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## The Inspired Voice: Invoking Poetry through Music

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### Introduction

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#### Inspiring Voice

She reluctantly puts her iPod away as she enters the classroom. He tucks his worn sketchbook into his backpack. Students gather in the hallway as two young freestyle artists battle. The bell rings, and one by one they settle into their seats and shut down their minds in preparation for today's lesson. A groan ripples from desk to desk like the subtle wave of a crowd during a baseball game. Poetry is on the agenda.

Undeterred, I pass out a poem to my class. As soon as the copy touches their fingertips, the material becomes another "stupid-piece-of-paper-with-a-bunch-of-boring-words-and- even-if-I-understand-it-this-time-I-probably-won't-like-it" poem. Why? I don't have time to think about it. I have to hurry up and clarify the difference between synecdoche and metonymy, and I just know these young brains are already imagining ways to resist learning.

There is a silent agreement between us: no one expects anyone to enjoy poetry. We read it because that's what we do in English class – and because they'll have to write an essay about it later. This isn't learning. It's tossing information to the passive bleachers.

Educator and author Bernice McCarthy defines learning as "the realization of something new and our response to that newness."<sup>1</sup> When we realize something, we bring it into our realm of existence. We may acknowledge it is there, and we may even look at it for a while. How similar is realization to inspiration? When we are inspired, we are moved to take action, to respond to the thing that suddenly enters our realm of existence. True learning is perhaps an interflow of realization and inspiration, a series of "aha" moments, a sense of being a part of something and having the power to converse – to receive in realization and to respond in inspiration. Let us be clear: realization is not a passive activity. Realization requires *voice*. It takes *voice* to converse. An authentic conversation requires *active* listening. It is an interflow of ideas; it is realization and inspiration.

What happens when a learner lacks voice? Perhaps the learner has a voice but it is suppressed – or oppressed. For many of my current students, school is synonymous with prison. It is possible to get through school – to put up with it until the time is served – but forget about enjoying it or taking an active role in the conversation

of learning. There seems to be a correlation between the absence of voice and the resistance to learning. A student who feels he or she has nothing to contribute will avoid participation or put forth minimal energy until the four-year sentence is over. So what can poetry mean for the voiceless? Poetry can certainly be a form of expression. It can also be intimidating and irrelevant for some students.

This unit is about inspiring voice. The muse of poetry holds the key and the power to unlock the cages of the voiceless, but unfortunately Euterpe tends to look like the creepy figure in the movie *Scream* (and the figure in the painting of the same title) to students who are not familiar with her. I imagine she looks even worse to students who have been aggressively alienated from her throughout their years of school. Sometimes a familiar cage is more comfortable than the beckoning curve of a long, bony finger. Essentially, this unit is about encouraging movement from silence; it is about realization and response. It is about inspiration. It is one-third of a larger idea that includes invoking poetry through music, art, and the land. The poetry seminar at the Yale Initiative, emphasizing the relationship between poetry and pictures, places and people, has brought my attention to the deep, handholding conversation between humans and art. This particular unit focuses primarily on students who have not really warmed up to poetry, but who readily seek contact with music. The lessons on music may serve as a foundation for finding poetic connections to art, land, or other sources of inspiration.

### **Why Music?**

The nice thing about music is that it is not necessary to master an instrument in order to like a song. Students are familiar with music. They are already connected to it, and they are not afraid to praise or criticize it. Not all of my students are musicians, but most of them are music-connoisseurs. Let us start in a place that is comfortable for students. We will begin the lessons with something that they know, so they feel immediately that they can contribute something. From this place of familiarity, we will extend outwards into the newness of learning. This is how we will move from the cage of silence.

Music is good for the brain. Educational consultant David A. Sousa describes how music can stimulate the limbic system in a way that allows students to make emotional connections.<sup>2</sup> According to Sousa, music can also stimulate parts of the brain that are responsible for recall and memory. Eric Jensen adds creativity, concentration and cognitive improvement to the benefits of integrating music in the classroom.<sup>3</sup> He shows how different areas of the brain are activated by melody, harmony, rhythm, and the measurement of beats.

Most of us have heard that music and math are connected. What about music and poetry? Students who are trained to listen for melodic or dissonant sounds in music may be able to identify similar sounds in poetry. Also, music deals with patterns, much like poetry. We feel music in a close, personal way. We have attractions and aversions to particular music for our own reasons. What are the similarities between the way we respond to a song and the way we respond to a poem? Does our musical taste have anything in common with our taste for certain styles in poetry? Are students with an affinity for rap—or for music with four beats to a measure—also sensitive to iambic tetrameter?

### **The Connoisseurs**

I teach students in grades 9 through 12. The classes on the forefront of my mind (and on my schedule) are PreAP English 9, 12th grade English, and Creative Writing 9-12. All classes are about 90 minutes long. I doubt that most teachers will be so lucky as to get such a combination of classes, but my intentions are to make the lessons applicable to high school English classes in general, give or take a few modifications. There are a few obvious differences between the three types of classes that I teach, namely the ages of the students, the

elective versus the mandatory, and the Advanced Placement versus the ordinary placement classes. They are all part of a school with a "bad reputation" and a tendency to contrast itself to the high school where all the "smart and rich kids" go. Of course, we are striving to change the image, but it does have an impact on how the students view their relationship to education.

Many of our students are bilingual or monolingual Spanish speakers. Most of my students who speak English as a second language will have completed supplementary ESL classes before entering my room, but they will still experience some difficulties with the English language. Students in my classes will sometimes write poetry in Spanish and essays in English. I find that it is important to look at the purpose of the student's use of language in poetry. Are students writing to improve skills in the English language? Or is it an exercise in expression? Can a student use his or her native language to develop details, imagery and content?

Like those in most classes, my students will possess a broad range of skills. Traditionally, students in my school are placed in PreAP English because they are good in math. Students who enroll in Creative Writing don't always consider themselves writers, and some are die-hard science fiction writers with a strong aversion to poetry, but at least most are willing to try. The 12th grade students are as excited about poetry as any 12th grader who is forced to take yet another semester of English. It is important for this unit to be applicable to all the classes, but it will be necessary to make occasional adaptations that are more appropriate for grade levels or types of classes. For instance, the students in Creative Writing may be more receptive to writing than some students in senior English, but they will still benefit from techniques that help them read and understand poetry. Writing with music in mind may add depth for more experienced writers.

