"A Unified Poet Alliance": The Personal and Social Outcomes of Youth Spoken Word Poetry Programming[i]

Susan Weinstein
Louisiana State University, USA

Abstract

This article places youth spoken word (YSW) poetry programming within the larger framework of arts education. Drawing primarily on transcripts of interviews with teen poets and adult teaching artists and program administrators, the article identifies specific benefits that participants ascribe to youth spoken word, including the development of literate identities, therapeutic experiences, overcoming of shyness, and increased self-confidence and self-esteem. The author describes the writing workshop format common to many YSW programs and analyzes the specific contribution of performance to the benefits that participants identify from YSW. This article draws on James Gee's (1991) concept of Discourses to explain the strong identification that many YSW poets feel toward their chosen genre.

Introduction

It turned into 300 poets chanting, marching out of the subway and onto the street. It was like we started this big revolution. (Marco, 2006 Taos youth slam team)

Marco's words, above, describe the aftermath of Brave New Voices, the annual international youth poetry slam festival. The 2006 Brave New Voices (BNV) took place in New York City, with the finals at the legendary Apollo Theater in Harlem. Marco's description focuses on the post-finals trip back to the hostel where the competing teams stayed. In this brief passage, Marco communicates much of the power of youth spoken word (YSW) – its ability to bring diverse youth together through poetry and performance and to help them develop a sense of their own potential power in the world, a sense based on the joy of shared creative passion.

The current article, part of the author's ongoing, multi-year study of YSW programming, represents an initial attempt to outline the major benefits of participation for youth and to identify the sources of those benefits. Drawing primarily on interviews I have conducted over the last three years with youth poets and adult teaching artists, and from observations of YSW activities and events, this article places YSW within larger conversations about a pedagogy of arts education.

As this article will demonstrate, teenagers who participate in YSW programs identify multiple personal and social benefits from their participation. Teen poets develop literate identities; that is, they begin to see themselves as writers and to act on that self-perception. In addition, teen poets regularly report that their self-confidence and their sense of self-efficacy, of belonging, and of purpose are enhanced by their participation in poetry programs. Throughout this article, readers will hear specific narratives from teen poets and their adult mentors about how these outcomes reveal themselves in individual lives. Since this article draws primarily on interview data, it is important to note that what we will be considering here are participant perceptions of the experience of youth spoken word – what people say about what they do with and in youth spoken word –and what they say it does to and for them (see Briggs, 1986). I believe these things matter because such perceptions and representations about what the work is doing create and reflect the values of the movement and join geographically- and socio-economically disparate participants. Nonetheless, at the end of this article, I will talk about issues that would benefit from further, non-interview-centered analysis, analysis that I plan to conduct as I continue working through the data I have collected over these past several years.

Youth Spoken Word as Arts Education

Studies of individual poetry programs have already begun the work of identifying the benefits of YSW. Fisher (2003, 2005, 2007), Holbrook and Salinger (2006), Jocson (2006), and Weiss and Herndon (2001) have documented spoken word programming at individual sites and have argued that such programs increase participant confidence, self-efficacy, and understanding of genre and process. What the current study adds is a widening of the lens to examine the commonalities across teen poets' experiences with youth spoken word programs, in order to establish with some authority the particular qualities of youth spoken word pedagogy that make it effective for so many participants.

Framing this specific focus on poetry education among researchers is a renewed emphasis on the benefits of arts education both in school and out of school (what some refer to as "the extra-curriculum"). A ten year study of after school programming targeted at "disadvantaged" youth found that while youth in all three general categories of programming (sports/academic, community involvement, and the arts) "were doing better in school and in their personal lives than were young people from the same socioeconomic categories" who did not participate in such programs, the youth in the arts programs outperformed their peers in the other types of after school programming (Fiske, 1999, p. viii). In other words, arts programming is uniquely effective with young people who by traditional measures are positioned as at risk. This is, perhaps ironically, because such programming does not itself position such youth as at risk. In other words, it rejects the deficit-based perception of particular categories of young people so common to youth intervention initiatives. Heath and Roach note that "Rather than focus on prevention and detention for 'at-risk' youth, these organizations urge creativity and invention with young people as competent risk-takers across a range of media and situations" (1999, p. 21).

As a result of viewing young people by their abilities, rather than by presumed social/economic/cultural *dis*abilities, these programs demonstrate convincing evidence of "achievement in the face of skepticism about the abilities of young people from communities lacking in economic viability and professional role models" (Heath and Roach, 1999, p. 22). In an educational era where talk about the achievement gap between the socioeconomic haves and have-nots is ubiquitous, the potential of arts programming to reframe the rhetoric and provide effective strategies for action must be taken seriously not only by educators and community workers, but by the funders who have money to support such efforts.

The 1999 report *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning* (Fiske, 1999), published by the Arts Education Partnership and The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, was a timely reminder of the many benefits of arts education at a moment when much conversation around education focused on crisis and (as would become increasingly true

over the next decade) on narrowly measurable outcomes. The summary of the report provides two clear, concise lists: one indicates "*why* the arts change the learning experience" (pp. ix-x) and one indicates *how* (pp. x-xi). While Heath and Roach focus on the benefits of arts education for youth categorized as at risk, the *Champions of Change* summary indicates that arts education is similarly effective at "provid[ing] new challenges for those students already considered successful" (p. ix). The arts reach young people from diverse backgrounds, then, by "transform[ing] the environment for learning" (p. ix) such that all participants engage in "self-directed learning" (p. xi) at the same time that they are guided by carefully trained adults who are themselves practicing artists, thus "enabl(ing) young people to have direct involvement with the arts and artists" and "connect[ing] learning experiences to the real world of work" (p. x). Arts education, according to this report, also takes the role of interpersonal relationships in learning seriously. The arts, we are told, "connect students to themselves and each other" and "provide learning opportunities for the adults in the lives of young people" (p. ix). Finally, *Champions of Change* tells us that the arts "promote complexity in the learning experience" (p. xi), a complexity that encompasses the embodied experience of learning, the "somatic knowledge" (Eisner, 2004, p. 19) which Eisner demonstrates that the arts both generate and require. The report also offers a view of arts education that liberates us from dichotomous thinking:

