# From Insurgent Listener to Word Warrior: Self-advocating through Spoken Word

## Introduction

"I am not an object." [1]

That line was written by budding Spoken Word poet Charlotte Murphy, an upcoming eighth grader who I was privileged to have had as a student. Her words resonate with me for many reasons, my chest swelling with pride at her bravery, yet protectively puffed, wishing none of my students ever need-be burdened by the objectification of which Charlotte's line speaks. But let's *get real*—try as we might, we cannot shield students from all that society imposes. We can help by listening—listening to students' struggles, their life rhythms. We can honor their realities by offering them a place to speak and by guiding the craft of their words so that those who are not-so inclined to listen will also hear and respect students' words. I can't do justice to an explanation of Charlotte's aural performance, though I must say that she delivered the words with a locked glare, her thunderous voice rolling like an approaching storm. She was calculated, controlled. Her seemingly rebellious words and delivery point at an understanding of baseless societal pressures. Like so many other students, Charlotte sees and hears these things. She feels like an outsider. Poems like Charlotte's need to be heard, performed transparently from memory with all the ethos that carefully voiced, truth-filled words have to offer. This unit is for the *Insurgent Listener* in all of us—the ears of longed-for acceptance that bends to understand ourselves, those around us, and how we all enter in. [2] It makes use of rhetorical tropes and theory to help students create and perform truth-filled Spoken Word poems.

This three-week, 90-minute block unit on Spoken Word has been designed for middle-level gifted students within the Humanities Department of the Pittsburgh Public Schools gifted education program. All units created for this program must be reflective of a gifted model of education which places emphasis on cross-curricular, project-based learning. It is my job to make the students aware that how they work toward and through production is as important as the product itself. Teacher-to-student ratio varies between 1:12 to 1:20.

The students in this program span the spectrum of abilities and backgrounds. Though grouped by perceived intellectual strength, they each have a wide array of talents and challenges. They need academic strength and/or interest-based enrichment and, at times, acceleration to satisfy the curiosity of their ever-wondering minds. They are not, contrary to popular assumption, 'all good students', nor do they all 'instinctively know

everything'. They all are also not capable of 'getting it all right on the first try'. They *really* like to ask questions. *A lot of questions*. Though most cherish their intellects, they struggle with the oft-negative reactions that others have to their seemingly-precocious perspectives. Thus, each teacher writes course material suited to the students' specific academic needs and interests. Students select courses similarly to choosing college electives. Thought-provoking units seem to be the most popular. Most of the students subscribe to my philosophy that great intellect is tethered to great responsibility, but many lack the academic confidence to speak out. This unit serves to build that confidence.

When I roll out this unit, the mainstream teachers will be working through Laurie Halse Anderson's Revolutionary War era novel, *Forge*, which is told from the perspective of Curzon, a soldier who is a run-away slave passing as free. [3] After I teach my unit, the mainstream curriculum moves on to speeches, including the *Gettysburg Address*. The Spoken Word unit fits well in between these—as the main character in *Forge* is reflecting on his position in society and the following unit on speech writing will be enhanced by use of the rhetorical tropes.

## Objectives

Students will be able to describe the concept and importance of logic (*logos*), character (*ethos*), and audience emotions (*pathos*). They will be able to identify and analyze the significance of rhetorical tropes within professionally performed and peer performed Spoken Word pieces, and employ such techniques in self-written pieces, focusing on the elements that improve oral performance. They will be able to explain the connections between inventions (*inventio*), arrangement (*dispositio*), style (*elecutio*), memory (*memoria*), and delivery (*pronunciatio*).

## Rationale

The rationale for creating a unit on Spoken Word can be easily gleaned from its definition—performance-based poetry. As a mechanism for self-advocacy, Spoken Word poetry combines the careful selection and arrangement of words with calculated oral delivery of an individualized truth. In education, *individualized instruction* is often touted as the means by which to access and maximize each student's potential, but this is often hyperbolic. What many school systems slate as 'individualized' is merely exchanged for a nearest-size fit. It accounts for only a dominant culture; not everyone, not every child, not every need. Horace Mann, in the 12th Annual Report to the Massachusetts State Board of Education in 1848, said, "Education, thus, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery…It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility toward the rich; it prevents being poor." [4] This rhetoric illuminates an ideology that education is to encourage equity. But as America celebrates its 238th year of independence, how close have public school systems come to realizing Mann's ideal? Not close enough. And enough is enough. Students feel left out. These *Insurgent Listeners* wait to hear for their invitation in. [5] Only when students learn to speak eloquently about what they think and actually need will Mann's philosophy be realized.

