Spoken-word poetry (SWP) is an innovative, engaging form which offers exciting opportunities for students' creative development. As teachers aiming to inspire creativity through this emerging form, we need stronger resources and understanding of SWP’s history, cultural impact and literary devices.

In this paper, I draw together my 15 years’ experience as a spoken-word poet, analysis of spoken-word poetics, with international research into the successful use of spoken-word poetry in education. I focus on two key questions:

- What do students and teachers need to create and appreciate spoken-word poetry?
- How can spoken-word poetry inspire creativity in our students?

Principles

Definitions:

- Slam poetry: any poetry performed in a slam (live competition), NOT a style or genre.
- Spoken-word poet / spoken-word artist / performance poet: a poet who creates work to perform, using techniques specific to that setting.

What do students value about poetry?

- Emotion
- Self-expression
- Relating to experiences of others
- Authenticity
- Immediacy
- Seeing themselves as creators

Students often see these values reflected in spoken-word poetry. Their attitudes may be profoundly shifted away from beliefs that poetry is mysterious, elitist, or inherently difficult, by repositioning themselves as creators rather than passive receivers:

“by the end of the process they come to understand that poetry is something that they create with their own words and that a poet is somebody who does just that.” (Chelley McLear, cited in Xerri 2017, 129)

What does spoken-word poetry (SWP) offer students?

Spoken-word poetry, as a recent innovation of oral traditions, offers the perfect avenue for students to meet the syllabus objectives of valuing ‘the power of effective communication using the language modes of speaking [and] listening’ and to ‘express themselves and their relationships with others and their world’. (NSW Board of Studies)
Many spoken-word poets say they are drawing on or actively reviving the oral tradition. Many entered poetry through hip-hop music (e.g. Kate Tempest, Luka Lesson, Omar Musa), mirroring the development of spoken-word poetry from its oral roots. SWP allows students to connect with oral traditions of their culture, either modern or ancient.

“Every kid is a poet.” – Luka Lesson (interview 2018).

Benefits of participation in spoken-word communities:

If our aim is to create a lifelong interest in literature, it seems evident that teaching students as writers within a spoken-word community is highly effective. (Nozica 25)

...as with all performance arts, spoken word poetry requires the performer to “show” him or herself to the audience; that is, to be seen. This element of seeing and being seen, embedded in spoken word poetry, makes this art form ideal for building a true learning community. (Dooley 84)

Youth spoken-word programs have been shown to massively increase young people’s engagement with poetry beyond the classroom.¹

Teaching spoken-word poetry:

Although slam poetry has grown into “arguably the most successful poetry movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (Gregory 63), there is still limited critical understanding of this emerging form. SWP has largely been dismissed or heavily criticised by the poetry establishment, limiting the vocabulary and resources available to teach and discuss it. While the hip-hop influences of SWP may pose a challenge to traditional analysis and evaluation of written texts, we should ensure it is not misrepresented as impoverished or incomplete poetry. This paper offers a framework through which to understand and appreciate SWP as a form with its own rich and complex craft.

Techniques

Spoken-word poetry is delivered as sound, and it therefore uses a range of techniques which are specific to the performance setting. It is ephemeral, evanescent, and immersive; and these conditions of the spoken word, like the materials of any craft, offer us certain possibilities and limitations. The following techniques are those that are often less understood or more difficult to analyse in a traditional evaluation of written texts. By appreciating them, we open up new creative processes for our students.

1. Rhyme

What is it?

Repetition of sounds in two or more words. It can be very simple or highly complex. Rhyme has a range of purposes in oral poetry including aesthetic, expressive and mnemonic. In spoken-word poetry our definition of rhyme should be as wide as possible, including internal rhyme, daisy-chaining, slant rhyme, multi-syllable and multi-word rhymes, as derived from hip-hop.

E.g.: Omar Musa, “My Generation”

    My generation
    bloomed with the blood of artists
    who sent messages in bottles

¹ This year in the USA, the National Endowment for the Arts recorded the largest increase in poetry readership in more than 15 years: 28 million adults. The number of 18-25 year olds reading poetry had more than doubled, attributed to the success of youth spoken-word programs. (Iyengar)
that ended up lodged in bleached coral
and humanity was a deep fossil to be fossicked someday
by a people other than us.

Why is it important?

Rhyme offers a creative tool for producing and shaping writing. If taught appropriately using examples from oral sources, rhyme is generative rather than restrictive.

The craft of writing is also modelled by a hip-hop approach to rhyming, which emphasises the pleasure of exercising, refining and mastering skills:

“I just love words; love how to bend ‘em, love how to break ‘em, twist ‘em, turn ‘em, make ‘em in couplets... it’s all acrobatics, it excites me.” – Kendrick Lamar

How can we use it in the classroom?

