

SLAM

THE
JOHN
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CONTENTS

The Practice of Teaching

- 4 ♦ "Slammin' " Lorilee Evans-Lynn
- 14 ♦ "Wary of Controversy?" Heather Bruce
- 19 ♦ " Staging Democratic Revolutions" Heather Bruce
- 21 ♦ "Additional Slam Resources" MWP Teacher Consultants

Teachers as Writers

- 16 ♦ "God Bless America" Jenni Frizzell
- 17 ♦ "Authentic Assessment" Jake Hansen
- 18 ♦ "Defying Darwin" Donna Miller
- 18 ♦ "I' m Sorry Dear" Jennie Frizzell

Student Writers

- 7 ♦ "If I Had Time Machine" Nick Weber
- 8 ♦ "Angry Black Woman" Kaylynn Sampleton
- 8 ♦ "Coffee" Kassie Clark

Announcements & Updates

- 2 ♦ Call for Submissions
- 10 ♦ Missoula City-wide Slam Photos
- 22 ♦ Join the MWP Curriculum Group
- 23 ♦ 3rd Annual Rural Writing Conference Photos

writing in the digital age

Submission Deadline: September 1

Publication Date: October 1

Students today are facing a much more comprehensive notion of what it means to be literate than previous generations. Author and writing teacher Jeffrey Wilhelm realized half a decade ago that “literacy has always been about using the most powerful cultural tools available to make and communicate meaning. At the present, those tools happen to be multimedia tools that use video, graphics, sound, and traditional text in a hypermedia format.” The sooner students begin producing multi-modal texts by working on inventing, shaping, producing, and delivering text, audio, video, and images purposefully, the better equipped they will be to write critically and personally about issues important to them, write to solve problems and make sense of the world, and write to tell stories that they need to tell.

Though multimodal texts and all these new literacies surround us everyday, pulling them into our writing instruction is still a relatively new idea. Most educational organizations recognize that the literacy environment is changing, but there isn’t yet an abundance of resources that help classrooms reflect this change. How have you successfully incorporated technology into writing you do with students? How has the availability of new tools and software changed how you write, how your students write, or what your final writing pieces look like? What problems or complications arise when you attempt to integrate technology and writing? How have you dealt with them? Please consider sharing your teaching ideas, experiences, and resources.

The Practice of Teaching: As you work to teach writing, what methods get results? You might build an article from a demonstration lesson or a successful classroom unit. Reflect on what pedagogical practices have proven effective and share some ideas or strategies we can put into play in our own classrooms. The length of the submissions for this section could vary wildly. They might be brief pieces of no more a paragraph or two that outline a successful lesson but might also materialize as lengthier pieces that explain a whole unit and give some theoretical background or support for your work.

Fresh Insight: What is happening in education that you feel you must say something about? Use this as a forum to share your views on writing education. There are many things going on at the classroom level up to the national level that we as teachers are thinking about, wanting to change, or are hopeful or angry about. This is a platform to expand and articulate some of those ideas. What important issues are those around us (or are we ourselves) not thinking enough about?

Teachers as Writers: Amid the daily chaos of teaching, what personal writing have you been able to do? What are you ready to publish? What better way to encourage all of us to continue to be writers than to offer one another some of the work we are doing. Submissions of any genre are welcome.

Book reviews: What titles have you found useful when working on writing? Consider reviewing one of your favorite texts to give others an idea of the content and approach they can expect from the author. We’d be especially interested in fairly new releases that others may not yet be familiar with.

Original Photography: Share images from your classroom, professional development, or photos that complement any of your writing submissions. Images should be sent as 300 dpi image files. Anyone who appears in the photo should be identified, along with any other relevant caption information such as a brief explanation of what is depicted, the photographer’s name and an approximate date the photo was taken.

Announcements/ Upcoming Events: Please pass on any information about upcoming events or opportunities or any other information that would be of interest and use to the Montana Writing Project Community.

And of course there is always be room for quality work that doesn’t fit the categories above or the current thematic issue. Please consider sharing your ideas, experience, and expertise.

Upcoming issues

Multigenre Writing

Submission Deadline: December 1

Publication Date: January 1

Expository Writing

Submission Deadline: March 1

Publication Date: April 1

Submission Guidelines:

Send any submissions to **montana.writing.project@gmail.com**.

- Manuscripts are only accepted in digital form, saved as an RTF or Microsoft Word file.
- In general, manuscripts shouldn’t exceed 2,500 words.
- Please list your name, address, academic affiliation, and e-mail address on your manuscript.

"Slam is all about styles. It is about expanding the possibilities of poetry instead of limiting them, about injecting performance into the art of poetry, and most importantly about creating community amongst poets and audiences of diverse natures...The competition is (or should be) secondary to the creation of enjoyable and artistically meaningful shows."

Marc Smith, creator of Slam poetry



Karlin Moorehead and Amanda Gates served as hosts at Missoula's city-wide Slam and kept the program moving smoothly all evening.



Rick McDonald and Quinn Lai perform their piece "A Bad Day."



Haley Anderson, Mariah Coley, and Kassie Clark perform a group piece.



Students from Big Sky High School were involved in every aspect of planning and running Missoula's City-wide Slam from performing on stage to taking tickets out front.



Seven years ago I had no idea what slam poetry was. Then in the summer of 2000 I spent a week in New York City, and one evening I ended up at the Nuyorican Café. I knew we were going to listen to some poetry but until that night my experience with listening to poetry was mostly limited to university or bookstore readings. The Nuyorican was no bookstore.

From the outside the Café looked like any number of other bars we passed walking into the heart of midtown. There was an eclectic group lined up all down the block to get in; some looked barely old enough to be in high school and others looked like they could be those young kids' grandparents. Once we got inside it was standing room only. People covered every open floor space, table, and railing. Even before the reading started the atmosphere was more like a championship sporting event than the poetry readings I was used to. As the emcee took the stage the audience was loud and cheering. The deejay's powerful, pulsing beats accompanied every introduction and keep the crowd pumped up between performances. Some of the poetry was serious, other pieces were humorous, much of it was political, but all of it was dynamic and expressive. It was performance art at its finest, and I was hooked.

After I left New York I realized many people had been enjoying slam for years. My first experience with the form was more than a decade after Marc Smith had originated slam in Chicago and even at that time it was already making its way into popular culture via HBO specials, MTV, and even a 60 Minutes feature. Still, somehow I'd missed all this back in rural Montana. After he experienced slam, Marvin Bell, an accomplished print poet, long-time faculty member of Iowa Writer's Workshop, and Iowa's first poet laureate had the realization: "...slam would be poetry, not ideas about poetry and it would be poetry in motion and in action, not fixed to a pedestal, and it would validate the lowbrow and the highbrow at the same time." All of that was what fascinated me about slam.

Beside an impressive display of skill with language, that first slam I went to was also a lesson in perspective, in paying attention to all sides of an issue, and in realizing that there always is more than one side. All week I had been impressed with how dramatically "cleaned up" New York seemed compared to my last trip only a few years earlier. While there were definitely results to be admired, until I sat there listening to a population that had directly been impacted by the means used to achieve those results I was admiring, it hadn't occurred to me that this cleaning up process wasn't smooth and enjoyable for everyone. Those poets' views of Giuliani were much different than what I'd read in the media, and their feelings about the changes that "cleaned up" their city were far from positive. More than anything I'd ever read on the page, experiencing slam made me rethink some of my own assumptions.

Once I'd experienced a slam, I was desperate to figure out how to give my students the opportunity. I wanted them to see how exciting it could be to control and utilize language so skillfully. I wanted them to see how skill with words could give you the power to be heard when you felt as your voice didn't matter. I knew that performance poetry could be powerful in my classroom, and every slam I attended increased this belief, but unfortunately I never got past wishing I could make it happen. I couldn't figure out how to implement it in a place so far from the cities where slam seemed to be so vibrant.

Luckily for the rest of us, other teachers are figuring it out. They are playing a vital role in increasing the spoken word presence here in Montana. Hopefully, their suggestions, ideas, and resources in this issue will encourage other teachers to explore performance poetry with their students and will supply teachers with some materials to begin.

This issue isn't an argument for replacing traditional poetry or spending any less time working on the way the words sound on the page, but hopefully it will persuade people who haven't experienced slam to take the time to explore this new approach to poetry and find one to attend. Teacher and performance poet Sara Hollbrook (see book review pg 20) has remarked "Performance is oral publication." Slam gives our students a great opportunity to experience this different version of publication as well as increase their skill with language and appreciation for what it can do. The strongest part of slam poetry is listening to the live performance, hearing how the poem comes to life when not tied to the page, experiencing the communal excitement of a whole room of people experiencing a poem together. It is all those things we can't capture on the page that make slam so appealing. Because of that, there is no way this issue can really do justice to its topic, but hopefully this issue will inspire you to figure out why all of us involve in putting this together believed it was worth trying.

