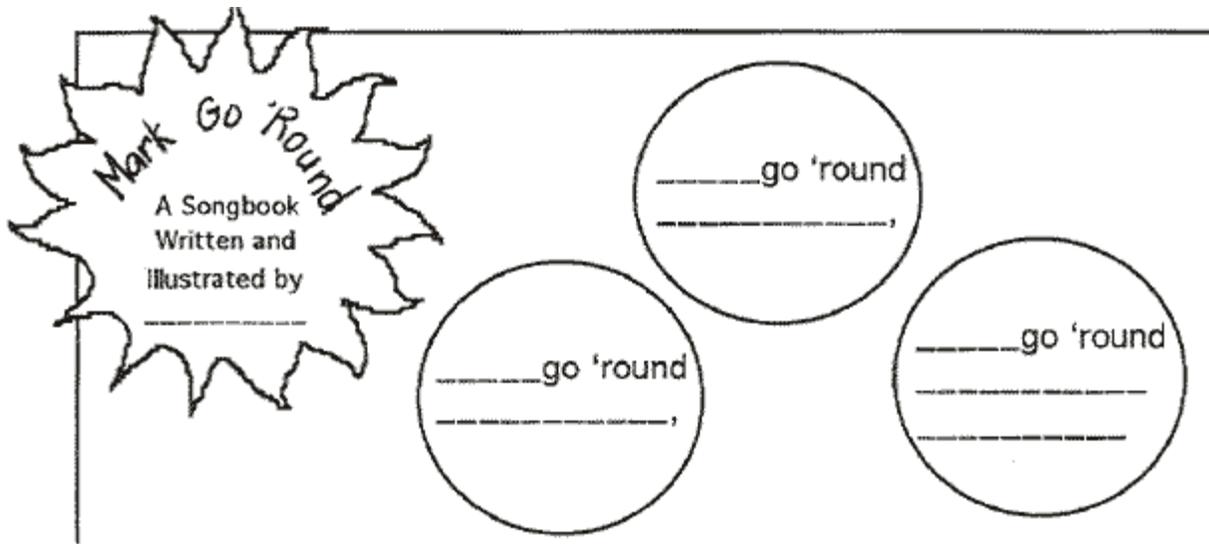


One category contained several jungle-related words, while another category related to school items. This sorting and Classifying activity helped the students to focus on a theme for their own new verses. After we categorized all the cards, we tried various words in the song. We had fun making suggestions. "Let's try having Sally go around a tree, mountain, and then a lake. We tried out our ideas by mapping in the air while we sang the new words. We found that some words were awkward to sing, especially in the third phrase because "chimney pot" has three sounds. So we added an extra word or two to make the phrase sound more like the rhythm of the original song. For example, the third phrase, Sally go 'round the lake every afternoon, was made to fit the music better by changing it to Sally go 'round the big, blue lake every afternoon.

When students were ready to write, the room was buzzing with the sounds of "Sally". I circulated, helping students sing what they had written. I encouraged them to do some serious editing. We talked about how their new words sounded in the song and played with other possibilities. At this point I realized that the extent to which each student had internalized the patterning in the song varied greatly. Not everyone's song was completely musical. I knew then the value of this exercise.

Writing

Each student made his or her own book in the shape of a circle.



Although we did no further work with "Sally Go Round the Sun", a creative writing session could easily precede or follow the songwriting assignment. The students could focus on describing all the sight, sounds smells, and experiences of Sally's journey. Just think of the wild adventure stories Sally could inspire!

For me, the value of playing with language in songs holds new importance. When substituting words in a song, we:

- listen more acutely
- evaluate more critically
- give much more consideration to achieving a musical sound.
- We are off to a good start in our songwriting endeavors.

Sources & References:

Sweeney, F.M. (1994) 90 folk songs. Langley. B.C.: Kidd and Co. Graphics, Inc.

Brownlie, F., Close, S. &Wingren, L. (1998). Reaching for higher thought. Edmonton, Alberta: Arnold.