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"Now I Believe if I Write I Can Do Anything": Using Poetry to Create Opportunities for Engagement and Learning in the Language Arts Classroom

Angela M. Wiseman, Ph.D
North Carolina State University
angela_wiseman@ncsu.edu

This paper describes how adolescent students responded to a poetry workshop in an English classroom where the content was derived from their knowledge from their various life experiences and understanding of world events. Informed by theories of New Literacy Studies, ethnographic methods of participant-observation were used to document an eighth grade urban public school classroom where a community member implemented a weekly program using music lyrics and poetry for an entire school year. Findings demonstrate how poetry, facilitated learning by attending to students' emotions and background knowledge, encouraging social collaboration, and providing an authentic purpose for students to communicate through their writing. A community-based poetry workshop provided students with powerful ways of using language to communicate led to important learning opportunities at school.

Hector walks into the classroom a few seconds after the bell rings and sits down. He is quiet and doesn't look at the students around him. He opens his notebook and begins doodling on the paper. When Theo, the community poet who teaches a weekly poetry workshop in this eighth grade classroom enters the classroom, Hector makes eye contact but does not smile or say hello. Theo glances at him twice, sensing something is wrong.

Theo begins his lesson by encouraging students to think about their education critically and consider how they have been exposed to lessons in school or in life that could be different than their own experiences. Theo begins to play the music from the Miseducation of Lauryn Hill, "What someone has thought of me/So caught up, I wasn't able to achieve/By deep in my heart the answer is was in me." Carlos, Hector's friend, leans over and asks him what he is

thinking about. "I have some bad news, man. My favorite cousin was killed this weekend in El Salvador," Hector tells him. Hector walks up to the chalkboard and draws a gravestone with "R.I.P. Alvarro" scrolled across the top in gothic lettering. Carlos watches him as he comes back to his seat, leans over to Hector and whispers, "Sometimes, it takes time before you can deal with that stuff. But you gotta deal with it sometime. Maybe you'll write about it later."

In a poetry workshop weeks later and after having a conversation with Theo at his after school program, Hector returns to the topic and finds words to express his loss. He writes, "You should never underestimate the preciousness of life/People's lives are lost but we bless the rest with life." After writing the rest of the poem, he volunteers to read it at the end of the class. Students clap for him, and Theo walks over and whispers praise in his ear.

This vignette took place in an eighth grade English classroom that I had the privilege of working in for a full school year. Pamela Martin, the classroom teacher, developed several projects and approaches to connect classroom learning with out of school events, such as creating a mural of community members they interviewed and volunteer work in places surrounding the school. In addition, her English classroom benefited from a collaborative partnership with a community member who worked at a nearby non-profit organization; he came in to the classroom each week to teach poetry workshops based on poetry and music lyrics. Theo, the community member, was an African American male who ran teen programs at the community organization that was designed to provide support to low-income and homeless people in the city. He and Ms. Martin held bimonthly after school poetry coffeehouses so that children could write and perform with their parents, guardians, and other adults from the community.

English instruction in Ms. Martin's classroom was a balance of skills instruction and service-based projects; Ms. Martin's collaboration with Theo was one of several projects that linked the students' classroom learning to community experiences. Theo taught a weekly poetry writing workshop in the classroom that lasted approximately 45 minutes, which he designed independently based on topics he believed were relevant to the students or music that conveyed an important message. While Theo took the initiative for planning his lessons, Ms. Martin did most of the coordinating for the poetry coffeehouses. The end product of the workshops and coffeehouses was an anthology with contributions from parents, students and teachers. Theo's poetry workshop became one way to encourage risk-taking and create a space where students could share and learn with each other.

Classroom literacy practices can function as a mediator between students' multiple experiences and classroom learning because written texts can reflect identity and relate the curriculum to experiences, knowledge, and interests (Moje, 2002). However, many middle school students express a disconnect between the curriculum and topics that are meaningful to them. This disconnect often results in increased stress and estrangement from school learning (Sturtevant et al., 2006). The national and local focus on student achievement is directed toward reading and writing assessment with a great deal of emphasis on measuring achievement. Yet, students' complex language practices are often missing from the curriculum, despite the fact that learning is connected to knowledge that comes from participation and experience in multiple contexts and

situations (Cook, 2005; Levy, 2008; Pahl & Kelly, 2005; Schultz, 2002). As a result, adolescents often feel that the instruction they receive at school is incongruous with their own experiences and future goals (Bean & Readence, 2002; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000).

