



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2014 Volume II: Playing with Poems: Rules, Tools, and Games

Growing Up Yo in New Haven: Teaching Spanish through Bilingual Slam Poetry

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Introduction

The following is an excerpt from a poem that I wrote after I heard that someone's opinion of me was that I was just a teacher. I had never felt so insulted. Almost without thinking, I began to write these words:

He is just a teacher. Just a teacher. Just. Un hombre who gives his vida for the students who fight him. He runs into fights con punos de amor y kindness.

Writing and reciting it to some friends was very therapeutic. I no longer felt anger and was proud, not just of my poem but of being a teacher. I didn't realize what I was doing with the poem and the words before I participated in Playing with Poems with the Yale National Initiative. I was playing with the word "just." It was used to describe my profession in a derogatory way, yet I took the same word and made it into something positive. The poem took away the power from someone else and gave it back to me. Poetry, and particularly for the sake of this unit, Spoken Word does this frequently.

In today's society, teachers are always under scrutiny. Changing standards and goals, a widening education gap, and issues of teacher salary, have saturated many conversations and have led certain people to not have positive views on teachers in general, especially teachers in an urban setting. In writing the poem I vindicated myself and no longer needed to defend myself or my profession to this person or anyone else. On tough days in the classroom I tend to refer back to my poem to recharge myself.

I was never much into poetry. Most poems I studied in High School just didn't speak to me. Sonnets, haikus, and iambic pentameter never seemed too interesting to me. Last year, I came across a video called "Til This Day" by Shane Koyczan. It's a poem that he wrote and made a video for about his childhood and how he was bullied in school. It was very touching and I loved the way it sounded. The way Mr. Koyczan read the poem made it come to life. He sped up and slowed down and changed his inflection, bringing out more meaning from the words than I would have gotten from reading them on the page.

I did some searching and found more of his poems and loved them all. As I continued reading and searching, I fell upon some Spoken Word videos. As soon as I saw the first one, I began thinking of the students from my school, if only because many popular Spoken Word Poets are African American while Mr. Koyczan is white. The

general theme of most poems involved the struggles of urban living, race, and sexuality. These themes are the exact things that so many of my students struggle with. They don't get many opportunities to talk about them and express them in a positive and healthy way. "I wish I could spend some time doing this kind of stuff with my Spanish students," I thought to myself. The Spanish curriculum in New Haven is very structured and does not allow for much variation. Moreover the content and vocabulary in Spoken Word poetry are always complex, too complex to do in Spanish for Spanish learners. So, in order to incorporate Spoken Word poetry in my classroom, I realized I would have to make some adjustments.

Background

In this unit, students will explore popular Spoken Word in English and Spanish from artists from around the country. Then they will look specifically at bilingual poetry which features English and Spanish within the same poem. Finally they will get an opportunity to write their own bilingual Spoken Word and perform it in front on their peers.

As a Spanish 1 and Spanish 2 teacher, I do not have many opportunities to go very in depth with any poetry unit. Hyde School of Health Science and Sports Medicine serves a population of almost ninety percent African American students, and getting them motivated to learn Spanish can be challenging. One thing they are interested in, however, is their music, mainly rap. Early rap music came from adding beats and rhythms to Spoken Word poetry. Some of my students even perform on their free time. As students from an urban setting, many of them have never left the New Haven area. As a Spanish teacher, I try to expose them to new places and cultures in the classroom so that they may want to explore the world one day in the future. Using this knowledge about their musical interest as a focal point, I will introduce research some popular African American spoken word, Latino spoken word, and bilingual Spoken Word. My goal for the unit will be for each student to write their own identity poetry using the Spanish vocabulary that they have learned in class throughout the year.

