

Slamming Hip-Hop in Secondary Schools
Rethinking the Ways We Teach Poetry

Will Small
October 2013

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a Bachelor of Arts Degree with Honours in English in the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the Australian National University.

Unless otherwise acknowledged in the text, this thesis represents the original research of the author.

Will Small

Date

Acknowledgements

Lucy Neave – for believing in the value of this work, and convincing me to pursue it. Your affirmation and encouragement are the reasons this thesis exists!

Samantha Jane – for encouraging me to write this, freeing me to give it time and energy and listening.

Mum –for raising me on words.

Dad – for encouraging me to follow my passions.

Omar Musa, Bryan Babyack, and far too many emcees, spoken word artists and poets to mention – for showing me how it's done.

The students I have had the privilege of working with over the last couple of years – your voices and your stories matter deeply.

Peace, love and rhythm.

Contents

Introduction

'Salvaging' Relationships with Poetry

p.5

Chapter 1

Hip-Hop Meets Slam: New Possibilities for Education

p.15

Chapter 2

The 'Voice Slam' Program: Blueprint for a New
Methodology

p.37

Chapter 3

Slamming Stories: Results of 'Voice Slam' Workshops

p.47

Conclusion

Growing a Love for Poetry: Speaking for Change

p.68

Bibliography

p.73

Introduction **'Salvaging' Relationships with Poetry**

...there is a need for the implementation of more culturally relevant curricula in schools... students would benefit from learning about and understanding hip-hop culture. (Au 2005, 210)

The introduction of slam performance of poetry into children's lives can salvage a relationship with poetry. (Boudreau 2009, 1)

The average Australian secondary school student has a relationship with poetry that needs 'salvaging'. Classrooms are brimming with students who perceive poetry to be elitist, out-dated and irrelevant; salvaging means overturning these perceptions, and teaching poetry as accessible, alive and important. I speak from experience: reflecting on the apathy I once felt towards poetry and the repeated negative attitudes I have encountered running poetry workshops with hundreds of secondary school students in the ACT and NSW.

I once understood poetry to be irrelevant, ancient and ultimately of minimal consequence in the 'real world'. And yet, a combination of hip-hop culture and slam poetry, and passionate 'practitioners' of both, changed these attitudes in me. From studying the lyrics of Tupac Shakur's song *Changes*, to watching performance poet Shihan on *Def Poetry Jam*, to the first time I performed at a poetry slam, I became convinced that the language of poetry could be far more captivating and engaging than I had previously imagined. For the most part, I did not encounter these art forms in the classroom; they seemed a stark contrast with the picture of

poetry I grew up with (dull, dusty and distant). Hip-hop and slam poetry not only captivated me, but encouraged me to revisit canonical poetry with a fresh perspective - considering how these poems may have sounded to *their* original audience. I now consider my relationship with poetry (both canonical and contemporary) to be salvaged – and I attribute it to these non-traditional ‘backdoor entries’.

Working with the ANU Student Equity outreach program in 2011, I developed a workshop for secondary school students, using hip-hop music and slam poetry to engage young people with poetry and encourage them to discover passion for it. This workshop was built on the premise that poetry is far from irrelevant; instead, it is a powerful force that can change individuals, societies and the world.

The workshop was run with approximately 25 groups of high school students throughout the ACT and South Coast region in 2012, and four youth poetry slams were hosted in local libraries and theatres encouraging students to perform their work in public. Over 30 students performed in the final slam, in front of an audience nearing 200. This event featured breakdancing, live graffiti artwork, rappers, a DJ and inter-state slam poets. The workshops and slam events aim to approach poetry from a fresh perspective, engaging with students who are disinterested in poetry and English literature, and connecting their own experiences and world, through engagement with contemporary culture to the poetry they are exposed to in an academic context. This program, called ‘ANU Voice Slam’ was expanded for 2013 to offer up to four subsequent workshops in

selected schools¹, followed by ‘in-house’ poetry slams within those schools, and then a final inter-school slam in a local theatre. The program has been received positively in schools, but it raises several questions. Are hip-hop and slam valid forms of poetry? Should they be taught alongside the classics? Why is it important that student relationships with poetry be ‘salvaged’, in the first place? These questions are foundational to this inquiry into the way poetry is currently taught in schools and the places it inhabits in contemporary society.

To ground this discussion, it is important to first outline what hip-hop and slam poetry actually *are*.

‘Hip-hop and ‘rap’ are terms often used interchangeably (Alim, Ibrahim and Pennycook 2009, 2), though this can be deceptive. ‘Hip-hop’ refers to a broader arts culture, including four primary artistic elements: the DJ, the emcee (or rapper), the break-dancer and the graffiti artist (Au 2005, 210). The term ‘rap’ specifically refers to the lyrical style of syncopated rhyme delivery employed by an emcee. Whereas hip-hop technically refers to the whole culture, the phrase ‘hip-hop music’ often refers specifically to songs created by emcees and/or DJs². If one removes the ‘beat’ that accompanies an emcee, or studies the emcee’s lyrics written on a piece of paper, it becomes difficult to maintain a clear distinction

¹ This is the result of Arts ACT funding: <http://www.arts.act.gov.au/community-participation/children-and-young-people> (ACT Government 2013) Conditional to the funding was the ACT Government selecting which schools the program was run in.

² For the purpose of this work, all creative elements of hip-hop are important and affirmed as a part of the wider culture they represent, but the focus is primarily on emceeing. Emceeing would not exist without its context of hip-hop culture broadly, and yet emceeing as a ‘mouthpiece’ within hip-hop is worthy of attention in its own right. Here this is particularly true because emceeing creates the clearest link between hip-hop and slam poetry.

between rap and poetry. Both employ language techniques such as rhyme, rhythm, meter, metaphor, alliteration and assonance, and both are used to tell stories, express ideas and respond to the world by crafting language creatively.

'Slam Poetry' is a modern format for performing poetry, with aims to diversify and reinvigorate it by making it competitive, dynamic and interactive. Started by Marc Smith in Chicago in the 1980s (Boudreau 2009, 4) slams are spoken word competitions, encouraging different poetry styles and inviting audience interaction. Slam poets have a time limit, cannot use props, costumes or musical accompaniment and are scored by randomly selected judges from the audience. Whilst slam is not restricted to any specific styles of poetry, it has been taken up by a number of emcees and lends itself well to the A cappella performance of rap verses.³

Here the term **'Hip-Hop Influenced Poetry Slam'** (Bruce and Davis 2000, 119) becomes useful. This phrase refers to an overlapping space in between the two broader cultures of hip-hop and poetry slam. "Although slam poetry is often delivered with a hip-hop vibe, it is not confined to the hip-hop culture" (Boudreau 2009, 4) and yet at the same time, "the rhythm of hip hop provides rich fodder for slam" (Boudreau 2009, 4). This space embraces the wider elements of both cultures, while focusing on a particular meeting ground in the middle, embracing the core

³ For many emcees, slamming poetry is not merely the performance of rap lyrics without accompanying music. Artists like Propaganda and Saul Williams in the US and Omar Musa and Luka Lesson in Australia, have distinct pieces for hip-hop sets and others for 'slamming'; these artists are representative of a larger group who manage to connect both formats, while also maintaining distinction between them.

aspects of hip-hop (emceeing, DJing, break-dancing and graffiti) and appreciating the broader scope of slam to include artists who perform vastly different styles of poetry and have no connection with hip-hop. This combination has been perhaps most influenced by *Def Poetry Jam*, a HBO TV show featuring several emcees performing slam poetry which “brought slam and hip hop together and brought commercial success and acknowledgment to slam” (Boudreau 2009, 5).

In my experience, student attitudes towards poetry and hip-hop are often in direct opposition to each other. Hip-hop has been extremely popular amongst young people globally and in Australia, and yet negative or apathetic attitudes towards poetry seem pervasive and widespread (Kelly 2005, J. Chang 2005, Kammer 2002, Page 2005). If hip-hop and slam are valid forms of poetry, these contrasting attitudes seem paradoxical. A broader definition of poetry (and subsequent model for teaching it) that embraces these art forms may be able to help students connect their experiences inside and outside the classroom, resulting in both academic and social benefits.

There is a growing body of scholarship concerning the use of rap music and hip-hop culture in education (Au 2005, Bruce & Davis 2000, Chang 2007, Christianakis 2011, Travis Jr.2013). There are also a number of teachers reconsidering the way poetry is taught in secondary schools, and incorporating new elements such as slam poetry into the classroom (Baker 2007, Boudreau 2009, Kammer 2002, Wishart Leard & Lashua 2006, Strever 2006, Moran 1999). In much of this research there are

suggestions about the overlapping space between hip-hop and slam. Significantly though, this research is almost exclusively from the US. Whether this research is relevant in an Australian context and whether these programs and teaching methods are applicable in Australia are questions informing *this* project.

Previous research in these areas, whilst generally reporting positive results, is limited. It is difficult to find any research of this nature conducted in Australia, and no such research has been conducted in the ACT. Moreover, whilst there have been studies of hip-hop and education, or slam poetry and education, the crossover between all three of these fields is a productive area of scholarship.

There is no shortage of questions raised by these converging art forms and their place in education. What is the nature of the relationship between hip-hop music and poetry? Should such a relationship be explored and promoted in a classroom context? How might poetry be taught, in any sense? What differences exist between hip-hop, slam and youth cultures in the US and in Australia? This is not to mention questions about the legitimacy of the literary canon, aims of the curriculum, or the sexism, violence and substance abuse often found in hip-hop music.

These questions deserve extensive and nuanced critical analysis beyond the scope of any single project. Nonetheless, the underlying inquiry into the relationships between youth education, hip-hop and slam poetry ought to be engaged with. The questions I have raised above are interesting in their own right, but they may also reveal new ways to think about achieving curriculum goals, youth engagement and culturally

relevant ways of teaching and learning. Hip-hop and slam may be worthy of literary analysis in their own right, but they may also give students a new perspective for approaching traditional poetry.

There are reasons however, to be sceptical about introducing slam poetry and hip-hop in education. Hip-hop has a reputation for promoting violence, crime and misogyny. Its popularity alone does not say anything of its positive or negative influence. Slam poetry, with its focus on performance may be more suited to creative arts classes, rather than English. It may not in fact have any impact on student literacy or desire to engage with written literature. These art forms can be politically subversive, unashamedly explicit, and may be more disruptive than productive in secondary schools. Not to mention broader questions about whether these should be viewed as 'serious' forms of poetry in the first place. These objections are certainly worth addressing. Are they valid? Can hip-hop and slam be separated from their criticisms? Even answering these questions leads to others: if, hip-hop and slam are to be used in classroom contexts, then *how?* (Christianakis 2011). Should they be used as mere means to help students reach other literary ends, or are they worthy ends in themselves?

Previous studies to be discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, such as those by Wayne Au, Heather E. Bruce & Bryan Dexter Davis, Houston A. Baker, Jeff Rice, Ernest Morell & Jeffrey M.R. Duncan-Andrade, Kathryn E. Boudreau, Ian A. Strever and Joel Kammer engage with similar questions to those above and defend the use of hip-hop and slam as worthy literary forms, as well as effective ways to shift student

perceptions and develop enthusiasm for poetry. According to these studies, *hip-hop* in education has: helped students develop self-confidence and engagement with social issues (Au 2005, Bruce & Davis 2000), assisted teachers in communicating with students (Baker 2007), teaching the literary canon (Baker 2007, Rice 2003), and teaching poetry and language devices (Morell & Duncan-Andrade 2002). According to these studies *slam poetry* in education has been shown to: improve attitudes towards pluralism and diversity (Boudreau 2009), allow 'diffident' students to communicate clearly (Strever 2006), and developed in students a passion for both writing and performing (Kammer 2002).