- Offer students a prompt such as “Everybody’s a victim in my eyes” (Kendrick Lamar). Ask them to write the next line, rhyming. Identify types of rhyme they have used, then ask them to try an alternative type.
- Use rhyming as a freewriting tool. Vocal freestyling could be recorded on student devices.
- Have students highlight the rhymes in different texts, e.g. romantic poems and hip-hop lyrics. Compare the different styles, density, and structures of rhyme.
- Experiment with using rhyme to make predictable and unpredictable word choices (when we hear patterns we expect them to repeat).
- Explore how rhyme helps oral poets to memorise even very long poems.

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2. Flow

What is it?

Careful construction of emphasis, pace and cadence to create implied rhythms. The moments of feeling ‘swept along’ in listening to a poem are a result of flow. It is a technique which connects audience and poet in the moment.

E.g.: Luka Lesson, “May Your Pen Grace the Page”

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||| |
Before I know it she’s on top of me
She’s rocking and she’s rolling me
We’re touching uncontrollably
She likes to switch the roles on me
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Why is it important?

Flow is more than a technique. It is a psychological state of optimal experience that we access in order to write and create. Listening to poetry can also be a flow-state: “getting lost in language that surges forward, allowing the mind to wander in the presence of words” (Bernstein 7).

How can we use it in the classroom?

- Remove conventional rules and restraints (spelling, neatness, swearing etc)

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2 Flow is “a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter.” (Csikszentmihalyi)
- Set timed exercises
- Require quantity, not quality, for first drafts (e.g. 5 mins non-stop or 1 full page)
- Introduce them to free-writing
- Use background music without lyrics in writing sessions.

3. Reconstruction

What is it?
Words or phrases are broken down into parts and recombined to form new meanings.

E.g.: Arielle Cottingham, “Tramlines”

My Dad says,
You look so pretty with straight hair
you look so pretty straight -
…You look so pretty when you’re straight

Why is it important?
Reconstruction encourages wordplay, fostering a love of language. It allows students to find and appreciate multiple meanings and investigate hidden ideologies.

How can we use it in the classroom?
- Offer a prompt such as “History is an ocean” (Arielle Cottingham) and ask students to reconstruct it in as many ways as possible. This can lead into writing a poem.

4. Redefinition

What is it?
Words are redefined to give them new meanings, sometimes by spelling them out, reconstruction, or by association. The new meanings often give a sense of greater significance than conventional dictionary definitions.

E.g.: Luka Lesson, “May Your Pen Grace the Page”

Pass a rush of blood till your arteries blast
And let the blood rush to your arm and let your artistry start

Why is it important?
Redefinition allows students to question assumptions about language. It performs cultural revision, empowering them to define their world in their own terms.

How can we use it in the classroom?
- Offer a word or phrase such as “power” or “unsatisfactory” and ask them to brainstorm a new definition for it. They can do this by: breaking it into parts and recombining them; spelling it out or scrambling letters; associating it with words that sound or look the same.
- Ask students to list things they get told a lot, starting with “They say...”. Then add a line after each, starting “what they really mean is...” or “what I hear is...”

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3 Freewriting is a method popularised by Natalie Goldberg in her book Writing Down the Bones. “I don't believe in writer's block. The cure: pick up the pen and get moving. Go, 10 minutes, tell me everything you know about mashed potatoes.” (Anderson-Childers)
5. **Incantation**

**What is it?**

A formulaic use of words to create magical effects. Incantation is characteristic of archaic poetries and employs the use of repetition to create enchantment.

**E.g.:** Luka Lesson, “May Your Pen Grace the Page”

May you mean every word that you say  
And may writing your lines be the way that you pray

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**Why is it important?**

Incantation embodies the belief that words and language have real impacts on the world around us. “Words become actions… I really believe that if you say something enough times, it becomes something; this poem is evidence of that.” (Luka Lesson, interview 2018).

**How can we use it in the classroom?**

- Write a poem about your wishes for someone important in your life, starting with the lines “May you…”
- Write an affirmation or mantra for yourself, like your own theme song, to say to yourself every morning. What do you want to remember when life is difficult?

6. **First person and direct address**

**What is it?**

First person: The poet speaks from their own point of view, using ‘I’ or ‘we’.

Direct address: The poet speaks directly to the audience.

**E.g.:** Kate Tempest, “Picture a Vacuum”

Now follow that light with your tired eyes  
Its been a long day, I know, but look  
Watch as it flickers and it roars into fullness…

**Why is it important?**

Spoken-word poetry emphasises an intimate relationship between poet and listener: the “element of seeing and being seen” (Dooley 84). The use of first or second person inevitably invites a more literal interpretation than it would on the page: we cannot help but identify ‘I’ as the poet and ‘you’ as ourselves. ‘We’ often signifies the poet representing a certain social or cultural group. This can make SWP a powerful vehicle for students’ expressions of identity, selfhood, experiences, and desire for change.

7. **Iconic substitution**

**What is it?**

‘Sound iconicity’ is the notion that words which are closely related by sound acquire iconic relationships, each evoking the other despite unrelated denotative meanings (Middleton 285). Iconic substitution exploits these relationships to create metaphorical associations. It suggests that a thing is like another thing, through sound.

**E.g.:** Luka Lesson, “May Your Pen Grace the Page”

I’m basically feeling that **art** isn’t **hard**  
What’s **hard** is your **heart**
Why is it important?