> The arts no longer need to be characterized solely by either their ability to promote learning in specific arts disciplines or by their ability to promote learning in other disciplines. These studies suggest a more dynamic, less either-or model for the arts and overall learning that has more of the appearance of a rotary with entrances and exits than of a linear one-way street. (p. viii)

In other words, there is a place in conversations about youth spoken word for questions like, "Does YSW programming nurture and/or develop high levels of poetic artistry?" and "Does YSW programming lead to improved academic performance?" But these should not be the only questions asked, the answers to these questions not the only ones valued. Eisner argues that "carryover to the extra-artistic or extra-aesthetic aspects of life is not […] the primary justification for the arts in our schools," since artistic activity carries its own inherent value, which one experiences when one "attends to the world with an aesthetic frame of reference and interacts with forms that make such experience possible" (2002, p. xii). In addition, because an arts orientation implies intensive attention to the process of creation, and not simply to final products or inorganically measured outcomes, *Champions of Change* and studies that follow it (including the present study) aim "to keep[] the focus of change on *learning* [emphasis added]" in educational reform efforts and educational research (Rabkin & Redmond, 2004, p. 13). That is, an arts education orientation encourages us to look for evidence of student success outside of narrowly defined outcomes and more through what young people actually *do* inside and outside

the classroom, and what that *doing* reveals about the development of their abilities to choose, negotiate, and accomplish to their own satisfaction complex, multi-modal activities.

Methodology

In 2006, I began working with a new teen poetry program in Baton Rouge called WordPlay. The director of the program had for eight years been a co-director at Young Chicago Authors, one of the largest teen poetry programs in the U.S., but had decided to bring her wealth of experience back to her hometown of Baton Rouge. I was already familiar with the work done by Young Chicago Authors, as I had lived and taught in Chicago for several years myself and coached a team for their city-wide poetry slam. Thus, I was eager to participate in and document the development of this new program.

Drawing on ethnographic research methods, I have spent many hours as a participant-observer in school- and community-based poetry writing workshops facilitated by WordPlay teaching artists. I have attended five to ten in-school writing workshops each school year from 2005-2006 through 2008-2009. In these classroom workshops, I have generally taken the role of an "extra adult" who can be called on by students for help during writing time or who might offer an additional idea during the direct teaching and discussion parts of the workshop. Like the workshop facilitators, I also participated in the workshop alongside the students by drafting my own poems, listening to others' drafts, and sometimes volunteering to share mine.

My particular role becomes a bit harder to define in terms of WordCrew, a group of teen poets defined by WordPlay as a "poetry and leadership council." Teenagers have to submit an application and attend a mandatory orientation session to become members of WordCrew; they are accepted or rejected not on the basis of their poetic talent, but on whether or not they can show the responsibility and commitment to complete and submit the application and then show up for the orientation. At the core of the WordCrew experience are the weekly evening workshops that WordPlay holds throughout each school year. I have attended these weekly meetings consistently since they started in January of 2006, excepting periods when I was traveling for research (primarily spring 2008, when I conducted research at youth poetry sites in the southwestern and northeastern U.S.).

Many of the WordCrew members call me "Aunty Sue," while others call me "Doctor Sue" and some, especially those I have known for several years now, just call me "Sue." The WordCrew members know that I am an English professor at Louisiana State, one of the two major universities in Baton Rouge (the other is Southern University, a historically Black school). They know that my work has to do with teaching English, and that I am doing research on teen poetry. In the WordCrew workshops, then, I have carved out a particular role slightly different from teacher/mentor/facilitator, though at times I take on each of those roles. It may be useful for

readers to know that both Edward and Lizzie, the Baton Rouge poets quoted throughout this article, were WordCrew members, and so we have participated in numerous workshops and other WordPlay-related events together. Indeed, Edward was the very first WordCrew member back in early 2006; he has now graduated from high school and is completing an internship with WordPlay while he explores his next steps in terms of college/career.

Outside of Baton Rouge, I have conducted interviews with youth poets, teaching artists, program administrators, and classroom teachers from Amarillo, TX; Chicago, IL; Connecticut; Hawai'i; Leeds, England; London, England; New Orleans, LA; New York, NY; Providence, RI; Santa Fe, NM; Stockton, CA; Taos, NM; and Worcester, MA and have collected zines, CDs, and DVDs produced by these programs and others. I regularly attend the annual Brave New Voices youth poetry slam festival and was an early member of the Youth Spoken Word Coalition, an international network of administrators, teaching artists, and teen poets working to create an ongoing conversation about curriculum, fundraising, and other issues central to this work.

My theoretical frame is rooted in New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 1991; Street, 1995). New Literacy Studies posits literacy practices as multiple and as based in specific social contexts. This frame encourages examination of not only literacy practices themselves, but of the power dynamics always at play in communicative situations. In particular, I draw in this article on James Gee's concept of Discourses (he capitalizes the term to distinguish it from the linguistic notion of discourse as an extended speech event) as "ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (1991, p. 127). Youth spoken word, then, is a specific Discourse that young people identify as desirable and then learn how to enter by observing how those already within the Discourse talk, act, dress, perform, and so on.

Often, a goal of educational research is to determine whether a certain approach that has been successful in one site is replicable; that is to say, is there evidence that the same kind of approach will lead to the same kinds of results in different settings? With YSW, we are in a sense working backward. Replication has already occurred across the country and internationally. In one example, San Francisco's Youth Speaks, the largest YSW program in the country, has lent its model and name directly to four partner programs: Youth Speaks Seattle, Youth Speaks Hawai'i, Youth Speaks Wisconsin, and Youth Speaks Nashville. In another example, through the migration of its longtime program director, Young Chicago Authors has spread its model to Baton Rouge's WordPlay, which has in turn assisted in the recent establishment of WordPlay New Orleans. In addition, the founding in 2006 of the Youth Spoken Word Coalition, which holds a summit during each year's Brave New Voices, has led to increased cross-program collaboration among dozens of organizations through the sharing of curricula as well as

approaches to program development, administration, and fundraising. If we can call youth spoken word a movement, it is because of this momentum – the people who participate in this work share a strong belief in its power and are willing to contribute their experiences and expertise to help it flourish wherever there is an adult willing to do the work and young people with an ear for language and a desire to be heard. I believe that academic researchers have a role to play in this movement as critical friends who can do the work of documentation and analysis necessary to all non-profit educational work, and it is in this spirit that the current article is offered.