While I was sharing the prospectus for this unit, Erin Breault, a high school History and Psychology teacher and teammate, posed this question, "How will you help students to find their way in?" An ideal way of *letting students in* is for educators to show and build reverence for each student's culture, including the historical and emergent vernacular, validating a student's turns of phrase and dialect. The study of Spoken Word can help to achieve this goal. Only when students can see that these speaking patterns have merit will we free the cog, thereby improving the social machine. Though 'business language' is often the favored teaching mechanism in education, pedagogy points at beginning always with what students know. Many famous poets have employed dueling languages. Imbedded in our curriculum are Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Langston Hughes, who both often evoked truth by melodically referencing the masks that *Insurgent Listeners* must wear—and both purposefully alternated between flawless 'white' English or broken-but-estimable 'black' English. Elizabeth Alexander, Thomas E. Donnelley Professor of American and African American Studies at Yale University, made direct remarks about the validity of approaching work this way, "To people forging a literary tradition against the historical backdrop of withheld literacy and legal semipersonhood, questions of how black writers and other culture workers construct our literary heritage are relevant indeed." [6] This made me wonder: How can I serve this need and still support the curriculum?

As I struggled to figure that out, I ventured off to view Maya Lin's commemorative infinity pool, "Women's Table"—a swirl of numbers etched in black stone, each aligning to Yale University's admission of women—fat zeroes until 1968. [7] The sun's heat blistered my knees as I strained to snap a photo of my birth year—a necessary struggle to get close enough to see it. That strain seemed like a calculated arrangement, a physical reminder of how hard it was to gain access to education and how much work one must do to continue to overcome such barriers. Of her design-inspiring research she said, "I came across a phrase that actually sent chills down my spine. Women were allowed to *sit in* on classes in the 1800s, and they were called "silent listeners."" [8]*Silent Listeners.* The phrase illuminated an idea I had come across that referred to slaves' desires to be literate, deeming them *Insurgent Listeners*. [9] This correlation sent chills down my spine. How many students have I had who felt as if my words and teaching did not let them in?

Guided by my questions, I began to hash out this unit as I sat on a splintered park bench, half its spindles gone. Though I did not bear a sign that said, "Leave me alone," or "Closed for repairs," my choice of seating had spoken to those around me. All that we do impacts those around us. Our words are as important as our image and movements. I switched seats. That is when I chose to combine Spoken Word and rhetorical tropes and theory—seated together they include everyone. As Paolo Freire, an educational reformist who focused on education as the key to social change, said:

> Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. [10]

Teaching Spoken Word in conjunction with rhetorical tropes can incorporate both informal and formal language, becoming a way in for students. It helps students internalize the concept of 'code switching'. It helps them build powerful text by accessing their personal truths in their own voices, thus establishing *ethos*, or credibility, making oral delivery authentic, moving them from *Insurgent Listeners* to *Word Warriors*. It entices students to care about what they write. Spoken Word lets them in and elements of rhetoric add the collegiate-level of thought that can change how students view their own abilities, giving them the tools to someday *fix* the social machine.

# Background

What is Spoken Word?

Spoken Word is a mixture of poetry, performance, and activism. These three elements relate to concepts in classical rhetoric. When well-formed and well-performed, the Spoken Word genre embodies many of the elements of rhetoric, as the genre is eloquently structured, delivered, and is persuasive in nature. For example, Spoken Word employs the rhetorical principles of ethos, pathos, and logos. It relies on deliberate arrangement, specific word choices and phrasing, and is meant to be spoken and heard. The performance element of Spoken Word is as essential as the words and arrangement, just as a political speech must be.

The origin of poetry itself is theorized to have been Spoken Word. Akin to storytelling, song, and prayer, oral poetry predates literacy. Westernized Spoken Word originated out of a rich oral tradition, traveling from Africa to America, carrying with it stories of the past. The South African Xhosa language, a tonal, rhythmic language, passed on history through poems and songs and was transferred to Western culture though missionaries as choral performance. [11] The art popularized in mainstream American culture, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance, with "[t]he greatest of these speakers [imbuing] their words with meaning by exploiting the musical potency of speech." [12] This oral tradition drove the 1960's "Black Arts" movement, a socially-charged period of political rhetoric infused with the guts of poetry. From pop music to pulpit, the Spoken Word tradition has been upheld. Hip Hop music makes a particularly good example, as many such artists speak on behalf of a culture that is undermined in the mainstream—the irony being its 'pop' status. These artists blast back in rhythm and rhyme, advocating for rights, carrying on and honoring the oral tradition.

Illustrating the enduring effects of the tradition, I had recently been privileged enough to attend a ceremony held in a Southern Baptist church. I learned quickly the meaning that so many of my African-American friends and colleagues refer to as, "Lifting up with prayer." As the reverend's sermon mounted, he raised the question, "Who are WE without one another?" [13] The phrasing ebbed and flowed. The congregation swooned, calling out joyful affirmations of his words. I *felt*. From the depths of what I can only describe as my soul, I felt. I cannot do his delivery justice on a page, nor with my own voice, but I felt his every word of his anaphora—"WE have endured. WE WILL endure." [14] Though at that time I knew little of classical rhetoric, I recognized the power of his voice and words, noting a glowing confidence in his posture, a hum collective among the listeners. His speech evoked ethos, pathos, and logos, giving credence not only to his own character, but to the character of his community, an emotion-packed, authentically and transparently delivered set of what he made me believe:

"A people united will persevere." [15]