This thesis is an attempt to engage with the questions raised in this introduction, by bringing together existing research in fields of hip-hop, slam poetry and education, as well as endeavouring to perform new research, in order to address the existing gap in research in Australia.

The first chapter will consider the negative perceptions many students hold regarding poetry today (both in Australia and internationally), arguing that there is a 'disconnect' between poetry in the classroom and poetry in contemporary society. Negative views of poetry in the classroom will be contrasted with the rapid growth of performance poetry and the popular success of hip-hop. This chapter will review existing literature exploring hip-hop and slam in education. It will make an argument as to why these works are important, and why further research is needed.

The second chapter will propose the 'ANU Voice Slam' program as one way of responding to some of these issues, and presenting poetry in a way that connects with students through mediums they are familiar with and exposes them to contemporary poetry in Australia and the world today. This chapter will argue that such a program aligns with the Australian English Curriculum. It will present the research methodology proposed to study the program, as well as outlining the key themes of the workshops and the details of participating schools.

The third chapter will present findings from the research, reporting how both students and teachers responded to the program. This chapter will discuss what the results suggest, and how this work might guide future research and development.

The conclusion will summarise the thesis, and present closing thoughts on the benefits of introducing hip-hop and slam poetry in the classroom, and *how* these might be introduced in schools, in the light of this study.

It is worth noting that one of the significant questions this thesis will not address in detail is *why* hip-hop and slam are popular and appealing to students. Exploring the complex social and cultural reasons these mediums have been successful with young people is another avenue for research, but this work is a practical study, predominantly looking at *if* hip-hop/slam projects have been successful.

This research regarding the possible benefits of hip-hop/poetry slam programs in schools may be of great value, particularly with consideration given to an Australian context and its unique challenges,

opportunities and cultural considerations. It may offer new insights into developing passion for poetry in students and provide some indication of how to improve and implement future programs of this nature. This project aims to both deliver some initial, foundational research and to encourage subsequent further research and development. This thesis will argue a case that hip-hop and slam should be used in the classroom, and the more important question to begin discussing is not necessarily *if*, but *how*.

1

Hip-Hop Meets Slam: New Possibilities for Education

A student teacher is teaching poetry to her year 6 class (children aged 10 to 11). As a prelude to the lesson she asks the class why they think poetry should be taught. The taken-for-granted assumption of one pupil's response – "Of course we do it. It's in the *National Curriculum*" (Kelly 2005, 129).

Poetry is taught in schools all around the world. Yet, how often is it perceived to be taught simply *because* it is 'in the curriculum'?

This chapter will draw on existing research to develop a picture of current student perceptions regarding poetry. I will argue that common views of poetry are of an elitist, irrelevant medium, and yet students deserve to learn about poetry as powerful and accessible⁴. Negative perceptions of poetry will be contrasted with the recent success of hip-hop and slam poetry, and the broader cultural and technological changes that have shifted the place of poetry in recent years. Objections to using hip-hop and slam in education will then be considered. I will present arguments to overcome these objections, while suggesting the benefits of introducing hip-hop and slam poetry into classrooms. Examples will be presented of educators who have used hip-hop and slam to change student perspectives and communicate a new vision of poetry, and I will discuss how these might inform future programs in Australia.

⁴ I am not arguing that poetry itself *is* elitist and irrelevant, rather that these are common (albeit false) perceptions.

Perceptions of Poetry

Students in our classes groan and roll their eyes during poetry instruction because somewhere along the way they have experienced poetry as esoteric and incomprehensible, and we apparently have not helped them to see poetry otherwise. (Bruce and Davis 2000, 123)

It is possible for students to have a perfectly adequate understanding of the formal aspects of poems, including metaphor, alliteration, assonance, rhyme and meter and still have a relationship with poetry that needs salvaging. If poetry is only understood as an esoteric, compulsory component of the curriculum, even if students comprehend poetry in an academic sense, it is unlikely they will appreciate it as a relevant art form they can use in their own lives. A student who grasps the formal aspects of poetry will not necessarily be able to answer the question *why* poetry matters at all.⁵ Formulating an answer to this question may be a subjective and evolving process⁶, but one that seems foundational to understanding poetry in a way that can extend beyond the walls of the classroom. If poetry *is* relevant, powerful and available for students to use in communicating their own unique perspective, then it should be taught as such. Traditional, canonical poetry is not itself the problem, but teaching its relevance and beauty can be a significant challenge for teachers in the classroom.

In a British study on sixth grade children's perceptions of poetry,

Alison Kelly found that whilst some children had a positive view of it,

⁵ In fact, overemphasising formal qualities may leave students struggling to see the whole as more than the sum of its parts.

⁶ In the 'ANU Voice Slam' workshops I have to come to advocate poetry as a way to be heard in a world of billions of voices, a way to process the mixed experiences of life and a way to harness rhythm. This will be further discussed in chapter 2.

several responses reflected a view of poetry as elitist and exclusive. This was found partially through children not perceiving themselves as 'real poets', stating reasons such as: "We don't make money out of it"; "We haven't had much practice"; "We're not much good"; "We haven't gone to a publisher" (Kelly 2005, 131-132), and also through recurring suggestions of poetry being "linked to class" (132); as one child said: "A lot of people, like the queen, probably know a lot about poetry and spend their days sitting in the garden, drinking champagne" (132). This quote reflects a view of poetry as being important to a certain group of people, in this case the British aristocracy, while being removed from the everyday lives of 'ordinary' people who do not spend their days drinking champagne 'in the garden'. If students develop a view of this nature while still in primary school, why would secondary students, without any intervention, develop an alternative view?

Though it would be insufficient to simply impose the results of a British study onto an Australian context, these attitudes are not unfamiliar. From a US context, Joel Kammer quotes Julian Symons' introduction to a 1963 book on poetry in which he states: "no anthology can heal the deep schism in our society that makes it inevitable that today the poet should speak, not to all men, but to a chosen few" (Kammer 2002, p.64). The quote suggests poetry was once accessible and enjoyed by people of all social classes but has become reserved for and linked to a select group. The quote is from fifty years ago, though it seems to foreshadow the responses Kelly discovered.

Jessica Chang reflects on her experience learning poetry in the New South Wales school system:

From a student's perspective, poetry is written it seems by a few select groups of people...the hippie beatniks that smoke Cuban cigars and play the bongos, and the wrinkly old men who are either dead or about to die and have probably written a poem or two in sonnet form, discussing nature and love, whilst using words such as 'thou' a minimum of fifteen times (J. Chang 2005, 16).

Chang attributes this perception partially to primary school students not receiving enough positive exposure to poetry, meaning that when they study it in later school years, it is already baffling and foreign. Students begin to believe that "...all poetry is written by 'dead guys' and is just too hard to understand and appreciate..." (J. Chang 2005, 17).

Geoff Page, an Australian teacher reaches a similar conclusion, writing that "...students in most state systems around the country have been offered a very slim, if not a starvation diet of poetry" (Page 2005, 14).

These are generalisations, which pertain to both the frequency with which poetry is taught, and the kind of poetry which students read, and they do not accurately represent every school and student in the country. However, there seems to be genuine cause for concern that in many places locally and internationally, poetry is perceived as something reserved for an elite few. This is not to say that young people of the current generation are unable to develop passion for poetry (nor that none of them currently possess such passion), yet it seems that many are not necessarily finding it in traditional places. Dana Gioia suggests this is at least partly because of the technological and cultural changes that have resulted in written texts

losing “primacy in communication” (Gioia 2003, 21). The broader issue is not merely about how students engage with poetry; it is how poetry is located within the cultural revolution of recent years, meaning “...literature, an imaginative enterprise created entirely from words, has been profoundly affected in ways that we are still in the process of comprehending” (Gioia 2003, 21). Gioia notes some of the trends emerging in recent years: people are spending less time reading than in previous generations, illiteracy appears to be on the rise in the US⁷, new technologies have impacted the weight written words receive, and *yet* new poetic forms like rap and slams are thriving. Gioia claims that in unexpected and controversial ways, and without the support of the literary establishment, poetry has become popular again, primarily through performance, a change he argues seems “both strikingly primitive and alarmingly contemporary” (28). Poetry originated as an oral art form, and now a new ‘oral culture’ is being developed. The reason poetry originated as an oral form was because it developed in preliterate cultures. In contrast, contemporary poets *can* write but choose to perform. Gioia’s article highlighted this 10 years ago – *prior* to the 2005 advent of YouTube. The millions of views of performance poetry videos on YouTube suggest

⁷ Gioia cites the United States Bureau of Census study, revealing “13 percent of Americans over the age of 20 are illiterate” (22). Though, he highlights an increasing difficulty in measuring literacy, which at one stage was “anyone who had completed fourth grade”, but becomes complicated when “school-age children spend considerably more time watching television than in the classroom...” (22).

this new oral form has likely only increased with technological development⁸.

There exists then a puzzling contrast between students in classrooms, disengaged with poetry, perceiving it to be elitist and inaccessible, and a rapidly growing audience for performance poetry. This performance poetry culture may be more established in the US, but there are signs of similar growth happening in Australia too. The Australian Poetry Slam website states that, "Every year about 1000 writers perform...for about 20,000 people across the country; from small towns to major cities..." (Word Travels 2013). This is speaking of Australia's largest slam event, but it does not include numerous independent slam events occurring year-round throughout the country.

How are these contrasting images to be reconciled? Is this new poetry culture being demonstrated and discussed in schools? Or is it a common experience that teachers:

...struggle to make schooling culturally relevant, while meeting curricular and institutional mandates that do not include hip-hop, rap or other popular texts...[leaving] many students academically disengaged from schooling? (Christianakis 2011, 1133).

This quote touches on conflicting expectations, that teachers present content in culturally relevant and engaging ways, while leaving out significant cultural movements of recent times. Arguably, slam poetry and hip-hop are the leading formats for contemporary poetry today. Poetry is

⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0snNB1yS3IE> – this video of performance poet Sarah Kay has 1,823,975 views at the time of viewing (4th October 2013). There are numerous other performance poetry videos with equal or greater success.

being accessed increasingly through live performance and online videos as opposed to written texts⁹, and slams have literally spread globally since their 1980's conception in Chicago:

There are slams in Singapore and Canada, in South Africa and Jamaica. Europe is thick with poetry slams...Slam has given forum and microphone to more poets than any other avenue for poets in the last twenty years... (Woods 2008, 19)

If slam is *not* taught in the curriculum or introduced in the classroom, then there is good reason to suggest a substantial disconnect exists between the poetry students are exposed to in schools, and the poetry they have the opportunity to engage with in the current context of their society. This is not to suggest hip-hop/slam be taught *instead* of traditional/canonical poetry; why not teach students the rich lineage of poetry that has stood the test of time, as well as the movement of poetry now¹⁰? In addition to this, whilst studying canonical poetry may teach students about language and creative expression throughout history, studying hip-hop artists and slam poets may teach students about recent and current struggles concerning politics, oppression and injustice that may be true in their own lives and society currently. The two need not be mutually exclusive though. Russell Simmons' *Def Poetry Jam* hosted by hip-hop icon Mos Def was often opened "...with a classic poem by Byron,

⁹ At the time of writing this, Shane Koyczan's spoken word piece 'To This Day' has received over 8,104,000 YouTube views - in *one month*: [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltun92DfnPY>.] Contemporary poetry texts selling at this rate are unheard of.