A Primer on Youth Spoken Word

Spoken word poetry, a.k.a. performance poetry, can be defined as poetry that is written to be performed, as opposed to what is variously referred to as page poetry, literary poetry, or academic poetry, which is written primarily to be read on the page. Both categories – performance poetry and page poetry – draw on common poetic devices including metaphor, imagery, allusion, rhythm, and so on. With performance poetry, two additional texts work in concert with the written text to create a fully-realized piece: the physical text (that is, what the poet/performer does with the body onstage) and the vocal text (the oral delivery of the poem). Of course, these paralinguistic features do have some role in page poetry. Page poetry is itself a physical text, for instance, and some poets emphasize that fact by consciously manipulating the form the words take on the page, in ways that would be difficult to reproduce orally. Oral performance is also a regular feature of page poetry in the setting of poetry readings; the distinction here between performance and page poetry is whether the poem was primarily created for performance or primarily created as a way to expose the work to a public that will then, ideally, go on to read the text in its written form. Similarly, performance poetry often translates quite well to the printed page, and many performance poets publish chapbooks or full volumes of their written work. Live performance, video recording, and audio recording are; however, the ideal media for publishing performance poetry and such poets will often include compact discs or DVDs with their books of poetry. There are, then, commonalities and differences between performance and page poetry, having primarily to do with audience and purpose, which both Discourses attend to in distinct ways.

In terms of pedagogy, most YSW programs are organized around a workshop model. Using the WordPlay (Baton Rouge) curriculum as illustrative, we see a consistent structure for workshops, whether conducted in classrooms or during out-of-school programming. The main variable here is time, in other words how long a workshop goes on, and that generally has to do simply with how much time is available at a given site. The skeleton of the WordPlay workshop is as follows:

- The teaching artist distributes printed copies of the **model poem**. Model poems range from the canonical to the contemporary (both page poetry and spoken word poetry) to

song lyrics, with contemporary page poetry and spoken word poetry predominating across workshops. If the model is a spoken word poem or a song lyric, the teaching artist may play an audio recording of the poem while participants follow along on the page.

- Participants read the model poem/s silently.
- The poem is **unpacked**. For WordPlay, this term specifically refers to the identification and explanation of any words or phrases with which participants are unfamiliar. Usually, the teaching artist will call on participants to either derive the meaning of the unfamiliar terms through context clues within the poem or to draw on prior knowledge to define the terms.
- The model poem is read aloud by a participant volunteer.
- The model poem is **cracked open**. In WordPlay workshops, this phrase refers to digging into the various features of the poem. The teaching artist asks participants, "What lines and images jumped out at you?" This is a key moment in differentiating the WordPlay workshop from the way that poetry is traditionally handled in the English Language Arts classroom, in that WordPlay purposely stays away from emphasizing *meaning* as the central point of poetry. Participants are encouraged to think about sound devices and imagery as elements that distinguish poetry from other forms of creative writing. Sometimes the possible meanings of the poem become part of the discussion, but often they do not. It simply depends on the direction in which the participants take the conversation.
- The teaching artist moves into the **scaffolding** portion of the workshop. Each model poem is chosen to highlight an element that can then be used to prompt participant writing. Sometimes the element is thematic, as with the Shout Out workshop that WordPlay often uses to start off a school-based residency. This workshop uses poet Sekou Sundiata's dynamic "Shout Out" as a model ("Here's to the was you been to the is you in/ To what's deep and deep to what's down and down/ To the lost, and the blind, and the almost found…"). In this workshop, participants work with the teaching artist to brainstorm a list of things that could be included in a Shout Out poem (examples include people, memories, things you hate, etc.). The teaching artist encourages participants to think about creating strong images in their own Shout Outs. The teaching artist will also point to the strong element of repetition in this model poem, and will tell participants that they can follow the model poem's repeated "Here's to…" structure if they so choose.
- Participants are then given time to **draft** their own poem. This is usually about 15-20 minutes, though in a 50-minute class period, it may be as little as 10 minutes.
- With 5-10 minutes left, the teaching artist calls participants back together for the **read around/sharing** portion of the workshop. While all participants are encouraged to share, it is not a requirement, as the element of safety that WordPlay sees as central to its work means that participants always have the final say in whether or not they share their writing with others.

As participants go through WordPlay workshops, they build a writers' toolbox, which is a list of literary elements that they keep in their WordPlay notebook and are encouraged to regularly revisit. Participants will often be prompted by teaching artists in one workshop to draw on their toolbox to identify specific features of a model poem; in this way, participants' understanding of literary elements is regularly reinforced through application to new models.

While many programs do include specific work on performance, my experiences thus far suggest that the forms this takes, and the frequency with which specific instruction in performance occurs, are much more idiosyncratic than with the writing itself. This is true too of specific attention to revision of written work. The most widespread and intensive focus on revision and on performance strategies seems to occur in direct connection with organized competitions, when a coach takes on the responsibility of preparing young poets for the stage. Anecdotal evidence suggests that early on, teen poets in YSW programs internalize performance styles largely from observations of models (adult mentors, popular artists, and peers) rather than from direct instruction. However, the particular ways that YSW programs address the processes of revision and performance is a topic that I plan to take up in future articles growing out of the data collected for this research project.

Teen spoken word programs exist all over the United States; there are several programs in Great Britain, and I have been told of other programs in Europe and Asia (I have not yet had the opportunity to investigate such programs first-hand). To what extent these programs emphasize writing over performance, performance over writing, or both more or less in balance, has to do with the artistic orientations of particular teaching artists and the function of particular programs. In all cases, though, the reason I refer to these programs as teen *spoken word*, rather than as teen *poetry*, programs is because performance at some stage is an integral element of most programs. There are several reasons for this:

> 1. Many contemporary teenagers first become interested in poetry through the lyrics of popular music. Therefore, they have grown up with the idea that performance is a natural part of poetic writing. Rap music, in particular, has emphasized the figure of the individual artist speaking about the experience of being in specific socio-economic relation to the larger world. Whether what is spoken in rap lyrics is literally the truth of the artist's life experience is another question entirely, but the image remains central to the genre and has an impact on what young fans understand to be the role of the artist in society.