World Language teachers try to do several things throughout the course of a class. In most states we use the national standards that go with the five C's: Communication, Culture, Comparisons, Community, and Connections. New Haven Public Schools likes to focus on professional development on just one or two each year. This year it has been Communication. There are three types of communication. Interpersonal communication involves individuals talking back and forth, and this now includes texting. Presentational communication is about speaking and writing the language, and Interpretative communication is about comprehending the language, listening and reading. Additionally, there are four modes of communication: reading, writing, listening and speaking. When foreign language teachers are teaching we are trying to hit all five C's as well as the four modes. It can be overwhelming. Many students feel like learning a language is too difficult and are never motivated.

A poetry unit would focus on the written and spoken parts of language and on presentational communication. In an attempt to motivate my students and get them engaged this will be a bilingual unit where they will be free to use English in their poems. There will be standards and objectives which the students will have to meet for Spanish, but it is necessary that they feel comfortable with the project to get the most meaning out of it.

Rationale: Why Poetry? Why Spoken Word?

Spoken Word Poetry (throughout the unit I will be using Spoken Word and Slam Poetry interchangeably) is a form of poetry that has become very popular over the last few decades, especially in urban settings like New Haven and Chicago. While most poetry is meant to be read aloud, Spoken Word has an even stronger emphasis on sound. The authors always write their poetry down but rarely are these poems read by others. Instead, they are meant to be performed, and because of this they tend to be louder and more passionately read than poems from others genres. ¹

The Spoken Word Revolution is a series of essays by Mark Eleveld and poems by various artists that outlines the history of how Spoken Word came to be so popular in the United States. According to Eleveld, the seeds of Spoken Word were planted in the 1950's during the Beat poetry movement. The Beat movement was poetry that was being written and performed in a way that was against the new status quo, which was looking at poetry as a very structured form more than a set of meaningful thoughts. Beat poetry was mostly about spiritual awareness and anti-materialist. ²

While Beat poetry was starting to gain popularity, it was quickly overshadowed by many of the cultural things that were happening in the United States in the 50's and 60's. The effect that the Vietnam War had on society's culture was particularly strong, as well as the rise of musical groups such as the Beatles which made any Beatniks that were left almost obsolete.

In the black communities however, a new genre was beginning to develop. Although not called rap at the time, MC's like Grand Master Flash and Sugar Hill Gang were using Jamaican DJ's to create a new style that gained traction very quickly. While these MC's did not really consider themselves poets, they definitely had much to do with making an emphasis on the performance side of written poetry. A new culture was beginning to form. ³

According to Eleveld, performance poetry began to find a foothold in Chicago in the late 70's and early 80's. Many venues had at least one poetry night when poets would come and read their poems. Here there was always a mix of the old way to read poems and the new style of performance that was beginning to get popular in the poetry circles in Chicago. A new form called "Poetic Boxing Matches" began to gain ground in Chicago, and the World Poetry Association was formed to have "Poetry Bouts." The first "Poetry Bout" was held in 1981 in a loft on Hubbard Street. It was a three fight card with poets going against each other in ten rounds. Just as in boxing, the winner of each round was given ten points, while the loser was given nine or less. The first event was a smashing success, and the WPA decided to head to Taos, New Mexico, to take part in Taos' National Poetry Circus. ⁴ The Taos Poetry Circus was the first major poetry competition, which we call today Slam.

The founder of Slam Poetry is Marc Smith. He writes an essay in *The Spoken Word Revolution* detailing what Slam should actually be. Slam is about three things: performance, community, and audience. He wonders if young poets today without knowledge of the history of the form take it for granted that they can go up on a stage and perform in front of hundreds or thousands of people, and now with the advent of YouTube, millions. Considering the history of performance poetry and how racially motivated most of it was, it's understandable that he feels the way he does. Many students today are disconnected from their civil rights history. Smith claims that performance changed poetry and particularly poetry reading, and is the reason that Spoken Word

is so popular especially among young poets. ⁵

The title *The Spoken Word Revoultion* is an apt one. There are organizations all over the country that hold Poetry Slams and support many of the local students in their community. The poems that will be presented in this unit are all accompanied by videos; their links will all be provided in the endnotes. They all display the same type of passion and fervor, albeit about different topics.