Christa Umphrey

Slammin' by Lorilee Evans-Lynn



Lorilee moved to Missoula in 1980 to study poetry with Dick Hugo. What she didn't anticipate was a love affair with teaching. When she finished her MFA, she pursued her high school certification and has spent the last 22 years in the classroom as an English teacher. She feels lucky to have spent the last eight years team teaching an American Studies class and the last 15 years teaching creative writing and advising Big Sky High School's literary magazine. She is a 12-year board member for Signatures From the Big Sky, Montana's only k-12 literary magazine, and in 2005 broke a long dry spell in her own writing to publish a poem in Mid-American Review of Bowling Green State University. In 2004 she traveled on a teaching exchange to Turkmenistan sponsored by the US Department of State. This year she is embarking on a new project with her students, a national literary magazine.

As I sit down to write about my Slam experiences over the last few years, I am struck by how difficult it is to put on paper what is, by its nature, a spoken form. Perhaps that is part of what makes Spoken Word a genre which appeals immediately to the young and one that remains a bit dubious to veterans (of which I am one), who generally think of literature as having an obligatory relationship with pen and paper. So though I can share all kinds of things about Slams and Spoken Word, know that when I write poems down here I feel like I'm diminishing them, showing one facet of a multi-faceted creature, one dimension of . . . you understand. Here's how Abbey Tripp, one of my students, the real heroes of this article, put it: "Spoken Word breathes; it has a heart beat. It is ultimately poetry in human form . . . Each [poem] has distinct qualities that allow you to remember them like you would remember an old woman with pink hair sitting at the back of the bus, or like a girl with bright red lipstick walking down the street. My spoken word's name is Regina. She doesn't like onions. I believe everyone has a spoken word poem inside of her, like a second personality. Who is the poem inside of you? Maybe he is a mow-hawked anarchist or maybe she is an angry woman going through her mid-life crisis." That said, let's start with the fundamentals: The Language.

Spoken Word Poetry: Performing or involving performing of the spoken word.

Slam: Spoken Word Poetry competition; Performance poetry contest in which judges chosen from the audience give poems scores.

Spoken Word is just that, spoken. It is virtually impossible to appreciate a great spoken word poem without hearing it, or better yet, seeing it. A Slam is a little like the creation of a Tibetan sand painting, only more feral and with points.

My first close-up experience with Spoken Word is probably a metaphor for how I've felt since, always a few steps behind my students. The fall of 2004, I left a student teacher from Philadelphia and a wonderful mentoring substitute who is currently Program Coordinator of MWP, in charge of my classes while I traveled for three weeks to Turkmenistan on a teaching exchange. When I returned, they had caught fire. My literary magazine class already sponsors several readings throughout the year. They wanted to add a slam. And they wanted to make it all ages, city-wide.

In February, we booked the Roxy Theater in downtown Missoula, put out the word, sponsored lunch workshops, and held our collective breaths. That night, my fear of being able to fill the 250-seat theater quickly transitioned to being able to fit the audience in the room with the readers. We eventually sent the readers to the stage where they sat cross-legged for the event and brought chairs from the lobby for the steady stream of late comers. A tv station showed up unexpectedly, as well as a number of university people and a 70-something woman who competed and whom the kids loved. Chad and I, my student teacher, who by then was volunteering his time in preparation for 2 ½ years in the Peace Corps in Namibia, sat in the back whistling, shouting, laughing and generally adding to the uproar.

Getting Started

If you want to start playing with this genre of poetry, you need to get ahold of some Spoken Word poetry, the kind to which you can listen. I would start with Slam Nation and Taylor Mali. Both are available for purchase, if nowhere else, on the internet. Slam Nation is a DVD that

follows Spoken Word Poets to the National Poetry Slam. A version for schools cleans up the language and subject matter, but it's more expensive. This DVD is great because it gives you the whole deal, from poetry to slam. You can skip the political discussions between poets, but I found them interesting. Regardless, you see a wide variety of poets, including groups, and you see the slam in action including instructions and judging. Every piece is terrific. Watch Beau Sia and Taylor Mali and some of the group pieces. I particularly like the group from Austin's "A Boy on the Open Road" for Montana kids who don't ordinarily display a particularly literary bent.

I would also get Taylor Mali's Conviction. This CD includes poems by Taylor Mali and others. They are all terrific, but you may want to start with: "Like Lily Like Wilson Like," "Seventh-Grade Viking Warrior," and "What Teachers Make," a reaffirming piece for everything you're doing. "The The Impotence of Proofreading," is unbelievably funny and astute, but could only be played in special classes. Taylor Mali is great because he was a teacher and his work is usually classroom appropriate, which is not always the case, one of the sticking points about this genre.

At the risk of ruining Chad Zibelman's poem by publishing it in its written form, I will include it below. Chad wrote and performed this poem (memorized) in the classroom as an introduction to Spoken Word. My students asked him to give it at the beginning of our first slam as a demonstration piece and to provide the judges an opportunity to practice scoring. I know it's impossible, but try to imagine a short guy with curly brown hair, a Philadelphia accent, and varying volume, tempo and rhythms. Here's what Katie Bauman had to say about Spoken Word, Chad-style; "To me Spoken Word means fun but serious, real and forward, in YOUR FACE! When I was a sophomore in high school, taking Ms. Evans-Lynn's creative writing class, we had a student teacher who we refer to as Mr. Z. Mr. Z with his sexy curly hair, brought with him the knowledge of Spoken Word Poetry! To us, it was a whole new world. . . We all greeted the idea with open arms and ears."

So many people ask me
What is Spoken Word Poetry?
What is spoken word poetry?

This is a spoken word poem
THIS IS A SPOKEN WORD POEM
Poetry plus Performance equals spoken word poetry

I am not reading cryptic words
Trying to fool you with my extensive vocabulary
And lack of thought
This is a spoken word poem

This poem, in part, has to do with me
When you write spoken word poetry
I want it to be about you

How do you feel?
What makes you angry?

You know what makes me angry
What makes me angry are
Family holidays that have become marketing ploys
Tap into the spirit
It's the corporate way of giving
Advertize Advertize
Sell Sell Sell
Consume Purchase Buy
We have a product you have to try

This is a spoken word poem

Spoken Word:

embellishes
with emphasis
on intentional
exaggeration
of alliteration,
rhythm,
repetition,
rhyme,

plays on words,
turns of phrase,
puns

creates
its own form

is generally
narrative
clever and
witty
but easily
accessible,
though should still
be appreciated
after multiple
readings

intentionally
interacts with the
audience

is performance
based

“I think it’s pretty neat to have an opportunity to speak or shout or repeat something you’re passionate about to an audience who’s listening. How often do you get to do that?”

~Katie Black,

Slam Poet and Big Sky High School student

Below, advisor Lorilee Evans-Lynn works with the sound crew before their poetry slam.



Aerie, Big Sky High School’s literary magazine is available for purchase for ten dollars. It has received the Highest Award in NCTE’s Program to Recognize Excellence in Student Literary Magazines three times since 1999 and Superior all other years. If interested contact Lorilee:

levanslynn@mcps.k12.mt.us or
lynn@montana.com or
Big Sky High School
3100 South Avenue West
Missoula, MT 59804

This is a spoken word poem
If this is a spoken word poem
You have to change the speed
And repeat I repeat
You have to change the speed
Repeat I repeat

Driving down the street
Concrete signs make you blind
I’m tired of catch phrase rhymes
Like it’s the best loan you’ll ever find
One billion marketing lies
Put them in a cardboard box
Call it a Happy Meal as the children whine
Cheap plastic foreign-made toy
Built in a factory by an equivalent boy
For ten cents you know
He hasn’t had a happy meal in quite some time
If this is a spoken word poem
It’s alright to cry

This is a spoken word poem

This is a spoken word poem

If you are going to write a spoken word poem
You must know two rules

The Number one rule of a spoken word poem
is that you have to speak it

And the number two rule of a spoken word poem
Is that when you speak it you have to mean it

~ Chad Zibelman

Classroom Tips and Procedures

When you’ve established the sound in your students’ ears, they’ll be more or less ready to go. I’ve found it effective to use Taylor Mali (and company’s) “How to Write a Political Poem” as a starter prompt. Though it’s ostensibly about political poems, the elements are ones common to spoken word and are a helpful set of directions for how to start. (Note: I never assign subjects for writing. I try to offer structure – if students have something concrete to focus on they stress a little less about what they’re going to write, and generally their writing is better.)