**Eloquence *pure.***

At the request of my students this past semester, I ran a mini-pilot on Spoken Word. At that time, I had no training in the Spoken Word genre or in classical rhetoric, though I did have some stage training in Black Box Theater and Creative Dramatics. I started from there, knowing that I really wanted to help my students explore ways to abolish societally-imposed labels. I did what so many teachers do—I scrambled to find material and tried desperately to stay one step ahead. It didn't always work. The kids knew more than I did. I knew I needed to learn more. As I struggled to write this unit, I was very fortunate to come across some of

their performances on video. As I watched, I noted that they *lived* Spoken Word. At that point, I stopped my desperate search for inspirational material—I had it. I realized that my students work—their words and truths—needed only minor, but valuable alterations. I didn't need them to change their ideas, but to think: This is where we were and this is where we'd like to go. They needed to learn, as well as I, the art of rhetoric.

There are five canons, or principles, of classical rhetoric that are applied to any type of oration. They are a pathway by which to teach rhetoric and I employ them in this unit to help structure the students' Spoken Word poems. Inventio is "the art of exploring the material to discover all the arguments which may be brought to bear in support of a proposition and in refutation of opposing arguments." [16] There are two kinds of argument: enthymeme and induction. [17] The second canon, dispositio, is the art of arrangement. This is akin to outlining, since during this phase the major ideas are ordered to achieve the most logical and impactful sequence—a rolling momentum. Aristotle believed the most important parts of any speech were "the statement of the case and the proof," but even he understood the importance of the introduction and conclusion. [18] He believed that one should rely more readily on logic—those details that hold universally true and therefore deplete the opposing argument. Though artfulness, he understood, enhanced delivery. Canon three, elocutio, or style, is arrangement on a magnified scale—looking at word choice and phrasing. Style makes use of tropes— many seeming synonymous with literary devices or figures of speech, but in rhetoric, tropes serve not to simply become ornaments, but rather to draw out understanding, finding the shades in meaning. The fourth canon, memoria, refers to memorizing text. The fifth canon, pronunciatio, or delivery, is "concerned for the management of voice and gestures (actio)." [19]

Aristotle may not have agreed that the poetic genre of Spoken Word shares a stage with rhetoric. [20] He believed poetics and rhetoric to be separate arts, as noted by his separate volumes, *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*; however, "Aristotle's definition [of rhetoric] can be made to comprehend not only those modes of discourse that are 'argumentative,' but also those "expository" modes of discourse that seek to win acceptance of information or explanation." [21] Aristotle's definition points at discourse that is crafted to *sound* believable. Since Spoken Word is written to persuade by accessing the poet's individual truth through deliberate arrangement, word choice, phrasing, and oral performance, it is difficult to define it without calling it rhetoric.

To show this connection, I analyze here a portion of my student's Spoken Word poem, "I am not an object." [22] (Appendices B) Though Charlotte had not studied rhetoric, I contend that her poem is an example of deliberative discourse. Though she didn't realize it at the time, she employed several rhetorical tropes. Charlotte framed her poem by posing the rhetorical question, "Who are you to tell me who I am?" Her point of view is feministic and her nemesis is chauvinism. On paper, the repetition of "I am not", an anaphoric phrase, or repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses, sentences, or lines, serves to not only tie the poem together, but to drive it forward. [23] The alliteration calls the ear to her point. She builds momentum by placing emphasis on the juxtaposition of 'I' versus 'you'. Even on paper, a quiet rage builds. Her lines lengthen; her descriptions become harsher. They repeat as if scolding a naughty child who needed to hear the rules again and again. The antiphrastic extensions, or irony of one word, often derisively through patent contradiction, serves as the example as to why she "is not": She is not because she chooses not to be. [24]

In another example, seated cross-legged in the middle of stage, giant pillows propped on their laps, three of my students performed their version of "I am not" as group. [25] (Appendix C) Their delivery was artful. They made the choice not to elevate their voices, to speed up, or to direct blame at others. Their choice to cycle through as individuals, but echo specific phrases, spoke volumes about their collective experience, yet

allowed them to remain individuals—illuminating their thesis. After studying classical rhetoric and learning to analyze the arrangement and style of eloquent speeches, I began to think about how utilizing the tropes of classical rhetoric could have improved their performances. For example, their choice to perform together had an impact on their individual and collective persona, thereby catapulting their delivery: Three young ladies supporting one another, yet retaining their individuality—what rhetoric! In another example, I hadn't realized the impact of memoria on ethos. Since my students were not required to memorize their pieces, I robbed them of *transparency*—the air of knowing that occurs when a speaker's words glide off the tongue without unintended hesitation. Instead, their downward glances at a page stole from their ethos by chipping the elegance of delivery. These young ladies, though, clearly argue their case—their beauty is pride and perseverance. No one can take that away.

