

Brave Voices through Time and Space: Poetry Café for Young People

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The absence of art is poverty... A true poet is a person of the heart. Somewhere it's that thing called love that inspires one to sing. Out of the pain, joy, and sorrow a man or woman can discover their wings. (Ethelbert Miller)

Overview

This unit will provide students with tools to appreciate and critique African American poets and their distinctive voices that use figurative language, sound devices and reflect upon some collective experiences. This unit is designed to demystify poetry as a difficult genre. I often find that many of my students and teacher colleagues view poetry with skepticism. I hear in my classroom or the teachers' lounge, "I don't think like a poet- therefore, I don't understand poetry." Poetry is further complicated by the canon which marginalizes or excludes many deserving African American poets. Therefore, teaching African American poetry presents interesting challenges. For example, many teachers cover African American poetry in a superficial way either during African American history month or in April during National Poetry Month. Hence, students may view African American poetry in cultural isolation and not make connections or inquiries into the ways it excites linguistic pleasure and illuminates the larger historical context.

Exactly how do teachers integrate teaching African American poetry in our standardized curriculum? Do we teach African American poems as stand-alone curriculum objects? Do we use poems pre-selected an anthology? Do we primarily focus on teaching literary concepts such as metaphors, similes, personification, which students come across in high-stake test? This unit is designed to address these concerns for middle school teachers (grades 6th -8th). It will cut across the curriculum by incorporating music, art, social studies, reading and writing. This unit

will provide students with an opportunity to read, write, speak, and think about poetry; to research, write biographies and practice criticism of African American poetry; and understand the role voice has in presenting real youth issues. The unit will culminate in a Poetry Café performance that will allow students to show-case their own poems; dramatically recite traditional and contemporary poems; and create multi-media presentations of poetic voices and spoken word performances. Through providing an opportunity for my students to talk about, respond, and read out loud African American poetry students should better understand the pleasures and nuances to be found in works by African American poets.

Rationale:

How and when to teach African American Poetry is an essential question teachers must consider. Instead of teaching African American poetry in a standard sequential unit, teachers may want to use the practice of reading a poem a day or making Fridays, African American poetry day. When I had more flexibility in my curriculum; I used Fridays, as my poetry corner day. At the beginning of class, we read, responded, or discussed a poem or completed mini-lessons on certain forms or techniques of poetry. Students seemed to enjoy this approach. However, due to testing mandates and my districts' standardized curriculum scope and sequence, I moved away from the "poetry corner day" and taught poetry during a focused unit of study, or used poetry to teach specific literary concepts as per the curriculum. I suggest that African American Poetry can be integrated, as a specific genre study; selected poems of particular African American poet(s) could be surveyed or; African American poetry could be centered on a specific theme or historic period.

I have had some success in teaching poetry in a variety of formats. I have developed a Poetry Café program that teaches poetry to support multiple learning styles and support cooperative learning. My Poetry Café has been implemented as a sequential unit over a 3-6 week period or as stand-alone lessons spread over the course of a school year. I have taught a unit which used Paul Lawrence Dunbar's classic "We Wear the Mask" as a thematic literary and visual arts project. Students analyzed and interpreted Paul Lawrence Dunbar's Poem, "We Wear the Mask" and were guided to use the muse from Dunbar's work to recite his original poems, and compose their own poems, spoken word, rap and dramatic monologues that explored the complexities of identity. I have also had success teaching poems using the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) and the Poetry Foundation, Poetry Out Loud program to teach poetry recitation skills.

What makes this unit unique from my past poetry units, is that this unit specifically uses poems from African American poets that address youth issues or uses the voices of young people or older speakers reflecting on their youth. In attempting to help my students understand voice and allowing them to find their own voices, I foresee some complications. First, the issue of neatly fitting the study of African American Poetry within a "standardized curriculum" creates some tensions. Although some African American poems are included in my district's prescribed

“Elements of Literature Anthology”, these poems may or may not fit with themes specific about youth voice.

The African American poems included in the Holt, Rinehart and Winston “Introductory Course-Elements of Literature,” do teach specific literary concepts. For example the traditional ballad, “Ole John Henry” is included in the anthology to teach about the theme “Machines Great and Small” and specifically to teach about sound devices such a refrain, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. Second, aligning poems selected for this unit with the “standardized curriculum”, present other problems, in that a poem like “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks, may not fit perfectly in the core curriculum themes or scope or sequence of skills being taught. Third, balancing the selection of contemporary poets with traditional poets can be a daunting task. Which poems to include and which to exclude is always a vexing problem. In June Jordan’s “Poetry for the People- A Revolutionary Blue Print” edited by Lauren Miller, contemporary poets are asked to address this very issue.

Adrienne Rich explains that even into her early adulthood she believed that “the poets in the anthologies were the only real poets.” Certainly many of us first learned about poetry in the way Rich describes. We believed that the relatively few and almost exclusively male Anglo-Saxon poets were “inspired by some transcendent authority and spoke from some extraordinary height”ⁱ

Choosing poems to teach is therefore a crucial act. What poems are best suited to lead students to harness their own voices? Having students reflect on and critically think about poems that speak to youth issues should help them understand their worldview and improve their multi-modal literacy skills. In her essay, “Blood, Bread and Poetry,” Rich speaks about her experience growing up hearing and reading poems. She recalled the sounds, repetition, musicality, rhythmic beats as well as power of concrete and sensual imagery. She also thought anthologies were only for real poets; that poetry was an expression of a higher world view. She eventually evolved and became a critic of the Euro centric male dominated cannon. She noted that “Every group that lives under the naming and image-making power of the dominant culture is at risk from this mental fragmentation and needs art which can resist it.”ⁱⁱ This perspective is relevant for teachers who seek to present and elicit voices of black children. Rampersad in his introduction to “Oxford Anthology of African American Poetry” reveals that the black children serve as inspiration for poets. “Over generations, the child has been perhaps the most poignant symbol both of despair and hope, of cynicism and optimism.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The pedagogical approach for this unit will emphasize inquiry rather than passive absorption. Paulo Friere, the Brazilian educator and author of the book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* argues for more equality-oriented education environments, in which the teacher learns from her students and students understand that the role of student involves teaching.^{iv} Using compelling poems

about youth should play an essential role in engendering a class climate that validates and situates my students at the center of learning instead of on its fringes.