Introducing Students to Slam

- Play “How to Write a Political Poem”
- As students listen, have them list the “instructions”
- You may want to play it 2-3 times (it moves quickly and is deceptively simple)
- List on the board the instructions they heard

Some examples from the poem:

- Loud then louder
- Wrap it up in rhyme, rap, until it sounds cool
- Glare until it sinks in
- HOOK – Keep it coming back to the end –
- Add a person – duos and groups
- Make fun of something everyone knows and loves –
- Sing and interrupt a song everyone knows and loves – gives a sense of urgency
- You can say the obvious, when everyone is expecting something else (The New York City Police department is

filled with . . . police officers.)

- Play with words—Injustice is Just in Us
- Discuss what each means
- Reinforce notion that these are instructions for any kind of spoken word poem
- Get out handout of suggested prompts—go over them.
- Let students choose one (or some combination) and let them write.

Spoken Word Prompt Ideas

My prompts are primarily to get students thinking. I usually give students the option of taking ideas their own direction. Many of these prompts I developed deconstructing Spoken Word poems I liked (mostly from the Taylor Mali CD *Conviction*). Particularly with Spoken Word, I encourage students to look for the humor in situations—humorous poems stand out dramatically in a Slam, not to mention offer some relief from the very serious. I also encourage group poems. They add texture, more of students can participate, and it often buoys up the shy ones.

- Have you ever seen. I have (then what that is)
- Follow a statement with a dramatization of it, how you might see it working out in life to its most minor/specific moments
- Have you ever noticed how (mean/sweet/sour/tricky/disgusting) people can be? Like . . . (you can make this light and humorous while still being serious)
- How is like (How falling in love is like owning a dog)
- I believe in . . . to make the world a better place—(what are you passionate about? What do you care about?)
- Take a real object and write about what it makes you think of
- Conversation with self . . .
- Conversation with someone else, aloud, while the “real” conversation is going on in your head (good as duo)
- Personification of something
- Apology
- Introspection into some idiosyncrasy you notice in society/around you (Like Lily Like Wilson/The the Impotence of Proofreading)
- Take the language of one subject (like dance) and apply to another (like Islamic revolution/politics)
- If _____ and worst still _____ Wouldn't you expect?
- If my _____ could talk, he/she would say _____ the trouble with men is. The trouble with women is . . .
- Zillions of funny things rolling around on email--“You know you are living in 2006 when . . .” -- that could be adapted and played with

Always encourage stream of consciousness. This applies to any prompt idea.

Preemptive suggestion for writers: When you get stuck, start rhyming and playing with the words in your mouth. Let them take you where they will—THAT'S the creative process and often develops hooks, repetition of themes, plays on words, puns all the defining elements of Spoken Word.

Producing Poetry

The following poem couldn't have been more surprising for any of us, including, I think, Kaylynn. I don't think I ever actually saw a draft (definitely NOT how I handle traditional poetry and readings). I offered the prompts above and gave students time to write. Kaylynn balked,

If I had a time machine

If I had a time machine
I would stop the invention
of NASCAR racing.
I would tap dance with Shirley Temple
and wait on the shore
for Christopher Columbus
and say, “Hey Bro, India is thataway.”
I would make Biggey and Tupac
shake hands and stop all their fighting
and then organize an intervention
for Chris Farley.
And I would also have a little fun.
Oh I would get a pet dinosaur.
That would be dope, I hope, can't cope
with it eating my cats and dogs.
And I would bring a laser pointer
to one of Hitler's speeches
and make the crowd wonder,
“What's that on his face?”
Maybe this Master Race
isn't such a good idea after all.”
And I would invite Malcolm X, Peter Jennings,
Abe Lincoln and Jimmi Hendrix to join me
in a 5 on 5 basketball tournament
where afterwards we would meet up
with the 3 Stooges
and the eight of us would have the wildest
Halo party in the history of mankind.
Next I would go get FDR
and we could go to Target
and park up front in the handicapped spot
and we would go halfsees
on the unrated version
of Wedding Crashers and take it back home
but watch it on the lawn because the entrance
to my home is not wheelchair accessible.
I would sneak into Francis Scott Key's
home while he sleeps
and change the national anthem to
“Dancing Queen” by Abba.
And I would be the 7th child
in the Brady Bunch
and Lolo would get the Eiffel Tower
and I would turn off Cheney's rifle power
and Babe Ruth and I
would hit mailboxes with baseball bats
if I had a time machine.

Nick Weber,
Big Sky High School

Coffee

So What? I'm a little tired, a little crabby
but I'll make it through the day
as long as I have my coffee.
Oooo, coffecee. Get outa my way, Fool,
it's coffee time
and no one is stopping me
from drinking every last drop of coffee
in my coffee pot. An obsession?
Nooooo.
An addiction. I am addicted
to the very sight, taste, feel
of the warm liquid
running down my throat.
Bitter. You want it sweet?
I can make it sweet.
Sugar? Cream? Coffee make me run,
it keeps me going, it's the gas in my tank,
the battery in my flashlight,
the coin in my slot machine.
Ten cups a day, that's all I ask.
Just 10 cups and you've got me,
a ready and willing worker.
Just put something in my hand,
give me something to do
and the caffeine will take care of the rest.
And I will run like a robot
till my fuel burns out.
More more more I need it
I want it
I have to have it
because when I don't
I turn into a monster.
Yes, a hideous beast
with fangs and foul breath
and a tongue that lashes out at any pitiful
soul
standing in the way of me and my
happiness.
Happiness? I am a slave to substance.
How can that be happy?
Don't let the tantalizing aroma
of freshly ground coffee beans
seduce you. You are your own person.
Happiness is not substance of any kind.
Hello. My name is Kassie Clark.
And I am a coffee addict.

-Kassie Clark,
Big Sky High School

saying she didn't have anything to write about. I had students work in groups and slowly, VERY slowly, this poem emerged and was shaped by the interest of the students in her group. When it came time to read in class, her performance was hesitant, stiff, and the poem was still skeletal. One of the things I try to do with all students is encourage personal voice—this example was perfect. As a young black woman, it was not lost on Kaylynn that she was in her own orbit in Montana; her peers WANTED to hear her "story," and she finally loosened up. By the time of the Slam she was treating her reading like a drama production, and she was ready. She took third place, and it was deserved.

Angry Black Woman

Have you ever noticed
how when a black woman is pissed
the first thing she do is
take off her earrings?
"I'm gonna smack this chick,
but first I gotta get rid of this bling bling!"

We like to keep it fly
but serious at the same time.
We dn't care if it cost 100 dollars or a single dime.
Dami it, we wanna look good!-
Mmmhmmmm

Have you ever seen an agry black woman?
I have, my grandma,
I said, "Nnny's got big o butt."
And she goes, "Git me a switch off that tree."
I fall to my knees
and beg and plead
Cuz I don't wanna face an angry black woman

You see we do it old school, southern style!
and old school hurts, it hurst so bad
you wish that you have never talked back
to your grandma,
to your mama
or even to your friend's mama.

The problem with black women
is we can make our own boyfriends scared of us.
"Baby, I'll call you back in a minute.
"Call me back!?! Call me back!?!
Is there another woman, another woman?
Who is she, where is she,
What does she have that I don't?!
NOTHING

And you start takin' your earrings off
You wanna show that chick who's the box
So she betta run to the cross as fast as she can
Cuz she's in trouble,
and if you're gonna do that
to your man's imaginary woman,
he can only imagine what you're gonna do to him!
You have hit your brim
Your patience are running thin
You are now an angry black woman.

Black women never get dumped
because that man will get thumped and thumped
on the head until he's saying
"Did I say I'm dumpin you?"

I meant I'm lovin' you."

This is my future
Big angry black woman
Cuz I've gotta big o butt

But I'm proud
Because a black woman
sat at the front of the bus
So I could have equal rights

I'm proud because Maya Angelou said
I am a phenomenal woman
It's in the arch of my back
The sun of my smile
The ride of my breasts
The grace of my style
And Queen Latifa, THAT'S MY GIRL!
Loud, proud, and movin' the crowd

I am angry, I am black, and I am a woman.

~Kaylynn Sampleton

Revising:

When I want to work on revising with students, the first thing I suggest is that they read what they've written and underline the parts they especially like. I have them look for a possible hook.