¹⁰ I often ask students to consider that Shakespeare was in many ways the 'rapper' of his day. His work was extremely popular, and he used 'everyday' language, including slang, in remarkably clever ways.

Shelley, Keats or Wordsworth”¹¹ (Makhijani 2005, 11), and “the roots of slam can be traced from hip-hop back to the first storytellers, Shakespeare, and the Beat poets of the 1960s” (Makhijani 2005, 9). Looking at the history of hip-hop and slam, it seems unrealistic to ignore their clear links with poetry through history. The Last Poets, for example are considered “a prototype for later rap artists...” chanting street poetry over the beat of conga drums in the early 1970s (Powell 1991, 246). Similarly, Gil Scott-Herron combined spoken word poetry and jazz music in ways that anticipated and influenced hip-hop. Beat poets like Allan Ginsberg paved the way for slam. Every generation of poets has been influenced by its predecessors – this is no less true of hip-hop and slam.

Objections

Hip-hop and slam may be popular, but that fact alone does not qualify them as suitable for educational purposes. On the contrary, it might be suggested that their popularity could increase the difficulty teachers face in engaging student interest with classical work. One might argue that teaching hip-hop and slam could compete with teaching valuable canonical poetry, but perhaps it is worth considering that these current expressions of poetry are clear gateways to the lineage they come from. Houston A. Baker is a strong advocate for an English pedagogy that incorporates hip-hop partly for this very reason: “...at the college level, Baker finds hip-hop helpful in teaching the canon of literary studies to disinterested students” (Rice 2003, 454). Wayne Au also identifies that, “Most commonly, in

¹¹ This is a clear example of hip-hop, slam poetry and canonical poetry all intersecting.

classrooms teachers have used rap in English courses as a bridge to the literary canon and to teach literary devices (Au 2005, 211). Helping students trace the work of their favourite rap artists to poets like Gil Scott-Herron, The Last Poets, Allen Ginsberg, and further through history, may give students a critical awareness of context for the artists they listen to and lead to positive discourse about how literature changes over time.

At this point though, it would be fair to interject with a broader picture of hip-hop. Both hip-hop music and culture have established controversial reputations, and teachers may feel understandably hesitant about opening their classroom to an ‘art form’ that “Critics often call...materialistic, misogynistic, homophobic, racist, vulgar and violent. It’s a hot mess, the roar of total chaos” (J. Chang 2007, 59). Schools may feel that such a culture is partly responsible for the reason students *are* disconnected from English literature.

A prime example of why *not* to bring hip-hop in to the classroom might be Kanye West’s first album. The 2004 release titled *The College Dropout*, proudly boasts the success he achieved without the help of formal education, openly mocking the education system in songs like “School Spirit”. Though even in an album that may seem at a cursory glance a negative influence to be condemned and discarded, there are genuine questions about education that may be utilised by teachers to engage their students in serious critical thinking. In “All Falls Down” for example, Kanye raps:

*Man I promise she’s so self-conscious
She has no idea what she doin’ in college*

*That major that she major in don't make no money
But she won't drop out her parents a' look at her funny*

These lyrics create a picture of a student who is undertaking higher education because of pressure from her parents, even though she feels the courses she is studying will not result in financial gain. This raises questions about the importance of education and the motivating factors that influence major life decisions. Is it a positive thing that this student is still studying, even though she is doing so only as a result of external pressure? Would it be better if she felt confident in her own decisions, even if it meant withdrawing from higher education? Further, what should be made of Kanye narrating this story as a 'college dropout' – and is it ironic he does so through a poetic medium? Kanye also criticises his own sense of materialism in the song, alongside numerous observations of problems he perceives in his society. There is an uncomfortable self-reflexivity, as he shifts between blaming external sources and then admitting, he cannot act "holier than thou". This song (and the album broadly) are rich candidates for classroom analysis. Chris Richardson argues, "West presents one of the more nuanced approaches...espousing certain dominant worldviews while also questioning the symbolic violence they perpetuate." (Richardson 2011, 98). The 'symbolic violence' Richardson refers to is Bourdieu's concept of imposed ideas of meaning that are presented as legitimate while concealing their underlying power relations. For example, he notes that much of the discussion around hip-hop blames rappers and hip-hop music for causing violence, without considering the practical experiences of drugs, poverty and crime that

have often been realities for many rap artists. Richardson contrasts West with “conscious rappers” who practice overt political discourse, reflecting on the way West engages with social issues and dominant worldviews, but constantly explores them from a first-person view, both ‘espousing’ and ‘questioning’ them (98).

Are controversial topics in hip-hop symptomatic of broader ‘symbolic violence’, rather than the sole responsibility of rappers? Rather than taking a simplistic view of hip-hop as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, these questions can be reframed to discuss the cultural circumstances that led to the birth of hip-hop in the first place – “an environment that was at once both oppressive and unyieldingly innovative.” (Travis Jr. 2013) Just as writers like Sylvia Plath are studied in English classrooms with consideration for the context of their life, one may ask what factors are important to a discussion of West’s work – and for that matter, any other rapper? Like other texts studied in an English classroom, *The College Dropout* could be explored on several different levels. Ernest Morell and Jeffrey M.R. Duncan-Andrade highlight that in a practical sense, hip-hop lyrics are perfectly suited to sustained analysis from a wide range of perspectives:

It is possible to perform feminist, Marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic, or postmodernist critiques of particular Hip-hop texts, the genre as a whole, or subgenres such as “gangsta” rap. (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 2002, 89)

There are reasons to object to combining hip-hop and education, but it seems unreasonable to entirely dismiss hip-hop based purely on the

negative material certain artists propagate. If students are already listening to hip-hop, then thoughtfully interrogating these issues in the classroom may equip them to be critical listeners who do not just consume music, but engage with it analytically. Teachers have the opportunity to use it to engage an interest in creative language, while also drawing attention to artists who are *aware* of the strong criticisms directed at their culture, and wish to respond in ways that promote justice and positive transformation instead. Jeff Chang puts it well:

The best artists share a desire to break down boundaries between “high” and “low” art – to make urgent, truth-telling work that reflects the lives, loves, histories, hopes, and fears of their generation. Hip-hop is about rebellion, yes, but it’s also about transformation. (J. Chang 2007, 60)

Margaret Hunter criticises mainstream hip-hop for its focus on ‘gender consumption’ and objectification, considering the frequent use of strip clubs in hip-hop music videos, numerous popular songs about strippers and prostitutes, as well as a distinct lack of female voices in rap: “while women rappers have become virtually invisible, women video dancers have become more and more common” (M. Hunter 2011, 17). She recognises though that the music itself is not necessarily the problem, highlighting that “...conscious rap and spoken word poetry, are an important source of pride, creativity, intellectual debate, and positivity in the lives of many young people...” (31). Aligning with the argument I have made here, teaching hip-hop need not mean ignoring or perpetuating

gender issues in hip-hop; along with crime and violence they should be critically discussed and interrogated.¹²

The criticisms often fairly levelled at hip-hop are no reason to try and keep hip-hop 'out' of schools. Rather, they highlight the importance of considering the methods with which such material ought to be presented, in ways that engage with the world students live in, while teaching them how to navigate and respond to it.

Teaching Hip-hop and Slam

Arguably, the majority of the objections towards using hip-hop in the classroom highlight the importance of considering *how* it should be presented. Formulating an answer to this question will take time and trial and may look different in unique contexts. It may be informed however, by the work of educators who have previously attempted to introduce it in their teaching programs. Presenting research from the US and then conducting research on the 'Voice Slam' program in the ACT will help develop some guidelines for answering 'how'.

Mary Christianakis highlights four different approaches to using hip-hop in the classroom –bridge, scaffold, critical text, and hybrid. She warns that merely using hip-hop as a bridge to reach the canon or a scaffold to complement it, fails to challenge the canon and risks using hip-hop only as a temporary tool to be discarded after achieving its purpose. A critical text approach includes rap lyrics among other texts, aiming to

¹² Discussions of this nature happen *within* hip-hop. Lupe Fiasco's 2012 song 'Bitch Bad' is a recent example of a hip-hop artist questioning common gender issues in hip-hop.

broaden the canon, but can encounter practical difficulties by requiring a serious challenge to traditional school curricula. She presents a hybrid approach as a “...process of negotiating social borders to accomplish a social intertextuality in schoolwork....a melding together of aesthetic spaces and practices to dissolve the literary and social boundaries between school and life” (Christianakis 2011, 1138-1139). A hybrid approach does not ignore the literary difficulties some may have with teaching hip-hop *or* the real experiences students have of hip-hop as a powerful influence in their own lives. It aims to open the space between the classroom and the culture and balance some of these tensions. Christianakis’ four approaches are worth keeping in mind when examining the following examples, considering that a short-term approach such as bridge or scaffold may not respect hip-hop and slam as valid ends themselves. The successful programs discussed below appear to have helped students navigate the space between classroom expectations, and the lives they experience in their community broadly, aligning with the hybrid approach.

Previous Successes

Kammer argues that he struggled with poetry as a student, but developed a passion for it through performance poets found outside of the classroom. Five teachers in California, including Kammer, had experienced the contrast between “...inaccessible and dispassionate works” and moments “...which brought poetry alive for them” (Kammer 2002, 65). Discontented with the way poetry was being taught and perceived, they developed a

poetry unit for twelfth grade students, involving visits from local performance poets, an online forum for students to share their own writing, and finally a poetry slam for the students to perform their work in their own school. Some of these poems were delivered in a hip-hop style, some incorporated music; all were original student work. At the end of the unit, over 3000 entries had been posted in the online forum, and the slam was packed with school students, who “...ignored the bell ending the period and sending them to their snack break, opting instead to stay to hear the finish and continue a sustained standing ovation” (Kammer 2002, 69). The response to the unit devised by Kammer and his colleagues suggests that it is absolutely possible to teach poetry in ways that invoke passion in young people. It is worth noting that this program did not just *replace* canonical poetry with contemporary poetry. Students studied a range of poets from Walt Whitman, John Donne and Andrew Marvell to Gil Scott Herron, The Last poets and other contemporary artists. A key part of their success seemed to be using technology and culture students were familiar with – such as creating an online space for writing poetry and encouraging students to perform their own poems, raps and music. This aligns with Christianakis’ hybrid approach, connecting the work of the classroom with the lives students lead outside of school.

Heather E. Bruce and Bryan Dexter Davis are high school English teachers in the US, who decided to bring together the tangible problems they saw in their local community with a new poetry program. They theorised that hip-hop and poetry slam could be used to create genuine change in the culture of their school and students’ lives. In their article

"Slam: Hip-hop Meets Poetry - A Strategy for Violence Intervention" they write of "...attempting to develop a Hip-hop-influenced slam poetry curriculum that teaches for peace" (Bruce and Davis 2000, 119).