> 2. Many of the teaching artists in these programs themselves come out of a background in hip hop, in poetry slam, or both. Thus, their own orientation is toward performance as a primary form of publication.

3. The philosophy that underlies most teen spoken word programming includes a belief that young people often feel silenced or ignored as they go through the many challenges associated with coming of age in a complex historical moment, and so literally speaking their experiences by performing their poetry is viewed as a mode of youth empowerment. This philosophy is illustrated in one of the tag lines used by the Youth Speaks program: "Because the next generation can speak for itself."

4. Performance is a key way that young poets come to recognize and speak to one another. It binds teens together as they listen to each other's words and experiences, it gives them a direct, unmediated experience of audience, and it provides them with what one of the teen poets in this article describes as the "rush" of being onstage – often, teen poets point to their first performance of a poem they have written as a transformative experience that makes them hungry to continue developing their craft.

The educational element comes in through the particular ways that a program chooses to help young writers develop their craft. The educational theorist I have most frequently heard program administrators and teaching artists refer to in talking about their pedagogy is Paulo Freire (2006[1970]), the radical Brazilian philosopher of literacy and education, who posits a "'problem-posing' education […that] rejects communiques and embodies communication" (p. 79). Freire famously claimed that verbal text is central to social transformation, since "to say the true word […] is to transform the world" (p. 88). Indeed, many YSW poems focus on the intersections of individual experience and societal ideologies of race, class, and gender, while for many adults working with YSW programs the focus is as much on youth development as on the craft of writing (these two topics – the thematic content of YSW poetry and the role of youth development/social justice orientations within YSW – merit further examination). It is no surprise that poets committed to supporting positive changes in the lives and experiences of young people and to interrogating the structures that limit such changes would find in Freire a guide and a muse.

Effects of YSW: Literate Identities

The issue of literate identities among teenagers is one that I first explored in my book *Feel These Words: Writing in the Lives of Urban Youth* (2009). Then, I identified ways that the act of writing poetry and rap lyrics led young people to self-identify as writers, which in turn made them think about the creative texts they encountered in classrooms, on the radio, in their neighborhoods, etc. in writerly terms, focusing on the effectiveness of artists' choices about language, tone, form, etc. In the case of the young writers featured in that book, there was little or no guidance from experienced elders to push the teens in their thinking on such questions. With youth spoken word, we see what happens when young writers regularly have such

conversations with adult mentors, and how their sense of self as writers is connected to their experiences with adult poets who have strong views on the composing process and on the role of the writer in the world.

What I encountered supports the findings of Fisher in her book on a spoken word poetry class in New York:

> Students […] began to view themselves as literate, capable human beings who rightfully belonged to a community of poets and writers. In order to move beyond what Joe [the classroom teacher] frequently referred to as 'ascribed lives,' the Power Writers redefined literacy to include their words, voices, and faces around the table. (2007, p. 83)

One of the key ways in which teen poets experience a literate identity has to do with the sense of belonging that it offers them, a sense that they are connected to others who have previously seemed possessed of an almost inaccessible difference. Edward from Baton Rouge describes how this sense of connection develops in WordCrew, the component of WordPlay mentioned earlier that encompasses some 15-20 teen poets who meet for writing workshops one evening a week:

> When we're going to meetings, we're all in the van talking about our problems and stuff. I was like 'Oh my gosh, I never knew these people were like that.' 'Cause you know, I just thought they were normal people that didn't have problems … We relate differently because we have our other activities that we're in … but we also have one thing in common. That's writing, that's performing, that's stuff that we want to do.

Edward describes quite clearly the process by which WordCrew coalesces around writing. He talks about the first WordCrew meeting he attended (also the first WordCrew meeting ever), at which participants started out sitting together by school:

> At the beginning it was kind of school, school, school. Then all of a sudden it was like outgoing versus the quiet, and it was also kind of like Black versus, well not versus, but Black over here and White over here. But it wasn't until we heard everyone else's words that we got to know each other and it just, we just got together, that's it.

Edward's words clearly reflect the conclusion that Fisher came to in her study:

> The [Power Writers] class helped students get to know their peers without depending on convenient stereotypes to assess one another's worth … For Arline, 'another face in the crowd' was transformed into a potential writer … The Power Writers wanted to know, 'Do you write?'. (2007, p. 96)

This idea of poetry programming transforming young people's perceptions of their peers also shows up in the fictional treatment of teen poetry in the young adult novel *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes (2003). In this book, every chapter features teenagers reconsidering their initial, superficial assumptions about one another based on the poems they write and share. I want to emphasize here that it is not the writing of poetry itself that does this work, but poetry *programming*, that is, the organized and ongoing work of a group of young people writing and sharing their work with one another under the guidance of adult mentors who consciously and methodically set up an environment in which teens feel safe enough to expose their experiences and ideas. The programming is powerful because it introduces and invites young people into the Discourse of spoken word poetry. Teens in these programs are regularly exposed to the work of established adult poets, from whom they begin to internalize the norms of the genre; they learn the "social language" (Gee, 2001, p. 20) that spoken word poets use within their artistic communities; they see how people who have already internalized a literate identity walk and talk and otherwise perform that identity in the world. In technical terms, YSW programming involves "a mixture of acquisition and learning." They *acquire* the Discourse of YSW through proximity to adult and peer poets, and they unconsciously internalize the behaviors and social languages that they are exposed to. At the same time, they overtly *learn* the skills and practices of spoken word poetry through structured workshops on various elements of writing and performance. Since "We are better at performing what we acquire, but we consciously know more about what we have learned" (Gee, 1991, p. 139), the educational setting that is structured to provide participants with experiences that allow them to both acquire and learn about a Discourse is ideal.