There are lots of ways to go from here, depending on your class. Some options include:

- Have students read to each other, identifying best parts; give each other ideas for turning the work into a more formal poem.
- Tell students to come next time with a typed version to workshop in small groups—probably three each. (When you break up groups note first who has a poem and balance groups so each will need about the same amount of time. At this point I would never send off delinquents to write—they are usually anxious and benefit from seeing what other people have done. I try to balance groups with two stronger writers and one weaker, so everyone gets help.)
- Show several performances again, good ones. Present the critique sheet.
- Have students score you. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the performance. (This is if you are willing to make yourself a role model. It makes you vulnerable but can be very powerful.)
- Start playing with reading in groups. Have them give each other suggestions. This time is also valuable for revising—most of the time no one sees the poem on paper. They could do trial critique sheets.
- Have one person per group read. Clap hysterically.
- Take sheets home and practice.
- Perform for the full class. (I break into critique groups of 4-5. While critiquers are writing, the rest of us give feedback. *What did Shelly do well? What could she work on? I loved it when... You give away that last line . . .* The final score is an average of our scores—they're usually very fair. I am the only person who scores everyone.)

One of the most affirming results of Spoken Word and Slams, regardless how out-of-my-element I sometimes feel, is the way it touches students



At the Missoula City-wide Poetry Slam Kaylynn Sampleton tied for 3rd place with her rendition of her poem an "Angry Black Woman," complete with removing her bling-bling before taking on the offender, her boyfriend.

"The thing I like most about Slams is the energy of them. It is like a little community coming together to share thoughts and feelings as a whole. There seems to be a lot of excitement and buzz throughout the audience before the show begins because they don't know what is coming. That is what is fun about slams—you don't know what is going to happen or what the next poem is about and if you are going to laugh or cry or be in awe."

~Courtney Rayfield,
high school slam poet

who normally wouldn't give poetry a second thought. In the three years we have been playing with Spoken Word, Slams have become a tradition that is anticipated by students who I wouldn't have ever expected to see at a poetry reading. People love them. In part, I think, because they are real. Some of my former parents came to our second Slam and the father volunteered to be a judge. Neither are the people on stage necessarily the usual suspects. We've had people travel from Great Falls and Arlee to compete, hearing about it through word of mouth.

One of the (many) unexpected spin-offs of our Slams is the revitalization of poetry generally. For reasons which remain mysterious to me, the line between Spoken Word and traditional poems, and Slams and readings, has blurred. Perhaps it is because our readings are generally zany (in a reading this fall one of our hosts wore a wetsuit and diving mask) and tend to be a cross between serious reading and stand-up comedy. Regardless, Spoken Word has definitely breathed life into all our readings and into the poetry in my English classes. It has bridged a gap and renewed zeal on both sides.

End Notes

During the teaching of poetry, I intentionally teach writing conventions, sentence fluency, development, essentially the Six Traits as identified by Northwest Labs. Sentence fluency is especially adaptable—it's easier to learn skills on shorter pieces than long. Students always respond better to authentic assignments.

Some kids will love Spoken Word; for others it will be torture. What I want is their best attempt at a poem (including editing and revising) read well. I want them to attempt Spoken Word, but that may not be their bag, and that's fine. With support and good prompts, even kids who don't like poetry usually feel good about what they end up with. If you sponsor a Slam, there are lots of roles for non-readers.

Perhaps best of all, writing Spoken word poetry (and poetry generally) addresses all the Montana Content Standards for Writing.

Resources Cited

(Check out the annotated bibliography for additional useful resources contributed by Lorilee.)

Conviction. Taylor Mali and Friends. CD. Words Worth Ink & The Wordsmith Press. September 2003. \$14.95.

Mali, Taylor. Top Secret Slam Strategies. Wordsmith Press.

SlamNation: The Sport of Spoken Word. Paul Devlin, Dir. DVD. 1998. \$29.95

Want to hear some slam poetry by high school students?

Lorilee's students from Big Sky High School have CDs from
their 2006 Slam available.

The cost is \$10.

If you are interested contact Lorilee:

levanslynn@mcps.k12.mt.us or

lynn@montana.com or

Lorilee Evans-Lynn

Big Sky High School

3100 South Avenue West

Missoula, MT 59804

Message to Readers

Lorilee gives Slam participants
the following guidelines:

1. **One poem under three minutes.**

2. The poem must be your original work.

3. No props or costumes, though mouth noises and singing are encouraged.

4. Your poem may or may not need an introduction; it's up to you.

5. Remember, you're **performing**, not reading, so ACT like it. Judges will be scoring you in the following areas: meaningful speed and volume changes, effective pauses and emotion, clarity, original language, spirit. There will be an example reader at the beginning to give everyone a chance to get a feel for how it works.

6. Please limit profanity and use only if appropriate to your subject, not to get attention. Judges are instructed to lower scores for gratuitous vulgarity.

7. You will have a microphone which you can hold or leave in the stand. Speak directly into it.

8. The audience will be involved. Pause if people yell or laugh so we can hear everything. Encourage them to participate.

9. Relax and have a great time. Thanks for reading! (And good luck!)

Slam Advice from the students:

- Poems can be about ANYTHING, not just politics and raging at x-lovers. They can be serious or funny or both.
- No rapping.
- Spoken word poems can be poems without being shouting rants.
- Poems can be effective without excessive profanity.
- ACT!! It's a performance.
- Allow kids to "have at it" — don't make the assignment too structured.



Big Sky High School's Aerie literary magazine classes, past and present, show off the Aerie sign at the culmination of their 4th Annual 2007 City-Wide Poetry Slam.

To the Judges:

These are the guidelines they give to those who volunteer to judge:

To help with your scoring decisions, here are some things to keep in mind:

1. Scores range from **1 to 10** and you **may use decimals**, but for the sake of those adding scores, don't use more than one decimal point please.
2. This is **performance poetry**. If you love a poem but it is not delivered dramatically, it should not receive the highest marks. That's the point of spoken word poetry and slams.
3. **Score on a relative scale**. Encourage, don't discourage, but neither give extra points simply to be kind. You can be supportive of everyone and not judge below 7. It's common for judges to score early poems lower than later ones. Please keep a kind of tally (on your yellow pad?). A 9 is very high in all areas. Tens are perfect. Don't give an advantage to later readers simply because of where they land in the program.

Things to look for in performances: **Subject matter is only part of what you're scoring.**

1. **Range of volume and speed. Listen for pauses, voice inflection, and clarity.** The poet should mix it up and changes should reflect the subject of the poem.
2. **Voice expresses emotion.** Is the performer passionate, whether speaking softly or shouting?
3. **Poetic language.** In addition to performance, you are judging originality—of subject, use of metaphors and similes, rhythm and rhyme. Listen for strong imagery. Listen for what makes this poem different than others, dependent on a personal voice.
4. **Profanity.** Listen for the line between offensive use of language and a word that is used for a particular effect. **Do not give high points to someone with gratuitous use of offensive language or subject matter.** You can go below 7 here if something is truly offensive.
5. **Body Language.** Does the speaker move effectively? Is movement distracting?
6. **Memorization.** Memorization should get higher points if the poem is performed naturally. I would be better to have a script than a halting performance.

Thanks and enjoy the performances! Oh, and please don't ask for a reader's phone number . . .



Above, Kara Jenkins, Emily Goodburn, Billie Loewen and Karlin Moorehead give commentary on society's expectations of women through their poem "36-24-36."

Below, one of the poets signs up to participate. Slammers traveled from as far as Great Falls and Arlee to compete for cash prizes.



Above, Courtney Damron and Neala Fugere comment on America's present political situation. One of the student organizers, Courtney Rayfield, suggested to potential Slam sponsors, "You should definitely have an open mind and should expect the unexpected. Topics could range from bashing President Bush to someone discussing an eating disorder."

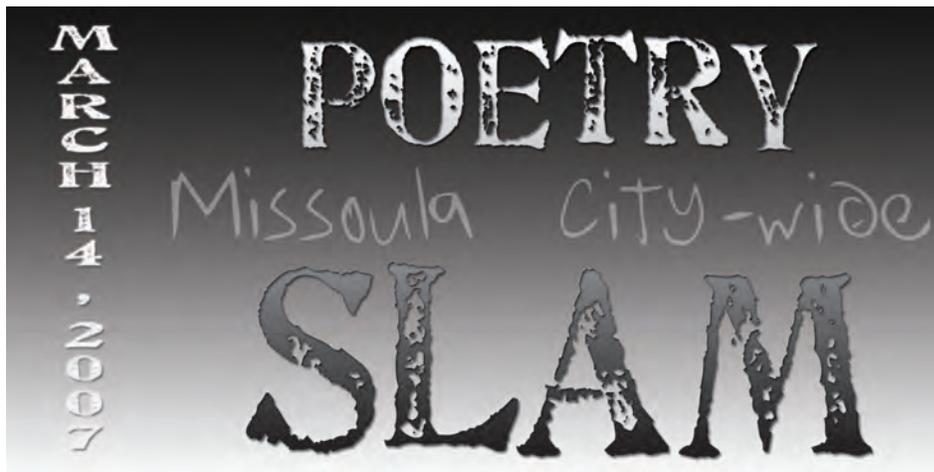
Below, the Slam winners, Kassie Clark, Mariah Coley, and Haley Anderson delight a packed house with their rendition of a fussy teen, a menopausal mother and a cranky, 80-something grandmother sharing their different points of view.



