

2017 Premier’s English Teachers Association Scholarship

The Power of Spoken Word Poetry

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# Introduction

My sister was thirteen when she started counting calories
assumed if she wrenched her body smaller
maybe she'd take up more space on the stage
I sat in her dance recital and watched her firework into air
ladybug cheeks eclipsing the tundra of her shrinking face
as she bowed, hands laced together like the ribbon on her pointe shoes
I remember thinking how easy it is to break pencils in two.
So today I write a note to the dancers:
you are worth more than the angle of your hip in pirouette
we do not add teardrop waist to gaunt thigh and reach human
not getting the part because your chest is too big or hips too wide just means
you are evolutionarily woman
and women are not meant to be downsized

**Hannah Green**

*Oak Park and River Forest High School Chicago
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I included this spoken word poem, written and performed by a student at one of the secondary schools I visited in Chicago, to demonstrate the power of spoken word programs in schools.
This student’s work, along with the many others I had the privilege to listen to, is a perfect example of why I was driven to complete this study. In her poem, she is using her lived experiences to deeply engage with the world around her. Her work is crafted using a variety of language features. She is confidently expressing her personal voice before a receptive and authentic audience (the performance). We can be sure that it was shaped by many revisions and with the feedback of her student team and spoken word teachers. What lies behind the poem is a driven engagement with poetry, so how did her teachers encourage this process? What techniques, programs and strategies did they use? How did the school support the work of the teachers? What were the greater artistic and education communities doing to enable the continued growth of poets like Hannah? And the greater question: what other benefits do student poets like Hannah experience as a result of participating in spoken word programs?

Reading several academic articles and books, I discovered many common findings, one being that poetry is a literary vehicle for self-discovery and understanding. It fosters emotional resilience while allowing for aesthetic and intellectual word play, which promotes literacy. It also improves attendance and retention rates, academic performance and career planning.

# Focus of Study

The aim of my study was to examine the work of teachers and teacher educators across three sites in the United States of America in developing student’s ability, motivation and confidence to read, write and perform poetry. Moreover, studies emerging from the USA note the power of Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) as a site for developing literacy, increased self-confidence, a sense of belonging and an enhanced understanding of artistic craft (Rabkin, Reynolds, Hedberg & Shelby, 2011; Fisher, 2003, 2005, 2007; Jocson, 2006, 2008; Weinstein, 2010). Weinstein cites that teenagers who experience SWP see themselves as “writers engaged in an artistic community” (Weinstein & West, 2012). Thus, a further aim for my study was to investigate the greater benefits that (SWP) programs can have on students’ lives and the strategies that teachers and organisers use to foster this kind of growth.

# Significant Learning

## Interviews with Emilie Zoey Baker, Miles Merrill (Artistic Director of Word Travels) and Sara Monsour (Artistic Director of Bankstown Poetry Slam) Melbourne and Sydney

Through these three interviews, I discovered that the spoken word community in Australia is small but growing, led by non-profit organisations and the schools that adopt their programming. Melbourne’s *Out Loud* teen team slam, *Word Travel*’s ‘Rumble’ and *Bankstown Poetry Slam*’s ‘Real Talk’ all work with students in classrooms and in after-school programs to develop their willingness, ability and confidence in writing, reading and performing poetry. Spoken word has such strong outcomes for students that each of these individuals wants to see it grow across communities in Australia. Miles states: “We want to inspire young people towards investing in their own literacy – to give them the opportunity to tell their own story and give them the tools to be able to tell that story in a more literate way that allows them to keep growing. We want them to see that their life experience matters. In regional Australia, students don’t see themselves reflected in the media they’re shown. Being engaged in spoken word, students find poetry accessible, immediate and empowering.”

## 4 February – Young Chicago Authors(YCA) Writing Workshop ‘Check the Method’, led by Kevin Coval, Founder and Artistic Director of YCA – Chicago USA

This three-hour open workshop involved approximately 20 young adults from diverse backgrounds, of various ages. After a quick ice breaker, the group does a warm-up writing exercise and is then exposed to a few texts (poem, short story, video) exploring a particular theme, which the group briefly discusses and analyses. Content is valued over form. The group is instructed to make a variety of lists from their own experiences (‘who, in the world, are your enemies?’, ‘write a list of people or institutions that have wronged you’, ‘make a list of people who mean well, but whose well-meaning is detrimental to who you are’).