## **Forms and Movements**

Music is the companion of poetry in this unit. It takes the lead in the beginning, steps back a bit in the middle, and ends its journey on the equal footing with poetry in a culminating performance. The poetry in this unit will be recognized in the form of spoken word, performance poetry, hip-hop, rap, and of course page poetry. With the contemporary popularization of performed poetry, a distinction between the page and the stage has worked its way into informal discussions between poets and spoken word artists. In fact, the question of whether there is a hierarchy of poetic quality – or a degree of literacy – between performed poetry and printed poetry is worthy of debate. Spoken literature, whether poetic or narrative, is by no means new, but perhaps our relationship to it is what really matters. It still seems more literary to publish a book than to produce a poetic CD, but there is a definite pull of poetry toward performance in the business of youth and in the coffee houses. It is this pull that accounts for the emphasis of the unit.

What is it about performed poetry that inspires our youth and some contemporary poets to participate in spoken word venues? The demands made by the community for spoken word institutions like the Minnesota Spoken Association and the Santa Fe Poets-in-the-Schools program are becoming more apparent. Why is Slam – and the idea of going to the Nationals – such a huge deal for so many poets? A poem performed (not just read) by a poet adds another level of conversation between the poet and the audience. The poet's voice resonates, allowing the audience to *feel* the sound of the poem. It's like music.

Students in this unit will examine differences and similarities between poetry, spoken word, performance poetry and forms of music like rap or hip-hop. The word on the street – and I mean the poet's word—is not always consistent about definitions. In fact, long workshops have been held in Minneapolis in an attempt to define these labels. The problem lies in the tendency of these labels to overlap. The title of poet is often applied to published, produced and performing writers who aren't rappers. A poem on the page can confidently call itself poetry (unless it is really a song that someone printed out).

Generally, a poet can read the object in question on a stage— even with a microphone— and the written material is considered to be poetry. If the poet reads with an emphasis on sound and delivery— with or without the paper in hand— the labels spoken word and spoken word artist emerge. Note the shift to spoken word *artist*, a term that includes the musicians who perform with the poet. Spoken word artists often make strong connections to hip-hop. The rhythm and cadence of delivery, the allusions to current events, and the visual appearance of the poet often reflects an aspect of hip-hop culture (though not necessarily rap). More discussion about hip-hop culture, its subcategory called rap, and its connection to poetry can be found in an overview of the Last Poets.

Performance poetry is often used synonymously with spoken word artist. A performance poet definitely has oral delivery to an audience in mind. The poem is memorized and usually more theatrical, although performance poets have also been known to perform with a... well, with a spoken word band. Think of it this way: a spoken word artist or performance poet can always be considered a poet, but a poet can't always be considered a spoken word artist or a performance poet.

A major difference between performance poetry and published poetry is the form it takes on the page. Performance poets don't always write with print in mind—it is the quality of sound that matters. As a result, the moving impact of the words may not be conveyed on paper. The poem, like a song without music, may seem incomplete without its performer. Of course, these are generalities. Those of us who have heard a published poet ruin a perfectly good poem by reading it aloud know that this isn't always the case, either.

The oral communication of poetry has shaped and reshaped itself throughout different eras. The unit will introduce students to poets from the Harlem Renaissance, the Beat poets, the Last Poets (in the context of the beginning of hip-hop), and finally our contemporary: Slam. We will look closely at three pieces from each section. I will provide additional poems and recordings for students, as they will need to select a piece to use later in the unit.

## Strategies and Key Elements

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### Framework

I follow Bernice McCarthy's framework for lesson design throughout the unit. McCarthy incorporates the work of Dewey, Jung, Vygotsky and neuroscientists to provide a structure that will serve all types of learners. The structure, referred to as 4Mat, divides units into four quadrants. The first quadrant makes a personal connection between the concept and the student, the second brings in expert knowledge, the third allows students to practice new knowledge, and the fourth encourages students to create something new based on the knowledge and understanding gained. For a more comprehensive look at 4Mat, refer to McCarthy's books in the annotated bibliography.

### Daily Exercise

Beginning with Lesson Three, students complete a daily exercise at the start of class. The exercise serves as a way to get focused while supporting the essence of the unit. There are two types of exercises that I use intermittently: one exercise is a music-related free-write; the other exercise involves writing as part of a group voice.

For the music-related free-write, I ask students to bring in a song or a compilation of music, not to exceed ten minutes. I will also bring in instrumentals to balance songs with lyrics. As we listen to the music, we write whatever comes to mind. We may be inspired by the mood or the lyrics of a song. The song may jog a certain memory. We may also critique the music. It doesn't matter, as long as we interact— or converse—with the music through writing. My Creative Writing students call this Stream of Consciousness writing. They compile elaborate collections of music and write silently for 40 minutes. We then read all - or part—of what we were inspired to compose. Students have written complete poems and stories in one sitting using this method. They find the musical inspiration - coupled with allowing the subconscious to emerge—to be liberating.

Another writing activity that is tied to the subconscious (in a less obvious way) is Exquisite Corpse. 4 In this exercise, every person writes two lines of poetry, folds over the paper so only the second line is visible, and passes it to the right or left. We read the whole poem once it has gone around the circle. This exercise allows students to be a part of something and to use their voices in a fun, low-pressure situation. Everyone is included, and no one is forced to stand out.

As the students become more familiar with writing techniques and terminology, I will ask them to apply one element to their free-writes. This will allow them to repeatedly use what we learn in class.

## **Unit Structure**

The unit begins with a personal connection to the student, moves into the introduction of new information, allows the student to apply new knowledge, and ends with another personal connection to the student. On occasion, the unit will swing back from application to new information, and back again to application, eventually continuing its progression to the final connection to the student. Each lesson will contain methods of assessment. These methods also advance the student toward the final performance assessment at the end of the unit. This process is intended to show sensitivity to differentiated learning, but it is the process of the unit as a whole that will target diverse learners, not necessarily a unit in isolation. Of course, teachers may choose to make personal adaptations.

