

Every Voice Matters: Spoken Word Poetry in and outside of School

In this article, the author works with members of a spoken word poetry group to develop ways to integrate spoken word into classroom and school communities.

The call for this issue of *English Journal* asks us to consider the following: *How can teachers help students connect with poetry and understand its cultural relevance as a force for speaking truth to power? How can poetry be used to motivate students to explore contemporary issues? How can poetry help us find meaning in everyday moments?* This article argues that to best answer these questions, we should turn to young people themselves.

Across the country, adolescents are writing and performing spoken word poetry. Youth Speaks hosts the international poetry slam known as “Brave New Voices” that is featured on HBO (<http://youthspeaks.org/bravenewvoices/>), and organizations such as Writers Corp, Poetry Alive, and Young Chicago Authors have also been instrumental in engaging young people in this writing. Several movies have depicted various aspects of spoken word poetry. For example, *Louder Than a Bomb*, directed by Greg Jacobs and Jon Siskel, follows several poets and their teams from across Chicago as they prepare for a city-wide poetry slam.

To learn about the writing practices of youth spoken word poets in the urban Southwest, I spent a year studying Young Voices Rise (YVR; all names pseudonyms). This poetry group meets approximately once per month at a large public library. During their 2013–2014 season, I attended their poetry workshops and slams (twelve days of events in all). I interviewed the cofounders of the group, Mark and Gabriel, and I conducted multiple interviews with six adolescent members of YVR.

The two cofounders of YVR are also its lead teaching artists. Mark is a 27-year-old poet and songwriter who self-identifies as Chicano, and Gabriel is a 34-year-old poet who self-identifies as white. Mark and Gabriel have been conducting YVR poetry workshops at the library together for the past three years, and these workshops are always followed with a two-hour open-mic poetry slam, a chance for the poets to showcase their work for 50 to 80 audience members. In addition to these library events that bring together youth poets from all over the metropolitan area, YVR partners with local schools, sending teaching artists to assist with after-school poetry clubs. These clubs then act as feeders for the Saturday functions.

In this article, I will first take readers into a typical YVR poetry workshop. Then I provide profiles of three members to demonstrate some of the different ways adolescents are engaging with this medium. Finally, I share some spoken word poetry resources and suggestions for those who wish to incorporate spoken word poetry into their courses, who plan to start an after-school club, or who would like to host a campuswide poetry slam.

Welcome to Young Voices Rise (YVR)

Mark begins the poetry workshop at noon. The 23 girls in attendance sit in a circular configuration made up of small café tables pulled together. Several of the teenagers are seated at side tables along the perimeter of the room because the main

circle of tables is already full. Mark seems to have instant rapport with the adolescents as he takes his place among them. After they go around the room and say their names, he guides them in a writing activity.

The second writing activity begins with a close reading of one of Julie Sheehan's poems. Mark keeps sending workshop participants back to the text, saying, "So what part of the poem, if we can look at the text, what part of the poem—or parts of the poem—tell us like, okay, she really doesn't hate this person? . . . What moment? Try to find it right now."

They discuss some of these moments. Then Mark shares his own feelings about the piece. He says, "The beautiful thing about this wonderful woman named Julie Sheehan is that she's bringing you really close to her world. She's saying, 'While you dig through the cashews, I hate you. My breath says I hate you.' . . . What's really beautiful about this poem is when you read through it, it's like, oh, I know more about her. She's like me. We have this human thing, right? . . . She does that by adding details: 'The little blue green speck of sock lint I'm trying to dig from under my third toenail, left toe, hates you.'" The group laughs. "That is detail. That is hilarious. That is what makes it funny."

The young writers have the next 30 minutes to compose poems of their own, using the model poem as a guide. Walking among them, Mark occasionally shushes those who are off task or stops to help a writer who is stuck. I hear him reassuring someone, saying, "Just explore it. Have fun."

After the 30 minutes pass, ten people volunteer to read their work. Mark gives them minimal feedback, sometimes simply saying, "Who's next?" The point seems not to be about critique but about helping these adolescents simply muster the courage to share.