Young writers discover the pleasures of a shared literate identity within their own local poetry programs, but the power of it is intensified for those who attend Brave New Voices (BNV). Brave New Voices, the annual, international teen poetry slam, made its official debut in 1997. Each year, the festival is held in a different city in the U.S. (the overwhelming majority of teams are from the U.S.), and the funding and organizing duties are shared between the local teen poetry program and Youth Speaks, the Bay Area organization described above as the largest and most well-funded of the YSW programs in the U.S. Most recently (as of the writing of this article), BNV was held in downtown Chicago in July 2009. Fifty teams registered for the festival, which meant some 250 to 300 teen poets, plus various coaches, family members, and

other entourage, staying at two dorms belonging to Columbia College, a small arts college that, not incidentally, housed the first undergraduate poetry major in the U.S. Participants attended workshops and forums, were lauded by Marc Smith (the man commonly credited with starting poetry slam in mid-'80s Chicago), and attended evening entertainments by the likes of Saul Williams, Beau Sia, Roger Bonair-Agard, and the members of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's First Wave Spoken Word and Urban Arts Learning Community. Along with competing in the BNV slam proper, teens also cheered their peers at the Speak Green environmental poetry competition supported by the Sundance Institute and at the late-night MC Olympics, in which BNV participants who write and freestyle rap lyrics got to display their talents. Six teams were participating in BNV for the first time in 2009; the finals stage, at the ornate Chicago Theater, featured performances by the four teams who made it to finals through competition, as well as invited performances by teams who hadn't made it to finals but had performed particularly well-received poems during the preliminary bouts. A high point of the evening came from a performance by the team from Guam, who attended this year as non-competitors but electrified the finals audience with a group poem about Guam's complex position as a U.S. territory.

Marco, a member of the 2006 Taos team, remembers the impact of his experience at BNV in New York: "All the poets staying in the same hostel is just crazy. Everywhere you went there were people beatboxing. I've never been somewhere where there's people making all kinds of noise, rapping in the halls at 2:30 in the morning." Marco also recalls how his sense of literate community – of the spoken word Discourse – developed in light of attending Brave New Voices: "Seeing a group of people your same age, you have something in common with everyone. Even if you have totally different lifestyles, you're still a poet. There's like a unified poet alliance. If you know someone's a poet, you're not intimidated by them."

It becomes clear from listening to teen poets that a literate identity consists of two major components. There is the knowledge of craft: learning the language and the application of poetic writing, the function of metaphor, of sound devices, of rhythm, and so on. But surrounding and supporting this internalization of craft is a direct experience of artistic community. This is Marco's "poet alliance," and it means that one can sustain a sense of belonging, of shared purpose, with the Discourse by remaining intellectually and emotionally connected to powerful and powerfully social experiences like open mic events, workshops, and slams, and one can signal one's belonging through one's own actions. Being supportive of other poets makes you a functioning part of the Discourse, as listening to poetry CDs or watching performances on YouTube allows you to become ever more an insider by learning about different performers, styles, and themes that are central to the Discourse. It's a whole world, and a world that can be intensely exciting to young people who have not previously felt a strong sense of social connection based on their personal interests. In terms of learning, this socialization process

indicates that identification with a particular Discourse precedes and engenders a commitment to and mastery of craft.

Discussing the way that this conception of learning maps onto children's early literacy development, James Gee phrases the idea succinctly as "identity before competence" (2001, p. 20). This formulation is quite different from a skills-based approach to schooling, and it explains why arts education at its best is effective. It teaches skills in the context of specific Discourses that are attractive to teenagers, and in which they can imagine themselves participating. In the case of YSW, it looks something like this: A teenager identifies YSW as a Discourse to which he/she wants to belong. Perhaps there is an assembly at school that features a spoken word performance, or the teen reads *Bronx Masquerade*, or comes across an episode of HBO's *Brave New Voices* series (this series documented the 2008 BNV and aired on HBO in May 2009), and feels a pull to take part (see the sections below about what drew specific teens to YSW). If this teen lives in a place where there is YSW programming, he/she finds that programming, attends a workshop or applies to be a member, and then the teen starts to see how seriously insiders take poetry, starts to hear and want to be able to claim the insider knowledge that grounds the community, and wants to become someone whose skills are respected by other insiders.

As Joshua from the Providence team says, in talking about his first experience preparing for and attending BNV, "As much as AS220 [the community arts space that houses poetry events in Providence] to the outside Providence world is mind blowing, the national poetry slam team [experience] is mind blowing compared to just this little venue in Providence. I was prepared to have my mind blown, and I was blown away, I was floored." Joshua's *mindblowing* sounds like a significant shift in his understanding of the possibilities for being in the world. His mind was blown first by discovering the arts collective AS220 in Providence, where he saw that people of diverse ages and backgrounds can and do choose to identify themselves as artists and to devote intense time and energy to developing their craft alongside one another. Then his mind was blown again when he became part of the national team: first, during team rehearsals, he learned the level of commitment, of sheer work, that is required to prepare for a competitive artistic goal, and then, at BNV, he was overwhelmed by the experience of being together with youth from all over the country with whom he has already been indirectly in community. Like many teens who have participated in BNV, Joshua says that the most powerful part of the festival is the social world that exists outside of the formal schedule. Indeed, this is the time during which youth poets, each year, build upon and revise the Discourse of YSW: "You're in close living facilities with four hundred of some of the smartest, best youth poets in the country and from other places in the world, just to kick it. So it's all about the after-hours stuff. Freestyle sessions pop up, there's open mics everywhere. *And* you get to go to slams, *and* you get to compete. It just keeps going. It's *great*."

The sense of literate identity as a shared thing, something that young people have in common with one another and are developing together, is both connected to and in tension with competition. Competition within the Discourse of YSW takes the overt form of slam and the less direct form of wanting to be respected by in-group peers (see more on the role of respect in the next section). In many cases, this competitive quality pushes teens to learn more about the craft of poetry. Steve from the Connecticut team says that for his team, competition has generated a "mutual effort to try to write better poetry, rather than an assignment. It is an assignment, but instead of 'Oh, I have to give something in so I can get credit,'" the aim is for the team to perform well and get respect from other teams at BNV. His contrasting of writing for and with his YSW team to writing for a school assignment is not surprising; for many youths, the revelation of YSW is that writing can yield rewards that are more valuable and more authentic than school grades. It can get you respect from people you respect, and it can gain you entry into a community (a Discourse) that you want to enter and live within. These are motivations and outcomes that are not impossible to generate within schools and classrooms, but they require teachers and administrators to take a broader view of learning and of outcomes than they often feel able to do, given the particular ways that schooling is structured in the U.S.

