Spoken word poetry is a hybrid art form that blends the composition and performance of the written word, incorporating the traditions of standard poetry forms and modern hip-hop culture. Spoken word poetry is a popular art form among many teens, primarily in urban areas, who use writing and performance as avenues for self-expression with a focus on personal and cultural identities. Teens often work in teams, sponsored by high schools and community arts organizations, to compete against one another in individual and group competitions.

Over the past two decades, the United States has seen a groundswell of spoken word advocacy, activism, and education in traditional educational spaces and in out-of-school settings. Spoken word poetry can connect and support young people and open new possibilities in their lives. The power of the spoken word is central to the story of human beings as it lends agency, solidarity, and power to marginalized or oppressed communities. Spoken word poetry is not merely the act of performing a poetic work aloud. It is the descendant of traditions of cultural remembrance, institutional preservation, and educational significance. Spoken word poetry is a significant part of the artistic, historical, and cultural fabric of humanity.

To understand the role of spoken word poetry in the informal learning ecology, it is important to understand the history of the art form. This entry continues with a brief history of the spoken word tradition and then describes the component parts of spoken word with respect to informal teaching and learning. The entry ends with examples of how young people engage in spoken word poetry in out-of-school contexts.

History of Spoken Word Poetry

Spoken word poetry is an oral art form that focuses on the aesthetic use of poetic meter, wordplay, and stylized vocal expression. The phrase spoken word is often used to describe various types of performance-based poetry including free verse, beat, slam, jazz, and rap. As an art form, spoken word occupies a position of particular social, cultural, and political importance. Spoken word poetry can trace its legacy back to West African oral tradition, particularly the griot, a community storyteller, diplomat, and keeper of institutional memory. Furthermore, music, dance, and poetry were central to indigenous ways of life appearing at nearly every major cultural event from birth to death. During the transatlantic slave trade, members of enslaved communities held fast to these traditions for emotional, social, and psychological solidarity during times of unprecedented inhumanity.

As Frederick Douglass and W. E. B Du Bois noted, the words of the community were a vital component for survival for enslaved African people. These oral traditions became intertwined with Western Christianity and gave rise to what would become known as work songs or spirituals often used to commiserate and collectively communicate. Additionally, Pentecostal traditions became imbued with indigenous customs including call and response, dance customs, and the “talking drum” found in many African communities such as the Mandinka.

These traditions were then subsequently passed down from generation to generation, following the Great Migration northward as a means of cultural memory, survival, and preservation and eventually inspiring writers and authors of the Harlem Renaissance including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Alice Dunbar Nelson. It was here that themes of social uplift, resistance, and repudiation of systemic racism and bigotry, as well as pride in culture and self, were explored in the context of the 20th century. And though the Harlem
Renaissance fell victim to the Great Depression, its influence can be seen in subsequent generations of poets, activists, and authors. Most notably, their influences can be found in musical traditions including gospel, jazz, and the blues.

These oral, intellectual, and cultural traditions ingrained in African American communities eventually became an explicitly sociopolitical voice that directly influenced the civil rights movement both in terms of style and content. Moreover, many speakers had adopted the cadence, rhetorical style, and vocal mannerisms found in the African American church. This can be clearly seen in speeches such as Sojourner Truth's “Ain't I a Woman” and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream,” which helped define and push forward the struggle for freedom and equality where ordinary people bolstered by the strengths of their culture and tradition worked toward realizing extraordinary change.

While these oral traditions clearly influenced activist circles, they left their mark on artistic communities as well. Beat poets including Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg, and LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka developed a style of poetry that focused increasingly on the performance in addition to the repudiation of traditional societal norms, and many established lyric and poetic conventions. These post–World War II artists embraced jazz, free-form verse, and nonconformity while rejecting standard poetic form and meter as well as Western social constructs involving religion, sexuality, and materialism.