The texts, sophisticated, substantial, but diverse and modern, are used as inspiration for a short piece based on one listed item. The group share their pieces around the circle. I later discover that this highly successful format is used across the city by almost everyone I meet.

* Poetry/rap reading at Chicago Publishing Resource Centre (Joseph Chilliams, Kevin Coval, Tara Stringfellow)
* The Green Mill Sunday night Open Mic and Poetry Slam, featuring Taylor Mali, hosted by JW Basilio, Director of Chicago Slamworks
* Oak Park and River Forest High School (OPRFHS) observation of in-class program, interviews with students in Spoken Word Club, interview with spoken word teachers including Peter Khan and Adam Levin, student work editing, final rehearsals and Winter Showcase.

I spent three afternoons at OPRFHS. Each day, I observe the period 8 spoken word freshman (Year 9) class. Peter Khan, the only full-time spoken word teacher in the country, possibly the world, works with every single student in the freshman year. For one week, each semester, Peter and Adam take over an English teacher’s class, teaching five periods of spoken word poetry. Each week builds on the students’ knowledge of poetry and their own life experiences and teaches a specific skill, this time the extended metaphor. They team-teach, and the students are read or shown a poem, something accessible and interesting. The student-centred learning approach means that students are then invited to briefly discuss the poem and highlight the focus points (e.g. examples of personification, all words related to the central extended metaphor, etc). A second and third poem are often used. Students then use the brainstorming strategy through lists, similar to YCA’s strategy, before they are asked to write their first poem. Over the five days, students write four pieces, which are read voluntarily in class. The week culminates in a non-competitive Poetry Slam, where each class votes two of their classmates to perform on their behalf before the entire grade. Having an in-class program means that teachers have the option of whether they want to include poetry in their own curriculum, as it has already been covered by the spoken word teachers.

The in-class program is used to recruit students to the Spoken Word Club, an after-school club that works year-round on writing and performance skills. Peter and Adam’s office is an open space where students come and go, using the space to work on their poems, seek help on anything and even do their homework. It was during this time that I had the honour of interviewing a few of the students, who reported the vast impact that spoken word has had on them. Since Peter mandates that students must have good attendance and a minimum C grade to stay in the club, students see the club as a reward. One student, Levi, reported that it literally saved his life, transforming him from being depressed and unmotivated to an honour student with straight As in every class. Another, Charlie, described the thrill of performance and how the club helped her get over her stage fright and allowed her to become a better and more confident communicator. Trey, a Year 10 student, explained that it was a way for him to express his feelings and to collaborate and make friends with different people. Bennet asserted that it helped him expand his vocabulary, think critically and write better both creatively and academically. Leah described how great it felt to have a family at a school where she is supported to succeed. Cara said that what made a difference to her is that the poetry they chose was more accessible and something to which she could relate.

During these interviews, I noticed the back-and-forth between the teachers and students. Students were asking questions and actively seeking feedback to improve their work. Their poems were shared with the teachers and other students using Google Docs, where the student and Peter could edit. After the interviews, the students read me their pieces and I observed how the other students actively listened and gave thoughtful and constructive feedback on each other’s’ work. The club, consisting of approximately 60 students, meets several times a week after school to do this kind of work. Sometimes they work on team pieces, sometimes individual ones and sometimes Peter brings in experts. In one session, he brought in a speech pathologist to help the students with their enunciation. His former students often visit to promote spoken word to the classes and work with the students on their poetry.

Each term, students perform team pieces in a Showcase for other students, friends and family. During the final rehearsals and mic-check, each group performs, while Peter, Adam and, this time, I provide feedback on the students’ content, voice, movement and pacing. The next night, almost 300 guests fill out the little theatre inside the school. The students, all on stage for the duration, perform their pieces to wild applause. These were some of the most talented writers and performers I had ever met. Their work throughout the year is published in the club Chapbook.