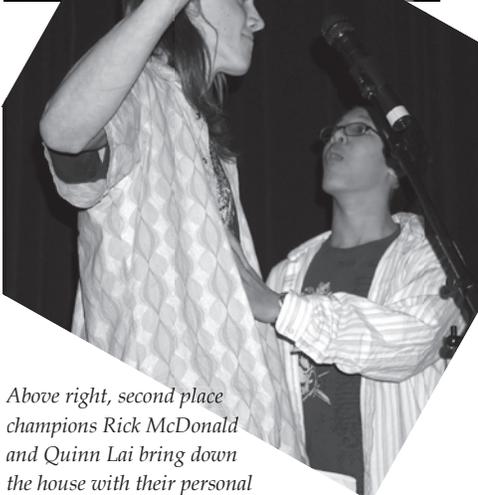
At left, Katie Bauman and Soren Estvold sell tickets at the entrance of the University of Montana's UC Theater. That night as they sold tickets they also collected \$100 in donations for Invisible Children, an international program to aid displaced Ugandan children and families.

PHOTOS BY
MADISON LYNN,
AND KELLY SMITH GILMORE,
& CHRISTA UMPHREY, MWP

Below, Haley Anderson plays an angsty teen.



Below, the judges, chosen from the audience before the show to represent the three Missoula public schools, the university, and the community, clearly appreciate this performance.



Above right, second place champions Rick McDonald and Quinn Lai bring down the house with their personal rendition of "A Bad Day."



Above, Abbey Tripp, scorekeeper for the night, says of Spoken Word, "There's something about it that moves unlike any other poems you will ever hear. The poems have opinions, emotions, personalities."

Below, hosts Amanda Gates and Karlin Moorehead announce the winners of the night's Slam, including a tie for 3rd place.



*It is difficult
to get the news from poems,
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.*
-William Carlos Williams

“[Slam’s] popular culture context should not deter you from experimenting with spoken word and performance poetry in a classroom context. One can readily find strong performance poems that aren’t all about anger and disdain—nor peppered with profanity.”



Heather Bruce, Montana Writing Project
Director, mother, grandmother, professor, poet, peace
activist.

Wary of Controversy?

The Poignant Democracy of Spoken Word and Slam

By Heather E. Bruce

The popularity of spoken word poetry and its derivative, slam, among youth today can provide models, tools and opportunities for students to develop appreciation for poetry while honing skills for artful oratorical performance and powerful rhetorical delivery. However, a two-headed controversy surrounding the phenomena of performance poetry and slam may make teachers wary about its value in the classroom. It’s our purpose here to address those fears.

Page vs. Stage

One of spoken word’s/slam’s controversial faces is pockmarked by the phrase, “page versus stage,” a conceit often used to compare academic poetry with slam poetry. Jeremy Richards, both a performance poet and a literary poet, finds the “page vs. stage” comparison “tired and misleading.” The Poetry Foundation (find them on the web at www.poetryfoundation.org) asked Richards to curate a series about poets who are accomplished as writers and performers, academics and slammers. Richards wonders, Are all page poems stuffy and abstruse? Are all poetry slams loud and sweaty, full of “rant and nonsense,” as Harold Bloom famously wrote in *The Paris Review*?

The “page vs. stage” controversy is not compelling on our view. We agree with Susan Somers-Willett, a performance/literary poet interviewed by Richards for the Poetry Foundation series on academic poetry and slams, who remarks, “I’d always been attracted to giving poetry a voice off the page. Slam challenged me to embody the poem through performance.... Unlike academic workshops, slam made me envision the poem in the realm of sound and performance. It gave me a new set of tools—vocalization, gesture, singing, improvisation, music dialect—tools that opened up another way of looking at my writing.... Performance is a real litmus test for the strengths and weaknesses of a poem, and so slam has made me a better editor of my writing.” Art is created in myriad genres and media, for a variety of purposes and effects. We process differently when we listen and when we read. We simply use different criteria to judge the effectiveness of poems in either media. Spoken word performance poetry and slam can be evaluated on the merits of their genres, which are delivered for a listening audience, rather than on the merits of poetry intended primarily to be read.

Controversial Topics and Profanity

Some of those blustery stereotypes about spoken word and slam—which blemish the other face of the controversy—occasionally ring true because of spoken word poetry performance’s and Slam’s roots in popular culture, its association with hip hop music, its emotional displays, street theatre style, no-holds-barred range of topics, and frequent uses of profanity, which lead many to find spoken word poetry performance and slam less appropriate than academic poetry in school settings. However, its popular culture context should not deter you from experimenting with spoken word and performance poetry in a classroom context. One can readily find strong performance poems that aren’t all about anger and disdain—nor peppered with profanity. Nonetheless, one of the powers of spoken word is its value in teaching students to use language, display, and presentation rather than verbal or physical aggression, violence or heartbreak to convey powerful emotions (Bruce and Davis). Spoken word performances/slams can provide an impressive vehicle for engaging students with the dynamics of compelling language use and the meaningfulness of revision. It also can help students experience the poignancy of democracy-in-action when they are allowed to experiment with poetic and performance elements that enable them to give voice to issues that matter to them. As a result, we think the rewards of the art far outweigh the risks.

Risks and Rewards

But let’s take a closer look at those risks and rewards: Lorilee Evans-Lynn of Big

Sky High School in Missoula certainly felt conflicted about her students' desire to stage a slam. Her uncertainty brewed out of this two-headed controversy. "Does spoken word performance devalue the art of poetry on the page?" was Evans-Lynn's initial concern. Of secondary concern was the potential for exploration of controversial topics and uses of profanity in a classroom context. Topics such as hatred, racism, war, homophobia are frequent themes in performance poetry and slams; such can be hard fare served up in school. Throughout human history the spoken word and poetry have been essential to communicating all aspects of the human condition. Every culture, every group of people, has had its poets and historians speak to them about love, hate, politics, family, neighbors, war, gods, and everything else that human beings typically care about. These poets and performers have proclaimed a full range of emotions and commented on every aspect of humanity. Most of what has been acceptably served up in school is the poetic valuations of well-classed white men. Spoken word performance and slam create a poetic venue for the valuations of everyone else—the poignancy of democracy in action.

What Evans-Lynn discovered in her students' heartfelt spoken word utterances were the day-to-day realities of their complex concerns about humanity in all its injustice and vain glory. She found while preparing with her students for spoken word performance and slam that poetry had become for them rich with possibilities for democratic transformation. When the poets' voices evoke that clear high note of anguish at the injustice of racism experienced in the here and now, or of the pain of suffering for years as a target of homophobia, or of the joys of falling in love—tackling such issues helps them to convey profound insight, inspire discussion and motivate empathy.

In direct response to the issue of curse words, performance poets and teachers Sara Holbrook and Michael Salinger in *Outspoken!*, a Heinemann text on teaching spoken word and performance poetry to secondary students (see review this issue), simply deal with potential uses of profanity by telling students they have to live within the constraints of school rules. They don't make a big deal about it, they just tell students with whom they work that the rules of the school must be followed. As students learn poetic diction and other devices for creating powerful imagaic and emotive language and riveting performance techniques, they realize that finding strong words and oratorical devices to express more artfully their anger or dismay or joy is much more interesting than using expletives on folks shock worn by a culture that peppers profanity into every discursive exchange.

Conclusion

Think of all the everyday influences of the spoken word: news and sports commentary, analytical punditry, lectures, political speeches, sermons, film, television and radio programming, to name just a few. Spoken word delivered artfully can be a powerful persuasive form of communication; delivered poorly, spoken word rambles, chatters, drones, bores, and fades away as useless noise. Delivered uncivilly, spoken word can sting and burn—that old saw about sticks and stones and broken bones and names not hurting is just not true, as most of us know. Our students need to develop skills of artful oratorical persuasion to communicate effectively in today's world. They also need to learn civility, most particularly, in an age when talk shows regularly devolve into name calling shout fests aimed to tantalize audiences with questionable models of behavior. Controversial aspects of spoken word poetry performance and slam can be easily mitigated with deft selection of models and some basic rules for establishing mutual purpose and respect in the classroom and on the stage. We think spoken word poetry performance and poetry slams, which blend poetry, performance, and competition in a revival and extension of ancient oral traditions, provides just the right vehicle for students to learn oratorical performance and civil delivery. Along the way, we just might learn to get the "news from poems," of which William Carlos Williams speaks in the epigraph, that can teach us about living in the fullness rather than the misery of humanity.