The purpose of this article is to describe how the community member and teacher created a curriculum that integrated students' knowledge as they learned poetry in an eighth grade English classroom. In this classroom, personal reflection and critical analysis of real world events became central to the way that literacy was taught and created. My research question is: How does a poetry workshop taught by a community member support and extend the literacy learning of students in an eighth grade language arts classroom? Specifically, I set about to describe the space created when a teacher invited a community member where students learned to write, share and respond to student-authored poetry.

Related Research

This study is grounded in New Literacy Studies which establish that knowledge is socially constructed in a dialogic manner, literacy practices are socially and historically situated (Street, 2003) and grounded in the actions of everyday lived experiences (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000). Classroom learning is affected by experiences that occur from participation in multiple contexts, such as home, school, sports, church, or peer groups. As Gee (1996) explains, "Literacy practices are almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of the wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values, and beliefs" (p. 41). Language use and literacy learning reflect the opportunities students have to question practices and experiences in their lives; however, further research is necessary to understand the pedagogy of building on students' multiple contexts in the classroom (Street, 2003).

Using poetry, writers can position themselves based on contextual factors as well as their own personal, cultural, and social identities (Cappello, 2006) which can create a complex level of understanding and interaction in the classroom. A poetry workshop has the potential to bridge students' personal understandings and worldviews with the classroom curriculum by reflecting knowledge acquired from participating in multiple contexts while also increasing students' understanding about language (Jocson, 2005; 2006). Jocson (2006) documented the implementation of a poetry program called Poetry for the People (Jordan, 1995) and found that writing topics that emanated from students' lives enhanced student engagement and expression while also extending literacy development. Likewise, Fisher (2005) found that poetry in the classroom created spaces where students can express and learn together, which also increased attendance and participation in school. Both studies demonstrated that when students have opportunities to expand their own understanding and interact with relevant topics critically, they benefit in various ways. As Fisher (2005) noted, "While acknowledging the literacies students engage in everyday outside of school, these writing communities also provide opportunities for students to learn and master the 'standard' while understanding the standard does not belong to any one class or ethnic group, but in fact, belongs to them as well" (p. 128).

When students have various ways of acquiring and communicating knowledge in the classroom, they expand their ways of learning and interact with topics that are relevant to their own lives (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). Poetry, with its use of creative and metaphorical language, can give middle school students an opportunity to link their own

learning to their literacy development because they have opportunities to express themselves artistically and creatively (Jocson, 2005; Kinloch, 2005). As Friere and Macedo (1987) stated, “Language...plays an active role in constructing experience and in organizing and legitimizing the social practices available to various groups in society” (p. 8). Poetry has the potential to provide students with opportunities that bring their knowledge from the margins to front and center of classroom learning. This can be done when teachers encourage the use of language for expression, communication, learning, and even critique and empowerment (Wissman, 2007).

The Classroom and Poetry Program

The study was situated in an eighth grade English classroom at an urban middle school that was comprised of a diverse population: 19 African American students, 2 Hispanic students, and 1 Asian-American student; 9 males and 13 females. The urban middle school was located in a historically African-American neighborhood in a metropolitan East Coast city that was a significant location of music, arts, and culture. Built in 1929, this school was the first junior high school for teaching and training African-Americans in the city. After the neighborhood experienced much deterioration with buildings and infrastructure, it is now becoming gentrified, and upscale lofts and restaurants are replacing many of the low-income housing.

The poetry program began because Pamela, the teacher in this classroom, was looking for a way to connect students’ learning in the classroom to the community. By working with a local nonprofit educational organization called Urban Voices in Education (UVE), she was introduced to Theo. Theo, who was also a poet and artist, agreed to teach a weekly poetry workshop and then emcee bimonthly evening poetry coffeehouses for families, students, community members, and teachers. UVE secured grant money from the Ford Foundation to improve parent involvement, and they used the funds to pay him a stipend for two years. This research site was selected because it provided me with a unique opportunity to document a collaborative relationship with a teacher, community members, families, and students through literacy activities in an urban public school. All locations and names in this study have been given pseudonyms.