Jamila Lyiscott, a multi-ethnic, professional Spoken Word poet, paints a similar image in her Spoken Word performance, "*3 Ways to Speak English.*" [26] She frames her *I am* poem as "I am articulate." [27] It is an excellent example of 'code switching', a concept that Lyiscott references in her poem. It is a momentous example of rhetoric in its careful arrangement and well-placed devices. The first line establishes a nemesis: "Today, a baffled lady observed the shell where my soul dwells." [28] Lyiscott immediately sets this in present time by using, "Today." This suggests to the listener/viewer that this is a recent, real event. She is establishing credibility, or ethos, by framing this in the context of personal experience. A nameless woman referenced in the poem is "baffled" by the poet's "shell," which is a reference to skin color. The poet pauses through the second phrasing, bouncing the word "articulate" in rhythmic syllabication, purposefully drawing attention to the word. The "baffled lady," is confused, and this confusion is an intentionally ambiguous parallelism: The woman is confused because she only see's skin color and also because the nameless women thinks it matters. The poet is taking a clear stand on this subject: Her skin color is irrelevant—it is her humanity, or "soul," that matters.

In a flowing, rhythmic style, Lysicott shifts quickly to referencing college, and responds to a Professor:

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 And my answer is tainted with a connotation of urbanized suggestion There's no
misdirected intention Pay attention 'Cause I'm "articulate" 29
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Again, the nemesis is drawn out. In shifting from a random person, to an educator, Lysicott is building her argument that society as a whole is confused—even those entrusted to educate need educated. She contrasts this with her own father. In a deepening Jamaican accent, she builds the narrative, referencing the speech that she knowledgeably controls as she talks to family and friends. She builds her argument rhetorically, answering her own rhetorical question:

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 But who controls articulation? Because the English language is a multifaceted
oration Subject to indefinite transformation Now you may think that it is ignorant
to speak broken English But I'm here to tell you that even "articulate" Americans
sound foolish to the British 30
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She rolls forward in speed and reflection, blasting in increasing momentum the Eurocentric idea that she is not "articulate" only by a non-inclusive, stagnant standard. She goes on to declare her deep understanding of the English language and of culture:

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 'Cause I speak three tongues One for each: Home, school and friends I'm a tri-
lingual orator And announce that I'm "articulate." 31
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# Strategies

By beginning with what is relevant and real to each student, we give them access, we let them in. It is not a teacher's job to give answers, but rather to ask questions. Most of these sections include question sets to help access prior knowledge, guide them toward discovering new material, and help them to extend their ideas. Several strategies are listed below for each of the parts of the unit's whole.

**Introduction: "The Way In"**

I am a proponent of a dramatic opening. For this reason, I have included the script of what I plan to use as an introduction to this unit—I aim to captivate my audience, modeling my expectations for them as brave speakers' of truth, by utilizing elements of rhetoric, particularly focusing on *pronunciatio*, or delivery. The speech plays on the concept of 'wearing words'. It directs each student to choose a single word that defines him or her, write it on a lanyard, and wear it. (*Note that each 'word' should be retained by the students for a future lesson!*) Part of this lesson was gleaned after reading *The President Electric*. In the script, I have noted the rhetorical devices that were employed. (Appendix B)

It is important to understand that the sequence for learning will be: Read silently, marking text; Share misunderstandings, such as new vocabulary, define; Read aloud; Discuss markings; Listen to and/or watch material; Re-examine meaning. The material below more specifically details this sequence.

**Strategies for Reading (*Inventio*)**

Examining multiple exemplary texts gives students something for which to reach for (or reach over!) when they begin to write. Multiple examples are used to steer students away from 'write likes', which is akin to parroting information—though some students will inevitably mimic a pattern or style of a favored author, I do not want them to use someone else's words. I want them to use their own. For each text given, the text-marking pattern that I use during my close reading strategy is simplistic; student underline phrases or lines that they feel are most impactful, square unfamiliar words, and circle whatever specific element I am asking them to look for in a given piece. I use this method for several reasons, primarily because it is easily recalled and gets them started quickly. It also serves to allow each student to engage with text on his or her level. Once the text is marked, students will first have an opportunity to discuss the words that they could not decipher. When possible, having students look at the prefix, suffix, and/or root of a word to see if any can determine the meaning. If not, the word should be re-visited after the text is read aloud. I like to do the first reading to model inflection and phrasing. Students are allowed to re-mark the page if desired. The main question that needs to be answered is: *What question did the speaker answer?* [32] This means that, since text is presented like an answer, the reader/listener must learn to flesh out the guiding questions that were used by the author that drove the construction of his or her text. This works in reverse order when an author begins to invent a new piece of writing: He or she lists questions to guide what is to be said and then begins to answer them.

**Group Discussion Strategies (*Inventio*)**

I use a discussion strategy that I call "Socratic Rotation." Instead of requiring kids to raise their hands, I present the leading question at hand, and allow any student to begin by means of "Self Selection". Once that student has finished, the turn rotates to his or her right. Students have the opportunity to pass, but in order to

speak, each must wait until his or her turn arrives. The directive is that they cannot pass twice, and they may not repeat what another has already said. If another student has already covered what the current speaker wanted to say, then the speaker is to acknowledge who it was that said it. They are to begin with phrases that do not slight others, such as, "In the text, x, y, z, I think the speaker means...," or "Adding on to what, (student's name) said, ...," or "I connect to this line because, in my experience, I...," etc. This builds listening skills, cooperation, and the students relish not needing to raise their hands. It also gives them a tool to use when working in cooperative groups. I generally do not need to intervene when using this method, though I often chime in or redirect with a probing or clarifying question.