Concerned about the growing culture of violence in schools they had worked in, they decided to teach English in such a way that worked towards peace and equality, believing creative mediums of language might be powerful enough to help prevent violence, particularly in male students. This thinking is fuelled by the notion that a kind of "emotional illiteracy" is at least partly responsible for the violence:

Killings and other violent acts by emotionally troubled adolescent boys, along with the generally cruel way boys tend to treat one another or girls, are indicative of the potentially dangerous and lethal ways boys exercise their "emotional illiteracy" (120).

Bruce and Davis present Hip-hop influenced Poetry Slam as a way to encourage *both* emotional and linguistic literacy. This is because it is not only a way to encourage writing, but also an invitation for the honest expression of feelings rather than their suppression. Hip-hop music has often been characterised by struggle, and as a platform for minorities to speak about the injustices, pain and suffering they have endured: "Rap music is a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless." (Rice 2003, 467). Bruce and Davis believe that their program helped students develop confidence, and deal with their emotions constructively and creatively. They conclude their study by stating:

Although we cannot yet speak for slam's long term or broad-reaching effects on our students, in our class they are demonstrating more tolerance and respect for each other and for us; and that in itself,

constitutes a laudable milestone (126).

Their research is positive, though it might not be enough to satisfy a sceptic – without long term results and repeated positive evidence from several schools it is hard to draw definitive conclusions. It is important to note though that measuring the results of poetry curriculum of this nature with numerical evidence and statistics will always be somewhat problematic; the impact of language may be hard to measure, yet nonetheless very real. One cannot ‘prove’ the change in Jonathan Adames, a 17 year-old emigrated from the Dominican Republic who states that a similar education program called Project HIP-HOP helped transformation take place in his own life:

“I now feel like a person, a person with a voice, who is a part of a community of people with voices – voices that instead of guns can be used as weapons in the war against oppression...” (Murray 1999, 10).

Yet, if enough voices like Jonathan’s speak positively about such experiences it seems reasonable to infer that programs of this nature are capable of having a genuine impact. Jonathan’s statement makes sense when considering the strong emphasis that hip-hop and slam have on *every* voice being valid. In contrast with the earlier attitudes expressed about poetry as elitist and inaccessible, slam challenges the notion that reading, performing and evaluating poetry are activities only to be undertaken by a specific group:

As competitions open to and judged by anyone who wishes to participate, slams open the door not only to the socio-political issue of who has access to poetry but also to the critical question of what

poetry is and how it should be evaluated (Somers-Willett 2005, 51).

In opening these sorts of questions, slam invites all participants to rethink traditional categories, and envision a broader community connected by a common freedom of expression and a diversity of voices. Jeff Chang points out that, in a sense, this has always been a central purpose of hip-hop - to value participation rather than the criteria of *who* participates:

If you have the guts to step into the cipher and tell your story and, above all, demonstrate your uniqueness, you might be accepted into the community....That this communitarian honouring of merit....can transcend geography, culture, and even skin color remains hip-hop's central promise (J. Chang 2007, 60).¹³

Perhaps a significant reason *why* students connect with hip-hop in the classroom is the way it challenges hierarchies and affirms the value of minority voices that often go unheard. Diane Wishart Leard and Brett Lashua write about this, suggesting that in programs they have run with inner city students the opportunity to write raps meant that "...youth, traditionally silenced, engaged with popular culture to voice experiences and challenge dominant narratives of public schools and daily lives" (Wishart Leard and Lashua 2006, 244) They write of teaching rap with groups of students who have struggled with achieving academic success, and who have had disrupted experiences of school. They advocate for teaching "...from where the student is, rather than from where the teacher

¹³ The 'cipher' that Chang speaks of is in fact, the central hub of community in hip-hop (Alim, Ibrahim and Pennycook 2009, 1). Essentially, a cipher is a gathering of emcees, with an open invitation for any to share their voices, stories and rhymes – much like a poetry slam.

is at.” (261) Applied to teaching poetry, this idea would suggest using what students know and experience as a starting point, with the hope of broadening their knowledge and understanding over time.

Whilst I am advocating for hip-hop/slam as opportunities for legitimate academic and curricular purposes, the program I have developed, and those of many educators presented here are intended to be broader than that. Hip-hop may be a useful tool for teaching language techniques, and canonical history, but alone this would still not give students an answer to the question I raised earlier – *why* poetry matters. The ‘Voice Slam’ program communicates that poetry matters, wholly apart from literary purposes, at least partly because it gives a voice to the voiceless, and can build self-confidence and self-esteem in young people. Similar programs like the one developed by Bruce and Davis used the work of the classroom to engage with violence in the community.

Jeff Chang argues that hip-hop itself developed as “...a voice for the oppressed” (J. Chang 2007, 62), and across all cultures it has spread to it has consistently been characterised by a:

...progressive agenda that challenges the status quo. Thousands of organizers from Cape Town to Paris use hip-hop in their communities to address environmental justice, policing and prisons, media justice, and education (J. Chang 2007, 60).

Hip-hop, then, may have a unique opportunity in the class room to develop student interest in English, by connecting it with social problems they care about and strengthening their community. Ian A. Strever speaks

of running a yearlong poetry elective as well as a whole school poetry festival, aiming to create “a poetic culture” in the school (Strever 2006, 67). He argues that bringing poetry ‘to untouched corners of the school’, rather than just containing it in English classrooms, resulted in a “more sensitive and considerate student population” (68).

A critic may argue that poetry should only be taught for its aesthetic value, and this interaction with broader community problems is beyond the work of the English classroom. Realistically though, this will always be a tension. Students do not exist in classrooms ‘in a vacuum’: they learn English within the social circumstances of their lives. This is why a hybrid approach may be so valuable, teaching students to analyse English texts critically, while drawing on content that acknowledges and engages with their context.

Unfinished Work

The projects that have been outlined here have reported positive results. Whether running poetry slams at the end of a poetry unit, giving students the opportunity to analyse rap lyrics in comparison with texts in the literary canon, or encouraging students to write poetry as an alternative to violence, these educators claim that introducing slam and/or hip-hop into the classroom has had a positive impact, in various ways.

However, the majority of this work is coming from a US context. There are different social issues in these communities. Hip-hop and slam are far more established. The education system has different structures

and challenges. Would similar programs be successful in Australian classrooms?

Hip-hop and slam have developed strong and influential cultures in Australia in recent years. The Australian Poetry Slam has been running since 2005 (Word Travels 2012), and local slams are run across the country. In addition to US hip-hop being popular, Australian hip-hop has become an increasingly prominent subculture in recent years (Mitchell 2003). Though there has been some research done on Australian hip-hop and slam generally, there seems to be very limited work done on how and why these mediums might be brought into *education*. There are; however, a growing number of programs being developed to engage young people through these mediums. In Melbourne for example, the community organisation, 'The Centre for Poetics and Justice' aims to help young people combine performance poetry with social issues. On their website it states:

The purpose of CPJ is to create new access points into literary education and encourage social awareness for young people through spoken word poetry workshops and events. (The Centre for Poetics and Justice n.d.)

In 2012 'Word Travels' pioneered a youth-focused slam event called 'The Rumble', involving a series of workshops and slams across Western Sydney, culminating in a slam final at the Sydney Writer's Festival (Word Travels 2012). The Rumble had a strong focus on encouraging students to speak about their unique experience of life, and the challenges

they have faced, such as living in certain suburbs or belonging to marginalised cultures.

The ANU Voice Slam program shares similarities with both of these initiatives, aiming to work with disadvantaged and/or disengaged young people and encourage them in the context of the English classroom, as well as in their broader social context. Programs like these demonstrate changes in how poetry is being perceived and used across Australia. The impact hip-hop and slam have had on myself individually, the reception of the ANU Voice Slam program in 2012, and the work shown in this chapter from US schools leads me to believe these art forms may have a powerful impact on the way poetry is thought about and taught in Australian schools.

In the following chapter I will outline the ANU Voice Slam program, and present a research methodology for beginning to examine how this program may support and benefit students and teachers, within the Australian education system. The results of this research alone may not be enough to draw definitive conclusions, yet as with the previous research outlined here, it may enable continued development in these areas, and help invigorate the discussion of how these art forms may be used to positively benefit Australian schools.

2

The 'Voice Slam' Program: A Blueprint for a New Methodology

Ideas about reading and writing in English classrooms should always be subject to revision, especially in an evolving post-modern world where all things are contextual and subject to change. (Kirkland 2008, 69)

In 2011, I developed a single 90 minute workshop for secondary students called 'Beats, Rhymes and Life', sharing the name of the 1996 album by hip-hop group 'A Tribe Called Quest'. This initial workshop was predominantly focused on hip-hop, with some reference to slam poetry. I opened with a brief history of hip-hop culture, an overview of written and 'freestyle' rap, and a discussion about the idea that rap is simply a modern form of poetry. Convincing students of this can create a paradigm shift in students' thinking about poetry. As Adam Bradley writes "Rap is poetry, but its popularity relies in part on people not recognizing it as such" (Bradley 2009, xii). For students who are avid listeners of hip-hop music, becoming convinced that rap is a form of poetry can make it far harder to disregard poetry broadly. The second half of the session was dedicated to helping students write their own piece and then share it with the group. To encourage students to write, the Nas song *I Can* was played and discussed. *I Can* is a hip-hop text that demonstrates intelligent, poetic use of language, while empowering young people to pursue knowledge and education. The following excerpts from the third verse in the song can be

used to teach students about rhyme and meter, but furthermore for the social comments they make about history, race and education:

*Before we came to this country
We were kings and queens never porch monkeys
There was empires in Africa called Kush
Timbuktu, where every race came to get books...*

*...If the truth is told, the youth can grow
Then learn to survive until they gain control
Nobody says you have to be gangstas, hoes
Read more learn more, change the globe*

In these lyrics Nas contrasts his historical African ancestors who valued literature, with current stereotypes and pressures to be ‘porch monkeys’, ‘gangstas’ or ‘hoes’. His lyrics suggest that returning to literature and education is the way young people can change these social issues and grow. One can imagine interesting discussions ensuing from the comparison of these lyrics with others from the aforementioned West album, *The College Dropout*. Hip-hop has a variety of comments to make about education, and songs like these can be a stimulus for challenging and relevant discussions. In my experience, playing *I Can* in the context of this workshop was useful in engaging students to write their own poetry and rap verses, often challenging attitudes of students who may feel they are incapable of such writing.

‘Beats, Rhymes and Life’ was delivered in several schools throughout the ACT and South Coast region. The majority of these were partnership schools of the ANU Student Equity program, with a high number of

students from disadvantaged backgrounds¹⁴. Sessions were run with groups of students from a variety of year levels (from year 6 to year 12), and were adjusted where needed to fit the needs and timetables of different schools. The workshop was often run with whole class groups, but at other times with selected students from multiple classes, or with specific groups, such as indigenous and/or Pacific Islander students. Sessions were held in school classrooms, libraries, drama spaces, and lecture theatres. These sessions were always run with the aim of connecting with any students who failed to see English as relevant to their life or worthy of their attention.