Teachers who do choose to become involved in YSW often do so because they have seen positive effects on teens they know, and participation can help these teachers learn new things about their own practice. Dawn, a public high school English teacher in Baton Rouge, says of YSW:

> It challenges students to think critically. Half of it is performing in front of their peers. It encourages them to do well, even to have a good message, not to get up there and say something about 'my grill.' [Instead, teens learn that they have to] say something important about my grill. I think you can have a wonderfully performed poem but not have it responded to well if nothing's said. What do you want to say? You have something to say, now say it. [YSW] has helped me to cultivate that.

This quotation suggests that Dawn has seen the WordPlay workshops in her classroom have a direct effect on the level of her students' willingness to think critically and to delve more deeply into familiar subject matter. But it has also helped her figure out ways to challenge her students' approach to writing and to specific topics in ways that are generative, that tap into what her students care about and desire beyond passing grades.

The literate identity that teen poets develop through participation in YSW programming has multiple implications: it can provide the sense of belonging that teenagers often yearn for, it fosters a healthy sense of competition as teens strive to be as good as the peers and established artists whose work they are regularly exposed to, and it gives them an understanding of how

artistic communities function and how they can themselves enter or establish such communities for themselves.

Outcomes of YSW: The Psychological and the Social

Therapeutic Benefits

When we talk about the psychological benefits of making art, we often find ourselves talking in therapeutic terms. There is no shortage of therapeutic narratives in YSW. In one example from my research, Allison (Connecticut) says, "Whenever I write, it's always a healing process for me, getting stuff down on paper and just making sure that my emotions don't go out to other people." Marco, a former Taos team member, now attending a state university in the southwest, sees spoken word as having helped him deal with deep-seated psychological issues:

> My mom died when I was young, in the fourth grade, and I always had a lot of problems with depression and stuff, and dealing with emotions and stuff like that. And once I got into poetry it gave me this other way to vent and this other way to express myself.

Kate, coach of the Hawai'i team, identifies this kind of support as one of the main benefits she sees in spoken word programming:

> Working with a lot of at-risk kids, learning how many kids out there are really in trouble, so emotionally fragile with no outlet, and then to see them discover poetry … To know that they've got that place to go, [that] doesn't involve cutting, drugs, extreme promiscuity, all the things teens tend to do when they're on that self destructive path…

Edward (Baton Rouge) echoes Kate as he narrates his own pre-poetry hardships:

> From the second semester [of] my eighth grade year to right about the beginning of second semester my sophomore year, it was a bad time, 'cause I had low grades, I had an unsuccessful relationship, people were hurting me, I was being stereotyped, I was being judged, all this stuff. I was like, 'Oh my goodness, I can't handle this' … Until WordCrew came along, I got exposed to new things and I was like 'Okay, I have a reason to live. I'm gonna keep doing better and better.'

Julie, a classroom teacher who has worked with the Connecticut program for many years, talks about seeing the transformative power of YSW through the experience of her own son:

> My son was the quiet, much harassed and abused, and actually received a death

threat student. There was nothing to pick on him for, but in elementary he had gotten that dictionary mouth, so when he started with the poetry, I gave Elaine (who runs Connecticut's UpWords program) his first poem. She said, 'This is really good. I want to work with him.' So I dragged him from Trumbull to Hartford. It changed his life. It was therapeutic for him. He had a lot of issues he was dealing with. When he met Elaine and the other kids on the team, he was like the leader of the team. So Elaine, I credit her. He always was going to write and read. But I credit her with supplying him with a group that gave him unconditional love.

YSW grounds a very personal process – writing one's individual experiences – within a social milieu that involves sharing one's poetry, critiquing and revising together, and performing for and with an audience. So the individual therapeutic benefits of creating art are combined with the interpersonal benefits of working on that art with peers and adult mentors. Ideally, then, YSW helps young people work through their individual, deeply personal issues at the same time that it creates a supportive community in which those issues can be safely shared. This creates a situation that can help youths who have felt that their experiences and feelings alienate them from others to reframe those beliefs. There is, of course, some risk here. Creating a space in which teens regularly share personal experiences is a huge responsibility, and one that should be taken on carefully.

Shyness, Self-confidence, and Performance

Lizzie from Baton Rouge recalls the effect that her very first WordCrew meeting had on her: "After the first 5 minutes I had adrenaline rushes 'cause I was so happy and stuff, and I was just pumped and just talked for like three hours to my mom afterwards 'cause I was so happy." But, she echoes Edward's comments above about his initial impressions of other WordCrew members as she acknowledges that one meeting didn't completely cure her shyness:

Actually meeting people in the group was harder for me because I'm a really shy person. It's just really difficult for me to go up and start talking to people. And like I'm not really, I don't have a lot of things in common with most of the kids in the group, like we have writing in common and like, but I'm not really like a gangsta or anything, to put it that way…

Edward also talks about how his way of responding to negative peer judgments has changed from his pre-WordCrew days: "Back then they was like, 'He's kinda weird.' And right now I'm probably getting in their faces and telling them to shut up because they just don't know who I am, they just look." For Edward, then, it's not so much that he's no longer ever perceived negatively by others as that he now has the self-confidence to put such perceptions in perspective – and such perceivers in their place.

Again, it is not solely the writing of poetry that generates psychological and social growth for teens. As Marco (Taos) explains, the performance element is integral: "You get a rush onstage, I don't get that rush from a lot of other places." Lizzie (Baton Rouge), another self-professed shy kid, identifies the performance element in spoken word as having helped her:

> WordCrew has really helped me to say what I mean more. Like I used to get stage fright really, really badly … I used to start shaking and my face would get red and I'd start crying and I'd have to run away. Yeah, it was bad.

Like Lizzie, Catherine (Connecticut) credits the performance aspect of spoken word in particular with drawing her out: "It's just made me a much more social person, much more comfortable with performance. I've learned that I thrive in a performance atmosphere … In junior high, I was so shy. It made me so much more comfortable in my own skin, it's fantastic." In fact, the supportive, social nature of YSW makes it attractive to the not-so-shy as well. As Anthony (Providence), who describes himself as a "born extrovert," explains of his relationship to his team, "I have other support systems. I'm not gonna be like, 'Oh, I had no other friends before I joined poetry and they brought me together.' I'd be able to survive without them. But I wouldn't want to."