Works Cited

Holbrook, Sarah and Michael Salinger. *Outspoken!: How to Improve Writing and Speaking Skills Through Poetry Performance*. Heinemann: Portsmouth, 2006.

Susan Somers-Willett, Susan. Interviewed by Jeremy Richards. June 2007.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/feature.onpoetry.html?id=179688>. PoetryFoundation.org.

*You might also wish to listen to the podcast on performance poetry featuring Jeremy Richards at podcast@poetryfoundation.org.

“[Slams] give you the opportunity to stand up in front of ten or ten million people and tell the world what makes you tick. It’s poetry with limitless possibilities, no rules, no criticism, just you and your thirty seconds of fame, giving life a piece of your mind. It really opened my eyes to things about me that even I didn’t realize.”

**~Tessa Budney,
High School Slam Poet**

**“I think it’s
pretty neat
to have an
opportunity to
speak or shout
or repeat
something
you’re
passionate
about to an
audience
who’s
listening.
How often do
you get to do
that?”**

~Katie Black,
high school
Slam Poet

God Bless America: A poem in Two Voices

by Jenni Frizzell

Driving the SUV

God sure did bless America!

I have to remember to pick up
the dry-cleaning.

I need to pack for that trip
to Africa.

I need help!

My sister called twice today.

My brother is on his way over
for dinner.

Hopefully he’ll remember the
wine

Or I’ll kill him.

I need to call the kids’ doctor.

Soccer practice, concert tickets,

It’s hopeless!

I feel like there’s something I
need to remember.

Oh, I completely forgot...

Jacob: An African night-
Commuter

When you go back to America

Maybe you don’t forget us?

Maybe after you are back a
month

from Africa

If you still think of us

you’ll help.

My sister is dead, raped,
tortured.

My brother has been taken

He is trained to kill

Or they’ll kill him.

We have no doctors or police to
help us

We are out of hope

But not if you remember us

Please don’t forget.



The ten members of the Project Outreach Local Leadership Team have been busy throughout the beginning of the summer conducting interviews with teachers from across the state, at all subject areas and grade levels, to gather information about their experience with professional development in regards to writing as well as to gauge their progress in implementing Indian Education for All. The aim of this inquiry is to explore the ways in which our site is meeting the three goals of Project Outreach: to increase access, improve relevance, and expand the diversity of the leadership. The team is now moving into the second year where they will develop a plan of action based on the results of this first year of inquiry.

At right, members of the Leadership Team met in Missoula in May to check on progress and plan for the upcoming work.

Authentic Assessment or Rate of Exchange: A Spoken Word Poem

by Jake Hansen



Jake Hansen is a 2006 MWPP teacher consultant and a tutor in the University of Montana's Writing Center. He is also working on a Master's degree in English Teaching. This summer, for the second year in a row, Jake is working with middle school writers in the Writing Project's Young Writers Summer Camp for students in grades 6-9.

Jake has an ongoing interest in exploring alternatives to traditional grading and finding innovative means of assessing writing. In April he and MWPP Project Coordinator Caroline Simms (above) presented a strand on assessment at the Rural Writing Conference in Great Falls.

Check out the new and improved Montana Writing Project website!

[http://
www.cas.umt.edu/
english/mwp](http://www.cas.umt.edu/english/mwp)

- ❖ find background information about the Writing Project
- ❖ keep track of upcoming events
- ❖ locate resources
- ❖ contact staff
- ❖ find useful links

I wish that I could get energy from kissing,
that I could exchange all these kind thoughts I think about all these
people I think I know
for burritos and a gently used mountain bike,
that instead of turning in my paper in on time,
you could say "Get it?"
and I could say "Got it."
and we could call it good.
Enough.

I wish that when I ate really good food, the dishes did themselves,
and that if someone gave me a compliment
I could keep it.

I wish the breath from all this talking I do
all this talking I do
all this talking I do
all the time
could power windmills that would pay my electricity bills
and that your laughter could disassemble an atomic bomb
or at least help me pick out my clothes in the morning.

Close your eyes. Picture a shallow well, well, well. A coin tossed.
Heads, my decision to try to cut down on my sugar intake is worth
the price of a plumber coming to fix the shower.
Tails, green tea instead of coffee gets me plane fair
at a plain, fair price.

I wish having a relatively functional relationship with my parents
meant that I didn't have to see them so often
and that being a decent big brother
was something I could put on my resume.

I wish that if it felt good for me that meant it would feel good
for you
"cause you give me good feeling..."
But as I continue peeling back the layers of all of these desires
I realize that they're selfish.

Which makes me wish that in exchange for being selfish
we could all get inexpensive shellfish
— good ones, preferably shrimp —
this far from the ocean.

Defying Darwin

Donna L. Miller

Your balance impaired,
you hop, lopsided,
your right wing fluttering
like a helpful rudder.

This is your second year in my backyard,
and I marvel at your anomalous life.

You fluff up your feathers
to look large and intimidating,
protecting your place at the feeder,
undeterred by your one-legged handicap.

Ignorant of dysfunction,
your green neck glistens against the sun;
your black ebony glows.

As you turn,
the light dances upon coppery wings
and accents peacock purples
hiding among indigo shades.
Although a common blackbird,
you produce a kaleidoscope of color
to the lingering and watchful eye.

While clumsy on the ground,
in the air you swoop and soar,
a graceful flier,
teaching me lessons about survival,
defiance, and uncommon beauty that
emerges when we truly look.

Above, Donna Miller offers us some traditional poetry to enjoy along with this issue's collection of performance pieces. Donna teaches high school English in Chinook. She is also co-director of the Montana Writing Project.

I'm Sorry Dear

Jenni Frizzell

I'm sorry, dear,
if I'm the one stuck inside this
thin blue shell
peck
peck
pecking away
all day
trying to get to a place I can stretch
a place where the air is a little
less recycled.

I'm sorry,
so sorry dear,
that I'm not able
(in all my tiny heartbeats)
to spare one for you to
chew on
or
turn blue on,
but I need all the blood I can get.

I'm sorry
to embarrass you,
but I'll stand on this bar barefoot
until someone climbs over red vinyl stools
to dance with me
to this great song looping in my head.

You think I'm a fool.
You think I'm crazy.
You think I behave inappropriately,
Given
THE situation.
Which situation, may I ask?
Because I'm here to finally unthaw.

I'm sorry to be that pebble in your shoe,
that exposed electrical wire,

that toaster in your bathtub.

We learn out of discomfort
what lips are worth when bitten,
and I'm sorry for that, too.

If it's too barbaric to buy myself
a new
red
dress
and spin the olives in my glass,
I'll stop there, and I promise
to apologize
or realize
that 'sorry' sort of lost
it's punch
at the beginning of this poem.

Spoken Word Poetry: Staging Democratic Revolutions—A Review of Resources

Heather Bruce



Jenni took part in MWP in the summer of 2006 (where she wrote this slam poem). She is an English teacher at Hellgate High School. In between teaching and writing, she is working on her graduate degree at the University of Montana.

“Slam poetry is a great way for a teacher to get to know their students. It allows them to see through their eyes, and truly hear the voice of the quiet boy who sits in the back of the class.”

~Renee Wonnacott,
high school
Slam Poet

Several years ago I wrote the article “Slam: Hip-hop Meets Poetry—A Strategy for Violence Intervention,” with Bryan Dexter Davis, a former student. (See bibliography for more details.) At the time, Slam—or spoken word poetry competition—was something of an offbeat, underground, little known phenomenon. Now Slam competitions circle the globe (Weiss & Herndon), and such noteworthy poets as Jimmy Santiago Baca and Sherman Alexie have earned the title of “Heavyweight Poetry Bout Champion,” a variation on Slam. The phenomena of spoken word poetry have been covered on CBS News’s 60 minutes (<http://poetry.about.com/library/weekly/aa120799.htm>), warranted a 6th season-running HBO series (Def Poetry Jam), produced a full-length feature film, *Slam!*, which won the Sundance Film Festival’s top prize in 1998; filled a documentary, *SlamNation*, by five-time Emmy winner Paul Devlin; achieved a live stage Broadway run (Russell Simmons’s Def Poetry Jam), which subsequently toured, and created numerous live and studio audio recordings.