Despite positive feedback from teachers and students, it was difficult to measure the effectiveness of a single session, and it was felt that a series of workshops with a stronger focus on developing an ongoing relationship with students and exploring a broader range of material might have a more significant impact. Over time, the workshops developed a stronger emphasis on poetry, still incorporating hip-hop but using it more as a supporting element, rather than the central focus. The history of hip-hop was condensed or removed from sessions, and more time was given to discussing what makes something poetry, and *why* poetry is worth writing. Over time, I began to advocate three reasons why every student should consider writing poetry:

1. In a world of billions of voices, performing poetry is a way to be *heard*.

¹⁴ ANU Student Equity partnership schools are generally located in low-socioeconomic or regional areas and have a high number of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

2. Writing poetry is a way to *process* the mixed experiences of life.
3. Humans are creatures of *rhythm*, and poetry is a way to harness it.

These reasons are subjective, and others may advocate for a different list, but in my experience students responded positively to these three ideas.

Towards the end of 2012 I expanded one workshop into four sessions with a heavier emphasis on slam poetry, a distinct hip-hop presence, and a stronger focus on helping students with developing their own writing and performances, aiming to move from a lecturing style, to an active session encouraging the participation of all students. During this time, I also began to consider the possibility of conducting research on the workshops, both to gain some evidence about the benefits they appeared to be having, and to develop a clearer sense of how they might be improved for future schools.

The 2013 Voice Slam Program

Over the course of 2013, the workshop series has been run in eight secondary schools in the ACT, with groups of roughly 25 students each time. The first workshop is still called 'Beats, Rhymes and Life' and aims primarily to change the perceptions students may hold regarding poetry, by looking at the work of rappers and slam poets and discussing what makes something a poem. The second workshop is titled 'Finding Your Stories', and aims to encourage students that they all have stories worth telling and a voice worth sharing. This session focuses primarily on the

practical process of writing. The third workshop, 'Slamming Your Words' moves from writing to performance, engaging students with discussions about what makes a good performance, and how to 'slam' poetry rather than just read it. The final workshop, 'Your Voice as a Force for Good' is an attempt to summarise the three previous weeks, coupled with a discussion about the responsibility of having a voice, and the power poetry can have for speaking into real world issues. Each workshop combines discussion of concepts, demonstrations of performing poetry, and practical writing/performance exercises.

Over the four sessions, students are exposed to a variety of performance pieces from poets such as Omar Musa, Luka Lesson, Sarah Kay and Shane Koyczan. I also perform a selection of my own poems to demonstrate different points during the workshops. For example, a piece I wrote called *Linguistic Emcee*, features the lines:

*I know my semantics, syntax and morphology
When I'm on the mic you might struggle to follow me
Linguistic Emcee, realising the right phonemes
Phonetically my word diet's packed with protein*

I use this poem to discuss with students the way people are often drawn to rhythm, even if they do not understand all the words or concepts in a poem. Students often express that even though they do not know what words like 'morphology' and 'phoneme' mean, they find this piece highly entertaining. This feeds into one of the broader themes of the workshops – poetry is a way to be heard and captivate an audience, even in a world of over seven billion voices.

During the workshops students participate in a range of different writing exercises, such as creating a poem that is no longer than ten words (linked to a discussion about Twitter, texting and other modern forms of communication), writing the ‘worst’ poem they possibly can (to help students become comfortable writing and discussing how they think poetry should be evaluated), writing in groups, as individuals, in silence, with ‘beats’ playing in the background, and in a range of other ways aiming to demonstrate that poetry and its composition cannot be simplified to any single formula.

An Invitation of Sorts

No doubt there are obstacles involved in suggesting substantial change in the way poetry is taught in Australian schools. Immediately the challenges of aligning with curriculum may come to mind, though upon analysing *‘The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English’* document this does not seem to be the case. On the contrary, it may be read as an invitation for programs of this nature.

Under the headline ‘Aims of the English Curriculum’ it states the aim of helping students “...understand, interpret, reflect on and create an increasingly broad repertoire of spoken, written and multimodal texts across a growing range of settings” (5). These statements bring to mind Christianakis’ arguments for a hybrid approach to using hip-hop in education. The texts of hip-hop should not replace classic literature or other texts being studied in classrooms, but they ought to have a presence,

helping students negotiate between the world they experience, the texts that have shaped it in the past, and those that are doing so now.

Beyond this, whilst the English Curriculum describes certain skills students need to attain – such as understanding rhyme, meter and metaphor - very little guidance is given regarding how to actually teach poetry. Somewhat surprisingly, the curriculum does not state any required texts. How poetry is taught is entirely up to the school and the teacher, as long as it meets the outcomes of the three strands – Language, Literature and Literacy. This opens the door for the use of programs such as the Voice Slam workshops. These workshops engage students with texts, both written and performed; they encourage students to write and implement a range of poetic techniques, and they emphasise and explore the power of language.

The curriculum opens the way for a broad approach to teaching poetry, creating the possibility of discussing what makes a text valid in the global environment students experience. This is an exciting invitation and a challenge for educators to consider, particularly in the light of poetry's prominent and current movement in hip-hop and slam.

Research Methodology

Of the schools who participated in the Voice Slam workshops this year, three also participated in this research project¹⁵. Ethics approval was granted both from the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee and the ACT Education and Training Directorate.

¹⁵ The three schools were selected primarily due to timing – schools that ran the program earlier in the year fit more appropriately into my research schedule.

In each of the three schools, students were invited to participate in the research with their consent and that of their parents/guardians. The research was conducted through short, recorded focus group sessions after the final workshop (with approximately four students per group), and individual interviews with teachers who attended the workshops.

During the focus groups, students were asked a range of questions regarding how they felt about poetry before and after the workshops, how they felt about writing and performing their own poetry, and if they regularly listen to hip-hop music. Answers to these questions gave some indication of student perceptions of poetry, the overall impact of the workshops, and how prominent hip-hop music is in Australian youth culture. In the interviews with teachers, questions were asked concerning how teachers felt about teaching poetry generally, whether they think the workshops complemented their existing teaching program, and whether or not they observed students engaging in different ways to how they might typically do so in an English class.

The nature of the research is qualitative, and primarily aims to give a general indication of how the workshops are received by students and teachers, and what benefits they might have for teaching and learning. Focus group discussions were chosen as the method of research to give students an opportunity to speak freely and openly, with a guided discussion rather than closed questions. By answering in a group of peers, a comfortable environment was created for students to respond in. Focus

groups were chosen rather than surveys¹⁶ to remove barriers difficulties with literacy might have presented for students answering the questions. Teachers were asked to choose the focus groups, based on their knowledge of class dynamics and students they thought would answer comfortably together.

Participating Schools

The names of the schools will not be used in this report, but it is worth noting they were geographically located in three different regions of Canberra (the distance between the two furthest schools from each other being over 34 kilometres). In this sense, the answers given by students ought to represent the ACT to a greater extent, rather than merely a specific school or suburb. In the first of these schools, two year nine classes participated in the full four session program. In the second school, one year eight class participated in a shortened two session program. And in the third school, one year ten class participated in the full four session program. Each class group was roughly between 15 and 20 students – a total of 60-80 students in all the sessions combined. 36 of these students participated in focus group discussions, conducted after the final workshops. All student participants were between 14 and 16 years of age.

The workshops have been developed with flexibility in mind. As a new program offered to schools, it has been important to adjust to the unique needs, timetables and cultures of each school. This creates

¹⁶ANU Student Equity do give out feedback surveys to students after workshops, but these are often not comprehensively filled out by students, and are also limited in the range of questions they ask.

challenges, but it also presents an opportunity to see how the program operates in different contexts, and what appears to increase or decrease its effectiveness.

At present, a program like this can be hard to classify. Some schools have seen it as an opportunity for English classes, and others have been interested in it from a social/student wellbeing perspective. Neither view is necessarily right or wrong, though trying to measure exactly what benefits these workshops offer schools may assist in understanding how they may be run most effectively in the future, and what kind of outcomes schools might expect from the program.

3

Slamming Stories: Results of ‘Voice Slam’ Workshops

“I thought [poetry] was like...all that old stuff...how like everyone’s like...I dunno...Sir Archibald and all that kind of stuff. Like the really old stuff.” (Matthew, ACT Secondary School student)

“I’d say from what I observed that their idea of poetry is much broader now...they valued a bit more what they had to bring to the table – and their voice.” (Kate, ACT Secondary School teacher)

This chapter will report on and analyse the general results arising from the student focus groups and interviews with teachers. The names of students and teachers have been changed to preserve anonymity.

A Basic Analysis

Not all students participated in the research. There were two primary reasons for this. After discussion with teachers and principals, in order to have a minimal impact on classroom time, I only spent one hour in each school conducting focus groups. This meant that there was a limit to how many students could participate. In addition to this, it proved difficult to get students to provide parental consent. Students were given information sheets and consent forms for themselves and their parents, but many students forgot or chose not to return these.

Out of the 36 participating students, 25 reported to regularly listen to hip-hop music (69%). 26 reported either having a negative or neutral view of poetry prior to the workshops (72%). 34 gave answers suggesting

a positive change in their understanding of poetry over the course of the workshops (94%). 30 reported that they found writing poetry easier after participating in the workshops (83%) and 26 reported that they would like to learn more about poetry and other poets after the workshops (72%). 24 students reported that they had an increased interest in finding out about study options at university (66%).

These numbers are positive, but they represent detailed answers given in the context of small group discussions. In these discussions certain questions were direct – such as *'Do you regularly listen to hip-hop/rap music?'*, and the majority of answers were a straightforward 'yes' or 'no'. However, several questions were open in nature, and the answers were more varied. For example, *'Before the workshops, how did you feel about poetry?'* Answers to questions like this were understandably more diverse. Therefore, the statement '26 reported having a negative or neutral view of poetry prior to the workshops' is derived from a range of responses from 'I hated it', to Matthew's response that poetry was '*...sir Archibald and all that kind of stuff...*'¹⁷ In view of this, the numbers previously given are useful in a general sense, but they need to be examined in the context of the discussions they came from.

Broadly speaking, answers from the focus groups appear to indicate that a large percentage of students in this age category regularly listen to hip-hop/rap music, and that an almost identical proportion feels

¹⁷ These discussions did not explicitly explore *why* students held these attitudes. Future research may benefit from exploring what reasons students give for disliking or feeling apathetic towards poetry.

negative or apathetic towards poetry.¹⁸ The results suggest that the workshops increased interest in poetry, confidence in writing and interest in learning about other poets in the future. It appears the workshops were successful in using culture and music that students were already familiar with to re-engage their interest in the English classroom.

The Words of Students

To give an indication as to how the previous numbers have been arrived at and other insights the focus groups presented, the primary questions that were asked in each discussion are here presented, followed by an indicative sample of answers and some observations concerning those answers.

Do you regularly listen to hip-hop/rap music?

25 students answered this question in an affirmative sense (For example: 'Yes', 'Yep', 'Yeah'). If the sample is indicative of students in the ACT broadly, this suggests that over two-thirds of secondary school students in the ACT listen to hip-hop/rap music. Significantly this seems to indicate that in Australia (as in the US) hip-hop music is a highly consumed genre by young people and is therefore likely to be viewed as relevant and engaging. Students were not asked *why* they connect with hip-hop, but Au suggests that part of the appeal may be the sense of 'battling' that is

¹⁸ Consider this in the light of Adam Bradley's earlier statement about the popularity of rap being dependent on people not recognising it as poetry. How could this paradigm shift affect the way that this large percentage of hip-hop listening students understand and approach poetry?

central to hip-hop: “rap music has been a way for urban youth to say to the world, “Look at me, I can take whatever you dish out and come out standing.” (Au 2005, 210) This may make hip-hop particularly empowering for students from challenging circumstances¹⁹. Australian youth have may have different social struggles to those discussed in US hip-hop, but Australian hip-hop is still frequently characterised by underdog success stories and themes of resilience. The high number of students answering yes to this question suggests that if it is granted that this music can be an appropriate avenue for teaching poetry, then a significant number of students will already be familiar with work that may form a basis for discussion in English classrooms. Connecting hip-hop to poetry may therefore have a strong impact on the way a large number of students understand and approach poetry.