Before the 90-minute session concludes, Mark leaves the group with a personal story and some words of advice. He says, "When I was a young person, I had a lot of . . . issues with anger . . . I think um maybe the only thing that really helped me negotiate my world, 'cause it was confusing, um was uh writing. . . . There's a lot of things you're not going to have control of. But what's beautiful about writing, and this is what I want you to



A poet performing at an open-mic event

remember, is that you can control every single element of what you need to say. . . . And that is one of the things that helped me survive. And I'm not saying it's going to help you, but I promise you, the more you write and the more you speak, the easier it's going to be to find who you are and value that thing. Okay? So um, again, thank you. Keep writing, and treat each other well."

The session ends at 1:30 p.m., and the writers disperse until 2:00 p.m., when they will have a chance to perform their writing for a larger audience at the poetry slam.

Profiles of Three Spoken Word Poets

The poets who attend workshops like the one above come to the library from all over town. To give readers a sense of some of the writers in YVR, I introduce three members, Rafael, Jasmine, and Jorge. As their profiles show, YVR members write on a range of topics and for multiple purposes.

Rafael: Poetry as Activism

Rafael is an 18-year-old senior in high school who self-identifies as Latino. During his ninth-grade



A poet writing at a workshop

year in high school, he failed his English class and had to take summer school. This event was a turning point for him because his summer school teacher was also the school's poetry club sponsor. She helped bring him into the club, which was a feeder for the YVR events at the public library. YVR teaching artists, Mark and Gabriel, regularly came out to conduct workshops at the poetry club at Rafael's school. By his senior year of high school, Rafael was enrolled in a dual-enrollment honors English course. He plans to be a teacher himself, either in English or history, so he can "give back to the community, to show them that anything's possible, that just because you come from a rough background or you're not what society wants you to be, you can still achieve."

Rafael described his poetry as follows: "I write a lot of political pieces. I really like the works of Martin Luther King Jr. and Caesar Chavez. When I do my pieces I kind of envision myself as if I'm them, an activist, so when I perform the political pieces, it's like a speech." Some of his other writing role models include President Obama, Pablo Neruda, William Wordsworth, and Eminem.

At a YVR poetry slam, Rafael performed a poem acknowledging both sides of his heritage:

I am the product of los conquistadores stepping foot on new ground. I am the product of pillaged villages, raped women, and lost culture. Spanish blood flows through these veins and Aztec skin keeps it all in. Yo soy mestizo. I am the product of two worlds colliding. I am the product of years of oppression, colonization, and revolution.

Throughout the 2013–2014 YVR season, Rafael performed poems on other topics as well. Some of these poems discussed being in love, appreciating national parks, and experiencing racial discrimination while getting pulled over. While he is able to write on a range of issues, to Rafael, being a poet is first and foremost about being an activist.

Jasmine: Poetry as Art

Jasmine is a 16-year-old junior in high school who self-identifies as Hispanic. She goes to the same school as Rafael and is active in the poetry club there. During her first few months of involvement with YVR, she was selected to go to the Brave New Voices competition. In addition to writing and performing poetry, Jasmine loves listening to music, playing guitar, singing, and acting.

Jasmine told me about how her writing has changed since she became involved with YVR. She believes that her writing used to have a simple structure and little poetic language. Now Jasmine has a much better understanding of how to use metaphors. She has written about "life traveling" in her poems, and even though she says she has not traveled much herself, she likes "to write for the future." These are letters to her future self.

Lines from Jasmine's poetry stand out for their philosophical quality. Below are some examples:

- I am still looking for the person who sips moonlight like wine.
- I have tried to sleep backwards in bed just to see if my feet would be the restless ones instead of my head.
- And I always wonder, if I sit in a dark room long enough, will I develop like film, or was this all just a waste of time?

Whether she is writing pieces about love or politics, there is a poetic sophistication to her writing that makes her work really compelling. Jasmine is a poets' poet, and it is no wonder that teachers at

her school have begun asking for her help in developing spoken word poetry units for their English classes. She has also been asked to teach spoken word poetry classes in the evenings for a local arts organization.