Aesthetic Space

The role that performance plays in attracting and maintaining youth involvement in YSW programming is critical. The "rush" that Marco experiences onstage is generated by the nature of what Boal (1995) calls the *aesthetic space* – any place where the norms of "the stage" (performer) and "the auditorium" (audience) are mutually enacted by participants (p. 18). In such a space, "performance … calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of expression and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performer with special intensity" (Bauman, 1977, p. 11). Thus, at open mics and poetry slams, and less formally in the read-arounds at the end of writing workshops, teens find themselves, their words, and the experiences they reflect "regard[ed] … with special intensity." The performance key of a particular Discourse carries normative behaviors for the audience: it "fixes the attention of the audience more strongly on the performer, binds the audience to the performer in a relationship of dependence that keeps them caught up in his [*sic*] display" (Bauman, 1977, p. 16).

In addition to this interdependence of audience and performer, there are specific "ground rules of performance," in other words, "the set of cultural themes and ethical and social-interactional organizing principles that govern the conduct of performance" (Bauman, 1977, p. 28). These ground rules are both overtly and covertly communicated in YSW, and they make it likely that

teen poets will be positively reinforced when they get onstage to share what they have composed. Some of this is carried over from poetry slam culture, whose mantra of "the points are not the point, the poetry's the point" and exhortations to audiences to boo slam judges if they don't like the scores are ubiquitous at youth slams. But there is also an emphasis on process in youth spoken word pedagogy that encompasses the way that peer poetry is responded to. The valuable thing, and the thing to be responded to onstage, is not just the poem itself. It is the hard work of composing and writing the words, the emotional risk of self-revelation, and, finally, the courage to read or perform the poem aloud to an audience. Certainly, young audiences also respond in the moment to lines and images that strike them, and some poems are received with greater levels of enthusiasm than others. But the default response to a performed poem in the YSW Discourse is positive and supportive. This is often taught directly in YSW workshops and is regularly modeled by teaching artists and experienced teen participants as youth poets perform. For example, in Baton Rouge, we regularly see audience members snapping their fingers in approval at specific words or lines, and YSW audiences invariably applaud and shout supportive comments when a performer forgets a line.

The performance frame of YSW thus carries certain norms that create a sense of trust and safety among participants. Yet that alone would not account for the "rush" that Marco describes from being onstage. To the structure of the performance frame, we have to figure in the element of instability, of risk, that is, the "emergent quality of all performance" which "resides in the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of the participants, within the context of particular situations" (Bauman, 1977, p. 38). The structure of the experience is predictable; the particular nature of the experience is not, and this combination of safety and risk generates for performers a "rush" and a desire to repeat that rush on a regular basis.

Respect

Related to the themes of confidence and increasing social adeptness is the idea of respect. As young poets start taking their craft seriously and gaining confidence through the support of adults and peers within spoken word, they often find that peers outside of that immediate world start taking them more seriously as well. My experiences as a classroom teacher and a researcher of teen literacy practices has provided me with anecdotal evidence that teenagers commonly respect artistic ability of various sorts, and certainly young people immersed in hip hop culture in particular are schooled in the idea that "skills" equal respect (in my last study, one young rapper claimed that as long as you've got the skills to rap, you'll get respect no matter where you come from - "you can be a damn duck," he said [Weinstein, 2009, p. 28]). Marco from Taos says:

> I love poetry. It's a powerful thing. It's given me a lot of leverage that I didn't have
> before. When I was in high school, nobody would really talk to me. I had my friends

and everything, but people didn't know who I was; I wasn't really popular. But when people started hearing my rap…

I ask him if he thinks that his writing got him respect: "I think that's a big part of why I write. I get a lot of satisfaction from being onstage, and when people like what you're saying, you feel approval, and it's reassuring, I guess." Edward's (Baton Rouge) experience is similar to Marco's:

I finally feel like I have a voice, that people are actually listening to me … At the beginning of the year, in WordCrew people were listening to what I'm saying, but in school and other places, people were saying, 'Oh, what's that?' I was like, 'Oh, that's my poem.' 'Oh, can I read it?' And I was like, 'Yeah.' And they just get into it and the next day they want to read it again, and the next day they want to read it. It happens all the time.

Edward recalls a particular evening when he performed a poem that elicited a big response from the audience:

It was a whole bunch of snaps, whole lots of cheers. And in the middle of the poem I kinda stuttered over and I had to stop, and that's when I felt love from my audience. They were just like snapping and hollering and whooping, and I'm like, 'Okay, I'm gonna keep on going.'

As mentioned above, the kind of support Edward describes is something that is overtly taught, as well as indirectly modeled, by adult mentors in teen poetry programs. Unless a safe and supportive ethos is established in a workshop, there will be little writing and less public sharing of work. So teen poets are instructed from the onset to "respect the mic," a phrase borrowed from hip-hop culture that, in YSW terms, means to give full attention to whomever is sharing their poetry, to show appreciation for a particular phrase or idea with claps or snaps, and to help the performer through difficult moments with cheers and shouts of encouragement. The result of this is not a lack of critical response to teen poets, but a trust among young poets that they are among friends, that the risk they are taking by exposing their words – and themselves – is acknowledged and supported by the audience.

Carol, an English teacher at a prestigious Baton Rouge high school that has been involved with WordPlay since its inception, talks about one young poet, Callie, who suffered less from shyness than from what might be called a deep case of difference. Callie's parents are both English professors, and early in high school, she struck her teachers as being somewhat separate from her peers:

She distanced herself for the first two years of high school, you know, not really a part of the group. And now she is. She's very willing to stand up and read a poem. Now the 'cool kids' in my creative writing class, they're not the ones known for good writing. They asked Callie to come and do her SAT poem [a poem criticizing standardized tests that Callie performed locally and at Brave New Voices], and they asked her to do it again. And Callie's not part of their crowd. It's just that they really, really liked [the poem], and they really thought it was cool, and they thought Callie was cool. Before they thought she was weird. All of us as adults appreciate Callie because she's an old spirit, but this has given Callie an opportunity to rejoin her peers.