On the surface, Spoken Word does not seem like it would be a good fit for a Spanish teacher. English poetry does not necessarily address any of the Spanish standards in New Haven and around the country. Additionally, Spanish Spoken Word uses language that is too advanced for Spanish 1 and Spanish 2 students. While those aspects are true, the new Common Core State Standards require all teachers to address the English Language Arts Standards in all grades. Some of the standards that are addressed in this unit are mentioned in the Appendix below. Moreover, it is my belief that by combining topics that are important to the students and their culture, with that of the culture they are supposed to be learning about, they will be more engaged and willing to learn about the new language and culture. For me, one of the things that Spoken Word poetry does really well is open the mind of the audience. So many times the authors are able to bring people in, in a way that is more meaningful than a regular speech.

Connecticut is one of the many states that are implementing the Common Core State Standards next year. One of my concerns with these standards is that there are only set standards for Math and Literacy, but every teacher in school is held accountable to supporting these Math and Literacy standards and district supervisors have to provide evidence that courses like Spanish and French are doing just that. As a Spanish teacher, I support Math standards by practicing arithmetic in Spanish periodically in class. I am able to incorporate literacy standards more fully with a variety of activities that we do in class. For example, I can take a non-fiction text in Spanish, a news article about weather for example, and have students do a close reading on it. I then can create questions in English which they can answer using evidence from the text to support. A close reading is a protocol that many teachers use to strengthen students' reading skills.

The three main shifts in Literacy thinking with Common Core are: "Regular practice with *complex texts* and their academic language; Reading, writing, and speaking *grounded in evidence from texts*, both literary and informational; and *Building knowledge* through content-rich nonfiction" (taken from Common Core website). An argument can be made that Slam Poetry is very complex text and given the autobiographical and journalistic nature of many of the poems, one could also argue that they count as non-fiction texts as well.

I have found many examples in which Slam poetry has been beneficial to students in schools. One organization has stood out above all others, however, Global Writes is in six cities in three states around the country and puts on Slam poetry competitions between schools where students show off their skills (Rubenstein, 2009). Global Writes has created a program where professional poets go to these different schools with professional poets for thirty two weeks and teach students grades 4-12 how to write and perform Slam poetry. ⁶ The idea of performing and competing engages the students in a way that "getting a good grade" doesn't with most. Additionally, these students are creating their own work, it's something that they are proud of, because they made it, and it's about them. The following is an excerpt from a poem by Jessica Blandon, a sophomore in high school. ⁷

They said that I could never find salvation behind a
microphone.

Never alter dreams with ink,
Or save lives with stanzas
But they were wrong.

Mama your hums are hymns to my prophecy.
And it's true I'm never home but
Between the 5 children I know who hold their tears back
in fear of dehydration
and the tiny shoes that hang from the phone line
in remembrance of those we lost to stray bullets --
I can't find a reason to stay home.

How does this small excerpt support the Common Core Literary Shifts? This is a complex text that could be read and analyzed. The complexity and continuous use of metaphors that are directly in line with the kinds of things my students are faced with allows them to address it in a personal way. When one thinks of salvation, does one immediately think microphone? Or does one think about stanzas when one thinks about saving a life? What is the author's prophecy? These are questions that the students can address to show mastery of some ELA standards. The following is one of the 9th grade ELA literature reading standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

It seems that this poem written by a high school student can be perfectly used to meet this standard in a classroom. Poetry, specifically Slam poetry, is a very good way to engage students and meet the new Common Core ELA Standards.