In the shadow of the civil rights movement, spurred on by influences of the Beat Generation, spoken word poetry made its way into popular consciousness by way of The Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron with their blend of contemporary political consciousness and incorporation of the traditional “talking drum.” Specifically, it was with Scott-Heron’s now classic “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” in the album Small Talk at 125th and Lenox in 1970 that spoken word poetry permanently entered into wider American cultural consciousness as it received critical acclaim, significant radio play, and cultural support for its overtly political message.

With the popularity of spoken word on the rise, venues began to host live poetry performances. Many of the beat poets had made their way to New York and California, fertile ground for these types of performances. Around the same time that The Last Poets were gaining popularity, the Nuyorican Poets Café on New York’s Lower Eastside was founded and remains one of the oldest American venues for presenting spoken word poetry. As these spoken word performances gained popularity and frequency, another poetic form emerged—the poetry slam, or formal spoken word competition. Poet Marc Smith is credited with starting “the poetry slam” in Chicago, in November 1984. These competitions spread across the country, and in 1990, the first National Poetry Slam took place in Fort Mason, San Francisco. Today, there are thousands of “slams” that take place across the globe.

Hip-hop culture and rap in particular continues the legacy of these oral traditions and adds to the rich cultural history that undergirds it. Born in the late 1970s in New York’s South Bronx borough out of wholesale economic, political, and social disinvestment, this form of artistic, political, and cultural expression that brings together various marginalized cultures serves the selfsame function as its predecessors but has become so much more. Recent research indicates that hip-hop culture is arguably the most influential cultural artifact in modern history, and it has influenced nearly every facet of popular culture and has found an outlet in nearly every nation across the globe. This is particularly true of rap music. Drawing from cultural legacies, many contemporary rap artists have embraced elements of jazz, spoken word, gospel, and African traditions to create an artistic form that is at once vibrant and vital.
as well as deeply committed to the continuance of cultural, political, and social solidarity.

Poetry and Identity Development Outside School

In recent years, the oral and spoken word tradition has taken root in traditional educational spaces including classrooms, extracurricular clubs, and workshops. This is the case for informal learning spaces as well and takes on various expressions. For example, young people often engage in composing poetry outside school both in online settings and through their participation in community arts organizations. Shared goals and outcomes for participating in poetry programs include developing positive identities both as poets and as empowered citizens, engaging in an iterative production process, and giving young people access to an art form that has the potential for personal and political empowerment.

While the composition process functions similarly in these types of spaces, in online settings the written word is the end goal, while in face-to-face organizations young people often compose poetry to share these poems orally for an audience. In online spaces such as Figment, young people write, read, and critique one another’s work. Adolescents who participate in these spaces adopt identities as poets and value the iterative process that critique afforded them as writers. The program is an example of a face-to-face community arts organization that aims to help young people build writing skills, self-confidence and self-awareness, and social conscience. Poetry for the People participant and literacy researcher Korina Jocson (2004) describes poetry as “a site for critical transitions from home to school and the places in between. Poetry offers a place where youth can be themselves and embrace their own experiences” (p. 700).

While poetry as a broad genre provides the backdrop for understanding young people’s participation in spoken word, knowledge and understanding of rap and spoken word texts in particular can generate a socialized understanding of identity in out-of-school contexts. During the mid- to late 1990s, Greg Dimitriadis conducted research on the ways in which African American youths mobilized rap, hip-hop, and other popular cultural texts such as movies to form perceptions of self, community, and location (both geographic and historical). Dimitriadis argues that contemporary youth create and practice notions of self, belonging, and community outside school in ways that are essentially marginalized or disregarded by both educators and education researchers. He goes on to note that the ways in which the participants in his research mobilized texts to make sense of the world around them was at best unpredictable and that youth culture in its unpredictability “exceeds the stable and predictive categories teachers and researchers have to talk about it” (Dimitriadis, 2001, p. xxii).