Jorge: Poetry as Therapy

Jorge is an 18-year-old poet who self-identifies as Hispanic. He likes art, basketball, comedies, and cooking. Jorge has been a member of YVR for two years, and he has competed on the Brave New Voices team twice. His writing role models are G. Yamazawa, Willie Perdomo, and B. Yung.

When Jorge performs his poems, his experience shows. This poet recites pieces from memory and includes carefully considered arm gestures. His voice is strong and clear, and he delivers poems with great confidence and emotion. In addition to performing at poetry slams and working as a tutor, Jorge is in his first year of college. He is studying immigration, economics, and Spanish.

Jorge has used spoken word poetry to work through important issues in his life. When he was an infant, his biological father was murdered. Jorge's poems grapple with the sadness he has felt. Consider the following excerpt from one of his poems:

All I ever wanted was just a little bit of your love.
Just a little bit of your time to show you that
I'm worth making memories with.

Jorge has also used poetry to work through his feelings about having a stepfather, someone he has come to love and accept over time:

The man who raised me is my pops, my step dad.
He's been by my side since I was two years old.
With his black hands he taught me to respect others
and how to shoot a basketball.
He taught me the importance of responsibility and
how to converse with girls.

On his participant information form, Jorge explained how poetry has changed his life: "It has helped me become more vulnerable, responsible, and open-minded, as well as provided me with an outlet to express my inner-self." Performing his poems at YVR events allows Jorge to speak about

his life in a safe, supportive space. It has been therapeutic for him and helped him to grow into "a young man who cares for his community."

Implications for Teaching and Learning

These profiles of Rafael, Jasmine, and Jorge reveal some of the ways adolescents use spoken word poetry. Their stories also suggest possibilities for using this medium in schools. For example, Rafael gives us a glimpse of how poetry could be used alongside historical study. Students could conduct research and take a stand, speaking out about topics and issues that they care about. Jasmine shows us how poetic language is valued in contemporary performance poetry. She reveals how figurative devices gleaned from English courses can be applied to a form of writing that she enjoys. Jasmine can help us see the potential of spoken word poetry in the classroom for complementing more traditional forms of poetry study or as a unit of study on its own. Finally, Jorge shows us how poetry can be used for self-expression and reflection. Through this form of writing, he makes sense of his lived experiences and takes control of his life. Jorge shares his poems with authentic audiences in safe spaces. He can help us see how writing can be used for healing and other personally meaningful purposes.

As these three poets demonstrate, through the writing and performance of spoken word poetry, young people can experience the relevance of poetry, learn more about important issues, stand up for what they believe in, and see poetry in the world around them.

Spoken Word Poetry Resources

The idea of bringing spoken word poetry into English language arts classes or of hosting events on campus may seem daunting to those who are new to this medium. However, there are many resources available, including videos of spoken word performances posted online. The following sites contain some examples:

- "10 Spoken Word Performances, Folded Like Lyrical Origami" (<http://blog.ted.com/2012/12/07/10-spoken-word-performances-folded-like-lyrical-origami/>)

- “15 Videos That Will Make You Rethink Everything” (<http://www.care2.com/causes/15-videos-that-will-make-you-rethink-everything.html>)
- Taylor Mali’s piece, “What Teachers Make” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxsOVK4syxU>)

In addition to these videos, many print resources are available. Alan Sitomer and Michael Cirelli’s *Hip-Hop Poetry and the Classics* includes poetry exercises, model poems of various styles, and instructions for hosting a poetry slam. Also, Mark Eleveld’s *The Spoken Word Revolution* and *The Spoken Word Revolution Redux* provide countless examples of spoken word poems, and each of these books comes with a CD as well. The poetry organization Youth Speaks has put out its own curriculum guide titled *Brave New Voices: The Youth Speaks Guide to Teaching Spoken Word Poetry*. This guide by authors Jen Weiss and Scott Herndon includes five weeks of lessons and directions for hosting a poetry slam. All of these are excellent resources.