Music was often the catalyst for introducing a theme or lesson and provided a model for writing and expressing; Theo selected songs from a variety of genres that he felt conveyed an important message and selected his topics based on the interactions he had with students in the classroom and youth at his community organization. While Theo took the initiative for planning his lessons, most of the coordinating for the poetry coffeehouses was done by Ms. Martin. The end product of the workshops and coffeehouses was a published anthology with contributions from parents and students. Ms. Martin arranged to “loop” with her students and teach them English for both their seventh and eighth grade years so both she and Theo could continue her involvement with the same students.

Data Collection

This study utilized ethnographic techniques of participant-observation and descriptive analysis (Creswell, 2008) and were applied to the classroom setting as I gathered data throughout a full school year. Data were collected from September to May and involved observations on average twice a week, both weekly poetry workshops and regular English lessons. In addition, I held four focus groups sessions (Krueger & Casey, 2009) with a group of five students who were identified by the teacher as representative of students in

this classroom based on race, ethnicity, academic success, and interest in poetry. Four group interviews were also held with other students who were interested in talking about their poetry and their experiences in the workshop. What you are reading here is part of a larger study that focused on many aspects of the poetry program, including family participation and collaboration with community members.

Data were generated from three sources: (1) Classroom observations and interactions that were recorded through field notes and audio recording; (2) Student writing; and (3) Individual or small group interviews and discussions that were audio recorded. Classroom lessons, focus groups, and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed in order to be analyzed.

Data Analysis

I began my analysis of this study by coding topics that emerged and using inductive methods to develop categories from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). There were four themes that emerged from this analysis: the learning space of the classroom, the importance of collaborative learning, how knowledge was created, and how students wrote for their audience. Ensuring for trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability was an important consideration of my research design (Merriam, 2009). By having prolonged involvement in the classroom, collaboration with research participants, and varied types of data, I ensured for credibility. The research was transferable through thick description and understanding of the context (Merriam, 2009) and dependable through regular observations and using a variety of methods that overlapped. The data was confirmed by using methods of triangulation (Mills, 2003); while the poems were the focus of analysis, I also juxtaposed comments from focus groups, group interviews, and classroom observations to provide further insight.

Findings

There were four main components of this poetry workshop that provided students with the opportunity to engage with language and learn together. The first significant component of this poetry workshop was that it created a learning space in the classroom where students could express their feelings and experiences through their writing. Second, writing poetry encouraged collaborative learning because students were encouraged to work together during the writing process and often modeled their own writing from fellow students. The third significant point about the poetry workshops was that the structure of the poetry workshops allowed for knowledge to emanate from all participants in this classroom; community members, students, and the teachers were all considered as resources for literacy learning. Finally, writing for performance and publication provided an authentic purpose for students' learning and as a result, many students wrote outside of the classroom and even connected their interest to goals related to their education or future occupations. In the next section, I will elaborate on these four main points and show how the poetry workshop supported and extended students' classroom literacy learning.

Space for expressing feelings – “We can communicate through writing”: Students were encouraged to use their own experiences as topics for their poetry, which created an important space for them to express their feelings and reflect on their lives in a classroom context. One conversation that I had with Cherie was illustrative of how poetry allowed students to write their

life narratives, but also control and understand their perceptions by describing the situation through their writing. During a focus group, Cherie explained how frustrated she was regarding her relationships with her friends. She decided to write about her friendships during the poetry workshop.

I wrote about my friends and how my mom told me never to trust nobody, but I didn't believe her. I had to find out the hard way. I said, "You know, that's my friend," and stuff and then people would tell me that, "You know, she was talking about you; she was saying all this about you."

Cherie's initial poem reflected her sadness and anger towards her friends, but her revised piece was more introspective, focusing on her personal self-reliance and strength. Her poem, which had been composed earlier that same day, demonstrated how she realized that her power came from within:

My friends and teachers always supporting me
Even when I'm in trouble
They are always there for me
Always on the double.
Most important of all
Is me
The talented and loving
Me...

In her poetry, Cherie reconsidered and re-envisioned her situation, and she was able to transform her feelings from sadness and frustration to describing herself in powerful terms. She reflected on how friends were "always there for me" but that she was the most important source of strength.

Some of the students explained that the poetry allowed them to express their feelings and channel their emotions using a positive outlook. Hector reflected this idea during a focus group discussion when he explained that, "I can channel my anger into the poetry. Last year, I got angry a lot and was self-destructive. I've been able to change that because I can communicate through writing."