## Writing Strategies (*Dispositio and Elocutio*)

Dispositio, or arrangement, is the deliberate unfolding of main ideas. Elocutio, or style, goes hand-in-hand with dispositio. Through the completion of several tasks in the *Classroom Activities* section, students will thematically build components of their Spoken Word poems, learning to make decisions about arrangement, style, and delivery along the way.

Brainstorming is a common way to begin a writing activity or to flesh out and expand existing ideas. The creative thinking model is a full-spectrum brainstorming model. This strategy is particularly helpful for getting students to begin choosing words for a particular subject. Its stages are fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration. If I were to ask you to spend three minutes listing all of the words that had to do with *labels*, you may list things such as people, disks, records, gender, race, groceries, etc. When the list becomes too cumbersome to manage, or when time is up, the list should be broken into categories and regrouped. This helps to find patterns, repetition, and similarities. From the regrouped list, categories are crated and, depending on the purpose of the brainstorm, the most relevant and/or unique set is chosen. The final step is to add detail to the chosen set. This may be a set of statements about why the set was chosen, its relevance, definitions, or connections. When students use the chosen set, they should be made to write/state what it is that they feel or would like to say about it. It could be thought of this way: A question should guide the writer/speaker, but the reader/listener should read/hear a statement.

The first step in rhetoric is to choose a topic. In Latin rhetoric, res-verba, or what is said and how something is said, respectively, can only be fleshed when a subject is thoroughly converted to a thesis. [33] My students' topic will be chosen by them, but guided by the connection between how they want to be viewed in society, using the antithesis, I am/I am not. Since my students are beginning with only six words, working with groups to 'define' each word will allow them to grasp the idea of terms versus words. They will be asked to list alternative ways their word could be defined and whether the word should be kept or changed due to any potential ambiguity.

When given this task, I suspect that my students will often resort to using a thesaurus. I like this method, though Aristotle did not favor it, as he "...maintained that a real definition could be rendered only in a phrase." [34] Students will expand their chosen words into phrases, using them to begin construction of their Spoken Word poems. They will be directed to seek the etymology of each final word and add a description and example. [35] When expanding each phrase, they will be required to maintain positive definitions, as Aristotle contended that "...definitions, whenever possible, should be stated positively, not negatively." [36]

Elocutio, or style, requires not simply ornamentation of text, but rather a coherent, systematic relationship to the invented material and the arrangement of it. My students' styles vary. Some pull phrasing from the power of their church, many from music. But all begin with some style. To enhance that style without desecrating

who they are is essential to granting a 'way in.' To help students understand style, we must simply come back to words, phrases, and arrangement. Ask: What does this word mean to you? How might others define this word? How does it impact your phrasing? Your piece as a whole? Do other words in your piece connect back to it? How? And if not, why not? These same questions can be asked of any text and it is very beneficial to compare multiple texts from one author to see if style remains fixed—which, contrary to popular belief, it doesn't always do.

To help students to make choices about proper arrangement, I will first question their ideas about arranging a speech. Then, I will introduce the *Monroe Motivational Sequence*. This is a model for creating persuasive speeches. It is in a problem-cause-solution order and suggests several options for building in elements of craft, such as addressing ethos by adding in a personal narrative. The twofer here-in lays; using this sequence is compatible with ideas within classical rhetoric and it will familiarize students with speech structure prior to beginning the mainstream unit on speeches. Monroe outlines an arrangement as well as gives support on 'style' by offering ways to expand each section of the arrangement.

To score writing, I return to Adler, who wrote, "[A] piece of writing should have unity, clarity, and coherence". [37] In other words: Is the piece remaining on one subject? Are the words and phrases unique? Is the message clear? Would the message benefit from additions, cuts, or simple rearrangement? (Appendix E)

**Stage Work Strategies (*Pronunciatio and Memoria*)**

Elements of pronunciatio, or delivery, can be taught throughout the entire process of teaching this unit. I use an inexpensive Flip [tm] Camera that films in AVI (AVI is a compressed file and it minimizes virtual size) so that students can see and hear their performances. It is essential to note that inflection of voice and the dramatic pause are critical to helping the audience understand what a speaker is trying to convey. It is in the act of oratory that the listener picks up the often subtle, yet none-the-less impactful meanings that might be lost if the text were silently read. I will use a question set to draw them in with essential questions, reflective of Common Core: What is meant by communication? What is included in *good* communication? How can you be fairly sure that both parties understand each other? What can become clearer when you perform a text? What things seem obvious to you about working on a stage? (Expected responses are control of appropriate volume; body and facial expressions being visible by the audience; all elements aligning with what is meant to be conveyed.)