### *Silence*

What does it feel like to be silent? When do we feel forced to be silent? When is it appropriate to be silent? When is it necessary to speak? Why do some people speak more than others?

We begin in a place of no-sound. We understand voice because we know what it is to be in a place of no-voice. It is only a visit to a place where some students may live; it is a brief tour of where some may eat silence, work silence, shop silence. We won't stay long. Besides, this place is not *too* strange - after all, don't we spend an awful lot of time asking students to be quiet?

Students experience silence in two phases. In the first phase, they are just silent; they don't communicate. They don't write or draw. In the second phase, they write or draw, but do so without talking. The two phases together remain under ten minutes. Once the silence is broken, students discuss the experience. What is the difference between writing or drawing and not doing anything? Is writing or drawing a form of silence or a form of expression?

During a class brainstorm, we generate ideas about the ways we express ourselves—especially the ways that go beyond using our mouths and vocal chords to speak. We must remember that music is a form of expression. The brainstorm leads to the idea of "voice" as a concept that can be applied to different forms of

expression. Voice is more than the sound from our throats. Voice is the ability to express. It's a sense of identity. It's power.

Students use a journal to reflect and answer the question: What does it mean to have a voice? **Anaphora** is included by having students repeat the phrase, "I have voice when..." in their writing. Remember what it felt like to be silent. Do opposite feelings occur when we have a voice?

Some students begin right away to shape this into a poem. We discuss the aesthetic appeal of choosing when to repeat a phrase, rather than repeating it every single line. This exercise is for generating ideas, allowing students to have a voice, and for beginning to define what voice is in the first place. It is a first quadrant experience: it connects the concept to the student.

### *The Good Song*

What makes a good song? Why do people like some music but not all music? How does the musician use singing, melody, beat, or rhyme as voice? What inspires the musician to use his or her voice?

For those who believe that asking students to be silent is like biting down on a battery, the exploration of a good song may also serve as a starting point. We are still in the realm of personal experience. This time, however, we begin in a place of sound.

Students bring a favorite song to class and develop criteria for what makes a good song. We are still in the realm of what the students already know. **Dissonance**, and whether it ever occurs in "good" songs, may be included in discussion. Do other students agree that the song is good? What specifically makes it good or not good? The focus on specific details will help students go beyond an initial emotional response. This exercise will lend itself to helping students understand what makes a "good" essay.

The musician may use singing, melody, **rhythm**, or **rhyme** as voice. The voice is a form of expression and a sense of identity and power. It may be used to express emotion, establish a relationship to the world, and encourage change. What inspires the musician to use his or her voice? What is the purpose of the song? Students tell a story, write a poem, or complete a journal entry that speculates why the singer / musician chose NOT to be silent about his or her topic.

### **Medium and Purpose**

What are the differences and similarities among poetry, spoken word, performance poetry, hip-hop, rap and song? What are the literary terms that will help identify the different elements of poetry?

We now enter a place of newness. Spoken word artists and performance poets introduce themselves to the students through performance or through the page. Students are still able to respond personally, noting feelings and impressions, as they compare the new poets to the musicians they brought to class. We enter the second quadrant of the learning cycle with the new material and the introduction to literary terms.

Sekou Sundiata, Floetry, Ursula Rucker, and Saul Williams all have CDs available and have at least some selections suitable for the high school classroom. Laurie Anderson is a good example of turning a story into a performance with music. It may be interesting to compare a story accompanied by music with a poem accompanied by music. Anderson's rhythm is subtle, and she speaks in complete sentences. Her music and sound effects enhance the **mood** of her stories.

Poet Sekou Sundiata emphasizes his words with the sounds of blues and jazz. He also makes direct references to musicians such as Jimi Hendrix, John Coltrane and Mary J. Blige. Floetry consists of singer Marsha Ambrosius and poet Natalie Stewart. The duo work together to give poetry a sound that ranges from R&B love ballads to the more rapid rhythm of hip hop. Ursula Rucker's poetry often focuses social issues such as sexism and racism. It is easier to separate her poem from the music than it is in the case of Floetry. Saul Williams often appeals to young emerging spoken word artists. He uses **alliteration** and **repetition** to give his poetry a strong hip hop sound, although the music tends to be more similar to rock, particularly with the distinctly rock sounds of electric guitar and percussion. This combination creates a dramatic, at times frantic, mood. Williams' poems usually comment on social issues and the quest for personal truth.

This type of poetry can be compared to music. It can also be argued, especially when listening to Floetry, that the poetry *is* the music. However, half of Floetry is a poet, not a singer. The use of a **refrain**, which regularly appears in songs and ballads, also works its way into performance poetry—but not always. In examining the purpose of refrains in songs, students can analyze why certain lines are repeated in poetry. The use of rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, repetition, mood, **tone** and possibly dissonance and **cacophony** can also be compared between performance poetry and music. For the purpose of clarifying different forms of verbal expression, students define and compare terms: Poetry, Spoken Word, Performance Poetry, Hip-Hop, Rap and Song.

A specific topic or theme can be voiced in different ways. For instance, the topic of revolution has been explored in Gil Scott-Heron's performance poetry (with music), "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," in the Beatles' song, "Revolution," in Robert Frost's poem, "A Semi-Revolution," in Diane Di Prima's "Revolutionary Letter" poems, and Daniel S. Solis' slam piece (a poem performed without music), "Welcome to the Revolution." Solis' poem can be found in the anthology, *The Spoken Word Revolution*.

Students can choose the form that best portrays the theme or topic by giving details to support an opinion. Students should also note whether the topic is best portrayed due to the form or to the skill of the artist. The use of literary terms will help students focus on details.

### *Same Good Song, Different Medium*

How do I perceive my song, now that I have new knowledge of literary elements? What happens to my song when it is no longer a song? Will its voice remain in another form?