Hector's poetry reflected anger towards his father, his feelings about current events, and thoughts about racism; he thought about these ideas on a personal and global level and he was able to alleviate some of his negative feelings by writing. For instance, in his poem "Precious," he focused on finding strength within social problems:

Don't ever think you got it bad
People got it worse
If you faced with a choice, make evil drop first
No need to get angry if your glory just faces.
Some people are dying never told the story of AIDS.
Remember one thing, never take anything for granted.

You should never underestimate the preciousness of life
People's lives are lost but we bless the rest with life.

Hector, as told with the vignette at the beginning of the article, had thought about loss and death with his cousin's passing. In several of his poems, he explored the topic of death and wondered about people his age dying. In this poem, he struggles with the idea of anger, evil, decisions, and value of life. All of these topics reflect complex thoughts that he contemplated over the school year. For Hector, as well as other students, their poetry provided them with a way to express and communicate their feelings.

Poetry as a form of social collaboration – “We help each other.” The social nature of poetry writing was very important to students and reflects an important aspect of adolescents' development that is often neglected in school; adolescent students want the opportunity to talk and learn together. While students were often writing about very personal events, they found that they could often relate to their classmates' experiences. For instance, as she was talking about her writing with two other students, Cindi articulated this idea:

Yeah, like the poem where we had to write about a test of our faith, I wrote about...okay... I wrote about how my father and my mother are getting back together... But, it kind of helps you to communicate with the other kids, too. You can find stuff in common with each other. Taniqua was like, I don't have any brothers and sisters, and I can't write about them because I am the only one. Then she found out that William, he is an only child, too.

Students' understanding of shared or similar experiences was one of the things that created a transformative space in this classroom; students' collaboration and sharing created and supported an environment where students developed trust in each other. In one focus group, I asked how they were able to express their feelings in front of the class.

Me: One of the things I'm amazed by is how people are able to read all sorts of things in front of each other. You guys are able to express in front of each other.

Desiree: That's what really helps because you can't really hold our inner thoughts inside and keep them to ourselves. When it's time to express them, people help us with it.

Peer collaboration was an essential aspect of this program and also an important aspect of students' literacy learning. When students composed and then performed their poems, it provided them with opportunities to communicate and learn from each other. Furthermore, they were able to support each others' writing and expression because they took on supportive roles to encourage their classmates.

Distribution of Knowledge – We all learn from each other: By inviting a community member in to the classroom to teach his craft, encouraging children to write about topics relevant to them, and organizing coffeehouses where families participated and performed, this English classroom became a transformative learning experience where all participants could share their expertise and understanding. The students felt that their learning in this classroom was relevant to their lives, and they appreciated the opportunity to reflect on and write about their emotions.

Jeanine and Cindi were two students who reflected on how writing helps to deal with problems, communicate with others, and express feelings in a focus group:

Cindi: It kind of helps because some things that you can't say aloud to certain people, you can write it down in a poem. So it helps you, too, getting problems off your back. And I like how we write poems, but we use the chorus and the title from a song so we make it like a song, and we listen to the song and then we write the poem.

Jeanine: So, it's kind of like a journal, when you have your poetry, except almost everybody knows about it.

Cindi: Because say, she (Yolanda) wasn't her friend any more, and she could go home and write about it, "I'm mad at blah, blah, because she did this." Instead, she could write it in a poem and this way, she could tell other people and then she could talk about it. Because when you talk about your problems, that's the best way to get help. So you should talk about it. If she talks about it, she could probably get more strength to go on.

Jeanine: A lot of people have problems expressing themselves, just talking. By them writing poetry, they get all these emotions and anger that's all bottled up out. And they can actually be directing it and talking to that person.

In this focus group, Jeanine and Cindi convey how articulating emotions leads to strength and that communicating them is an empowering act. Taking the idea of empowerment further, Cindi reflected on how she could use her voice to influence others and convey her beliefs:

Cindi: And poetry helps because when, like kids are the future and we don't speak out. So, when we say how we feel during our poetry slams, Theo was like, "It's not just about these poems, it's about listening to these children express how they feel about the world." Because a lot of people, they will express problems that everybody goes through. You can sit there and compare in their poems. They might be worried differently, but in a way, they all have the same meaning. It's like the same stuff that we feel. So, we are expressing to the public about certain things. And then maybe, someone could hear what we say in our poems and they could do something to change that.

While some students used their poetry to create an outlet for their feelings, Cindi exudes hope that she can express her feelings and change the world. For many of these students, reading and writing poetry was empowering and strengthened their resolve to make their lives better.