Slam Students: Teaching Slam Poetry

In this unit I will present poetry in three parts: English Slam, Slam en Espanol, and Bilngual Slam. In addition to that I will present several poems published in *Cool Salsa*, edited by Lori M. Carlson, which takes many poems and shows the English and Spanish versions of them. With each set of poems I present, I will ask the students to discuss several questions. First, what is the poem about? While this may seem like a simple question, it has several layers. Most Slam Poetry is saturated with metaphors, which will be good practice for students in analyzing poems. The questions become much more difficult for the poems I present in Spanish because my students will not know the majority of the vocabulary. They will need to rely on cognates, repetition, and the poet's performance to identify the theme, tone, and general idea of what he or she may be speaking about. The second question is; what poetic elements are present? The students will hear rhyme and repetition in many of the examples that I show them. They will pull evidence from the text and decide whether these elements are effective or not for what they believe the poet is trying to convey. Pulling evidence from the text

is another standard of the Common Core which they will be touching on here. The third question is: do you agree with the poet? In other words, do the students feel the same way as the poet? Most poetry is very subjective and this is a good opportunity for students to begin thinking about their own writing. Are the poems that they will be exposed to inspire them to express their feelings or create new ones the students never had?

Slam Poetry

There are so many Slam Poets out there, and even more poems. There is not really a way to go wrong when choosing a poem. It would be really great if you could find a poet from your city; if not, try to align some of what they say with Spanish vocabulary you have done or are doing. For the purposes of this unit I have chosen some very popular poems that are readily available on Youtube. Lamar Jordan, a Chicago native, was featured prominently in a documentary "Louder than a Bomb" with several of his provocative pieces. "Blink" is a poem he wrote about his desire to be a slam poet and why he does it. ⁸ The following is an excerpt that has been transcribed for your use.

In this field, keeping it real still matters. Rappers can listen and learn, be dishing concerns And making our pockets fatter I'd rather Stimulate your brain than spit about pushing cane And its funny how often rappers claim To make it rain But never notice that their mouths are nothing but an umbrella on a sunny day Open for no reason See I've been using my brave new voice Since before the HBO season.

I chose this poem for several reasons. Mr. Jordan is a young black male and in his video is sporting a Yale cap. That may not seem like a big deal, but right from the beginning my students will see someone who looks just like them and values education. Mr. Jordan goes on to criticize the very music and artists that the students listen to for not saying much of anything in their lyrics. Because it comes from someone like Mr. Jordan, the students are sure to have an emotional response to this message, at the very least be engaged enough to agree or disagree. Using the three questions I posed earlier (what is the poem about, what poetic elements are present, and do you agree with the poet) can foster interesting conversation about the piece and what issues it addresses.

In the appendix are the titles and notes about several other poems that would be good to use while in the English portion of the unit.

Eslamnol

The Spanish section of the unit will be quite different from the English. While the English section is there to initially engage the students and get them to start thinking poetically about what they are passionate about, we take a detour with the Spanish section. It is important to expose the students to language that is not meant for learners so they can begin hearing it as it is supposed to be heard. When presenting a Spanish poem, I will ask the students to pay particular attention to rhyme, repetition, and the tone of the performance. The very fact that the students don't yet know Spanish is surprisingly an advantage. It forces and enables

them to focus on form rather than content, including poetic elements that are important in English Spoken Word but that they might not immediately notice, as they focus on what is being said, rather than on how.

After scouring the net for good slam poetry in Spanish I discovered that Spain has many organizations dedicated to poetry. As a Spanish teacher, I have never really taught much about Spain because of its distance from the rest of the Hispanic world, linguistically and geographically. This unit is a good reason to incorporate a small lesson on Spain, highlighting the differences and similarities it has to the rest of the Spanish speaking world, especially Puerto Rico and Mexico.

The Spanish Poem I have transcribed was performed by Irene La Sen at the National Spanish Poetry Slam Championship in March 2011. The poem is entitled "Yo Soy" ⁹ which means "I am". This is great because the first thing students in Spanish 1 learn how to say is "I am (enter name)". In addition to the students being able to recognize the most repeated phrase in the poem, there are many cognates that the students should be able to pick out, especially when they read a transcription as they listen, which will be provided for them. The following is a transcription of the beginning (the rest can be found in the Appendix).