Students enter the third quadrant and practice their skills. It's a poetry-lab and a form of assessment. What can the student accomplish on his or her own? What will the student discover? It is time for students to re-examine the purpose of the songs they brought to class. What does it want to express? How do the literary devices previously examined add to the voice of the song?

The songs can be expressed in another way. Lines from the song that are central to its purpose may be turned into a poem for the page, a rap (if it isn't already a rap), or a performance poem. A song without lyrics is more challenging, but not impossible. Some of the literary elements, such as repetition, dissonance, refrain, and mood can still be used. The student will have to use his or her feelings and personal knowledge about the song to determine purpose. It would be very interesting to see what words emerge from the song, once it's in poem form.

Students begin to use their own voices now, but they are not alone. They join forces with the singer/ musician to create something new. They explore how to maintain the purpose even if the voice changes. The goal is to

create a piece that feels just as effective as the old form. Students also pay close attention to voice.

### *A Survey of Voice: Harlem, Beat, Last Poets and Hip-Hop, and Slam*

How are the connections between music and poetry expressed through the generations? How do the writers' voices reflect (or reject) the societal views of a particular era? What makes a "good" poem?

We return to the second quadrant of learning with new material. Students are introduced to poets of the Harlem Renaissance and the Beat Generation. They will continue chronologically to the Last Poets and Hip Hop, and finally to the Slam poets of our time. We focus on the voice of the poet and the historical context of the poem as we interpret meaning and speculate about the source of inspiration. Students add **imagery**, **detail**, **diction**, **assonance** and **consonance** to their vocabulary during readings and discussions.

Students complete a paper in order to show knowledge of a poem. In the paper, they describe the purpose, state musical and historical influences, and use literary terms to evaluate how well the poem expresses an idea. We come back to the concept of the "good" song – but now we are looking at poetry. Students choose a poem that they like. Ideally, it is one of the poems we discuss in class; however, I am not against students finding other poems from the Harlem Renaissance, the Beat Generation, the Last Poets and Hip Hop, or Slam. I will present three poems from each section to the class and have other poems available.

The **Harlem Renaissance** began in 1917 on the occasion of three daring plays that produced dignified characters for an all-black cast. Two years later, Claude McKay published "If We Must Die," a poem based on the lynchings, massacres, and riots of the Red Summer of 1919. The NAACP, founded ten years earlier, encouraged writers, actors, musicians, and artists to stand as equal voices in an otherwise oppressive society. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, Harlem artists "rediscovered the ancient confidence and sense of destiny of their African ancestors and created a body of art on which future writers and musicians and artists might build."<sup>5</sup> This explosive period of creativity lasted about twenty years, beginning its decline shortly after the Harlem Riot in 1935.

The influence of music, particularly the blues, is apparent in the voices of poets. Blues gave voice to the oppressed. Tyehimba Jess writes, "Black folks couldn't just go out and protest racism in the '20s and '30s. But we could give voice to our pain through a blues song." Jess states that the responsibility of speaking the truth was the job of "Harlem Renaissance poets who sang their blues to America's hegemony." <sup>6</sup>

The blues began with the call and response model of field hollers during slavery and expanded from the South to the urban environment of the North during the early part of the twentieth century. W.C. Handy, often considered the father of the blues, established the three-line structure of four beats each.<sup>7</sup> The first line is repeated twice. The third line follows with an end-rhyme. For instance, Handy's "St. Louis Blues" begins "I hate to see that evenin' sun go down / I hate to see that evenin' sun go down/ 'Cause my baby, he done lef' this town." The repetition of lines can be heard in other blues music and in blues poetry.

Langston Hughes, recipient of an award for "Weary, Weary Blues," is known for incorporating blues into his poetry. Students will read the lesser known "Po' Boy Blues," as the feelings and predicament of the speaker can be fairly clearly understood. The second poem for this section, "Song" by Gwendolyn Bennett, uses musical references to express strong emotion. Although "Incident" by Countee Cullen lacks both "blues" and "song" in its title, it has a distinct rhythm and rhyme that students will be able to hear. The poem is also an excellent example of how language – even one word – can have a devastating impact. Now we are not only concerned with having voice, but with what we do with it once we have it.



**The Beat Generation** broke language conventions established by earlier poets, much to the dismay of some literary critics of the 1950s and 1960s who proclaimed such poems to be non-literary. The Beat writers began as a small group of four, including Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, but it grew from the East Coast to the West, expanding to include other writers of the same sentiment and time period. The word "beat" has an immediate connection to music, namely jazz. Ann Charters writes that jazz musicians used "beat" as a slang term meaning poor, exhausted or down and out. The word also implies a sense of being outside of society and on one's own. Eventually "beat" was applied to anyone who appeared to be a rebel or who lived as a bohemian. The Beat writers were essentially voices for people rejected by mainstream society.<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to note that both the Beat and the Harlem Renaissance writers engage a struggle with society. David Levering Lewis finds that for Harlem artists, art was a means to change society in order to be accepted into it. For Bohemians, art was a means to change society before they accepted it.<sup>9</sup> The Beat writers, living in an era of McCarthyism and blacklisting, project an image of a lone visionary heroism simultaneously caught in and rejected by society while pursuing a quest for truth.

Jazz music, write Gates and McKay, "knows that, despite all hopes and efforts, things might not work out for the best." Yet humans persevere. Jazz improvises ways to cope with trouble. According to Charters, Jack Kerouac was thinking of himself as a jazz musician when he wrote "Mexico City Blues," the first of three Beat poems that we'll read. "Mexico City Blues" is a tribute to bebop saxophonist Charlie Parker. In the spirit of Jazz, Allen Ginsberg decided to let go of his usual form and meter and just write, extending the lines of "Howl" out to the length of his own breath. The poem reflects the people in Ginsberg's world, his view of America, and his encounter with Carl Solomon, a man he met in a psychiatric hospital. We will read excerpts from parts I, II and III. Both "Mexico City Blues" and "Howl" are dedicated to other people. Diana Di Prima's love poem, "Song for Baby-O, Unborn" is also a nice source of inspiration for students who wish to write a "song" for another person.