Iconic substitution is an alternative way to approach figurative language and develop suggestiveness in student writing. It reveals our unconscious responses to language and patterns.

Applications: ‘Sleeping Beauty’

View a performance of the poem by Sarah Temporal and consider:

- What do you notice?
- What parts relate to you?
- How is the experience of performance different to reading from the page?
- How could you use this to motivate and guide creative writing in your classroom?

“The thing that drives you might be painful, but the minute it becomes a creative act, it becomes about love. It’s such a beautiful and generous practice to be able to write or perform. It’s just pure love.” – Kate Tempest

Processes

The process of preparing work for performance also offers students a strong, authentic framework for the craft of writing and creative development.

Play hard, work hard.

The techniques of SWP encourage a playful approach to language, treating it a as a fluid, physical substance to be cut up and revised. Once the ‘play’ of the drafting stage has been completed, students can be guided to take ownership of the ‘work’ of selecting, editing and refining their work for an audience. They should have opportunities to share or perform at frequent intervals in their ‘writing community’, becoming aware of how their work is valued.

Tell the truth

It is important to make some distinctions about what performing poetry is and is not. Firstly, it is not acting. Rather than coaching students on tone, voice and gesture, the writing community should help students authentically embody the experience related in the poem.

“Performance is not acting. It is remembering why you wrote it.” – Joelle Taylor

Secondly, performing a poem is not like giving a speech. It is about making yourself vulnerable, showing yourself, and taking a risk. It should be approached as a process rather than product, with audience feedback contributing to the development of the poem.

“Performing a poem is one of the most enjoyable ways of finding out how it tastes, how it works, how it hangs together, how rhythm, word music, the patterning of language and sound all combine to express feelings and meanings.” (Barrs & Styles)

Performance is a guide to ‘telling the truth’, as we discover the significance and emotional weight of what we want to say in our interactions with others.

Memorisation

Being able to perform a poem from memory builds students’ ownership of and confidence in their work. Memorising their own poetry (learning by heart), unlike memorising information (learning by rote), remains a relevant skill valued in many settings.
Performers memorise by:

- Saying the words aloud as they write
- Recording the finished piece on a mobile device and listening on repeat
- Using mnemonic techniques like rhythm and rhyme
- Using their body movements and gestures as triggers
- Chunking the poem down into small sections to learn
- Rehearsing over and over, at least a week before performing.

“...at what point do you realise that this isn't something that you’ve written, but this is just something that belongs in you?” – Kate Tempest

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**Best practice in teaching spoken-word poetry**

I briefly reviewed the available research on spoken-word poetry in education, youth spoken-word programs, and poet-educators. The following advice appears frequently:

- Teachers should participate on equal basis with students in writing activities:

  “whenever I’ve been in a class where…the teacher has shared what they’ve written...something vulnerable or personal, the respect between teacher and students becomes so equal and solid. Vulnerability is a tool that is sometimes undervalued by teachers.” (Luka Lesson cited in Xerri 2016)

- Collaborate with professional poets to benefit both students and teachers:

  “Writers often address the very same aspects of writing on which teachers may be working, and yet the effects can be radically different... their very living relies on their craft, and this clearly makes some important connection with pupils.” (Owen and Munden)

- Cultivate a writing community beyond the classroom and extend opportunities to publish and perform into that wider community:

  “the objective... is to make young people realize that their voice is important and that it has as great a value as any president’s, prime minister’s or anybody... once they’ve grasped that, you find that even the most nervous children often will get up and perform.” (Chelley McLear cited in Xerri 2017)

- When students encounter a poem, ask “What do you notice?” rather than “What is it about?”

  “the teacher’s role is... to find entry points into poems that echo students’ personal stories.” (Jon Sands cited by Nozica)

- Have students engage in a regular practice of writing before introducing techniques, and wherever possible, show them the techniques present in their own writing:

  “The skills of comprehension and analysis of form and language choice will develop over time, through the process of repeated composition and through exposure to a variety of texts.” (Nozica)

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**Resources**

_Sarah Temporal – free teaching resources_ for spoken-word poetry available on website. As this page is frequently updated, you can sign up for email alerts.

[https://sarahtemporal.com/teachers/]
Luka Lesson is currently designing resources for teaching his poems. These will be available on his website in early 2019, and he has said will include “workshop outlines, videos and examples of poems that have been produced in my workshops.”

Youtube:
- Best Slam Poetry playlist – Sarah Temporal http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwPTRIYrYRWclepnHNkJy9f7r-ivBkQ7e
- Teaching spoken-word poetry playlist – Sarah Temporal http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwPTRIYrYRWfrAGPcVrWDww9CODOF-sgzu
- Australian Poetry Slam https://www.youtube.com/user/AustralianPoetrySlam
- OutLoud Australia http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpqK6jWCYJz98XnU1o2KunQ
- Bankstown Poetry Slam http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYXAy1KV5lqHMaAW8-UNVXg
- Button Poetry https://www.youtube.com/user/ButtonPoetry

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