Researchers have conducted many studies of spoken word poetry programs around the country. Because of space constraints, I will discuss only two of them here. Maisha T. Fisher’s *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms* examines a spoken word poetry group in a New York school. Also, Korina M. Jocson’s *Youth Poets: Empowering Literacies in and out of Schools* looks at how secondary students in California engaged in a “Poetry for the People” program. Spoken word poetry research generally highlights features of these groups and the young people who participate in them.

For readers who are unsure whether there are any spoken word poetry groups close to them, conducting a simple Internet search using the term “spoken word poetry” and the city may yield some results. I highly recommend visiting youth poetry workshops and slams if they are available. Observing literacy learning in different contexts can give teachers new perspectives on teaching and learning. I know that these experiences have helped me see young people, as well as my role as an English educator, in a completely new light.

Supporting Spoken Word Poetry within Schools

I have seen spoken word poetry used in different ways on different campuses. Some teachers integrate spoken word poetry into their classrooms, either within traditional poetry units or as stand-alone units. Also, many schools now host school-wide poetry slam competitions. Some even offer after-school poetry clubs. Examining YVR’s practices can help teachers as they begin to plan their own poetry units, clubs, or slams.

Structuring a Poetry Workshop

YVR poetry workshops tend to follow a basic pattern. At these workshops, members quickly introduce themselves to the rest of the group. The rest of the workshop consists of one or two writing activities. If a model poem is used in a workshop, group leaders and participants break it down together until the language and the ideas of the poem are clear. These model poems also typically serve as springboards for writing activities. Mark refers to these exercises as “structured prompts” and explains they are “super aligned to the poem, where it’s almost a worksheet.” The vignette above contains an example of this type of exercise. Participants looked at a poem that used vivid details, and they wrote vivid poems of their own. In another workshop, Mark read the poem “Abandoned Farmhouse” by Ted Kooser, and then he had the writers compose poems about abandoned spaces. Mark and Gabriel always set aside plenty of time for sharing in these workshops.

Establishing a Safe Space

Mark and Gabriel establish a safe space at YVR events. One way they do this is by upholding three rules at workshops: (1) Be brave, (2) Be respectful, and (3) Your voice matters. These rules are essential for creating a space in which poets feel comfortable sharing their work with each other. Mark and Gabriel also encourage frequent low-risk sharing in the workshops. When poets do share, very little critique, if any, will be given. They try to

Observing literacy learning in different contexts can give teachers new perspectives on teaching and learning.


get students to be brave and share because so many of them have had negative experiences with writing or poetry somewhere along the line, typically in an English class. The teaching artists emphasize that all of the participants' voices matter and that poetry belongs to them regardless of where they come from.

Hosting a Poetry Slam

Hosting a poetry slam can be a rewarding experience. The main guideline for a poetry slam is that it should be entertaining. The host interacts with the audience, demonstrating how to give love and energy to the poets through snaps, claps, and comments. A deejay plays music in between the poems, and, in fact, a really good deejay listens to the poem and chooses a song to play afterwards that builds off the conversation initiated by the poet. Audience members can clap along to a song or even get up and dance. Judges score poems on a 0–10 scale (going out to one decimal place), and then the audience responds to these scores through cheers or boos. By the way, at a YVR slam, it is never acceptable to boo a poet. In the time I have spent with them, I have never seen an audience member act disrespectfully toward a poet. As the event concludes, the host announces the winners of the slam, stressing that the scores do not really matter. The host also encourages audience members to meet someone new after the slam. These practices contribute to a safe, fun, and welcoming event.

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Conclusion

Spoken word poetry workshops and slams can encourage young people to share their stories and develop their voices. During the time I have spent with Jorge, Jasmine, Rafael, and other YVR poets, I have watched adolescents critique their worlds, demonstrate empathy and maturity, and identify with writing. Through the medium of spoken word poetry, these writers are learning that their voices really do matter. 

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ReadWriteThink Connection

Danielle Berg

The ReadWriteThink.org lesson "Crossing Boundaries through Bilingual, Spoken-Word Poetry" guides students in writing spoken word poetry on the topic of boundary crossing. This lesson includes workshop activities, model poems, rubrics, and an optional service-learning component. Students may participate in a poetry slam or publish their pieces in a class anthology. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/crossing-boundaries-through-bilingual-30525.html>