The struggle with society continues in the work of the **Last Poets** and **Hip Hop** artists. The Last Poets blended music with poetry in the late 60s and 70s and are considered to be the parents of today's hip-hop. They recorded "When the Revolution Comes" prior to Gil Scott-Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" and spoke boldly as voices of the civil rights movement. The song "Jazzoetry" reflects their style of writing and performing: a mixture of jazz, funk and poetry.

The origins of hip hop are thought also to include dub, a Jamaican style of music brought to New York in the late 1960s by artists such as DJ Kool Herc. Dub included energetic percussion rhythms that evolved into speech rhythms. In 1979, the first official hip-hop single, "Rapper's Delight," was released by the Sugar Hill Gang (although it is disputed whether the lyrics were stolen from Grandmaster Caz of the Cold Crush Brothers). Hip-hop can also be traced back to the African griots, oral historian-poets. It moved through time, picking up a taste of blues lyrics and jazz scat singing along the way.

During the late twentieth century, hip-hop was a means for artists to cope with an inability to be accepted by mainstream society - particularly mainstream music industries. Hip-hop was ignored by MTV until the mid 1980s when it became more violent. The impressive degree of social awareness and artistic flare may be lost in some of the music heard on hip hop radio stations today, but it is important to remember that although certain songs are profitable, they cannot wholly represent the expansive hip hop culture.

Queen Latifah and Mos Def draw the listener's attention to the state of society in the songs "The Evil That Men Do" and "Respiration," respectively. Queen Latifah makes **allusions** to the Declaration of Independence, apartheid, and slavery as she speaks about trying to live positively in a world of drugs, poverty, and the evil actions of mankind. Mos Def creates a **metaphor** for New York City as he laments the violence inflicted upon

a breathing, bleeding, and sighing entity. His tone shows affection for the city, yet he urges his listener to be more aware of the violence that plagues society. The Last Poets, Queen Latifah and Mos Def push for social change, much like the writers of Harlem Renaissance and the Beat Generation.

The use of alliteration, repetition and internal rhyme in hip-hop can also be seen in **Slam** Poetry. Like the poetry of the Beat Generation, slam poets have been accused of being non-literary. Slam depends heavily on performance; line breaks and stanzas are most likely lost on the audience member. Recently, however, books have been published to showcase slam and performance poems exclusively. Perhaps this is an indication that performance poetry is making its way into mainstream literary culture.

Marc Smith started slam in 1986 as part of the Chicago Poetry Ensemble. The competition rules evolved from a desire to get audience members to participate (random audience members, rather than a panel of esteemed poets, judge the performed poems), a strategy to keep the suspense going throughout a show (competing poets must make it through three rounds in order to win), and an aversion to really awful poetry that goes on and on (all slam pieces must be three minutes or less). Slam emerged from a local event made up of a few people to become a national phenomenon. Slam poets compete nationally and internationally. Slam is a business: poets can pay to become a member of Poetry Slam Incorporated, a requirement in order to participate in the annual National Poetry Slam.

Slam poets are considered performance poets, but they aren't allowed to use music or props. A connection to music is apparent, however, through rhythm and cadence. Poets may sing parts of their poems, or even interject part of a popular song during the performance. Vocal sounds (non-words) are also used to emphasize mood or rhythm. Poets may also create dance-like movements, especially during team performances. It is rare to see a slam poet who holds still.

Like hip hop, slam poetry ranges from one-dimensional and lewd to socially conscious and deeply sensitive to the sound and meaning of language. Slam poets Sherman Alexie, Patricia Smith and Mayda Del Valle connect the use of language to social and cultural issues. In "Marriage," Sherman Alexie explores the meaning of bread. Patricia Smith shows the loss of identity in "My Mother Learns English," while Mayda Del Valle expresses the struggle of being caught in the middle of two tongues in "Academia Leaves My Tongue Heavy."

We end our survey of how voice evolves through different eras by examining how voice evolves in the individual, using the above poems as our guide. We listen to our own experiences, our own backgrounds, our own conversations with the world, our own voice.

#### *A Battle of Voice: Harlem, Beat, Last Poets and Hip-Hop, and Slam*

How effective is the voice of a specific poem?

It's time to put new knowledge to practice in a third quadrant exercise. Students have written a paper about the voice of a selected poem, now it's time to play. It's time to compete. We loosely follow the rules of a slam as students read their selected poems – the way they believe it should be read. Students work in teams of three, and each team has a chance to compete in all three rounds.

Now students get to experience performance poetry. They experiment with delivery. They pay attention to the musical qualities of the poem. They combine their own voice with the voice of the poet and create a new kind of sound.

## *A Poetry Concert*

How can I express my own voice in a piece that uses poetry and music?

Students show off what they have learned in a final performance. They create a piece of their own and write a proposal that discusses the literary elements, the connection between poetry and music, and the purpose of the piece. They explain why the poems effectively express their own voices. Suggestions for student projects include the following:

- Original poem about music
- Original poem that uses sound devices
- Original poem performed with music
- Published poem performed with original music
- Original musical interpretation of published poem
- An original poem that responds to a song or another poem read /heard during the unit
- A poem sung to an original melody that captures the overall mood or tone
- A video or slideshow with poetry and music

## **Sample Lessons**

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### **Essential Questions**

How does music inspire poetry? How does poetry inspire music? Why is inspiration important? How does inspiration encourage voice? Why is voice important? Why is poetry an effective medium for voice?

Many questions will drive the varying learning activities, but it is the last question that is central to the unit. It is at the heart of the lessons. Why is poetry an effective medium for voice?

Poetry can speak for the silenced. Poetry can express what society does not say. Poetry can move with an era and it can move against it. It can move the reader and the listener. It can even move the writer. Poetry can evoke change. It can keep us from forgetting. Poetry can cry for us. It can laugh. It can scoff. Poetry can turn words into instruments. It can give us a sound that lets us hear who we are. It can sing.

### **Standards, Benchmarks and Learning Targets**

New Mexico Content Standards address what all students should know within the subject area. Language Arts has three content standards: 1. Students will apply strategies and skills to comprehend information that is read, heard, and viewed; 2. Students will communicate effectively through speaking and writing; and 3. Students will use literature and media to develop an understanding of people, societies, and the self.