Adolescence marks a time where students are adjusting to many real world feelings and experiences, yet the curriculum is often devoid of spaces that reflect this (Bean & Readence, 2002). The poetry workshop provided students with a chance to express their feelings and students reported that it also supported their academic growth. Ms. Martin also confirmed that in many cases, students' attendance improved, their homework grades were better, and their

behavior was positive. Because the teaching and learning included students' ideas and insights, it changed the way the students viewed their relationships with Ms. Martin. In one conversation I had with students they explained to me how their interactions with Ms. Martin is a different kind of relationship than they had experienced with other teachers. Some students explained to me that "...other teachers don't listen to me like Ms. Martin does" and that "Ms. Martin understands that things happen to us. She is understanding". Because learning in this classroom was dialogic and the students were central to the way that literacy was taught and produced, students felt cared for and were more invested in learning for this class.

Authentic learning opportunities – “Maybe I want to be a writer!”: Students' involvement with poetry led to actions that affected their lives in various ways outside of the classroom, connecting their learning across their own life contexts. As a result of their writing experiences, certain students discovered an interest in poetry that led to involvement in other organizations and activities. Out of the 22 students in this classroom, 6 of them pursued additional activities to write and perform poetry in addition to the poetry program. In addition, many students explained to me that they wrote at home, even if they did not participate in formal poetry or writing organizations. Their interest in poetry filtered into various aspects of their daily life and encouraged their participation in activities outside of school.

One student, Shakira, participated in poetry slams around the city. In one slam I attended at a local university, she was the sacrificial poet at a competition that pitted talented, high school students against local, adult poets. A sacrificial poet is a poet who reads at the beginning of a slam in order to give the judges an opportunity to “practice” scoring and critiquing the participants. It is an honor because sacrificial poets are chosen because they have been identified as having a lot of writing potential, and it provides them with exposure. When Shakira was telling me about the poetry slam, she explained how her involvement led to work with an admired poet: “Last year, I was in a poetry club and I got invited to perform at a poetry slam with Nikki Giovanni. They invited me again...I'm a sacrificial poet.” Shakira's interest in poetry extended outside of the classroom into other events and provided her with exposure to events and a nearby university and with a nationally known author. The opportunity added to her lived experiences and provided her with acknowledgement for her strengths and talents. Shakira had never experienced this kind of acclamation before; her experience provided her with important recognition and encouraged her to continue writing and performing.

Hector was another student who sought out other opportunities to write poetry. He joined a lyric writing group taught by Theo at his community organization. The group was comprised of male high school students, and he was the only one in middle school. Hector wanted to pursue more opportunities for writing and mentorship with Theo which led to his involvement in the group. Both Theo and Ms. Martin observed improvements in Hector's school attendance and performance as a result of his increased interest in poetry. Several students, such as Shakira and Cindi, applied to attend a high school with a focus on the arts in order to continue pursuing their interest in writing during their high school experiences. For these students, poetry influenced their present activities and future goals.

Discussion

Students expressed that the poetry workshop created a space where they were comfortable and respected, which represented a vast contrast from their prior school experiences. The focus on emotional and social aspects of their lives was relevant to their own priorities and values. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of the poetry workshop created an atmosphere for peer support and interaction; students were highly influenced by the writing of their peers and used the poetry to communicate important ideas or events. It was important to students that they had an opportunity to express their feelings while they learned about poetry. Being exposed to the craft of poetry writing caused some of the students to pursue other ways to be involved in performing and writing. Relevant topics, peer interaction, and writing for an audience led to increased confidence and a sense of empowerment in this classroom.

In this classroom, students were able to contribute to the curriculum in ways that were relevant and meaningful. The purpose of this approach was twofold; students could use the poetry to convey their ideas and experiences to others and also learn that their perceptions were accepted and supported as commonalities emerged through their writing. Furthermore, other caring adults such as family members and community members had a voice in the literacy learning in the classroom. As hooks (1994) so aptly states, “If the effort to respect and honor the social reality and experiences of groups in this society who are nonwhite is to be reflected in a pedagogical process, then as teachers—on all levels, from elementary to university settings—we must acknowledge that our styles of teaching may need to change” (p. 35). When teachers open up the “poetry club” of the classroom to incorporate the voices and experiences of a variety of people, they enhance the curriculum and welcome multiple viewpoints and perspectives. Poetry has the potential to change and extend students’ learning in many ways, both inside and outside of the classroom.

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