## YCA Workshop/Open Mic ‘Wordplay’

These workshops are run once-weekly and use a similar format but have a wider audience. The host/MC introduces the open mic with “when I say ‘we are’, you say ‘family’, we are…” and the crowd yells “family”, “when I say ‘this is my’, ‘you say ‘living room’, ‘this is my…’” and the crowd yells “living room!”. A sense of family and belonging is promoted at every opportunity in every venue and at every event. Writers see themselves as part of a writing community and have a network of support, which bolsters their confidence and esteem.

## Interview with Kevil Coval (YCA Artistic Director) and Jamila Woods (YCA Associate Artistic Director)

In this interview, I discovered that YCA develops and delivers professional learning for both classroom teachers and their teaching artists who are sent into schools for short and long-term residencies (up to 20 weeks). The teaching artists are offered a stipend for this, for which the schools partially pay. This has the dual purpose of obtaining better outcomes in their programs for the students and providing career development for the poets. Teaching artists are recruited based on the strength of their craft and their natural ability to teach others. YCA builds upon this by providing workshops in pedagogy, classroom management, providing feedback, developing strong partnerships with the classroom teachers. The residencies include in-class and out of class programs, which culminate in the *Louder than a Bomb (LTAB)* state festival/competition, which began 17 years ago with five schools and has grown to 112 in 2017. Kevin explained that he believes so much in the value of the program that he will continue to develop and promote it until every school in the state or even country is involved because he has witnessed the deep impact it can have on student academic achievement and personal life.

Jamila illuminated that while it helps, classroom teachers do not necessarily have to be writers or poets, but that they must have a belief and a passion for the process and the craft. Kevin added that teachers must listen to their students’ voices and encourage the expression of their own experiences. The lived experience must be as important and as valued as anything a canonical writer has written in the past.

We also discussed whether they have used the strategy with students of diverse abilities and students with disabilities. Kevin cited that since poetry is often brief and since he uses modern works that are relevant, spoken *and* written, and in the language the students already use, it is often more accessible than the traditional works teachers use. Both Kevin and Jamila espoused the controversial, but proven strategy of moving away from the classical literary canon and giving value and attention to texts from the 20th and 21st centuries, asserting that we need to start in the now and develop a foundational appreciation for poetry before gradually moving back. We should expose them to different kinds of texts, but content should be valued above form. Kevin stressed that people connect with ideas.

I asked how teachers of all ages achieve this, and Kevin responded that teachers need to continue learning, not just about pedagogy, but also about texts. We need to know what the students are listening to and reading, what language they are using, so that we can enter their quality world and make them love poetry. The old texts, whilst wonderful, are inaccessible for most students as they often cannot replicate that language and thereby conclude that poetry is not for them.

When discussing their pedagogical strategies, they explained that composition and performance are paramount and above reading and analysis. There is some discussion and analysis of meaning of poems and the literary features that shape them, but it is through first-hand experience of composition, feedback and editing that students learn about the mechanics of language. This reminded me of some of the conversations I had witnessed between students at OPRFHS, in which they identified aspects of language and form to provide feedback and suggestions to one another. Writing ability is also developed through consistent and frequent practice, as students write several poems a week, some even one a day. They also perform every week to allow them to build confidence and theatrical skills, thus becoming confident, engaged and empowered young people.

## Interview with Robbie Q Telfer (poet and teaching artist with Chicago Slamworks, Bowery Poetry Club, YCA and Project Voice)

Robbie insists that “everyone is a poet”. His broad experiences with youth include performing at assemblies for schools, delivering writing workshops and working closely with students in residencies. He tells me that “there’s a magic that you lose when (the poetry) is 100 years old”, because once students realise “you don’t need a PHD to write” and “you don’t have to be Poe or Wordsworth”, the work becomes empowering.

* Thomas Kelly High School (observation of after-school spoken word club, facilitated by Mojdeh Stoakley of *Chicago Slamworks*). Interview with Modjeh Stoakley
* *America Scores* Red Carpet Poetry Slam
* *YCA’s* ‘Louder than a Bomb’ youth spoken word competition community building event ‘Crossing the Street’

At this event, hundreds of students and their teachers from across Illinois gathered to kick off *LTAB*. The event served to build a deeper sense of community and cross bridges (or streets) across the various often highly segregated parts of Chicago. Students were repeatedly and passionately told that their voices mattered and that they must use their voices to connect with others and express their lived experienced because, these too, mattered.