Each content standard is further developed in benchmarks, which are level specific checkpoints (grades 9 – 12 have one benchmark). Performance standards are listed under benchmarks as concrete examples of what students should know and be able to do. As part of a mission to develop vertical alignment, teachers in Santa Fe schools have translated performance standards into student-friendly language now called learning targets.

I have written the learning targets in first person to reflect the student's voice. The learning targets

correspond to specific activities and finally to the assessment at the end of the lesson. The lessons provided are a closer look at the strategies listed above. I have taken three of the learning quadrants used in Bernice McCarthy's 4Mat to illustrate first the connection to the concept, second, the learning of new material, and third, the practice of new knowledge. The fourth quadrant asks students to create something new based on their new knowledge. The fourth quadrant contains the final performance assessment. At the end of the unit, students will use the shared elements of poetry and music to show how poetry is an effective medium for voice.

## **The Good Song**

### *Learning Targets*

I can deliver an informative presentation; I can establish and defend a point of view; I can design and apply criteria for evaluating my oral presentation; I can explain my ideas in a clear, logical and comprehensive manner.

### *Activity*

1. Ask students ahead of time to bring a favorite song to class. They must firmly believe that it is a "good" song (for any reason), as they will have to defend their position. I remind them to keep their audience in mind when they select their "good" song. If a member of the class feels offended, the student will have to explain why something that offends contributes to what makes the song good. This activity has always been a lot of fun, and the selection of songs has been surprisingly eclectic. One of the presentations even led to a battle between Carlos Santana and Jimi Hendrix.
2. Before playing any music, students develop criteria for what makes a good song. At this point, we are still in the realm of what the students already know, so it is not necessary to get overly technical. Some students may say a good song is one you can dance to. Others may comment on the subtlety of internal rhyme. Talk to students about **dissonance** and whether that occurs in "good" songs. Keep a list where it is visible.
3. Students take turns playing music. They defend their song using their criteria, and then the rest of the class gets a shot at it. Open up the discussion. Do other students agree that the song is good? What specifically makes it good or not good? The focus on specific details will help students go beyond an initial emotional response. This exercise will lend itself to helping students understand what makes a "good" essay.
4. Discuss: Why do people like some music but not all music? Does a certain kind of music attract a certain kind of personality? What kind of personality do you think the singer has? Use prior knowledge and speculation to create a persona behind the voice. How does the musician use singing, melody, **rhythm**, or **rhyme** as voice? The musician may express a certain emotion, attitude or style through the sounds of words or music. Remember that voice is a form of expression and a sense of identity and power. The voice may be used to express emotion, establish a relationship to the world, and encourage change. The musician has a reason for engaging in a kind of conversation rather than remaining silent. What inspires the musician to use his or her voice? What is the purpose of the song?
5. Tell a story, write a poem, or complete a journal entry that speculates why the singer / musician chose NOT to be silent about his or her topic. Use ideas generated from the discussion. What inspired the poet to move from silence to voice in order to create the song? Students are encouraged to use their imaginations, as it is not likely that the artist will be there to provide facts. However, the connections between the song and the

possible points of inspiration should be reasonable. This exercise helps students begin to think about the reasons behind creating art. As they think about what may inspire someone else, they plant the seeds for a deeper understanding of literature – and a better understanding of their own sources of inspiration.

6. Read the stories or poems. Discuss the plausibility of scenarios.

### *Assessment*

The student is able to develop criteria and evaluate material, deliver a presentation about what makes a particular song good, discuss voice in terms of musical expression, and write a reasonable speculation about the inspiration behind a song.

### **A Survey of Voice: "Po' Boy Blues"**

#### *Learning Targets*

I can evaluate information by posing questions, responding personally, exploring issues, and identifying writing techniques; I can analyze and explain author's purpose, tone, perspective and message; I can analyze and interpret the significance of literary movements as related to social movements and historical periods; I can read and analyze literary works and identify significant themes and concepts as they relate to me; I can use language that is appropriate for my purpose and audience.

#### *Activity*

1. Listen to excerpts from blues songs. Although Muddy Waters recorded in the 1940s and later, his rhythm and lyrics are immediately engaging, providing a nice introduction to blues. "Louisiana Blues" clearly follows the structure of repeating the first two lines and using end-rhyme for the third: "I'm going down in Louisiana, baby, behind the sun /I'm going down in Louisiana, honey, behind the sun /Well, you know I just found out my troubles just begun." Bessie Smith, a Harlem Renaissance blues musician, also uses this structure in "Chicago Blues," a song that also connects blues to a city: "Late last night I stole away and cried/ late last night I stole away and cried / Had the blues for Chicago, and I just can't be satisfied."

2. Students take notes while listening to Muddy Waters (or another engaging blues musician). What kind of emotion does this song express? What is the singer saying? Using Cornell notes, students write "Emotion expressed in song" and "Thoughts expressed by singer" on the left margins and write their own ideas on the right.

3. Discuss the emotion and thoughts expressed. Examine the repetition of lines, which can be traced back to the form of W.C. Handy.

4. Listen to Bessie Smith (or another Harlem Renaissance blues musician) and continue to take notes. What are the similarities between Muddy Waters and Bessie Smith?

5. Discuss the similarities. Pay close attention to structure.

6. Read "Po' Boy Blues" by Langston Hughes. The blues structure appears in all four stanzas. For example, "I fell in love with/ A gal I thought was kind" is repeated once and followed by "She made me lose ma money / An' almost lose ma mind." 10 Discuss the thoughts and feelings expressed by the speaker. The poem begins by lamenting the need to leave home, a place of sunshine, for a colder world in the North. He speaks about

having to face difficulty in spite of being "a good boy" and about experiencing loss as a result of falling in love. The poem ends with the speaker saying he's so weary, he wishes he'd never been born.