The spoken word revolution is nothing short of electrifying; its purpose is to get poetry out of the hallowed halls of academe and back into the mouths of the everyday poet on the street. In our *English Journal* article of May 2000, Davis and I argued that “Slam provides access to poetry for those who believe poems are impenetrable. Slams give students an outlet for the words, ideas, and sounds that circle inside them” (123). We believed then and we believe now that spoken word performance poetry gives our students means “to express the complexity of their thoughts in words and to practice expressing those thought verbally, especially when it comes to emotions, rather than acting on angry...impulse” (120) thus mitigating violence. Performance and poetry combine to create opportunities for students to be moved by the power of language and to find voice to express the difficult, the emotional, the unspeakable, the complex mix of heaven and hell that can be adolescence. Performance poetry honors adolescent experience and provides young poets with means to show up, be heard, be counted and to prepare for democratic participation as citizens.

Montana Writing Project Teacher-Consultant Lorilee Evans-Lynn, a creative writing teacher at Big Sky High School in Missoula, has learned first-hand the power of spoken word. Introduced to the concept of Slam in Summer Institute, Evans-Lynn initially was reluctant to open the door to the messy chaos that can be Slam. However, Evans-Lynn discovered that she could not hold her students down. She was surprised and they were thrilled by what they can poetically accomplish in a spoken word atmosphere. Evans-Lynn at her students’ behest first organized the Missoula all-city poetry festival, a festival that recently completed its fourth year (see pages 12-13). The festival thrives and gets bigger each year, drawing high school and university poets from all over western Montana to perform in front of standing-room-only audiences.

Teachers, who feel like Evans-Lynn once did, now have numerous resources specifically designed for school use, which can help them prepare students for spoken word poetry experiences. In addition to looking at the video archives on the Internet mentioned above, I recommend the following as essential guides for becoming involved with teaching poetry and performance. All these works give solid writing and performance suggestions that guide teachers to effective strategies for teaching performance poetry successfully.

A good introductory resource because of its comprehensive overviews and practical step-by-step guidance is Jen Weiss’s and Scott Herndon’s *Brave New Voices: The YOUTH SPEAKS Guide to Teaching Spoken Word Poetry* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001. ISBN 978-0-86709-508-1/0-86709-508-3.144pp. \$17.50). This volume is based in the authors’ work with YOUTH SPEAKS—a nonprofit literary arts, education, and cultural resource center for teenagers in both the San Francisco Bay Area and New York City, which offers free ongoing public performance and publication opportunities, after-school workshops, in-school presentations, and mentoring programs. Weiss and Herndon cull from their experiences as poetry workshop leaders to introduce classroom teachers to effective methods for teaching poetry and to outline a practical five-week course that fosters poetic awareness through writing, self-reflection, and performance. Designed specifically for an audience of middle and high school teachers, Weiss and Herndon give teachers a

“People who don’t write poetry can write Slam poems. This is a big difference that I see: when people think of poetry, they think of rhymes and pretty words. But a Slam poem is more like music than poetry, with a beat and rhyming and, usually, a message at the end about something serious or something funny... You don’t have to know grammar or the history of the Greeks or understand why images are useful in writing. You only need a sense of what makes people angry or glad or otherwise emotional, because lots of good slam poems come from what the writer feels, rather than just what they know about literary devices and English language.”

~Mariah Coley,
high school Slam poet

nice overview of spoken word poetry and explore the relationship between poetic forms, youth expression, and performance that will help even the most poetry-phobic to succeed. Weiss and Herndon provide practical step-by-step guidance for teaching poetry, for coaching spoken word poetry performance and for staging a school-based poetry slam. Their methods help foster poetic enthusiasm that enables all students to shine in front of an encouraging audience of their peers.

High school English teacher John O’Connor offers a collection of 25 poetry exercises along with classroom advice for teaching poetry in grades 7-12 with his *Wordplaygrounds: Reading, Writing, and Performing Poetry in the English Classroom* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2004. 155 pp. ISBN 0-8141-5819-6. \$30.95 non-member, \$22.95 member). This book is especially useful to the poetry phobic. Its tone enlivens and encourages with multiple, varied and comprehensive exercises. O’Connor intends the book to work as a full course in poetry or as “single exercises that can be used in other courses as good entry points to other types of writing, such as personal narratives, descriptive pieces, and autobiography” (qtd. in *The Council Chronicle* March, 2005. <http://www.ncte.org/pubs/chron/arc/119902.htm>). All the activities are high interest and energize students by using their own life experiences as a basis for their writing. The book is scaffolded for easy teacher accessibility and maximum student success.

It begins with exercises that guide teachers to direct students in developing simple lists and wordplay and moves progressively toward guided exercises that involve more complicated forms and topics. O’Connor’s primary emphasis is on having fun and making sure every student succeeds. “The key,” O’Connor says, “is to give students practice at noticing and using language in creative fashion” (*Council Chronicle*). The book contains a remarkable number of poetic models—more than 30 from professional poets and more than 80 from students in his classes and guides teachers for directing students toward effective dramatic performances that help them to interpret poetry through a variety of media, such as music, art, and dance. O’Connor’s book helps teachers develop poetry curriculum and performance strategies for use primarily in the classroom, but it also demonstrates ways to stage poetry events beyond the classroom walls.

If on a tight budget (and who teaching in Montana isn’t?) and can only afford one of these valuable guides, I recommend the highly usable resource *Outspoken! How to Improve Writing and Speaking Skills Through Poetry Performance* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006. ISBN-978-0-325-00965-0/0-325-00965-1/224pp + DVD \$24.50) written by Sara Holbrook and Michael Salinger, two performance poets who teach in artist-in-residence programs primarily in Ohio schools). Holbrook and Salinger key their techniques to 8 of 12 NCTE/IRA English/Language Arts Standards and explain how performance poetry helps students build communication skills. They see “every poem as a minilesson...little jewels to teach everything from point of view and tone to inference and subject-verb agreement. Persuasion, visual and figurative language, the writing process from draft to revision, all the elements of good writing can be taught through poetry,” they claim. According to the authors, “Using poetry to teach active listening strategies, clear expression, and the power of inflection, articulation, and gesture in effective communication is not only a convenient strategy, it is highly effective” (ix).

Theirs is a marvelous resource that describes a series of activities that take teachers through the process of developing, implementing, and assessing poetry performance. It uses a dialogic structure of conversations between Sara and Michael, which sets an informal tone that mirrors the National Writing Project principle of “teachers teaching teachers.” Right at the start, Holbrook and Salinger assuage teachers’ concerns about “language usage appropriate for school”—their students must obey school policy, period. They provide a solid rationale for teaching performance poetry and specifically key each chapter to standards, so teachers (and administrators) can readily see the legitimacy of the curriculum. They demonstrate ideas for encouraging even the most reluctant students to speak clearly and write from the heart, use familiar workshop structures to guide students at all levels toward vibrant completed pieces and exciting, dynamic delivery. The lessons they present draw on memoir, metaphor, character, point of view, and articulation. Everything is here to effectively teach spoken word performance poetry including specific advice on assessing the writing, speaking, performing, and learning of your students. For the visual learner, the book comes with a DVD that contains *Outspoken: Playhouse Square Center’s Slam-U Program*, a film documentary that chronicles Salinger and his students as they prepare to compete in a national poetry slam. The DVD clearly and movingly demonstrates what student performance poetry might look like and the

positive effect it has on students' lives and learning.

Teachers of younger students will find essential *Nancie Atwell's Naming the World: A Year of Poems and Lessons* (Portsmouth, NH: firsthand an imprint of Heinemann, 2006. ISBN 0-325-00746-2. 374pp. Comes with Guide and DVD. \$65.00). Although expensive, the volume contains more than 200 poems (permissions to reprint poems cost a bundle) and 150 5-10 minute lessons intended for daily use as a part of Atwell's approach to reading and writing workshop. Like most of Atwell's publications, *Naming the World* is richly scripted for effective and immediate use in the classroom. Atwell, as always, provides teachers with plenty of support to teach straight from her book. Her rationales are well grounded, clear and she includes a wealth of reading, response, writing and performance suggestions.

The DVDs that accompany the Holbrook and Salinger and Atwell books are indispensable tools to instruct teachers. Atwell's DVD focuses on teaching and gives the teacher a clear model of poetry workshop strategies but would not be terribly useful as a model to which students might refer. The Holbrook and Salinger DVD on the other hand can also serve to model for students where they might aim their sites. Salinger's final remarks on the DVD are thoroughly convincing after watching what he accomplishes with his students: "You're teaching life lessons along with literacy and comprehension—the language lessons. [If] you want to know what's going on in your kids' heads – [if] you want to learn more about them, this is a good way to do it."

Indeed.