## Interview with Jamael Clark (former student of OPRKHS, research student at ICU)

Jamael’s qualitative research in the form of interviews and observations, discovered that it is “critically essential to implement poetry in the classroom as an instrumental teaching tool to sustain classroom engagement”, particularly with students of colour. He found that poetry can “dynamically engage students of colour at the high school level to foster transferable skills inside and outside the classroom” primarily due to the cultural and social capital that these programs built. He identified that relevancy, connectivity and vulnerability were key elements that engage students where traditional education fails.

## Interview with Pam Laskin (director of Poetry Outreach and English faculty member at New York City College) New York USA

Pam coordinates a program in which tertiary creative writing students are sent into schools to deliver writing workshops. Students’ poems are entered in a competition and compiled in an annual Chapbook. She believes that partnerships with universities and young writers is crucial for schools.

## Interview with Jon Sands, teaching artist with various outreach programs, including Urban Word NYC New York USA

Jon started using spoken word at a syringe exchange with homeless people and drug users. It worked so well that it was turned into a weekly event, he feels because the exchange of stories created an alternate and more productive label for young people – the label of ‘writer’.

Not presenting himself as the “ambassador of what is the truth of this poem” is central to his teaching philosophy. He believes that the teacher’s role is not to ask leading questions, which he perceives deadens the energy, but to find entry points into poems that meet students’ personal stories.

We discussed that the key skill of the facilitator/teacher is to know how to build momentum in the discussion of the model poem and transition gracefully into writing. When to speak and when to step back is described as a “dance…a living organism”. Jon states, “you don’t want to push the conversation…but (it) still has to be deliberate”.

* *Nuyorican Poets Café* Open Mic
* ‘Slam School’ at *Urban Word* (students and teachers from *AECI school NYC*, hosted by Ashley August)

## Interview with Susan Weinstein, Louisiana State University New Orleans

Sue Weinstein has been working in and studying the field of SWP for many years and is in the process of publishing a new book on the subject. I asked her what she found to be the greatest challenges in teaching SWP. She identified teaching revision/editing as one and suggested that facilitators bring in pieces of work in various stages to demonstrate the process. She also believes it needs to be a part of the regular teaching schedule. Teaching performance is another area of improvement and she feels that we need to work on developing teaching artists’ and teachers’ ability to workshop this. She also believes that the sensitive material that often comes up in SWP workshops as students write about their lives can be a challenge for teachers who are not also trained as trauma responders, thus she expressed the need for professional learning in this area in terms of how to respond and what resources/support networks should be used.

She spoke about ‘writing workshop’ as a central strategy in the English classroom, such as the ‘workshop in a box’ strategy I had witnessed at *YCA* and *Urban Word NYC*. She also sees modelling and scaffolding as key teaching strategies and reinforced the idea that students should not be asked ‘what does this mean poem mean’, but rather ‘what do you notice’ or ‘where did this poem connect with you’. She explained that many teachers feel uncomfortable teaching poetry but that she has seen them transform when using this strategy together with their students. She pointed out that the most effective way into poetry is to teach students “as writers…(because)…kids engage much more with something when they’re positioned as people who are doing that thing”.

# Conclusion

In a mere five weeks, my practice and my beliefs about poetry education have been transformed. Beyond that, I have borne witness to how a shift in perception and teaching strategy can have a profound impact on students’ learning outcomes and lives. My short-term goal is to redevelop the poetry unit in my school and to develop a partnership with Bankstown Poetry Slam. I also aim to help other schools develop similar programming. My ultimate goal will be to innovate poetry education across NSW and thus breathe new life into the craft of imaginative writing and reading.

Grandma has always been a growing garden.
Summer, her stemming season.
But this summer grandma will burn in her son
She will think about how she planted him in 6 feet of soil
How his roots kiss moss
and his casket criss crossed
this summer, there will be no talk of scattering seeds across the front yard,
She will be drowning in dirt like earth worm

**Sydney Johnson**

*Oak Park and River Forest High School Chicago
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Anyone interested in reading more on this subject, please contact me for a list of resources, readings and YouTube poems. I am also in the process of developing a resource on running a spoken word program in a school. I am contactable at narcisa.nozica@det.nsw.edu.au.

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