Which artists do you listen to?

This question was not always answered by all students, but it is particularly interesting to note answers that were repeated numerous times. In responses to this question Eminem was referenced more than any other artist (nine times), followed by Macklemore (four times), Tupac (three times) and Hilltop Hoods (three times). Of these four artists with the highest number of repeated references, Hilltop Hoods are the only Australian artists; the other three are American. More broadly, the same pattern was seen with all answers given – 38 artists were referenced in

¹⁹ This is not to say that *all* hip-hop comes from struggle, but perhaps it is significant that numerous hip-hop artists are successful, in spite of adverse circumstances. Even the success of hip-hop, from the humble origins of New York Block parties to a global phenomenon is an unexpected ‘underdog’ narrative of sorts.

total, of which seven were Australian and the other 31 were all US artists. It is possible that students referenced certain artists for social reasons (to look 'cool' for example), or because the work of artists like Eminem and Tupac have still seen greater success globally than Australian hip-hop artists. Australian hip-hop as an established subculture is still far younger than US hip-hop, and these answers may be very different in a few years. At present, the higher number of American artists suggests that US hip-hop still has a strong influence in Australian youth culture. In considering questions raised earlier about implementing workshops of this nature in Australia while using research predominantly from the US, this is worth noting. Though Australian hip-hop *is* consumed by young people, American hip-hop still appears to have a dominant presence, perhaps indicating that hip-hop programs that have been successful in US schools may be similarly successful here.

Before the 'Voice Slam' workshops how did you feel about poetry?

In contrast with a generally positive response towards the previous questions about hip-hop, the majority of answers to this question were negative. There were several openly negative answers, such as "Really bad. I didn't like it at all", "...Just full of Shakespeare and stuff. Really not my cup of tea", "Boring" and "Hated it." Yet there were also a high number of apathetic answers, such as "Yeah...didn't have any thoughts really...it just wasn't there", "I didn't really think about it" and "It's just something you do at school." This latter group of answers reflects the attitudes I opened this work with, reflecting on my own earlier view of poetry as irrelevant

and inconsequential. There were some positive responses: “I liked it a lot”; “I like poetry. Always have”, but these answers were the minority – only 8 answers were along these lines. Matthew’s previously referenced answer about ‘Sir Archibald’ was given to this question. A response of this nature raises further questions. Perceptions that poetry is for or about ‘Sir Archibald’ has connotations that imply not only age, but *class* with the presence of the word *Sir*. Whether or not it was a conscious part of his answer, the statement affirms a picture of poetry as elitist, in addition to generationally irrelevant.

Has that changed, since the workshops? And if so how?

Of all the questions, broadly speaking this one had the highest number of positive responses. In addition to several affirmative statements that indicated a generally positive attitude, like “Yes, I definitely like it better”, numerous students gave practical reasons, such as “Yes, because it helps me express my feelings”, “Yeah, I can just write it better” and:

“Ever since I started writing more in class and all that, I haven’t been so angry. Like I still get angry, but not as much, and I don’t cry over nothing. I can write it all down and feel fine.”

Answers of this nature reveal that more than merely academic improvement, a new understanding of poetry can have social implications for students and schools. This fits with the hybrid approach to hip-hop in the classroom, connecting the academic goals of improved literacy and a greater understanding of language, with social benefits relating to the everyday lives of students and their experiences. Numerous answers to

this question contained comments about self-expression and writing from students reporting that they felt more comfortable putting their feelings into a poem. In addition to this, answers here generally implied the development of a broader understanding of poetry: “I guess I just realised that poetry is a lot wider than I thought it was. There’s a lot more things that are poetry.”

Can you describe your experience of the workshops? What did you like/dislike? Do you have any stories or things that struck you?

Being a set of open questions, there were a variety of responses to this. Some students commented on specific aspects of the workshop they enjoyed. Several said a favourite part was learning about and watching ‘freestyle’ rap, and others commented on particular writing exercises, like writing a poem telling the story of a scar they possessed. Again, answers were given that were suggestive of social benefits the workshops may have, particularly in terms of improving classroom culture. Sarah said, “We had our chance to speak” followed by Chloe stating, “We had our opinions heard.” Another student said, “No one judges you, when you do it” and another commented, “It’s like talking about really meaningful things without being judged. And it’s like a cool thing – people think it’s awesome at the same time.” Answers like this suggest that teaching slam poetry and creating an atmosphere for students to express whatever they have written, increases confidence and allows students to overcome fears of judgment when speaking. Students also seemed to agree that poetry is a powerful way to have people listen, as shown for example by Nicholas’

observation: “.... you read out your poetry, and everyone just goes quiet.”

To this Kate added, “...they’re just amazed.”

How do you feel about writing your own poetry now?

To this question almost all students expressed that they found the process of writing easier than previously. 30 students gave answers that implied this. Some students were highly positive stating “Yeah, I feel like I’d be way better at writing than when I first started this program”; “I love it. Easy, just...give me 5 minutes and I can write a whole page. It’s all it takes.”

Other students still expressed difficulties with writing, but made statements that suggested they felt at least a small increase in confidence: “It’s not as hard...but I still can’t do it properly”; “Uh...a little bit underconfident with that...but more confident than I was.” Jake confessed he had never written poetry in his own time previously, but after the workshops he had written two pieces outside of school, stating: “Yeah I find it better. I have written now, since I’ve had the workshops.” Isabelle’s answer reveals that not only was she more willing to write, but she wanted to show her teacher and connect what she had written at home, back into the classroom context:

“It was not long ago...I was like half asleep but I thought of something so I started rapping it. So I wouldn’t forget it. I gave it to Miss Smith.”

How would you feel performing/sharing your work in front of other people?

This question had the most negative responses, with several answers along the following lines: “I won’t feel confident.”, “Yeah not confident at

all.”, and “No, never. Embarrassing.” Some students expressed a willingness to perform with an admission that they would still find it difficult: “I don’t like performing in front of people. I would but I just don’t like speaking.”, and “I can. I get nervous though.” A small group of students responded positively: “I’d share.”; “I would do it.”; “Yep, I’m good with it. I don’t care. I’d do it.”; “I reckon if I wrote one really good one...like I wouldn’t do all of them, but if there was one really good one that I liked. I would do it.” Answers to this question are interesting to contrast with the questions about writing and perception of poetry. It appears as though the workshops had a higher impact on those areas, but may not have been as effective in building student confidence to share their work. For future workshops and programs it may be worth considering how to improve this. Potentially this could be assisted with more practical discussion about how to deal with the reality of nerves and examples of other students who *have* decided to share their own work, despite being nervous. It is important here to consider the relationship between being able to share and feeling apprehensive about it. Even professional performers struggle with nerves, and to students who identified nerves as a significant problem, I confided that on a personal level I still have to deal with them, but I aim to use them to improve my performance rather than cripple it.

After the workshops, would you like to learn more about poetry and other poets?

26 students responded positively to this question, expressing an interest

in learning more about poetry in the future. Some students did make a point of adding that it would depend on the type of poetry:

“Yeah...as long as it was more interesting like yours. But I don’t like Shakespeare and stuff like that because it’s really boring. And repetitive.”

“Definitely the more modern poets.”

In a sense, it may then remain a challenge for future workshops and programs to consider how to most effectively use the ‘modern poets’ to engage student interest alongside and in contrast with canonical poets. Perhaps students would benefit from studying a modern piece and a canonical poem at the same time and looking for what similar features and themes the poems may share.

Student Answers and Gender

I did not seek to explicitly consider gender in this study, but it is worth briefly commenting on. 20 participants were males and 16 were females. The majority of focus groups were exclusively male or female students, but due to uneven numbers of participating students, two of the focus groups were mixed (this decision was also influenced by teachers who chose the groups, based on which students they thought would or would not answer comfortably together). This did not appear to have any significant impact on the answers students gave – similar answers were given in male, female and mixed groups. Students of both genders answered the majority of questions in similar ways (citing for example several of the same hip-hop artists, and reporting similar views about poetry before and after the

workshops). Generally, answers suggested more males initially had an openly negative attitude towards poetry, whereas more often females were apathetic. It may be worth considering also that student answers may have varied if a female researcher conducted the workshops or the focus groups. This could be an area for future research to consider in greater depth.

The Reflections of Teachers

Student responses would be incomplete without being balanced by the observations of teachers who are familiar with these classes and equipped to comment on broader changes in class culture, as well as how these sessions supported or detracted from achieving educational goals. One teacher was interviewed from each class and asked questions about their views on the perception of poetry in schools, the way they observed students to be engaging with the workshops, and the positive and/or negative impacts for their own teaching program, considering both curriculum objectives and classroom culture. These discussions were more open and extensive than discussions in the student focus groups. Here I have divided answers into the core categories the discussions centred around, and have provided an indicative sample of the answers given.

Perceptions of poetry

All discussions with teachers opened with questions about perceptions of poetry they have encountered working with students. The idea of negative perceptions and preconceived ideas was affirmed. Frank stated:

“Look, poetry units always have that general resistance at the beginning. It’s a matter of getting through that resistance. Largely because...I think they do have preconceived ideas.”

Kate stated that students frequently had “Generally kind of apathetic or negative attitudes.” And Emily said the student attitude is “Pretty negative. And there’s definitely this annoying perception among the boys that it’s for the girls.” This perception did not necessarily come through in the questions I asked, but it is interesting to hear a teacher observe a difference in attitudes towards poetry based on gender. If it is true, male students may have particularly benefited from seeing a male poet.

During this part of the discussion I also asked teachers how they have felt about teaching poetry personally. Robin talked about struggling to understand poetry in the past and identified the sessions as helpful in refining her own approach:

“...it helped me see the value in poetry which is then something I can impart, because often if a teacher doesn’t understand why they’re teaching something or how to teach something, it’s difficult to teach it.”

In contrast Emily reported enthusiasm about poetry, but felt underprepared at times to respond to questions from students: “I feel really positive about it, but I do feel that there’s a deficit in my knowledge”.

The engagement/behaviour of students during workshops

The second part of each conversation was about observations the teachers had made regarding the actual engagement and behaviour of their students during the workshops. I asked each teacher to consider if the

atmosphere of the classroom was different during these lessons and if they though students were more or less engaged than on an average day. Kate said that when students were watching poetry being performed they were “Definitely more engaged...it was one of the few times there’s silence in the room ever.” She also thought this was true when students were writing their own poems, commenting that two students “who are quite off the charts” were noticeably more engaged when writing and produced some of the best work they had created all term. Robin also thought students were more engaged during the sessions, stating “they were actually participating –and listening.” Frank was enthusiastic on this point stating a definite level of higher engagement in some students, commenting that “Certain students who just will not engage with the traditional methods really took that on...and ran with it. They loved it.” He followed this remark though by stating that, “for certain students it didn’t work as well...but, that’s like any method in teaching. You’re always going to have the hits and misses.” Frank reported that it was students who were generally less interested in poetry that were more interested in the workshops.

