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Decolonising DMU Toolkit

# Poetic Pedagogy: Using Slam Poetry As A Tool For Decolonising In The Classroom

## What is the issue/ problem this resource will help to address? Context setting

Within the context of decolonisation, utilising emancipatory methods is a fundamental way in which students' voices can become embedded within curriculum. It should be noted, however, that this approach differs to conventional 'student voice' initiatives, where the focus is usually feedback on the experience of educational instruction.

Embedding spaces for voice allows for deeper reflection on the subject through expression of opinions and perspectives, allowing students to become better invested in their own learning. Emancipatory approaches have the potential to nurture passions and to embed the self into learning. This aspect is important in that fostering "a variety of new types of multiple literacies" (Kelner, 2000) helps to empower students, making education relevant and responsive to changes in society.

Poetry has been one approach which has allowed for the unfiltered, passionate expression of a student's position in the world in the context of the subject under study. Poetry has been examined in ethnographic research (Phipps and Saunders, 2009); education (Foire, 2013); literary studies (Perloff, 2004); decolonization and Indigenous education (Thaman, 2003); and nursing (Cronin & Hawthorne, 2019) to name but a few, and its use within pedagogic practice has been gaining significant traction.

The Department for Education and Science (2007) have noted that:

*Poetry matters because it is a central example of the use human beings make of words to explore and understand. Like other forms of writing we value, it lends shape and meaning to our experiences and helps us to move confidently in the world we know and then to step beyond it.*

Poetry as development of personal growth supersedes the mere transmission of knowledge. The experience of poetry can offer crucial 'thinking spaces' in which to reflect on our lives, thereby enhancing an understanding of the self. It is from this position that education can become a truly empowering space, one which fosters a re-balance of power within the teaching space and reminds students of the power and importance of their own voices (Freire, 1970).

Spoken word poetry is a type of poetry which amalgamates different poetic styles and interrogates crucial ideas about politics, identity and race with a language that is authentic, imaginative, and informative. When applied in the classroom, it is an effective tool in the hands of educators for the implementation of reading/writing practices and literacy in culturally diverse contexts which liberate poetry from traditional textbooks and also develops critical consciousness in students (d'Abdon 2016). Mark Kelly Smith (poet, educator and founder of the slam poetry movement argues that "[spoken word] poetry is probably the most effective educational tool for getting students interested in reading and writing poetry" (Smith 2009: 173) and this has been confirmed with numerous studies that highlight the benefits of exposure to poetry as igniting the dormant passion of students (d'Abdon 2016; Kinloch 2005).

It is a means to enable and integrate counter-storytelling in the classroom which challenges traditional norms of knowledge by giving creative space to marginalised voices and making sense and meaning of their lived experiences (Yosso 2005; Lowery & Walker 2017).

### **Case study/example**

Slam poetry (or spoken word) was utilised in a series of online seminars for a final year, Undergraduate Marketing module focused on the sociology of consumption. The group were half-way through their study of the module and the topic of discussion was contemporary youth cultures and consumer identities. I explained to students that they would be engaging with an 'unorthodox' activity related to the discussion, with the ultimate aim that it would feed into the larger summative assessment – a TED Talk. As part of the session, I shared the poem 'Open' by *George the Poet*, which was part of a Coca-Cola campaign for that year.

Based on the themes raised within the online lecture, students were then asked to each scribe a poem, titled 'youth'. The only instructions provided were to think deeply about their own experience of this word within the context of their own lives. Students were asked to anonymously post their poems onto a Padlet page once they had finished. Some students kindly agreed to share their poems as part of the toolkit, an example is provided to the right:

### **Youth**

**(written by Rachel, 3rd year UG student)**

*A changing economy  
Has made the world an anomaly.  
We are told to live within our means  
But my means are not the means of  
the generation before  
Because I am today's youth.  
Saving for a future that is uncertain  
Dressing for a meeting that is unwritten  
Planning for a legacy that cannot be set in stone  
So, what am I to do with a student loan?  
Because we are tomorrow's youth.  
But until we right the wrongs of our predecessors  
We will be stuck in a hopeless era  
Wondering what is special about us  
And not knowing how to right the wrongs of days past  
Because we are yesterday's youth.  
And now we sit amongst our peers  
In the midst of certain uncertainty  
Looking for hope in our degree  
That maybe we can be free  
But yet that may not be the case for many  
Because we have only 1 and not 3  
Because that is a problem for future me  
Because we are the future's youth.*

(Permission obtained from student prior to sharing)

The students across the seminar sessions engaged very well with the task. They seemed to have found a 'safe space' to share their thoughts and feelings about issues important to them as youth – topics ranged from student debt, uncertain future/economy, love, relationships, anxieties, and hope. The online setting worked well in that it allowed for anonymity - where students chose to remain anonymous – and created a space to amplify issues important to them. As a group we spent time discussing the themes.

The level of engagement was wonderful, in that it allowed for a creative expression of how one would like to express themselves and ran the "wonderful and terrible risk that [individuals tapped] into powerful feelings" (McVeigh-Schilz and Ellis, 1997).

## Points to consider when adopting this approach

- 1. Develop a rapport** – this approach can only work well when there is a positive relationship between tutor and student. Feedback from some students indicated that they need to feel that their views and opinions are valued, and this in turn helps to build trust. Through this trust, students were seen to be more willing to engage with this activity.
- 2. Proactively learn about your students** – use the data available on the profile of students for your module. Develop an understanding of the spaces that they may be coming from.
- 3. Make use of technology** – Anonymity is helpful, especially when the information being shared comes from a personal space. Time away from the classroom setting provides opportunities for students to reflect and think about their experiences with less distraction/intervention from the tutor.
- 4. Ditch the empty vessel approach** – Students often don't realise the knowledge, expertise, and insight that they already have. Enabling students to tap into this rich repertoire of information can help us to reconsider ways in which 'knowledge' is categorised.
- 5. Encourage peer-to-peer learning** – Ensuring that the learning environment is not merely information being disseminated by the member of staff leading the session but becomes a space which nurtures a community of learners. Learning from one another is valuable and enables students to become custodians of knowledge.

## References

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