To attune students' ears to the subtle, yet impactful phrasing, pausing, and elevating voice, each student will be given a set of marking symbols and the text of each day's Spoken Word poem on which they will use the symbols to mark the passage in the way that they feel it should be read aloud. Markings will include / to be placed around a phrase over which the performer should linger; a * over words that dictate increased volume; and # to be placed over words or phrases that seem to warrant a change in gesture or facial expression. Students will pass their marked passages to a partner and each student will take turns reading the passage trying to follow the implied marks, discussing changes as needed.

Weeks prior to the final filmed oral performance, I will give students a few pointers on memorizing text. These are: Look at a single line, say it aloud, then close your eyes and try to visualize the line as you say it; Write the text, line by line, repeatedly; Audio record yourself and listen to it repeatedly; Ask friends to rehearse with you, perhaps giving you random line starters to see if you can finish the line; Peg your text literally or figuratively via visualization around a place that you love—imagine picking up these notes in a specific order around the room or place; Scramble the text by cutting it up and put it back together.

**Conclusion: "Learning Letters"**

A speaker is only as good as his or her final word. With this in mind, a strategy that I developed to give closure to a unit is something I call "Learning Letters". It arose from a need to bring a group of emotionally-charged kids back down. We, a small group of six, had spent a semester consistently discussing each other's struggles and choices. We had trouble saying goodbye. This concluding activity aims to summarize students' learning by asking each student to reflect on what each class member has to offer. Individual packets of paper, headed with each student's name, are circulate. Each student is given three minutes to write to another student. I post several starters on the board, such as: From you I have learned...You inspire me because...You changed my mind when..., etc. The students are allowed to write in any genre that they wish, even in webs or lists. I also take part in the activity for two reasons. One, I want them to view me as a learner, too, and two, I want to monitor their writing to keep them focused, modeling the behavior that I expect. It promotes several things; focus on audience, confidence in construction of text, and careful word choice. This activity brings the unit full-circle, beginning and ending with the impact of words. These letters are some of the dearest possessions I have.

# Classroom Activities

The sequence presented here is deliberate and I suggest that it be followed. It is a path by which students can simultaneously construct text, improve it along the way to make it more powerful, while learning to deliver that text powerfully. Each number denotes a 90-minute block.

1. Introduction: Wearing Words

    a. Deliver opening speech (Appendix A)
    b. Discuss words versus terms
    c. In teams, list all possible definitions, connections, and connotations of each teammate's word.
    d. Discussion: What does your word mean? What alternative meanings does it have? Explain how this word represents you? Who else might it represent? Why?

2. Six Word Memoir (*I am...*)

    a. a. Discussion: What is included in good communication? What might you need to do to convince someone to show respect toward you? What personal traits *should* instill respect?
    b. b. Introduction to prewriting: Using the 'Creative Thinking' model with 'I am' prompt, which requires students to think of themselves and define themselves with the most accurate six words possible.
    c. c. Stage work introduction

    i. Being seen
    ii. Being heard
    iii. Being understood

3. Opposing the Six Word Memoir (*I am not...*)

a. Create web of societally-imposed labels.
b. Discuss: What do you wish people saw instead? Why is it important for you to be able to say this aloud?
c. Re-draft '*I am*' to include the antithesis under each statement as '*I am not*' statements.
d. Stage work:

i. Audience must decide, upon hearing the reader, if the arrangement of ideas has *flow*. Discuss: What choices did you or will you make to the arrangement of this poem? Why? How did it impact the poem?

4. Invention of Arguments

a. Discussion: What is the importance of adding facts—statistics, laws, reports—into your work?
b. Review, "I am/I am not" poems. Ask: Which of your lines connect? Which are the most nagging? Why? What question could you form from that selection?
c. Discuss overall project goal and rubric, noting that the audience is, in many ways, as much one's self as it is society. Ask: Why? (Appendix H)
d. Handout and discuss 'Monroe's Motivational Sequence.'
e. Allow students time to research and document news stories, statistics, laws, and reports about their singular selection from 'I am/I am not.'

5. Finding the enthymeme in internet memes.

a. Re-post image of 'Big Brain/Small Brain' image and allow the students to freely associate experiences with it.
b. Demonstrate a syllogism based on the discussion. Possible*: All those who label others are fools. X labels others.* (The missing/implied is: *X is a fool.)*
i. Discuss: Why might this 'missing' part be important? What purpose does it serve?
c. Revisit "I am/I am not." In small groups, discuss: What syllogism is evident? If none, what can you add or eliminate to create one?
d. Stage work – Students will read their most current work on stage.
e. Homework: Assign favorite lyric search. (Make sure that students understand that they must be submitted for approval.)

6. Marking for Oral Performance of Text

a. Read and respond to *3 Ways to Speak English* using close-reading strategy, marking for 'power phrases.'
b. Listen to *3 Ways to Speak English*. Discuss: How did your marking hold up to the speakers? Did the voice make impact where you expected it to?
c. Watch *3 Ways to Speak English*. Discuss: How did this visual element change or enhance your understanding?
d. Homework: Give handout on memorization and assign memorization of lyrics, due in two weeks.
i. Model 'Pegging' with a short list of unrelated words.