Positive/negative impact on students in English more broadly

After discussing the engagement of students during the workshops I asked the teachers to comment on whether they thought the sessions had any impact – positive or negative – on student behaviour and engagement in English classes more broadly. Frank was positive on this point,

particularly after seeing students participate in an in-school slam during their lunchtime:

“Yeah, it’s had a great impact. Just going up and seeing today...there were so many kids up there. I didn’t expect there to be that many – to be honest. So, just that result was great.”

Frank’s answer is suggestive of a change in class culture – these students seemed more willing to participate in an ‘English’ based activity in their own time. Emily, who teaches the class that only got two sessions felt that it was not enough time to have a broader impact: “...just the two lessons in a big whole class context was not enough.” Emily’s class was the only one who had two sessions rather than four, and she was the only teacher who made a comment suggesting the time was an issue in this way. She was positive about the workshops, but it seems that a higher number of sessions are likely to have a more positive impact for students. Kate commented that because some of her students produced work of a higher quality than usual during the workshops, she was able to continue to use those works as an example, when trying to motivate her students: “...in terms of trying to get quality work from them when I haven’t been able to otherwise, it’s been useful using that as a reference point.” Robin was positive about the way the workshops helped students to see poetry in “a more active way, instead of just text book based”, but did not feel there was a noticeable change in their engagement in other classes.

Benefits resulting from the workshops – Curricula and Social

I then asked teachers to identify what they perceived to be the benefits resulting from the workshops, considering both curricular and social positives. Interestingly, answers suggested these two categories are interdependent and achieved most successfully together. Frank stated:

“...just by getting them more engaged it’s always going to get more results curricula-wise. And community-wise, classroom...it got people talking. It got that group work happening. I mean that’s part of the curriculum as well. It got the kids working together.”

Emily also emphasised this link, saying:

“...you need the social kind of stuff before you get to the curriculum. If they don’t have a sense of self-worth...they’re not motivated to do the work, then they won’t learn anything. So, once you’ve got those things then you can get to the curriculum stuff.

Improvements to student self-esteem and confidence were mentioned in several answers. Kate identified a social benefit as:

“...having some students speak their poems to the class, who wouldn’t otherwise. ...in terms of that confidence to speak to their peers – huge advantage ...self-confidence, valuing their voice...”

Emily also stated that “one of the key things was self-esteem and self-efficacy”. She thought the workshops assisted students in using their unique voice to express themselves, and she stated that this was particularly positive for “students who don’t feel a lot of success in English.” Reflecting on the benefits for achieving curriculum, Kate pointed out that the four strands of the English curriculum are ‘speaking, listening, reading and writing’, and the workshops helped particularly with speaking and listening, areas she argued can be challenging:

“...there’s generally in the past more of an emphasis on reading and writing...and it’s quite hard to incorporate speaking and listening. Because students are hesitant to speak in front of their peers. And they don’t listen very well. So yeah, to develop those two strands it’s really valuable.”

Emily argued that from a curriculum perspective the workshops did engage students with language: “Especially with vocab and understanding literary devices and just getting them to start thinking about transforming thoughts into words.” Frank and Robin both commented that in a broad sense the workshops presented poetry “in a new light”, possibly changing the way these students approach poetry in the future. Robin expressed it:

“I think they were able to see a different way it can be approached, and its purpose and how it can be used. So I think that was good for them to understand that English topics aren’t set to what they might think they are. That there are actually other approaches.”

Negative results and challenges

Teachers were then asked to consider if they perceived any negative results arising from the workshops. Frank identified the main challenge was the impact the sessions had on his teaching time: “I had less time to get through assessment....That was the only negative....But, it was worth it.” Emily identified the opposite problem, suggesting the most prominent difficulty was: “...only being able to do two one hour lessons across like two weeks ...” Considering these answers together suggests future programs may need to consider how to find an appropriate balance between spending enough time with a class to achieve significant positive results, without having a negative impact on the other educational

demands teachers have limited time for. Frank's statement that "it was worth it" is a key one to consider. There was a cost for Frank – and presumably other teachers who lost four double lessons – yet he considered the gain to his students worth such a cost. Kate identified another challenge from the sessions, regarding class culture:

“...I think there was some of their poems that were degrading to other students. But that wasn't so much an outcome of the workshop itself. I think it has to do with the atmosphere of the class culture, which isn't very strong at the moment...Not really apart from that.”

One challenge regarding the class culture seemed to be difficulty in getting students to write anything in the first place. Though another characteristic (certainly not exclusive to this group) was a sense of disrespect for teachers, other students and school broadly. These challenges need to be dealt with at the same time. Encouraging students to write without discussing respectful ways to do so may result in even worse class culture, by allowing students to freely write negative things about each other. Yet, limiting what students can write too much at the outset may stop them from writing anything at all. For classrooms where this is a problem, a practical solution may be to allow students to write, but check what they have written before they share it with the group. My observation from encountering this problem with numerous groups is that the content of student writing does change over the four sessions, and perhaps a necessary part of that change is allowing free and open writing initially, and then trying to direct it with a continued discussion about the weight of responsibility that writing and performing brings. Controlling

what students write is not necessarily possible or helpful, but considering what can be done to create a safe environment where students are empathetic towards each other with their writing is important.

In this part of the discussion Robin answered that considering her own class there were “no negative outcomes”.

Teaching poetry in the future

Finally, I asked teachers if the sessions supported their own teaching and if they thought they would approach poetry lessons differently in the future. Frank said,

“It’s given me new ideas. Try to make it more relevant to them...Different ways of doing it. Slamming it. I couldn’t do the slamming it, but I could get the kids doing it. That’s a way to get them engaged.”

Similarly Robin stated, “Yeah, I’d say so. I got some new ideas.” And Emily said she benefited from “...exposure to different poets. Helping to define poetry...or not define it, as the case may be. ...Strategies to get them writing...you gave lots of strategies for that.” Kate stated:

“Yes, it definitely supported my own teaching. ...having people perform slam poetry, in the flesh, was so beneficial because students could see, someone from Canberra, not that much older than them, has produced this poetry and that was encouraging for them...and you could see clearly the voice theme, from just showing them they have a voice in the first workshop, to them using their voice to perform in the last one.”

Further she reflected on how the sessions had given her a different perspective on the aims she would set at the beginning of a poetry unit, saying:

“This year I would have wanted them to know poetic techniques and be able to analyse poems –whereas I think if I did it again it would be more along the lines of I want them to know the power that their voice has and how best they can wield that. And I’d want them to create their own poems using their own voice, as well as analyse other poems.”

Reflections of an Emcee

The responses students and teachers have given indicate that this program does genuinely help shift student perceptions of poetry and engage them with it in a way that produces excitement and enthusiasm. In addition to these responses, this is certainly the impression I have from actually running the program. Every time I visit a group for the first time, I discuss with them what they think poetry is and which poets they know. Almost always they can only name dead poets²⁰, and they speak about poetry in a clinical, prescriptive way. I enter classrooms expecting negative or indifferent attitudes towards poetry, and I am rarely surprised. By the final session, several of these students often willingly perform their own poetry in front of their peers, and they have written poems that may not fit their original prescriptive definitions. With some of the groups in this study the first session was difficult. Respect for poetry was not high, and capturing the attention of students was challenging. Intentionally, I

²⁰ If students are *only* familiar with poets who are dead, then poetry is likely to seem more like history than an ongoing, living art form.

often do not perform a poem for students until they begin to talk among themselves and behave disruptively. At that point, I begin to perform a poem, and almost without fail, students stop talking and listen. This is not because I am special – it is a demonstration of the first point I advocate to students in answering *why* poetry – it is a way to be heard; people listen when someone speaks with rhythm, passion and confidence.

Each student, teacher and classroom is different and certain things cannot be measured in research or replicated in a well-planned session. The dynamics of engaging with each unique group necessitate changes in how the session runs. Yet consistently, I have seen students realise poetry is powerful, and given the chance to find their voice and write from their unique perspective, they rise to the challenge. Some students relate to hip-hop and slam poetry as survival techniques: ways to communicate their struggle through rhythm, without any interest in achieving a high English grade. Other students begin to see the possibility of pursuing poetry academically, realising that it does not have to be elitist, irrelevant, or exclusively the work of ‘dead guys’. I have to come to agree with the teachers here interviewed, that achieving curriculum goals is not easily separated from social issues – that success in one area is often linked with the other.

The answers given by students and teachers in this chapter suggest that introducing students to hip-hop and slam poetry in the context of their English classroom had several benefits, such as increasing students’ confidence, willingness to write and classroom engagement, as well as giving teachers new ideas for future lessons and assisting with achieving

the aims of the Australian English curriculum, like 'speaking' and 'listening'. I would argue that the answers shown here suggest that as I mentioned in the first chapter, the important question to ask is not *if* hip-hop and slam should be taught in English classrooms, rather it is *how*. This study alone cannot give a comprehensive answer to this latter question, but when considered alongside the research referenced throughout this work, important elements to consider seem to be exposing students to performance, inviting them to participate in writing and slamming, and assisting them in connecting the academic poetry of the classroom with the poetic cultures and art forms they experience in their everyday lives.

Conclusion: **Growing a Love for Poetry - Speaking for Change**

In this thesis, I have argued that hip-hop and slam (as widely successful forms of contemporary poetry) should be taught in English poetry classes, considering the benefits this may have for engaging and empowering students and assisting teachers reach educational aims.

In the first chapter, I introduced two contrasting trends – a seemingly widespread attitude of apathy and negativity towards poetry from school students, and the explosive growth of spoken word poetry and hip-hop culture during recent years. I argued that bringing slam and hip-hop into the classroom may be one way to begin ‘salvaging’ relationships with poetry, both engaging students in English classes and empowering them to use poetry in communicating their own unique viewpoints. I cited the work of several educators in the US who have reached similar conclusions and experienced success with hip-hop and slam programs in their schools. I argued that such programs could be beneficial in Australian schools, and researching these areas in an Australian context might positively inform future programs and educators.

In the second chapter, I presented the ‘ANU Voice Slam’ program as a suitable program for initial research in the ACT. I presented a general overview of the program, as well as a research methodology to begin to measure what kind of benefits the program is having at present. I also made an argument that hip-hop and slam programs fit suitably with the

Australian English curriculum, and that this does not need to be a barrier to their implementation.

In the third chapter, I presented the results of the research, discussing the answers given from student focus groups and interviews with teachers. The answers in this chapter gave a sense that the workshops did benefit both students and teachers. The results affirmed that prior to the workshops the majority of students had an apathetic or negative view of poetry. Answers from students suggested that the workshops increased their confidence in writing, their interest in poetry and their interest in higher education. Answers from teachers suggested that students engaged more than usual in the workshops, and the sessions appeared to improve student self-esteem and confidence, and equipped teachers with new ideas and strategies for teaching poetry in the future.