Yo, Soy rancor Soy definición errónea, la pulcritud gastada, Te sonrió y es mentira Soy una falsa, con lamentos de destilo Yo, soy lo que tú odias Soy represión y rabia Soy sonrisa dulce y educación. Yo, soy a la que llamas puta, La que obra y calla la que serena te quitas los billetes, y te llena de impurezas No me imaginas así.

As you can see, even in this short section, students should be able to identify at least seven cognate which can be added to their vocabulary. The performance itself is very somber so students should be able to describe the theme as that.

Spanglish Slam: Bilingual Poetry

Once the students have learned about and heard select Spoken Word poems in both English and Spanish, I will introduce some bilingual Spoken Words poems. The following is the bilingual Spoken Word poem that I wrote call "Just a Teacher":

He is just a teacher. Just a teacher. Just. Un hombre who gives his vida for the students who fight him. He runs into fights con punos de amor y kindness. Though he is taken from and stolen from and comes to a room Where dia a dia la escala Richter esta activa. Katrina, Rita, Wilma, and Ike hacen vida Vida that crumbles down around him every day because He is just a teacher His students toman tiempo to smash but not to Climb la escalera de success so they crash and crash. His co-workers se rien at his attempts They have wasted their care on countless tears and tears. They go through the motions and tell him its no use but he refuses to take that pocion numero 9, theres not enough of that one, ni aqui ni alla or anywhere but inside of him deep inside him beneath the doubt and the fear under the frustration and la tristesa beyond the stress and the desperation Es un Corazon de Justicia. Because he is just a teacher He lives in a mundo where bombas go off in

Boston, And guns go off at random, Los ninos learn to give up, And never learn.
There's no rush To meet Jesus.(hey-sus) He lives in a comunidad where it s cool to
be cruel, Where smiles and kindness are returned in kind with ridicule. He works in
an escuela where creativity is traded for robotics, No not that kind Where the
administration is a strain whose developed a resistencia To la medicina called
change. Where el deseo to learn is killed by the desire to escapar To escape a
place where ser diferente is to be hated And to be hated es normal. Because he is
just a teacher El cambiara this place Not with a cape or an S, He can't fly through
el cielo but flies through the minds of his chicos And he can't lift a building but
he will lift tu alma. His students can't help but odiarlo because he is a teacher,
But they can't help but amarlo. Because he is Justicia. Teacher.

Originally, I wrote the poem spontaneously in English. For this unit I rewrote it to be bilingual. One feature of it is that the English words are replaced with Spanish words, which means that there is no Spanish grammar in the poem. This was done purposefully so that the students do not get confused. Many of the words I decided to change to Spanish are cognates which will help students to understand many parts of the poem like; activa, tiempo, pocion, and numero. Additionally, there are sections where rhyme, repetition, and puns work their way in, which will all be addressed when the poem is taught.

Bilingual poetry will be good for the students to play with because it allows them to play with the rules of grammar in both English and Spanish and it will get them interested in vocabulary that is not necessarily in their Spanish curriculum. The practice of looking up words that they want to include in their poetry will hopefully carry over to when reading Spanish texts later in the school year. A lot of students do not have the initiative to look up words they do not understand and always want me to just tell them what it means. If they practice looking up what words mean on their own with the Spoken Word poems that they are creating, they will do it more often.

The students will be assigned to create a three-minute poem which will need to include at least twenty vocabulary words in Spanish. If they want to use whole phrases or use more than twenty words, that is acceptable. As they work I monitor progress and give suggestions to individual students. They will be put in groups of three or four so that they can practice the poems with each other and give productive feedback on content and performance. At the end, the classes will hold a Hyde Slam Competition during lunch over the course of a week. Most students will not know how a Slam is scored so I will use anonymous votes each day Monday through Thursday. On Friday the top student from each day will perform again and new votes will be tallied. The winning poet will receive a credit for a test grade in class (grades are a huge motivator). Traditionally, Slams are hosted by some organization and the host chooses judges that gives scores on poems from zero to ten based on the author's content and performance. The slam at school will be similar but instead of a panel of judges all the students will get to participate in the voting.