7. Marking for Oral Performance of Text

a. Read and respond to *Spelling Bee* using close-reading strategy
b. Mark for 'power phrases.'
c. Listen to *Spelling Bee*. Discuss: How did your marking hold up to the speakers?
d. Watch *Spelling Bee*. Discuss: How did this visual element changed your understanding?

e. In small teams, students will do the same with their lyrics.
  f. Homework: Remind students that their lyrics need to be memorized for the following week.

8. Stage Work

  a. Each student will recite his or her lyrics alone on stage, holding the paper, but attempting not to refer to it. The only directive should be, "Eye Around", meaning scan the tops of the audiences' foreheads.
  b. Discussion: What would you change to improve you delivery? Why? Ask for volunteers to try again, incorporating suggestions.

9. Rhetorical Tropes

  a. Simultaneously Read/Listen/Watch, *To This Day* Discuss: What is powerful in this delivery? What is ordinary? Extraordinary? How do these play off of one another?
  b. Jigsaw: Give small teams quotes and names/samples of rhetorical devices and let them figure out which is which, explaining their answers to other teams.
  c. Reread "To This Day." Discuss: What do you think about his phrases now? How did his words and delivery impact one another?

10. Understanding and Addressing Ethos, Pathos, Logos

  a. Reflect on covered Spoken Word poems. Discuss: What did they all have in common?
  b. Expand poem with the writing prompt, "I remember when...," which illustrates a time when the student demonstrated an element of his or her "I am..." poem.

11. 1:1 Conferences/Work Only/Assign Memorization of "I am/I am not."

12. Rehearsal/Peer Feedback

13. Filming

14. Filming

15. Viewing

16. Closing: "Learned Letters" (See *Strategies*)

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# Appendix

A. Standards

B. I am not an object by Charlotte Murphy

C. I am not

D. Introductory/Modeled Speech

E. Rubric

**Appendix A**

**Standards**

As I developed this unit, I truly began to understand the potency of Common Core, and in turn, also began to understand the damage that a scripted curriculum can do. There is no possible way that, prior to knowing each student as an individual, you can set a curricular design in stone. There must be some level of flexibility. Common Core suggests the imbedding of *skill acquisition*—leaving space for choice; alternative texts, methodology, or otherwise. This unit covers Common Core Standards: CC.1.2.8.F Analyze the influence of the words and phrases in a text including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings, and how they shape meaning and tone; CC.1.2.8.H Evaluate an author's argument, reasoning, and specific claims for the soundness of the arguments and the relevance of the evidence; CC.1.2.8.L Read and comprehend literary nonfiction and informational text on grade level, reading independently and proficiently; CC.1.2.8.L Read and

comprehend literary nonfiction and informational text on grade level, reading independently and proficiently; CC.1.4.8.C Develop and analyze the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples; include graphics and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension; CC.1.4.8.T With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed; CC.1.5.8.G Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English when speaking based on Grade 8 level and content.

## Appendix B

  I am not an object Charlotte B. Murphy I am not an object. I am not a robot crafted for the sole purpose of turning you on. It is not my duty in life to entertain people like you. Because I am not an object. I am a complex string of emotions and thoughts. I can love and I can hate I can feel sad and I can cry I am ALLOWED to cry And nobody will ever take that right away from me Because I am not an object I do not exist to entertain you I do not have to wear make up I am allowed to wear make up I do not have to shave I am allowed to shave But if you ever try to make me feel like there is something wrong with me For thinking this way For acting this way For looking this way Then there is something wrong with you And you need to change your attitude. I am not an object. I do not exist for your pleasure and my needs are allowed to be important to me because no one can ever love me more than I can. And if you try to dehumanize me and make me think that my needs aren't important then I will be even more self-obsessed because since when do you care so much? I am allowed to care about myself. To me my needs will always come before the wants of a self-righteous misogynistic society such as yourself because no one can ever love me more than I can and if you try to make me feel wrong for loving myself then there is something wrong with you and you need to change your attitude. Because I am not an object. I am a complex string of emotions and thoughts I can love and I can hate I can feel sad and I can cry I am ALLOWED to cry And no one can ever take that right away from me I am a strong independent smart beautiful human being I am a woman And if you ever try to make me feel wrong for that then you're wrong You need to change your attitude. I am not a mate I am not a creature with my sole purpose being to reproduce I can have children. I don't have to have children. But if you ever try to make me feel wrong for either decision then you are wrong. You need to change your attitude. I am not an idiot. Wearing low cut tops is not "asking for unwanted attention" I am allowed to feel good about myself and if you can't control yourself that is your own damn problem But know this If you ever try to lay a hand on me in a way that I am not ok with I will **Take. You. Down.** Because my needs will always come before the wants of a self-righteous misogynistic society such as yourself and if you try to make me feel wrong for that then you're wrong You need to change your attitude I am not a bystander. I will not stand idly by as you strip my rights away The right to choose what I wear The right to an abortion The right to be paid as much as a man who wishes he could be as awesome as I am. I am not a bystander. I am not an idiot I am not a mate I am not an object I am a complex string of emotions and thoughts I can love and I can hate I can feel sad and I can cry I am ALLOWED to cry And no one can ever take that right away from me Because I am not an object I am a strong

independent smart beautiful human being I am a woman And if you ever try to make me feel wrong for that then you're wrong You need to change your attitude.