This unit will incorporate literacy standards which are tested during the Pennsylvania Department of Education' Assessment (PSSA) and Philadelphia School District's Benchmark tests. Some specific standards include 1.1.6.G.1: Summarize the major ideas/themes 1.2.6.A.4: Utilize the knowledge of text organization and content to determine author's purpose, effectiveness, thoroughness, 1.3.6.C.2: Describe figurative language (e.g., personification, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, allusion) 1.6.G.4: Cite evidence from the text to support responsible assertions. Detailed literacy standards are included in the Appendix # 1.

This unit builds on my long-standing interest in using poetry and finding ways to engage young people with the power of words as they move from "the page to the stage." What follows are highlights about poets and types of poems this unit could use to mentor students, explore youth issues and help young people develop their own voices.

Before students begin to write, publish and perform their own work, students will be exposed to a variety of works from a portfolio of poems. I will select works from poets I personally admire such as Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, Nikki Giovanni, Walter Dean Myers, Arnold Adoff, Toi Derricotte, and Lucille Clifton. I will have students view and read contemporary slam poets such as Gayle Danley, Saul Williams and up and coming voices aired on the HBO documentary, *Brave New Voices*. Spoken Word poems could be used to serve as a bridge to the hip hop aesthetic with which many of my students are familiar. The poems used in this unit cover a trajectory poets and voices that could be group as follows:

Langton Hughes

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) is perhaps the best known African-American writer of the first half of the twentieth century. His literary career spanned the years of the Harlem Renaissance, and civil right movement. Hughes was an exceptionally versatile writer, publishing poetry, fiction, plays, essays and history, autobiography, and children's literature. Hughes painted a portrait in his writings; he addressed social issues, as well as crafted poems that spoke to the dreams and aspirations of young and old.^v The question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" in Hughes' poem "Harlem- a Dream Deferred" represents a great inquiry for my middle school students. This poem is anthologized widely, and is included in NEA and Poetry Foundation's Poetry Out Loud collection. My students often select this poem to recite; I think this poem attracts my students because of its theme and literary devices. The poem is not a difficult read, but it poses complex questions. In the first stanza, it counters rhetorical questions, with similes, "like raisin in the sun", "like rotten meat" and "like syrupy sweet". In the second stanza, only two lines hints at what happens to dream, while the last line uses a metaphor. "it explodes". The poem offers an excellent study for both the pleasures of poetic sound and figurative language.^{vi}

Robert Hayden, Dudley Randall

Robert Hayden and Dudley Randall were contemporaries; their literary vision for social change recognized the material realities of racism, but at the same time they advocated literary possibilities that transcended racial and ethnic borders. They could be considered bridge poets between the poets from Langston Hughes' era, with poets of the Black Arts Movement such as Nikki Giovanni and Haki Madhubuti ^{vii}

Robert Hayden (b. 1913-1980) was born of racially mixed ancestry. His biographical mother gave him to William and Sue Ellen Hayden from Detroit who raised Hayden, as their own child. ^{viii} His poem "Those Winter Sundays" is also included in the *Poetry Out Loud* anthology. Students connect with the theme of father and son connections. This poem offers students an opportunity to study both content and form. For example, students may find that the hard "c" and "k" sounds (consonance) contribute to the mood the poem.

Dudley Randall (b. 1914-) is a poet, publisher, editor and founder of Broadside Press. He is considered a gifted poet and credited for being an inclusive editor for wide range of black poetic voices. ^{ix} Randall's "Ballad of Birmingham" is another poem in the *Poetry Out Loud* anthology that resonates for many of my students. Many of my students have a vague understanding of the civil rights movements, and this poem, based on the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 would serve as an excellent teaching resource. Some students have viewed Spike Lee's documentary "Four Little Girls" and I have noticed that poem has big impact when read out loud. The conversation between the mother and the child grabs my students' attention. This poem would fit in well with social justice topics incorporated in my school district's core curriculum.

Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, Toi Derricotte, Nikki Giovanni –

Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton and Toi Derricotte, and Nikki Giovanni represent some of the best African American women modern poets. Their poetry is very often celebratory of a life that, despite its hardships and injustice, presents redeeming qualities of black life. ^x

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917- 2000) who grew up on the south side of Chicago garnered critical acclaim throughout her career. She won a Pulitzer Prize in 1950 and in late 1960's became one of the renowned supporters of the Black Arts Movement. Brooks draws many of her characters from the underclass of the black neighborhoods. ^{xi} The poem "We Real Cool", represent a great poem for study for middle school students. The simplicity of the poem is appealing, but the message in the poem is very compelling and relevant to many of the young male students I teach. Brooks in an interview with the Detroit Broadside Press stated that "The We's in "We Real Cool" are tiny, wispy, weakly argumentative "Kilroy-is-here" announcements. The boys have no accented sense of themselves, yet they are aware of a semi-defined personal importance. ^{xii}

Lucille Clifton (b. 1936) has written prolifically since the 1950s when she was exposed to poets such as Amiri Baraka and Robert Hayden. She writes extensively about the African American

experience. Her many children's books, written expressly for an African-American audience in mind, include *All Us Come Cross the Water* (1973), *My Friend Jacob* (1980), and *Three Wishes* (1992). She also wrote an award-winning series of books featuring events in the life of Everett Anderson, a young black boy^{xiii}. Her poem "Those Boys that Ran Together" is a great companion poem for Brook's poem "We Real Cool". The content of this poem focuses on Black male experience and will resonate with many of my students.