Self-Esteem and Motivation

The combined elements of developing social skills and respect can result in increased self-esteem and motivation to learn, which Dawn, an English teacher who was working at an alternative high school in Baton Rouge when she first engaged with WordPlay, says has led to a noticeable increase in engagement at school:

Even teachers in other content and elective areas have made it a point to tell me that students involved in WordPlay, especially those who have attended Freshhhh Heat [WordPlay's monthly open mic event], have shown increased self-esteem. In alternative schools, students suffer greatly from low self-esteem; many believe that teachers want to prove them wrong more than they want to help students. Therefore, increased self-esteem helps to make this perceived wall between students and teachers more permeable for the student, which in turn increases the student's engagement in class. In short, the student is more willing to participate in learning, and therefore allows him or herself to take an initiative in his or her own education by becoming engaged. (Personal email communication)

Dawn describes the trajectory of one student in whom she saw clear changes:

Devaun, he wasn't involved from the beginning, but as our group grew and other people started talking about it, he would write but keep it to himself, share it with a couple of people in the group, and eventually he performed at Jambalaya Day, with his peers, and finally he performed at the last Freshhhh Heat that we had. And he's become a mentor to other students with writing, he's realized he's a good writer, he has good thoughts.

The kind of self-esteem that Dawn describes is something that students gain when they take risks and experience success meeting challenges. Getting up onstage to perform a piece of personal

writing to a crowd of strangers and friends would be a challenge for most anyone. The comments of young poets and their adult mentors suggest that this act gives young people the confidence to continue facing their fears and trying things that seem hard. The applause at the end of a performance, the appreciative comment from an audience member, the pat on the back from classmates and friends – these are the external rewards that generate internal confidence and make the risks worth continuing to take.

Conclusion

It is evident from the issues raised and analyzed in this article that youth spoken word poetry programming can have a powerful effect on participants. Educators and youth workers can draw from what youth say is effective about this programming as they create and revise programming within their own particular contexts – even those that are not specifically literary in nature. Looking at the claims that youth and adult participants in YSW make about their experiences offers a productive starting point for considering what may be useful about participation in creative Discourses like YSW. The literate identity that teen poets develop through participation in YSW programming has multiple implications: it can provide the sense of belonging that teenagers often yearn for, it fosters a healthy sense of competition as teens strive to be as good as the peers and established artists whose work they are regularly exposed to, and it gives them an understanding of how artistic communities function and how they can themselves enter or establish such communities for themselves. The psychological and social benefits that teen poets and their adult mentors regularly reference in their talk about their work certainly require further exploration. It is one thing for a young person to say that performing poetry affects his/her sense of self, and another to document the specific ways that this does or does not reveal itself through concrete experiences.

Ultimately, I hope that this article will be useful to educators and academics in a variety of fields, not only by foregrounding a particular artistic Discourse that may have been previously unfamiliar, but by encouraging attention to the potential for the arts generally, and the literary arts in particular, to help us think differently about teaching and learning. As Eisner claims:

> Work in the arts is not only a way of creating performances and products; it is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture. (2004, p. 3)

The arts, in other words, can be the site of an enormously expansive version of education. I hope this article has demonstrated the potential for youth spoken word, as a form of arts education, to generate this rich kind of learning.

References

Barton, D., Hamilton, M. and Ivanic, R. (2000). *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*. Routledge: London.

Bauman, R. (1977). *Verbal art as performance*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Boal, A. (1995). *The rainbow of desire: The Boal method of theatre and therapy*. London: Routledge.

Briggs, C. (1986). *Learning how to ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eisner, E. (2004). *The arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Fisher, M. (2007). *Writing in rhythm: Spoken word poetry in urban classrooms*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Fisher, M. (2005). From the coffee house to the school house: The promise and potential of spoken word poetry in school contexts. *English Education*, *37*(2), 115-131.

Fisher, M. (2003). Open mics and open minds: Spoken word poetry in African diaspora participatory literacy communities. *Harvard Educational Review, 73*(3), 362-89.

Fiske, E. (ed.). (1999). *Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning*. Washington,

D.C.: The Arts Education Partnership & The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.

Freire, P. (2006[1970]). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Gee, J. (2001). Reading, language abilities, and semiotic resources: Beyond limited perspectives on reading. In *Literacy as snake oil: Beyond the quick fix*, Larson, J. (ed.). New York: Peter Lang.

Gee, J. (1991). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. Falmer Press: London.

Grimes, N. (2003). *Bronx masquerade*. New York: Puffin.Heath, S.B. & Roach, A. (1999). Imaginative Actuality: Learning in the Arts during the

Nonschool Hours. In Fiske, E. (Ed.) *Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning*. Washington, D.C.: The Arts Education Partnership & The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.

Holbrook, S. & Salinger, M. (2006). *Outspoken!: How to improve writing and speaking skills through poetry performance*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Jocson, K. (2008). *Youth poets: Empowering literacies in and out of schools*. New York: Peter Lang.

Jocson, K. (2006). "There's a better word": Urban youth rewriting their social worlds through poetry. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *49*(8), 700–707.

Rabkin, N. & Redmond, R. (2004). *Putting the arts in the picture: Reframing education in the 21st century*. Chicago: Columbia College.

Street, B. (2003). What's "new" in New Literacy Studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education, 5*(2), 77-91.

Street, B. (1995). *Social literacies*. Longman: London.

Weinstein, S. (2009). *Feel these words: Writing in the lives of urban youth*. Buffalo: SUNY Press.

Weiss, J. & Herndon, S. (2001). *Brave New Voices: The YOUTH SPEAKS Guide to Teaching Spoken Word Poetry*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

About the Author

Susan Weinstein is an assistant professor of English at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where she teaches classes in English Education and literacy studies. Her first book, *Feel These Words: Writing in the Lives of Urban Youth*, was published in 2009 by State University of New York Press. Her research has appeared in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *Written Communication*, and *English Education*, among others. Prior to entering academia, Dr. Weinstein taught high school in both Chicago, Illinois and Cochabamba, Bolivia, and she has coached three youth poetry slam teams in Chicago and in Baton Rouge.

---

[i] The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewer who read the manuscript in both its original and revised forms. This reader's comments were meticulous, and the guidance they provided was invaluable.

International Journal of Education & the Arts