The first three stanzas express being let down by something or someone. The speaker is clearly disappointed with the world. The bitterness is conveyed immediately with an impression of coldness in the first stanza and continues through the next two. The use of the derogatory label "good boy" in the second stanza conveys an ironic tone and projects an image of someone putting on a particular act or persona for others – a persona that does little to alleviate the hard times ahead. In the third stanza, the speaker is a victim of cruelty by someone he *thought* was kind. Here, as in the first stanza, the speaker is worse off than he was before he acted on his hopes. He emphasizes his weariness in the last stanza. The word "weary" implies being tired physically as well as mentally. It is a complaint about continuing something that sucks out one's energy, yet implies relying on the very last bit of one's resources in order to endure.

Hughes wrote "Po' Boy Blues" in 1926, shortly after the Reconstruction era. African Americans migrated to northern cities to escape the segregation and lynching of the South. The industrialization of the North also provided African Americans with job opportunities. New York City, home of the Harlem Renaissance, attracted intellectuals and artists who advocated societal change for a better world. The promise of cultural transcendence from a state of oppression to a place of respect and equality lingered and teased Harlem Renaissance writers. Their encounters with people may have been "cold," the roles they adopted may have been less than helpful, and the strenuous investments of both body and mind may have been the cause of great loss ("She made me lose ma money / An almost lose ma mind"). In the end, one relies on the last reserves of energy even to *begin* a new endeavor ("Weary, weary, / early, early in de morn"), perpetuating a sense of never quite reaching the promise of a "richer " life—in every sense of the term.

7. Students work with a partner (optional) and use the structure of a blues poem to write about a disappointing event. Students can use humor. Although the events in "Po' Boy Blues" are depressing, the poem as a whole uses short lines and rhyme to give it a lighter and slightly humorous mood that undercuts the weariness. Students now have an opportunity to use their "woe-is-me" voices in a way that may even poke fun at an otherwise disappointing situation. Brainstorm topics together to get students started. Topics may include a sporting event that ends badly, an awkward date, an unfortunate vacation, a car that turns out to be a lemon, an unexpected grade, or anything else worthy of complaint.

Each stanza may consist of only three lines and one rhyme: two lines repeated, the third line rhymes. This will provide a structure and allow students to create clever rhymes in an otherwise simple form. Students work toward capturing the mood expressed in the blues songs.

8. Read blues poems with special attention paid to vocal intonations heard in songs.

### *Assessment*

The student responds personally, asks questions, and explores issues during the close reading and discussion of poem. The student takes notes and explains the author's purpose, tone, perspective and message, and states the significance of the Harlem Renaissance as it pertains to the poem; the student demonstrates significant themes, concepts, and blues writing style by creating and reading an original poem that relates to his or own life.

## A Battle of Voice

### Learning Targets

I can recognize a writer's style, tone and other rhetorical strategies; I can analyze texts and synthesize ideas; I can design and apply criteria for evaluating my oral presentation; and I can design and deliver an effective oral presentation by using clear enunciation, and gestures appropriate for a particular audience.

### Activity

1. Toward the end of the unit, each student selects a poem that connects to his or her own voice. The poem may reflect the student's opinion about a topic or issue, it may portray an experience that a student has had, or it may be written in a style that is similar to the student's own style of writing.
2. The student gets to know his or her own poem by writing a review. He or she explains why the poem is "good" by describing the use of literary elements and showing historical and musical connections. (This is actually the assessment piece for the second quadrant of learning, or the end of the survey of voices.)
3. Students are asked to think about how their poems would be read or performed. They watch excerpts from *SlamNation*, *Slam!*, *Def Poetry Jam*, *Love Jones*, *Poetic Justice* or *8 Mile*. A careful screening will provide excerpts appropriate for schools with strict language restrictions. Students give the viewed performances a score from 1.0 to 10.0 (using decimals for scores in between) and discuss what they like or don't like about the poems or performances. The class designs a rubric to evaluate body language, vocal intonations, enunciation, diction, musical attributes and rhythm, and the overall message of the poem.
4. Students prepare to battle their poems by becoming familiar with the procedure. Although the basic structure of the battle loosely follows a typical slam, there are variations:
  - Three people make up a team
  - If the number of students in the class prevent groups of three, a fourth person joins a team and does works with a partner on one poem
  - The team competes in three different rounds
  - Each person from the team competes in a separate round by reciting one poem
  - One person from each team acts as a judge for the other teams
  - The judges give each reading a score from 1.0 to 10.0 (slam using decimals to prevent a tie)
  - The scorekeeper subtracts the highest and lowest scores and adds the remaining scores.
  - Scores are reported at the end of each round
  - The team with the highest combined score wins the battle (and the prize!)

The above procedure is designed to allow every student to recite a poem. Another variation is to drop teams at each round so only three teams compete in the final round. This would heighten the competitive atmosphere and not all students would be able to read. Students can also recite each poem together to alleviate the element of stage fright. A group recitation would also allow teams to be dropped as the competition continues – at least everyone would have read something once. These are variations that can be modified by the individual teacher.

5. Students form groups of three (or four, if necessary). Each student practices reading and memorizing the poem with the help of the team (yes, students will strengthen those memorization skills!). Team members

give feedback based on the scoring of the viewed performers and the discussions about body language, vocal intonations, etc. The team members use the class-designed rubric as a guide. Team members decide which poem will go first, second and third. Typically, a slam poet will begin with his or her strongest piece as a way to "seduce" the audience and end with the second strongest piece, as the competition gets tougher as the slam continues. Slam poets, however, do vary on this strategy.

It is important for students to coach and support their teammates. Students are allowed time in class to practice and refine recitations.

6. Poetry teams compete. Teams draw numbers for the order in which they will compete. They draw for each round to provide variety. During the competition, audience members are told that it's okay to boo the judges for the score (often judges give lower scores than the audience prefers), but to always respect the poet (in this case, the performer). We like to say, "Applaud the poet, not the score" in classroom slams. Students will be graded based on the rubric, not the score.

Team members are allowed to be "on book" for the performer. In other words, one member of the team can hold a copy of the poem and feed the performer lines if he or she forgets.

It's a good idea to have a break - with a snack - between rounds. Students can help contribute and organize the food element of the performance. The presence of food will make the event feel more like a party, even though they are completing challenging work.