Toi Derricotte (b. 1941) hails from Detroit Michigan. She struggled with the divorce of her parents and the death of her grandmother at an early age. She explains how writing helped her through this difficult time: "I started writing when I was ten or eleven years old—and I think that my journals, my diaries, my poems were ways that I addressed the things that I couldn't talk about in my everyday relationships."^{xiv} I feel that her outlook and writing style will appeal to many of my students. In her poem "Blacks Boys Play the Classics" she uses the experiences of three black boys at the Penn Station to explore social justice. My school district's core curriculum contains a social justice unit, where this poem could be a great supplement. The beauty of this poem is that explores racism in our culture by juxtaposing liberal ideas with stereotypes. But in the end the poem implores that "We are one".^{xv}

Nikki Giovanni, Nikki Giovanni (b. 1943) is an internationally acclaimed writer and educator. Her involvement with the Black Arts Movement represented a rise to a more militant black voice. She is also known for writing what I would call "black love" poems. These are not romanticized poems, but poems about the love of the black aesthetic. One of her most anthologized, and poignant poem is "Nikki-Rosa". This poem highlights the lack of understanding of the deep roots of love and bonding in black families.^{xvi} Reading this poem will help validate for my students that irregardless of poverty and other deprivations in their surroundings that they can find love and beauty from their experiences.

Walter Dean Myers, Arnold Adoff

Walter Dean Myers and Arnold Adoff, represent contemporary poets and writers that I consider post civil rights multicultural poets. Their poetry is not only about the black experience, but pays tribute to the American experience.

Walter Dean Myers

Walter Dean Myers (b. 1937-) was born in and spent the first few years of his life in West Virginia. His family was extremely poor, and his mother died when he was a toddler, while giving birth to another child. His mother's friend Florence Dean adopted him and he moved to Harlem.^{xvii} Myers is a one of the favorite young adult authors that many of my students constantly read. Myers is known for crafting realistic fiction, non-fiction and poetry that depicts urban life similar to the Harlem neighborhoods where he grew up.

Myers' poem "Love that Boy", serves a mentor text for Jack a fictional character in the children's book "Love That Dog" by Sharon Creech. It tells the story of Jack, a boy who does not want to write poems. Through his journaling, we learn that soon he comes to love writing poems

and gets quite good at it. My students love this story and become instant fans of Myers. This book particularly validates for my young male students, that poetry is worthwhile form of literature.

Arnold Adoff

Arnold Adoff (b. 1935) was born of Jewish immigrant parents who migrated from a town bordering Russia and Poland. His mother was actively involved in the civil rights movements. Adoff is a respected anthologist of Black poetry for young people. He is also noted for creating poetry that explores the role of race and culture, mirroring the experiences of his own biracial family. He is married to Virginia Hamilton an African American artist.^{xviii}

For this unit, I may rely on some of Adoff's anthologies to build my own portfolio of poems to teach. Some of his noted anthologies are included in the students' resources section. I may also consider using poetry written by Arnold Adoff, such as "Black is Brown is Tan" Harper, 1973; "All the Colors of the Race" Lothrop, 1982; and "Sports Pages" Lippincott, 1986.

Spoken Word and Performance Poetry

Responding to poetry through performance has a valid space in the classroom. Dina Gioa the former chairman of the National Endowment of the Art and credited with creating the Poetry Out Loud National Contest argues for training students in performance poetry to keep the art of poetry alive^{xix}. When poems are read or recited it improves speaking and listen skills. I plan to use audio and visual-aides and incorporate dramatic and musical connections to invigorate my poetry instructions. Students will view and analyze work from slam poets such as Gayle Danley and Saul Williams. I also plan to show snippets HBO's Brave New Voices and selected episodes of Borders Open Door Poetry website to inspire and show students what performance poetry looks and sounds like.

My unit will support differentiated and multiple learning styles for students who really like poetry and those who don't. This unit on the pleasures and personal connections to African American poetry is intended to align with the School District Philadelphia's 6th grade core curricula. Through this curriculum unit students will respond, write and perform poetry about or related the African American experiences. The objectives for the unit are described in the categories below:

Objectives for Reading and Responding to African American Poetry

Students will read and respond to poetry through informal talk and formal discourse. Students will read poems to make meaning of sound devices (alliteration, assonance, rhyme, rhythm), understand language that speaks truth and tells dramatic events about the African American experience.

Objectives for Analyzing, Interpreting and Critiquing African Poetry

For analyzing, interpreting and critiquing poems, students will be able to describe the purpose of a poem, the strengths and weaknesses of a poem, describe how line breaks and punctuation effects the reading and meaning of a poem, and describe how a poem fits into the African American tradition.

Objectives Reciting and Performing African American Poetry

The culminating outcome of this unit will be for students recite and perform poetry from and about the African American experience. Students' recitations and performances will demonstrate their understanding of the diction, tone, cadence, and overall meaning of a poem. Students will write their own poems or spoken word set to jazz or hip-hop beats. In a culminating showcase, students may perform short biographical skits about African American poets; present new text-digital poems; and perform their own poems and spoken word for a live audience.