In reality, this analysis is limited in scope. It does however cast light on possibilities for future studies. The answers given in discussion groups could be analysed in a myriad of different ways from considering issues of gender, comparison between schools and year groups, to a more detailed analysis of the differences between a school having two workshops and another school having four. There is also scope for exploring links between specific hip-hop artists and attitudes towards poetry and education. In a sense, there is an overwhelming amount of research potential. In the first chapter I argued that this project could open the door for future research. The results in the third chapter affirm this. Future research could explore why so many students currently have negative perceptions of poetry and why they identify strongly with hip-hop. At a

primary school level, future studies could explore how students develop certain views of poetry, and at a secondary school level future studies could explore how factors like gender, socioeconomic status and cultural background influence the relationship young people have with hip-hop, slam and poetry broadly. Long term studies could seek to measure the continuing effects of integrating hip-hop and slam into education. This thesis forms an opening argument for reconsidering how poetry is taught, and reveals several areas of study worth pursuing further.

Roses from Concrete

In addition to having numerous hip-hop albums released, a collection of Tupac Shakur's written poetry was published in 1999, titled *The Rose That Grew from Concrete*. The title poem is the following four lines:

*Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete?
Proving nature's laws wrong it learned to walk without having feet
Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams it learned to breathe fresh air
Long live the rose that grew from concrete, when no one else even cared*

Tupac commented that upon seeing a rose grow from concrete an observer would not criticise the rose for its damaged petals; rather, they would marvel at its tenacity to grow despite such conditions. To simply criticise the negative aspects of a life like Tupac's own, or an art form like hip-hop is to miss the fact that poetry and art successfully grew out of oppressive circumstances.

Reflecting on the Voice Slam workshops, the metaphor seems pertinent. Poetry itself manages to grow even when it seems hemmed in

by certain systems and structures. Students from a range of schools and circumstances still manage to write powerful words even when their own lives seem surrounded by 'concrete'. For educators, parents, critics and observers the question is, do we choose to focus on damaged petals or celebrate living roses? Undoubtedly, we should work to minimise disadvantage, to address the structural reasons why poetry is perceived negatively and why students disengage from it, but we should not fail to see growth where it happens.

This study opens a window into the ways young people are engaging with poetry today. It reveals a persistent interest in language that connects with students where they are, culturally, emotionally and socially. It clarifies some of the challenges, particularly in developing programs that can have a genuine influence, without negatively impacting on the amount of time teachers have with their students and the goals they have to achieve.

Little Wins²¹

On a Friday evening, the 23rd of August, the Street Theatre hosted the ANU Voice Slam 2013. Eleven ACT students performed their own poetry, five students from Sydney travelled to perform their original rap piece, and over one hundred people came to watch. For some of the students who performed, their perception of poetry has changed radically, and their confidence in their own words has grown enough to share their voice,

²¹ A nod to Omar Musa's poem 'Fireflies'

regardless of the nerves they may have felt. As someone who has experienced a similar transformation I know that this is no small thing.

How to spread this transformation and teach poetry in ways that facilitate it are questions not easily or rapidly resolved. They are however ones worth asking. Salvaging damaged relationships with poetry is possible, and perhaps it begins with recognising the places poetry lives and breathes, today.

Bibliography

ACT Government. *Children and Young People*. August 23, 2013.

<http://www.arts.act.gov.au/community-participation/children-and-young-people> (accessed October 17, 2013).

Alim, H. Samy. *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Alim, H. Samy, Awad Ibrahim, and Alastair Pennycook, . *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Au, Wayne. "Fresh Out of School: Rap Music's Discursive Battle With Education." *The Journal of Negro Education* 74, no. 3 (2005): 210-220.

Baker, Houston A. "Hybridity, the Rap Race, and Pedagogy for the 1990s." *Black Music Research Journal* (Center for Black Music Research - Columbia College Chicago) 11, no. 2 (Autumn 1991): 217-228.

Baker, W. Douglas. "When English Language Arts, Basketball, and Poetry Collide." *The English Journal* 96, no. 5 (2007): 37-41.

Birch, Michele. "The Montana Poetry-In-The-Schools Program." *The American Poetry Review* 4, no. 4 (1975): 31-35.

Boudreau, Kathryn E. *Slam Poetry and Cultural Experience for Children*. The Forum on Public Policy, 2009.

Boyd, Nicola. "A Creative Writing Research Methodology: new directions, Strange Loops and tornados." Griffith University: Margins and Mainstreams: Refereed conference papers of the 14th Annual AAWP Conference, 2009.

Bradley, Adam. *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. New York: BasicCivitas, 2009.

Brawley, Lisa. "The Virtual Slam: Performance Poetry on the Net." *Chicago Review* 40, no. 2/3 (1994): 164-174.

Breeze, Jean Binta, Agbabi, Patience, Jillian Tipene, Ruth Harrison, and Vicki Bertram. "A Round-Table Discussion on Poetry in Performance." *Feminist Review* 62 (1999): 24-54.

Bruce, Heather E., and Bryan Dexter Davis. "Slam: Hip-hop Meets Poetry - A Strategy for Violence Intervention." *The English Journal* (National Council of Teachers of English) 89, no. 5 (May 2000): 119-127.

Chang, Jeff. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. US: Random House Group, 2005.

Chang, Jeff. "Interview: Saul Williams - slamming hip-hop." *Mother Jones* 26, no. 4 (2001): 78-79.

Chang, Jeff. "It's a Hip-Hop World." *Foreign Policy* (Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive, LLC), Nov-Dec 2007: 58-65.

- Chang, Jessica. "A student perspective: poetry in the New South Wales school system." *Five Bells (Poets Union of New South Wales)* 12, no. 1 (2005): 16-18.
- Christianakis, Mary. "Hybrid Texts: Fifth Graders, Rap Music, and Writing." *Urban Education* 46, no. 5 (2011).
- Chronicle of Higher Education. "Women and Hip-Hop." *The Chronicle of higher Education* 54, no. 7 (2007).
- Gioia, Dana. "Can Poetry Matter?" *The Atlantic Monthly* 267, no. 5 (1991): 94-106.
- Gioia, Dana. "Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture." *The Hudson Review* 56, no. 1 (2003): 21-49.
- Harris, Anne. "Alphabet Rap: hip hop and thee re-coolification of creative pedagogies as research." *New Scholar: An International Journal of the Humanities, Creative Arts and Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (2013).
- Hunter, Anita, Paula Lusardi, Donna Zucker, Cynthia Jacelon, and Genevieve Chandler. "Making Meaning: The Creative Component in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Health Research* 12 (2002): 388-398.
- Hunter, Margaret. "Shake it, Baby, Shake it: Consumption and the New Gender Relation in Hip-Hop." *Sociological Perspectives* 54, no. 1 (2011): 15-36.
- Jones, Nasir. "I Can." *God's Son*. 2003.

- Kammer, Joel. "From John Donne to the Last Poets: An Eclectic Approach to Poetry." *The English Journal* 91, no. 3 (2002): 64-71.
- Kelly, Alison. "'Poetry? Of course we do it. It's in the National Curriculum.' Primary children's perceptions of poetry." *Literacy* (Blackwell Publishing), 2005: 129-134.
- Kirkland, David E. "'The Rose That Grew from Concrete': Postmodern Blackness and New English Education." *The English Journal* 97, no. 5 (2008): 69-75.
- Lambirth, Andrew, Sarah Smith, and Susanna Steele. "'Poetry is happening but I don't exactly know how': Literacy Subject Leaders' perceptions of poetry in their primary schools." *Literacy* 46, no. 2 (2012): 73-80.
- Makhijani, Pooja. "SLAM: Performance Poetry Lives On." *Writing* (ProQuest Central) 27, no. 6 (2005): 8-11.
- Marc Smith ("So What!") *Founder of the Poetry Slam*. 2007.
<http://marckellysmith.com/?#/history/> (accessed June 11, 2012).
- McLane, Maureen. "A Night at the Slam." *Chicago Review* 40, no. 2/3 (1994): 157-163.
- Mitchell, Tony. "Australian hip hop as a subculture." *Youth Studies Australia* 22, no. 2 (2003): 40-47.
- Moran, Timothy Patrick. "Versifying Your Reading List: Using Poetry to Teach Inequality." *Teaching Sociology* 27, no. 2 (1999): 110-125.

- Morgan, Anne-Marie. "Language, literacy, literature: Using storytelling in the languages classroom." *Babel* 46, no. 2/3 (n.d.): 20-29.
- Morrell, Ernest, and Jeffrey M.R. Duncan-Andrade. "Promoting Academic Literacy with Urban Youth through Engaging Hip-Hop Culture." *The English Journal* (National Council of Teachers of English) 91, no. 6 (July 2002): 88-92.
- Murray, Nancy. "Sharing the Story of the Movement: the Project HIP-HOP Experience." *The Radical Teacher* 57 (1999): 8-15.
- National Curriculum Board. *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English*. Commonwealth of Australia , 2009.
- Page, Geoff. "Poetry in Senior High School: A Better Way." *Five Bells (Poets Union of New South Wales)* 12, no. 1 (2005): 14-15.
- Peoples, Whitney A. "'Under Construction': Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Black Second-Wave and Hip-Hop Feminisms." *Meridians* 8, no. 1 (2008): 19-52.
- Powell, Catherine Tabb. "Rap Music: An Education with a Beat from the Street." *Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 3 (1991): 245-259.
- Rice, Jeff. "The 1963 Hip-Hop Machine: Hip-Hop Pedagogy as Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 54, no. 3 (2003): 453-471.

- Richardson, Chris. "'Can't Tell Me Nothing': Symbolic Violence, Education, and Kanye West." *Popular Music and Society* 34, no. 1 (2011): 97-112.
- Shakur, Tupac. *The Rose That Grew from Concrete*. MTV Books, 1999.
- Shwalb, Nancy. "East of the River: Crossing Borders through Poetry in Middle Schools." *The English Journal* 96, no. 1 (2006): 40-45.
- Somers-Willett, Susan B.A. "Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* (Midwest Modern Language Association) 38, no. 1 (2005): 51-73.
- Spears, Sylvia. "Youth Poetry Slam." *Children's Voice* 14, no. 4 (2005): 45.
- Strever, Ian A. "'Who Makes Much of a Miracle?' The Evolution of a School's Poetic Culture." *The English Journal* (National Council of Teachers of English) 96, no. 1 (2006): 66-69.
- Student Equity ANU. *Voice Poetry Slam*. 2012.
http://drss.anu.edu.au/student_equity/voice_poetry_slam.php
(accessed June 11, 2012).
- The Centre for Poetics and Justice*. n.d.
www.cpj.org.au/CPJ/Who_We_Are.html (accessed June 2, 2012).
- Travis Jr., Raphael. "Rap Music and the Empowerment of Today's Youth: Evidence in Everyday Music Listening, Music Therapy, and

Commercial Rap Music." *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*
30 (2013): 139-167.

West, Kanye. *The College Dropout*. 2004.

Williams, Jean A. "Kanye West: the Man, the Music, and the Message." *Black Collegian* 38, no. 1 (2007): 20-24.

Wishart Leard, Diane, and Brett Lashua. "Popular Media, Critical Pedagogy, and Inner City Youth." *Canadian Journal of Education* 29, no. 1 (2006): 244-264.

Woods, Scott. "Poetry Slams: The Ultimate Democracy of Art." *World Literature Today* 82, no. 1 (2008): 18-20.

Word Travels. *Australian Poetry Slam 2013 - Official Site*. 2013.
<http://australianpoetryslam.com/> (accessed October 4, 2013).

—. *Word Travels: get your words to the world*. 2012.
<http://wordtravels.info/> (accessed June 11, 2012).