Appendix

WORLD-READINESS STANDARDS FOR LEARNING LANGUAGES

COMMUNICATION

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COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY IN MORE THAN ONE LANGUAGE IN ORDER TO FUNCTION IN A VARIETY OF SITUATIONS AND FOR MULTIPLE PURPOSES

- Interpersonal Communication: Learners interact and negotiate meaning in spoken, signed, or written conversations to share information, reactions, feelings, and opinions.
- Interpretive Communication: Learners understand, interpret, and analyze what is heard, read, or viewed on a variety of topics.
- Presentational Communication: Learners present information, concepts, and ideas to inform, explain, persuade, and narrate on a variety of topics using appropriate media and adapting to various audiences of listeners, readers, or viewers.

CULTURES

INTERACT WITH CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND UNDERSTANDING

- Relating Cultural Practices to Perspectives: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the cultures studied
- Relating Cultural Products to Perspectives: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the products and perspectives of the cultures studied

CONNECTIONS

CONNECT WITH OTHER DISCIPLINES AND ACQUIRE INFORMATION AND DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES IN ORDER TO USE THE LANGUAGE TO FUNCTION IN ACADEMIC AND CAREER-RELATED SITUATIONS

- Making Connections: Learners build, reinforce, and expand their knowledge of other disciplines while using the language to develop critical thinking and to solve problems creatively
- Acquiring Information and Diverse Perspectives: Learners access and evaluate information and diverse perspectives that are available through the language and its cultures

COMPARISONS

DEVELOP INSIGHT INTO THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN ORDER TO INTERACT WITH CULTURAL COMPETENCE

- Language Comparisons: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.
- Cultural Comparisons: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.

COMMUNITIES

COMMUNICATE AND INTERACT WITH CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN ORDER TO PARTICIPATE IN MULTILINGUAL COMMUNITIES AT HOME AND AROUND THE WORLD

- School and Global Communities: Learners use the language both within and beyond the classroom to interact and collaborate in their community and the globalized world

- Lifelong Learning: Learners set goals and reflect on their progress in using languages for enjoyment, enrichment, and advancement
- See more at:
<http://www.actfl.org/publications/all/world-readiness-standards-learning-languages#sthash.iVleV2vW.dpuf>

Bibliography

Carlson, Lori M.. *Cool salsa: bilingual poems on growing up Latino in the United States*. New York: H. Holt and Co., 1994. Cool Salsa is a compilation of poems that are in English or Spanish and have been translated over to the other language. There are many poems that can be used in any section of the unit, whether it is the English, Spanish, or Bilingual sections.

Eleveld, Mark. *The spoken word revolution redux*. Naperville, Ill.: Sourcebooks MediaFusion, 2007. The Spoken Word Revolution is a brief history of how the form of Spoken Word came to be accompanied by several pieces of poetry by various artists in different points in history.

"Kids Feel the Power of Poetry in Performance." Edutopia. <http://www.edutopia.org/poetry-slam-global-writes> (accessed August 12, 2014).

Jorden's poem Blink can be found online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CT_veYTFQmc

Irene La Sen "Yo Soy" can be found online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWe3qhej5oE>

Notes

1. http://www.nelson-atkins.org/images/PDF/Calendar/PoetrySlam_SpokenWord.pdf
2. Eleveld 12
3. Ibid 33
4. Ibid 102
5. Ibid 116 Essay by Marc Smith
6. Rubenstein
7. Poem by Jessica Blandon, a participant in Global Writes Program. <http://www.edutopia.org/poetry-slam-global-writes>
8. Jorden's poem Blink can be found online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CT_veYTFQmc
9. Irene La Sen "Yo Soy" can be found online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWe3qhej5oE>

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