Strategies

Incorporating poetry and art has become a standard practice in my pedagogy. In my view, the arts provide an effective means for students to understand culture and themselves. I plan to teach this unit primarily during my literacy block for 3-6 weeks. I meet with students for literacy 5 days a week for at least 90 minutes. Furthermore, some of the content for this unit could be taught across the curriculum in social studies and media literacy. Alternatively, I can teach this unit during an entire school year incorporating poetry lessons embedded with skills to be covered as per the my school district's core curriculum scope and sequence.

Before, During and After Poetry Reading Techniques

The PSSA in reading requires students to become proficient in reading, interpreting and responding to poetry. This unit will provide ample exposure to African American poetry to enhance students' abilities to appreciate standard poetic forms or determine deeper meaning in subtle or complex poems. Before students complete a formal response to a poem, students will use BDA (Before, During and After reading) strategies in which they understand, analyze, compare and contrast poetic forms and techniques. BDA strategy is an interactive reading and note-taking tool that allows students to comprehend information and literary text. Before reading, students can prepare to read by scanning a poem and making mental pictures for clues, making predictions, or setting a purpose. During reading, students can ask questions and have dialogue with a poem.

"Text rendering" is an example of a during-reading activity. Text rendering directs students to say or highlight any words, phrases or line that resonate for any reason, including confusion and lack of understanding. I plan to use BDA strategies for reading poems, poets' biographies, non-fiction and fiction text related to poetry. When using text rendering with poetry I may have students work in groups of four. Each student reads the poem aloud to the other members of the group. One student begins a conversation about the poem, using only the words of the poem and

interpreting them through tone, gestures, and body movements. Finally each group member has an opportunity to re-enact the poem, giving it his/her own interpretation.

Other graphic organizer and tools that can be used during BDA activities are provided below:

K-W-L What You Already Know, What you Want to Know and What You Learned

Using a K-W-L graphic organizer is a good starting point for eliciting students' prior knowledge and determining what they knew about a particular genre, concept or poetic techniques. Using K-W-L is great with inquiry learning because teachers can ask probing questions to lead student to discover new things; after completing the inquiry process students can then describe what new things they learned. For example in teaching the poems "Ballad of Birmingham" by Dudley or "Black Boys Play the Classic" by Derricotte, I could have students complete a K-W-L chart listing what they know about social justice or the civil rights movements. When asking clarifying questions I would be able to determine what strategies may be the most suitable for teaching students about the social justice themes. I find that facilitating discussions through using a K-W-L strategy supports both my higher and lower functioning readers and writers. Furthermore, it helps me place a poem in its social and cultural context. After leading class discussions, I often have students work in small groups to revise and illustrate their K-W-L charts which helps scaffold their learning.

Venn Diagram

Using a Venn diagram allows students to organize information to compare and contrast poems, authors, poetic forms, styles or literary elements. For example, students can use a Venn diagram to analyze the similarities and differences of the poems "Those Boys that Ran Together" by Clifton with "We Real Cool" by Brooks. Or students could compare biographies of poets such as Myers and Adoff. I plan to conduct mini-lessons using an inter-active Venn Diagram found on the ReadWriteThink website. <http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/venn/>

Vocabulary Squares

A vocabulary square is a graphic organizer divided into four quadrants that helps students demonstrate their understanding of word origins or parts of speech, synonyms or antonyms, visuals logos or icons and brief definition of words. Students take ownership of words that they are able to show understanding from multiple perspectives. I will use vocabulary squares when previewing poetic glossary terms, other literary terms as well as interesting or difficult terms words found in poems. For example, I could have students create vocabulary squares for the words such as alliteration, consonance, and repetition. Or I could select words like "austere" and "offices" which are essential to the meaning of the poem "Those Winter Sundays" by Hayden. A

vocabulary squares template can be found on the following link:
<http://englishseven.com/toolsforthought/VocabSquares.pdf>

Poetry and Sound Devices Graphic Organizer

Poetry is full of literary and sound devices. Students often enjoy the sound or play on words found in poems. I will use graphic organizers to help students scan poems and text for examples of sound devices and figurative language. Through this process students should be able to understand how poetic forms effects a mood of poem, and how poets deliberately makes choices of forms, words, and sounds to convey meaning. Using a graphic organizer I could lead students identify the recurring hard "c" sounds found in the first Stanza of "Those Winter Sundays". With the graphic organizer students should be able to see and hear the alliteration and repetition of initial consonant sounds of "c" or "k", **clo**thes ...**blac**k /**c**old / **crac**ked/ **ac**hed/ **w**eek**d**ay /**b**anked /**th**anked. This should therefore, help students make connection with how the consonance contribute to the mood of this poem.

Critiquing Poems:

Providing students the ability to articulate what makes a poem works is a valuable skill. Part of the reason some students don't get poetry is that that don't have an accessible set a guidelines to explain why they like or do not like a poem. Close reading of a poem is essential to being able to critique and explain what works in a poem. In close reading students learn to read the poem for its denotation and connotation. Critiquing strategies can apply to traditional poems in the cannon, contemporary poems or even slam poems. Through teaching students to critique other poems they will able to better self assess their own work. I will use the following steps adapted from June Jordan's Poetry for the People guidelines for teaching students to critique poems:^{xx}

Read the Poem Aloud –

It is essential that poems be read out loud by a competent reader to bring out the cadence and mood of the poem. Therefore, when I introduce a new poem, I either read the poem out loud, use a CD/DVD , or have an advanced student read the poem out loud. It is better to give the student the poem in advance and not have her read it "cold."

Purpose of Poem –

After reading or hearing a poem out loud, students can determine who is the speaker of the poem or what medium is the poem using to convey it message. Furthermore, students can establish what is the purpose of a poem. Is it a call to action? Is it to entertain, persuade, or seek empathy?