Additional Slam Resources recommended by Teacher Consultants

Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café. Ed. Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994.

This collection won the 1994 Book Award. The Nuyorican is one of the most well known and thriving centers of Slam activity in the county and this text collects work from 100 or so of their strongest poets. Though you can never capture the energy of slam on the page, some of these poems come close.

Behn, Robin, and Chase Twichell, eds. The Practice of Poetry. New York: HarperPerennial, 1992.

This isn't designed for spoken word specifically, it is a collection of prompts for traditional poetry writing, but the text has a lot of great ideas that work for the slam genre.

Bruce, Heather and Bryan Davis. "Slam: Hip-hop Meets Poetry—A Strategy for Violence Intervention." English Journal. May 2000. 119-127.

This article was reprinted in the anthology, *A Curriculum of Peace: Selected Essays from English Journal*, Edited by Virginia Monseau, Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2004: 192-206. In the September 2006 English Journal, Mark Dressman and Mark Faust name the article as one of ten watershed articles about "Poetry and Its Teaching in English Journal, 1912-2005: Ten Watershed Articles." Dressman and Faust had this to say about Bruce & Davis's article on Slam: "This article updated a long-running tradition of articles focusing on the oral performance of poetry. In the wake of a series of school shootings, teacher educator Heather E. Bruce and her former student teacher, Bryan Dexter Davis, teamed to create a project in which students at Davis's school wrote and performed hip-hop poetry in a performance-based workshop. The authors concluded, 'Although we cannot yet speak for slam's long term or broad-reaching effects on our students, in our class they are demonstrating more tolerance and respect for each other and for us.'"

Def Poetry Jam. <http://www.hbo.com/defpoetry/> produced by Russell Simmons.

Def Poetry is a weekly series hosted by Mos Def on HBO. Each half hour segment features new up and coming poets as well as many well-known writers and musicians. The show premiered in 2002 and is now in its sixth season. Seasons 1-5 are available on DVD (each for less than \$20 or available to rent) and though some segments have subject matter inappropriate for the classroom, many of the poems are great examples to use with students.

Eleved, Mark. The Spoken Word Revolution Redux. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, INC., 2007.

An anthology of performance-style poems with audio CD.

Glazner, Gary Mex, Ed. Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry. San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2000

This is a guide to Slam competitions and an anthology.

Hewitt, Geof. Hewitt's Guide to Slam Poetry and Poetry Slam. (comes with DVD) Shoreham: Discover Writing, 2005. \$19.95

Hewitt's Guide is a compilation of text, illustrations, a DVD and tips on writing and performing. You get the history, the rules, and tips on organizing, performing, scoring. Geof Hewitt was Vermont's 2004 state slam champion. Though a successful competitor, Hewitt is also know for his reminder that "the point is not the points, the point is the poetry."

Mali, Taylor and Friends. Conviction. CD. Words Worth Ink & The Wordsmith Press. September 2003. \$14.95.

The collection of spoken word poetry is a great place to start if you are new to Slam, especially for teachers. Mali is a former teacher and many of his poems deal with subject matter that will be familiar to educators. There are also examples of group readings. And, he is just an excellent performer. (read Lorilee's article for more details)

Mali, Taylor. Top Secret Slam Strategies. Wordsmith Press. Available at PoetCD.com Online Store or the Poetry Slam inc. Store (poetryslam.com). \$8.00.

This book is both a collection of slam strategies from the only three-time winner of the nationals and a glimpse into the slam community. You get tips about how to be successful at slam and a bit of a who's who of slam.

Journal of the Montana Writing Project

Taylor Mali website. <http://www.taylormali.com/>

This site has examples of Slam work (written and video clips), good resources to buy, and is a way to become familiar with other good Spoken Word poets and great Slam material. The site is full of resources.

Poetry Slam, Inc. <http://poetryslam.com>

The mission of Poetry Slam Incorporated (PSI) is “to promote the performance and creation of poetry while cultivating literary activities and spoken word events in order to build audience participation, stimulate creativity, awaken minds, foster education, inspire mentoring, encourage artistic statement and engage communities worldwide in the revelry of language.” Poetry Slam, Inc. is the official 501(c)(3) non-profit organization charged with overseeing the international coalition of poetry slams. Though slams are maintained in a growing number of cities by local volunteer organizers, the vast majority of slam series follow the rules established by the governing body, and are certified by the governing body as slams that adhere to the vision slam’s founders established for the art form over a decade ago. Because of slam’s exponential growth as an art form, PSI has emerged not only as an administrative body to maintain the rules that govern slam, but also as an organization that seeks to grow slam’s audience and protect slam’s interests.

SlamNation: The Sport of Spoken Word. Paul Devlin, Dir. DVD. 1998. \$29.95

Slam Nation captures the cutthroat world of spoken-word poetry with an “energy that pulses, snaps and crackles” (Chicago Tribune). This documentary begins in New York City at the Nuyorican Poets Café’s Grand Slam tournament and then follows slam champion Saul Williams and three other top poets--Beau Sia, Mums the Schemer, and Jessica Care Moore--as they journey to the annual National Poetry Slam. The film lets you see what its like to participate in a Slam as well as gives some great glimpses of slam poets in action. There is some language and controversial subject matter. *An edited/ clean version for use in classrooms is available for a higher price. (read Lorilee’s article for more details)

The Spoken Word Revolution (slam, hip hop and the poetry of a new generation). Ed. Mark Eleveld. Naperville: Sourcebooks MediaFusion, 2003. (includes audio CD)

This book is a great introduction for someone who doesn’t have any background with Slam (or anyone who wants to know more). Marc Smith, who invented Slam, advised Eleveld on the project and contributed some writing. Poet Laureate Billy Collins wrote the introduction. The text has great examples of Slam Poetry (and a CD so you can actually hear them performed) but each chapter also has tons of background information about the genre, its influences, and important people and events in the Slam community.

Smith, Marc Kelly with Joe Kraynak. The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Slam Poetry. Indianapolis, IN: Penguin, 2004.

Need we say more?... includes 2 audio CDs.

YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/>

If you are looking for free audio/ visual examples of slam poetry, there are a variety of options on YouTube that you can download. Of course it isn’t usually upper-end video, but its free and can at least give you a taste of slam. A lot of Taylor Mali is available, including “What Teachers Make.” There is an animated Mike Henry describing Slam Rules in “What is Poetry Slam?” as well as work from other well-known and amateur Slam poets.

Join us for MEA in October!

The conference will include a strand of Montana Writing Project sessions. Also don’t miss the keynote address and following open conversation:

“The Power of Language and the Language of Power”

Linda Christensen

author of *Reading, Writing, Rising Up:*

Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word

Mark your calendars!

Belgrade, Montana

October 18-19, 2007



Debra Earling, author of the novel *Perma Red* and *The Lost Journals of Sacajewa* and professor of creative writing at the University of Montana read from her work.

3rd Annual Rural Conference for Writing Education Responding to the Challenges of Access, Relevance and Diversity: Teaching Writing in Montana April 21, 2007 | Great Falls COT



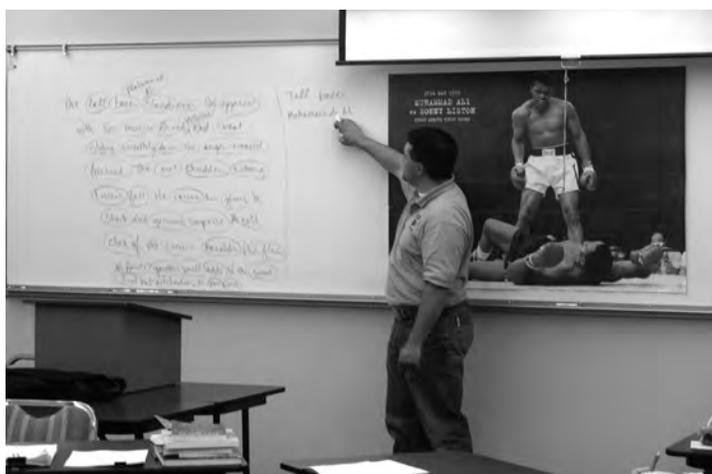
Kathryn Reed, MWP teacher consultant, prepared a session on writing memoir with students. She brought examples of her own middle school students writing to supplement the presentation.



Nearly every workshop built in time for participants to do some writing and reflection of their own.



Throughout her presentation on Native American literature Dorothea Susag (only a few days out of back surgery) shared numerous resources for writing teachers from preschool to high school who were looking for new materials to help facilitate implementation of Indian Education for All.



Casey Olsen, a teacher consultant and language arts teacher, also presented a workshop strand.



MWP is one of 195 sites in the National Writing Project (NWP) network.

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