## Appendix C

 I am not: A Spoken Word Performance by Teona Collier, Adia Hearns-Boyd, and Ciara Sing. (Teona) I am not ugly. Everyone has their own idea of beauty. I am not that. (In unison) I am not anyone else's idea of beauty. (Adia) I am not the girl with the long hair that all the guys want. I am not the curvy girls you see in all of the commercials. I am still a caterpillar in its cocoon growing its wings, waiting to fly. I'm not the naps you see when you look at me. (In unison) Just like naps, I seem to mold into different shapes. (Ciara) I never got my hair perfectly straight. But instead, it's a 'Fro with tight curls extending down my back. I'm not a size zero, and I'm definitely not (In unison) the Barbie doll that you played with when you were a kid. (Teona) I am not white. I am not black. I am brown. The color of unbleached flour. (In unison) Original and unmodified. (Ciara) I'm not the x in a box labeled as other. I'm not an Oreo. I'm not a mulatto or random paint splatters on the wall. (Adia) I'm not a dirty tissue that you can leave your mark on and then throw it away. I'm not defined by my skin. Each scar tells a story—a story of insecurities, of crying because I can't be beautiful as everyone else seems to be. Like everyone else, it's not my fault my only curve is my smile. (Teona) I strive for something greater than my situation. Never mind illiteracy, because, literally, it does not define me. I am not the struggle by any means, but I want to step out of my own ghetto. (In unison) I am beautiful. My own beautiful

## Appendix D

(Display "Gifted" image behind you.) (Allegory)

Which one of us has not been labeled? Judged unfairly? (Rhetorical Question)

I'll bet life and limb (Alliteration/Consonance) that your downcast eyes give me the answer that I already knew—

Not one. Not one of us (Anaphora) has escaped. We've all endured—some considerably more than others—the ones society holds at arm's length [*motion hands forward*]—we've all been judged.

I ask you to trust me and close your eyes. I assure you that I won't run out. *I won't send weird texts from your phone.*

Now, think about the core of who you are—that truth by which you *WISH* to be judged. What is your real character? [Give pause.]

As you think, choose a word, just one word that represents you. [Give pause, place lanyard/pen.]

Open your eyes. Write your word, placing it around your neck, but keep your word inward—toward your heart. [Wait for each to wear it.]

Struggle is this—the inward facing word—what you want people to see and hear that judgment aims to

silence. (Metaphor)

Who will turn their word first, setting it free aloud? (Nod to each in succession.)

Rhetoric is about well-worn words. [Metaphor] Spoken Word is about auditory liberty, or the freedom to speak about who you really are and what you really deserve. Together you're fully dressed. This is what I want you to know, own, and teach others. I'm here to work alongside of you.

(Teacher turns over her word to reveal '*student*'.)

**Appendix E**

| Spoken Word Self-Directed Learning Project | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Name:** | | | | |
| | ***Poem-Building Tasks*** | ***Done? (Yes, Incomplete, No)*** | ***Notes*** | ***Score Y=5%*** |
| **Planning** | Completed a Pre-Write | Y I N | | |
| | Consistently, Validly and Supportively Participated in Group Discussions | Y I N | | |
| | Defined and Selected Specific Words | Y I N | | |
| | Selected and Remained Focused on 1 Subject in the Final Poem. | Y I N | | |
| | Conducted and Selected Relevant Evidence for the Subject | Y I N | | |
| | Participated in Rephrasing Workshop and Selected | Y I N | | |
| | Elaborated for Clarity | Y I N | | |
| | Met 1:1 with me to Discuss Arrangement | Y I N | | |
| | Final Revision Contains 3+ Trope | Y I N | | |
| **Actions** | Marked Final Draft for Inflection | Y I N | | |
| | Performed Final from Memory | Y I N | | |
| | Rehearsed, Minimizing Need to Restart | Y I N | | |
| | Performed Final with Appropriate Eye Contact | Y I N | | |
| | Performed Final with Appropriate Volume | Y I N | | |
| | Performed Final with Appropriate Inflection | Y I N | | |
| | Performed Final with Appropriate Gesture/Movement | Y I N | | |
| **Results** | Typed 2+ Revisions which Demonstrate Significant Growth/Change | Y I N | | |
| | Received 8+/10 on *Trope* Quiz | Y I N | | |
| | Evaluated Self | Y I N | | |
| | Evaluated 2+ Peers | Y I N | | |

# Notes

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26. Jamila Lyiscott, "3 Ways to Speak English."

27. Ibid

28. Ibid

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30. Ibid

31. Ibid

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33. Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, 27.

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