The Strength and Weakness of the Poem-

Student should learn to point out what stands out in the poem, what things troubled them. Is the use figurative language strong; is the shape of the poem distracting?

Critiquing Using Differentiated Instructions

Because my students reading levels are so varied from 4th grade to 10 grade levels, when teaching the above critiquing techniques, I would have to do some of the instructions in small guided reading groups. Some students will however, be able to work independently, but others will need extensive guidance. What follows are critiquing tips that I would do primarily in cooperative learning groups. Tiered, differentiated activities or mixed groupings are best suited for the strategies that follow:

Sound devices

Analyze the use of sound devices in poems—e.g. the use of alliteration, rhyme, rhythm etc. This activity may be well suited for auditory and kinesthetic learners. Students can even tap out the beats or rhythms found in a poem.

Language use/word choice

Analyze the use of language—did the author use strong, descriptive verbs, figurative language, sensory details, etc.? What is the relationship of word choice to the mood or tone? This activity may be suitable for verbal or visual learners. Visual learners could even illustrate the images they see or feel in a poem.

Dramatic arch

Analyze the dramatic arch of a poem—e.g., does it have a beginning that builds to a compelling middle development and then an ending that lands the poem somewhere fully satisfying to the reader? Is it a dramatic event? Is it complete? Whose voice do you hear? What is the speaker's/narrator's relationship to the drama? Linguistic and extroverted learners may be more inclined this approach. Small groups could even perform a reader's theater, dramatizing a poem.

Shape of Poem/Punctuation

Analyze the use of punctuation and its relationship to the shape of a poem. What do you learn from the line breaks? What is the relationship of the purpose and the shape of the poem? Spatial and visual learners may find this activity more appealing. Small groups could experiment with using different punctuations or line breaks to alter the flow or cadence of a poem.

The key in using differentiated strategies is know your students learning styles and thus provide them multiple modes of assessing a poem. This should increase student engagement and reduce their frustrations in accessing the essence of African American poetry.

Constructed Responses

As per the Philadelphia School District's reading curriculum, students must be able to respond to open-ended prompts related to poetry fiction and non-fiction text. For example, the TAG it 3

strategy graphically helps students to **T**urn the prompt into an opening statement; **A**nswer the prompt; **G**ive details, evidence and examples from the text to support their answers. The more students practice this method of responding to text the better they perform on state test. Therefore, I will have students write constructive responses from poems used in this unit. Students may also write responses after reading biographies of African American poets. Refer to the student resources to see how this strategy looks and works graphically.

To support students' reading, writing and critical thinking skills I will conduct mini-lessons on interpreting poems related to or about youth issues and connect poems with their social and cultural context. I will model how to respond to poems, spoken word and other texts.

African American Poets' Biographical Writing Graphic Organizer

Using graphic organizers to plan and draft biographies about African American poets provides an effective means for students to connect poems to their authors and the social, political and cultural dynamics that inspire poets. Using a biographical organizer will allow students to conduct research and summarize the characteristics; contributions and influence African American poets have on society and themselves. Writing organizers can also help students outline an effective introduction, thesis, supporting paragraphs and conclusion for essays. I further plan to show students how to use quotes from poems as hooks or attention grabbers for their essays. To bridge the connection between critiquing poetry with the biographical writing students will conduct inquiry on a selected poem and determine how a poet's biography may connect to a specific poem. For example, through learning about Hayden biography, students may connect his poem "Those Winter Sundays" to the family dynamics revealed in his biography. This is not to say all poems have biographical references, but most poems have some imprint that reflects on the poet; it may be the poet's use of form, or subject matter. The intent is to lead students to make deeper author studies than the typical middle school biography that tells you when a person was born and why they are famous. Sample lesson plan # 2 provides more details for this inquiry approach.

Assessment

Assessments will include an evaluation of each student's constructive responses to selected poems as well as their portfolios of their own original poems and critiques of poems. Students' ability to recite and perform African American poetry will be assessed using a rubric evaluating diction, tone, and evidence of understanding. The biographical essay on an African American poet will be graded on the completeness of the research of poet's contribution to art and literature as well as their overall influence on society. Students should also be able to articulate what influence the poet has on their life and make connections to at least one poem. Students writing will be assessed using a holistic rubric evaluating their focus, content, organization, style and use of convention; Students will have to cite sources in their biographies. Included in the grade will be an assessment of students' ability to use internet sources, and use direct quotes. Furthermore,

students should be able to demonstrate how different poets responded to racism, poverty, and other social justice issues. Students' poems and reading response will be assessed for completeness. Their responses will focus on aesthetics, but also include knowledge about the social and culture context covered during mini-lessons, guest poets' visits and other activities.

Resources

I may supplement my standardized curriculum through collaborations with the Philadelphia Arts and Education Partnership (PAEP) which offers artists and poetry residencies. In addition to the resources available at my school, I will rely on the University of Pennsylvania's and Free Library of Philadelphia collections for books, videos and audio materials. The Art Sanctuary of the Church the Advocate in North Philadelphia is another organization I may collaborate with or attend some of their creative programs for school aged children.

I will use the *Poetry Out Loud* audio guide for students to hear how professionals recite poetry. The *Poetry Out Loud* website <http://www.poetryoutloud.org/> contains a variety of resources for students and teachers. I will also use *Borders Open Door Poetry* and HBO's *Brave New Voices* to show examples of slam poets performing spoken word poetry.

Students will be able to visually observe how poets' words come alive on the stage. Furthermore, I will use the clips of film to support students in learning and appreciating of the aesthetics of poetry and bridge it connections to hip-hop. Movie clips, documentary and snippets may be used to provide context for where poetry comes from and where it is going. For example, clips of the film the "The Great Debaters" may be viewed to show the how the Harlem Renaissance and Hughes' poem influenced social thought in south, where many blacks from the north, had migrated from. There is one particular scene where Professor Tolson, played by Denzel Washington, recites Langton Hughes and highlights the role poets were having in society in the 1920's.