Spoken Word Poetry as a Powerful Site for Informal Learning

There are programs and organizations across the United States dedicated to creating spoken word and performance art in nonstandard educational contexts with young people. Each of these organizations focuses on the creation of spoken word in a critical, engaged, and participatory context and offers a window into how engaging with spoken word as a genre affects the learning and developmental lives of young people. These organizations span the United States, often working together to curate events or competitions and to create a grassroots network of poets, activists, and educators.

Young Chicago Authors and Louder Than a Bomb
Young Chicago Authors (YCA) was founded in 1991 by Robert Boone, a local poet and teacher who realized that Chicago provided few opportunities and resources for teens interested in creative writing and poetry. Boone began offering free, weekly workshops for young people searching for a space for expression, opportunities for mentorship, and a community of other student writers. YCA develops essential creative compositional skills focused on spoken word, traditional verse, and various other creative forms. YCA is also the nonprofit home for Louder Than a Bomb (LTAB), the world’s largest youth poetry and spoken word festival.

Established in 2001 by poet and YCA artistic director Kevin Coval, LTAB seeks to cultivate voices of youth through educational endeavors centered on composition, publication, and public performance. Working with educator and poet Anna West, LTAB was cofounded as a public, artistic space where Chicago students explore notions of self, celebrate their intersecting identities, and engage in transformative works connecting education, art, and personal agency. This month-long poetry festival engages students and community members in civic and democratic participation. Annually, YCA and LTAB directly engage more than 10,000 Chicago area teens through a variety of programs as they develop, hone, and share the tools and approaches to center youth narratives and contribute to continuing conversations about equity, justice, and society.

Youth Speaks/Brave New Voices

Another longstanding creative arts and activism organization is found in San Francisco, California. Founded in 1996 by poet and activist James Kass, Youth Speaks strives to challenge deficit perceptions of youth, bringing marginalized stories and experiences from the shadows into the center. Through arts and composition education, civic engagement, and public performance, Youth Speaks establishes spaces and opportunities for young people to develop, present, and explore their creative voices through spoken word performance. The Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival annually brings together young poets from around the globe for workshops, slams, and civic participation. Brave New Voices provides youth with opportunities for writing, expression, and performance that showcase youth voice for positive social change.

Urban Word NYC

A significant presence in the poetic community in New York is Urban Word NYC (UW). Established in 1999, UW provides literary arts education and youth development programs in the areas of creative writing, spoken word, playwriting, college prep, literature, and hip-hop to young people in New York City free of charge. This collective of poets, artists, and educators centers the diverse and eclectic voices for the youth of New York City, offering spaces for critical literacy development, cultural engagement, and community leadership through free and uncensored writing and performance opportunities. The program hosts events for young people in a variety of community centers, public spaces, and performance venues across the New York City area and offers a variety of student workshops and after-school programs. UW works with New York University, Columbia University, and University of Wisconsin–Madison to offer development opportunities for educators, artists, and community organizers wishing to bring spoken word opportunities to their communities.

Atlanta Word Works
A part of VOX ATL, Atlanta Word Works (AWW), a youth-development nonprofit organization based in Atlanta, provides, encourages, and facilitates opportunities for young poets and artists to explore life’s contradictions, complications, and challenges through the development of critical literacy skills, participation in composition workshops, and public performance. Using spoken word, AWW develops critical thinking skills, creative problem solving, and skills for community uplift. Poetic expression provides opportunities for young people to develop the social, academic, and creative skills needed to construct fresh perspectives in order to build peace, encourage understanding, and bring much needed social change. AWW hosts weekly workshops, citywide poetry slams, and a variety of other performance opportunities, all focusing on self-expression and betterment of the community.

See also Critical Race Theory; Hip-Hop; Informal Learning in Music; Multiliteracies; Performing Arts and Out-of-School Learning; Youth Voice

Michael Dando, Erica Rosenfeld Halverson
http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483385198.n282
10.4135/9781483385198.n282

Further Readings