The emphasis of this lesson is on interpreting material and being able to give an oral presentation that requires more than a flat reading. Memorization will demand a closer look at the poem in question. Students will be aware of word choice as well as the tone behind the words. Students will also need to pay close attention to the inherent rhythm of a poem, as rhythmic patterns aid in memorization. The imagery of a poem will also stand out when students learn to picture what they are saying. A deep understanding of the speaker's meaning is often necessary in order to fully achieve memorization. Another memorization technique is to use chunking and repetition. The student reads the first line or short phrase over and over again until it is memorized, reads the second line until it is memorized, then returns to the beginning and reads the two lines together. Next, the reader memorizes the third line, returns to the beginning again, and so on, until the whole stanza is memorized. The second stanza is memorized in the same manner. Students can make their own chunks by separating different ideas or thoughts within the poem.

This lesson functions as a warm up for the fourth quadrant of learning, where the student creates something of his or her own. The unit ends with a showcase of original work. The challenging aspect of the final unit project is not competition, but originality. The teacher offers feedback regarding the recitation and provides suggestions for the original performance. The student uses his or her experience to create a new, original piece for the final show of music and literature: the poetry concert.

### *Assessment*

The student helps to design and apply criteria for the recitations of poetry. The recitation will show the student's interpretation of the piece and an understanding of vocabulary and meaning. The student will complete a self-evaluation based on the rubric.



## Annotated Bibliography for Teachers

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Collom, J. & Noethe, S. (2000). *Poetry everywhere*. New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative. This book is full of short, inspiring creative writing exercises.

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Gates, H. L. Jr. & McKay, N.Y. (Eds.). (2004). *The Norton anthology of African American literature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. Everything anyone ever wanted to know about African American literature is contained in this book.

Jensen, E. (2000). *Brain-based learning*. San Diego, CA: The Brain Store. This is a great resource for teachers who want to know more about the brain.

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anthology. While it is an excellent source for contemporary poets, it also includes classics such as the poems of Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker.

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prints the poetry "script" along with other poems by the nine poets.

Sitomer, A. & Cirelli, M. (2004). *Hip-hop poetry and the classics for the classroom*.

Beverly Hills, CA: Milk Mug Publishing. Hip-hop poetry is paired with classic poetry to provide lessons on metaphor, onomatopoeia, and other core literary elements. It comes with ready-to-use handouts and a guide for teachers.

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is a good resource for applying specific teaching methods to help learners in the

classroom.

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251-253. This article explores the attraction hip-hop has for youth. It also lists key

elements of hip-hop.

## **Annotated Bibliography for Students**

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book features poems from slam poets of all ages, including writers from Youth

Speaks. It comes with a CD.

Shakur, T. (1999). *The rose that grew from concrete*. New York: Pocket books. Tupac

wrote this collection of poetry when he was nineteen years old.

Simmons, D. (Ed). (2005). *Russell Simmons def poetry on Broadway... and more*. New

York: Atria Books. The poems of nine slam poets are performed on Broadway.

The poems talk about everything from relationship struggles to self-image to donuts.

## Appendix

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### *Literary Terms*

Anaphora: The repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of each line.

*I have a voice when I'm alone in my room*

I have a voice when I can hear my own heart

Alliteration: The repetition of the same sounds in a group of words.

*The undercurrents of conversation create a remedy spoken...*

Allusion: A hint that refers to literature or history.

Assonance: A form of alliteration where vowel sounds are repeated.

Cacophony: Harsh, non-harmonious sounds. It includes words or phrases in literature that are hard to pronounce. Like dissonance, cacophony can be used for dramatic effect.

Consonance: A form of alliteration where consonants are repeated.

Diction: Word choice. The writer uses words or phrases to convey meaning. Note "Leave me at once" versus "Get out of my face."

Dissonance: In music, harsh, clashing sounds.

Imagery: Not only what we can imagine seeing in literature, but what we can imagine hearing, touching, smelling and tasting.

Metaphor: A way of describing something by comparing it, sometimes very subtly, to something else.

Mood: The atmosphere of the poem. A poem about loss may *feel* sad.

Refrain: Words or musical notes repeated at the end of each verse.

Repetition: Words or phrases are repeated. Repetition can create a musical effect.

Rhyme: Internal rhyme is used often in spoken word poetry and hip-hop. Slam poet Taylor Mali makes fun of its overuse in political poetry: "Because I have seen the disintegration of gentrification/ and can speak with articulation/ about cosmic constellations, and atomic radiation." End rhyme, particularly masculine end rhyme, can create a sing-song feel to the poem, especially when combined with a set rhythm.

- *This is the day*
- We go away
- To see our friends
- And make amends.

Rhythm: The measurable beat of a line, poem or song. Students feel the rhythm of a song when they dance or move to the music, but it may be hard for them to articulate the pattern. At live spoken word events, even when the poet performs solo (without musicians), audience members will nod their heads, swing their legs, or tap their foot to the beat if a poet establishes one. Think about how we feel the motion of a song. Now imagine a poem that moves from the page to the same air that the song uses. How do we feel the motion of the poem?

Tone: The poet's attitude toward the subject of the poem. In a poem about loss, the poet's voice may seem bitter or resentful.

## Notes

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1 McCarthy, B. (2000). *About teaching: 4Mat in the classroom*. Wauconda, IL: About Learning, Incorporated.

2 Sousa, D. A. (2001). *How the brain learns*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

3 Jensen, E. (2000). *Brain-based learning*. San Diego, CA: The Brain Store.

4 The Exquisite Corpse originated as a surrealist parlour game. Participants passed around the paper and added one word, thereby constructing the sentence: "The exquisite corpse will drink the new wine." Eventually, poems and stories were created by this game.

5 Gates, H. L. Jr. & McKay, N.Y. (Eds.). (2004). *The Norton anthology of African American literature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

6 Jess, T. (2004, March/April). The word/the blues. A meditation: Investigating blues poetry, an old tradition [Electronic version]. *Black Issues Book Review*, 6 (2), 19-21.

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