Selected clips from HBO's documentary "The Black List" could also be viewed to present perspectives of black life. This may serve as a muse to help students reflect and write their own poetry about "black life." Another documentary entitled "Disappearing Voices" may be viewed to demonstrate how the landscape of black media has influenced black voices. Lastly, selected clips from Tupac's "Resurrection", a documentary presenting the poetry and artistry of Tupac Shakur may be viewed to show how an iconic hip-hop figure used poetry to express issues relevant to youth.

A detailed list of poems, films and web resources is provided in the annotated students' resource sections.

Classroom Activities / Lesson Plans

Sample Lesson Plan 1

Title: Love That Dog

Grade Range and Subjects: 6th - Literacy (Reading and Writing):

Duration of Lesson: 2-4 Class Periods of at Least 45 Minutes.

The specific goals are to: read and respond poetry through analyzing the sound devices and figurative language; understand how poets get inspiration from other poets, compare and contrast similar poems; informally and formally critique poetry and write constructed responses.

The materials and resources include but are not limited to: Sharon Creech's Love the Dog, print and Walter Dean Myers' Biography, pre-formatted or teacher generated graphic organizers.

Inquiry Question: Where do poets get their inspiration?

Warm Up Activity – Imagine a Poet

After introducing Jack in the story, "Love That Dog" students learn how Jacks feels about poetry, because he says, "...boys/ don't write poetry. Girls do!" In their journals students will describe and illustrate what kind of person they picture when they imagine a poet.

Mini Lesson – Poet's Inspiration.

Teacher will discuss how when Jacks first learns to write poetry, he borrows a lot of ideas from other poets' works. Teacher will elicits reasons why this is or isn't an acceptable practice? Teacher will provide evidence that from borrowing from others Jack develops his own style. Teacher discuss where should we draw the line between being inspired by someone else and copying his or her work?

In their notebooks student will list poets or artists who inspire them. Students will then describe one poet or artist that inspires them and why she/he inspires them.

Activities – The Pleasures and Response to Love that Dog.

Students will scan the poem "Love That Boy" by Walter Dean Myers and locate examples of sound devices and figurative language. rhymes (internal / external), alliteration, repetition, metaphors, simile personification, hyperbole, etc. Students will use a T chart graphic organizer to record examples of sound devices (right side of chart) and figure of speech (left side of chart), found in the poem.

Students will complete a close reading and critique of the poem. Working in small groups of 4's, students will read the poem out loud. Describe what makes it a poem? And describe what is purpose of the poem Love that Boy?

Using a Venn diagram students will compare and contrast Jack's poems about his dog Sky and Walter Dean Myers' poem "Love That Boy."

Students will complete the following constructed response:

Jack's poem "Love That Dog" was inspired by Walter Dean Myers' poem "Love that Boy", how are these poems similar and different? Provide at least 2 examples from each poem.

Tip: How does Jack reuse his own words, and where can you find lines that were inspired by other poets?

Don't forget to use the TAG strategy when completing this prompt.

T - Turn the prompt into the opening statement.

A - Answer the prompt

G- Give details from the text to support your answer.

Wrap-up or Extension—Take a line on Walk

As a wrap-up or homework assignment students will compose their own poem inspired by Walter Dean Myers. Students will chose a line from either poem "Love That Dog" or "Love That Boy" and continue the line with their own words, relating it anything that they enjoy or admire.

For example students may compose a Love that Cat poem. Or Love that Girl poem. Students will share their draft with a partner and revise and edit their own poem inspired from other poets.

Sample Lesson Plan 2

Title: African American Poets and Their Biographies-

Grade Range and Subjects 6th - 8th Grade Social Studies and Literacy (Reading and Writing)

Duration of Lesson: 4-8 Class Periods of at Least 45 Minutes.

Reading, Speaking # 1 & 2, Writing # 1, # 2 & 3: Asks relevant questions, and respond to questions; write in a variety forms; write for variety of purposes; and speak using effective communication skills. Social Studies Standard(s): culture, time continuity & change, people, places and environment.

The specific goals include but are not limited to: Using a biographical organizer students will conduct research and summarize the characteristics; contributions and influences African American poets have had on society and themselves. Examine the interactions of ethnic, national, or cultural influences in specific situations or events.

The materials and resources include but are not limited to: print and electronic poems, online media links, PowerPoint, pre-formatted or teacher generated graphic organizers.

Inquiry Question: What role do African American Poets have society?

Warm Up Activity – K-W-L Africans Americans Response to Social Justice

Students will complete a K-W-L chart listing what they already know about how African American Poets respond to social justice issues. What new things they want to know? After the

project is complete they can list the new things they learned. The teacher should allow for lots of discourse and ask probing questions to help students generate extensive lists for their K-W-L charts.

For the warm-up students may list 3-5 things they know about African Americans response to social justice. However, for the K-W-L chart to be considered complete, students should name at least 10 things they know and want to know about the topic. The more questions students have the better their inquiry process will progress.

Mini Lesson – Biographical Graphic Organizers

The teacher will model how to use biographical graphic organizers. Teacher will guide students to conduct research on Langston Hughes. Teacher may provide a brief biography of Hughes from the Academy of American Poets <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/83> . The teacher will model for students how to graphically organize Internet or reference sources.

The graphic organizer will allow students to summarize the reason Hughes is famous, important characteristics, experiences that made Hughes famous, important contributions and things they personally admire about Hughes.

This graphic organizer is great for helping students paraphrase and summarize biographical text. Scholastic.com Biography Book Report Graphic Organizer provides an example of what this graphic aid looks like, http://www2.scholastic.com/content/collateral_resources/pdf/f/feb05_unit_BiographyChart.pdf .

Activities: Composing Biographical Essays Using Poetic Hooks.

Students will plan, draft and revise biographical essays describing why the African American poet they selected for their essays is such a great person.

Student may complete biographical essays from the list of poets provided in the rationale of this curriculum unit or select other poets reviewed or approved by the teacher.

Students' essays will include quotes from a poet or critic as hooks to grab and maintain readers' interest. Students should not just include basic biographical information gathered from their research; students must show how their selected poet contributed to American Literature, what influence their selected poet had on American society and how their contributions personally influence and inspire them.

A Biographical Writing Rubric may be used to assess students' proficiency in writing a biography. The rubric may assess if student present key facts of the poet's life, provide insights on the poet's personality, supplies strong descriptions, paints vivid portrait using appropriate quotes, and includes proficient organization and use of conventions. A sample rubric for Biography Writing for grades 4-8 can be found at: http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/tguide/pop-rubric_b1.htm.

Wrap up or Extension – Non Print Biographical Portraits

For a differentiated biographical project students may present a biographical portrait of an African American poet using a non-print forms. Students may compose a biographical comic; compose a storyboard or other non-print presentations of their selected poet.

Sample Lesson Plan 3

Title: African American Poetry Café Showcase.

Grade Range and Subjects: 6th - 8th Grade Media Arts and Literacy (Reading and Writing)

Duration of Lesson: 6-8 Class Periods of at Least 45 Minutes.

The specific goals include: Produce, perform and exhibit spoken word poetry. Display multi-media arts products, incorporating: images, text, music, transitions and special effects. Reciting African American poems and performing original spoken word poetry reflecting the historical and cultural context of African American aesthetics.

Materials / Resources: LCD projection, royalty free material, Digital Camera, I Movie, Garage Band, pre-formatted or teacher generated story board templates.

Inquiry Question: What are ways African American poetry, writing on the page can be translated or enhanced in non-text forms?

Warm Up Activity – Images and Sounds from Hughes’ “Harlem”

Students will first silently read the poem Harlem- What happens to the dream deferred?”
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=175884> .

After reading the poem, students should complete an “image and sound response.” Using a T chart graphic organizer, students will list the images and sounds they imagine while reading the poem “Harlem.” Students may draw a few images from the poem and use bubble captions to show the sounds that come from the poem.

Mini Lesson – PowerPoint - Poetry Slides Board

The teacher or visiting media artist will provide mini-lesson on how to create a story board for translating the poem “Harlem” into a PowerPoint media presentation.

Teacher and students brainstorm how to break the poem into 3-6 story board frames. For example, 1st story board could have the lines “What happens to the dream deferred? Does it dry up/ like a raisin in the sun?”

Using a white board and LCD projector connected to a laptop, the teacher could model how to find clip arts, royalty free images and sounds/music to connect with the text.

For example, for the intro to the poem the teacher could play a sample of Donny Hathaway singing “Young Gifted and Black” to compliment the poem. Images of the sun could be uploaded or images of the deprived communities could be imported to depict the essence of the first few lines of the poem.

Students may provide ideas for other images, symbols, sounds for other lines of the poem.

Activities – New Text: African American Poetry PowerPoint Presentation

Working in groups of fours, students will form media production team teams to produce a PowerPoint rendering of a notable African American poem.

Students will select from a list of poems from some of the following poets Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, Nikki Giovanni, Walter Dean Myers, Arnold Adoff, Toi Derricotte, and Lucille Clifton.

Students will thoroughly explore the poem, discuss its meaning and poets' use of techniques, and brainstorm the different ways to represent the selected poem in a non-print form on PowerPoint slides.

Students will use a 6 panel story board to decide what images, symbols, sounds and transition could be used to translate their poem into non-print presentation.

Once story board is completed, students will continue working in groups to create a PowerPoint Slide presentation of their selected poem.

While preparing their presentation students will refer to a rubric to ensure they are integrating sound, images, symbols and words to reflect interpretation and understanding of the poem. For detailed rubric refer to the appendix number 2 - PowerPoint Presentation of African American Poem.

Wrap up or Extension — Poetry Out Loud/ Poetry Slam Contest.

This unit may culminate with a showcase celebration of students' performing and presenting poetry for a live audience.

For the poetry recitation, students may perform and recite poems from the Poetry Out Loud: National Recitation Contest Anthology. Students will have opportunity to read and bring the words of the world's most prolific poets from Dunbar to Langston Hughes alive on stage.

The poetry slam will highlight original work produced by students. Some poems may encompass universal issues such as teen struggles, while others may take listeners on personal journeys through their ars poetica and pay homage to poets as diverse as Robert Hayden and Tupac.

During the showcase students' PowerPoint presentation of African American poems rendered as Next Text can also be displayed. This type of closure for the project will provide lasting impressions for the students' voices to be honored and respected.

Bibliography and Citations

Teacher Resources

- Franco Betsy. *Conversation with a Poet: Inviting Poetry into K-12 classrooms*. New York, Richard C. Owens Publisher Inc, 2005. This practical book provides great ideas for mini-lessons for discussing and writing poetry,
- Historical and Cultural Context: Langston Hughes and Christopher Moore. *Teaching Multi-Cultural Literature*. Annenberg Media Learner.Org. 6 Mar 2009
<<http://www.learner.org/workshops/tml/workshop6/index.html>>. This resource provides lesson ideas for teaching biographical and cultural related to Hughes and his poetry.
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- Jordan, June. *June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint*. New York, Routledge, 1995. This book provides a useful guide to inspiring young people at the college level to appreciate poetry. Activities can be adopted for grades 6-12.
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Creech, Sharon. *Love That Dog*. New York: Harper Collins, 2002. This book is writing in narrative form book provides a great example of how to help younger students find mentor poets. The protagonist Jack, uses Walter Dean Myer as a mentor poets and find his own poets voice.

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Students' Web and Media Resources

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Center for Digital Stories. Center for Digital Story Telling. 19 June 2009 <www.storycenter.org>. This site provides digital resources for teachers and students.

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National Endowment for the Arts and Poetry Foundation. 19, June 2009 <www.poetryoutloud.org> . This site provide resources for teachers in students to master the craft of reciting poetry.

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"Tag It A 3." PSSA Test Taking Strategies. School District of Philadelphia. 06 Jun 2009 <<http://www.phila.k12.pa.us/schools/creighton/PSSA%20tag.pdf>>. This graphic organizer provides the process for responding to fiction and non-fiction text.

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The Great Debaters, Directed by Denzel Washington. 121 mins. Harpo Films (2007) (USA)—Clips of Melvin Tolson (Washington) reciting Hughes poem could be used to make connections with historical and cultural events during the Harlem Renaissance.

Appendix 1:

Pennsylvania's Department of Education Academic Standards

The School District of Philadelphia's Core Curricula Standards are aligned with the

Standard: Reading #1

Apply effective reading strategies to comprehend, organize, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate texts to construct meaning.

Standard: Reading #2

Read a variety of materials including fiction and non-fiction, classic and contemporary texts from a diversity of cultures (especially African, Asian/Pacific, European, Latino, and Native American cultures), communication systems, and functional texts.

Standard: Reading #3

Read for a variety of purposes: to seek information; to apply knowledge; to enhance enjoyment; to engage in inquiry and research; to expand world views; to understand individuality, shared humanity, and the heritage of the people in our city as well as the contributions of a diversity of groups to American culture and other cultures throughout the world.

Standard: Literature

Listen to, read, recognize, and respond to literature as a record of human experience that provides individual perspective, promotes understanding of multiple perspectives, and reflects the importance of cultural influences.

Standard: Writing #1 –

Plan, draft, revise, and publish writing using correct grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, and effective vocabulary, appropriate to the purpose, context, and audience.

Standard: Writing #2

Write for academic, personal, social, civic, and school-to-career purposes.

Standard: Writing #3

Write in a variety of forms including journals, essays, stories, letters, plays, poems, and reports using figurative, descriptive, literary, and technical language.

Standard: Writing #4

Conduct and document inquiry-based research using oral, print, and communications systems.

Standard: Speaking #1

Speak for a variety of purposes including informing, persuading, questioning, problem solving, sharing ideas and stories, reaching consensus, and responding sensitively and respectfully using language appropriate to the context, audience, and purpose.

Standard: Speaking #2

Speak using effective communication skills including enunciation, inflection, volume, fluency, and non-verbal gestures.

Standard: Listening #1

Listen actively for a variety of purposes including comprehending, interpreting, analyzing, evaluating, responding effectively, and for enjoyment

Standard: Listening #2 - Recognize the diversity of oral English language use, patterns, and dialects, and understand its implications across social contexts, cultures, ethnic groups, and geography.

Standard: Viewing

View media, technology, and live performances for a variety of purposes including gathering information, making informed judgments, processing information, and for enjoyment.

Appendix 2

New Text Rubric – PowerPoint Presentation of African American Poetry

Group Members Names: _____

Name of Poet _____ Title of Poem _____

Number of Stanzas _____ Total Number of Lines _____

Indicate between the numbers 1 to 4 your assessment of the following parts of your project (4 = Strongly Agree, 3= Agree, 2 Disagree, and 1 = Strongly Disagree)

Domain	Student Assessment	Teacher Assessment
Planning – your group completed a 6 panel story board before using PowerPoint	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
Originality – your PowerPoint is creative and original.	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
Content – your interpretation of the poem goes beyond word for word understanding; your PowerPoint offers a fresh reading of the poem.	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
Media Style – your group made media choices (sound, images, symbols, colors, transitions, white space) that makes your PowerPoint very appealing.	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
Editing – Your PowerPoint has been edited to provide the maximum impact using only 6-8 slides. Each slide has no or few mistakes, each slide is clear and to the point	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
Collaboration – Each member in your group contributed equally to the success of your project.	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
Learning – Each group member learned more about the poem and about how to use PowerPoint.	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4

Fun – Completing this group project was fun and rewarding

1 2 3 4

1 2 3 4

FINAL SCORE

FINAL SCORE

Final Comments _____

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- ⁱ (Muller 1995).
- ⁱⁱ (Adrienne 1986)
- ⁱⁱⁱ (Rampersad 2006)
- ^{iv} (Freire 1987)
- ^v (Rampersad 2006)
- ^{vi} (Grimes 2009)
- ^{vii} (Boyd 1998)
- ^{viii} (National Endowment for Humanites n.d.)
- ^{ix} (Boyd 1976)
- ^x (Rampersad 2006)
- ^{xixi} (Jackson 1997)
- ^{xii} (Brooks 1970)
- ^{xiii} (S. Brooks n.d.)
- ^{xiv} (Penn State College of Liberal Arts 2006)
- ^{xv} (Weller 2005)
- ^{xvi} (American Studies Resource Center 2006)
- ^{xvii} (Encyclopedia of World Biography 2007)
- ^{xviii} (Vardell 2007)
- ^{xix} (National Endowment for the Arts 2005)
- ^{xx} (Muller 1995)