

## Finding the Poetic High:

### Building a Spoken Word Poetry Community and Culture of Creative, Caring, and Critical Intellectuals

Gerald T. Reyes

#### Introducing...

*"This next young poet coming to grace our stage brings the richness of her daily struggles to life through the beauty and truth of her words. Show your love for our next poet blessing mic...ladies and gentlemen, please give it up for Poet Lydia Calderon!"*

Underneath dim light of our transformed classroom, the sea of middle school youth goes wild with cheers and applause. Lydia spurts up like a splash of water from the crowded couch that sits in the middle of what we call the "Lyricist Lounge." She drizzles onto the miniature stage and glistens underneath the spotlight that illuminates each poet who takes control of the mic. Placing her piece on the music stand, she now frees her hands and arms, allowing them to dance in synchronicity to the rhythm of her words. With natural sass tugging at her smile and right hand on her hip, she pauses briefly to command attention and gather the thoughts needed to introduce her piece. As silence sweeps the room, Lydia gazes out into her audience. Finally, she releases her soul.

*Why don't you paint me like I am  
with purple cherries all around me dancing  
Paint me prancing around with dimples on  
every poetic smile I let out  
that shines with words you haven't yet  
heard as I shout out*

*Paint me with hatred in my eyes  
dried from cries from all the violence  
happening in my life  
like when my favorite cousin got shot  
R.I.P. Junior  
Paint me with a spot of sadness*

Gerald T. Reyes is the Middle School Lead Teacher at Lighthouse Community Charter School in the Oakland Unified School District, Oakland, California.

*but don't let the tears out  
because I'm tired of that...*

As 13-year-old Lydia's words caressed our spirits, I knew she was doing what June Jordan once proclaimed: "taking control of the language of our lives" (1995). Along with the other poets in our learning community, I have never ceased to be amazed with their ownership in language. Whether Latino, African American, Fijian, East Indian, Filipino, Chinese, Tongan, or Caucasian, it has always been essential for me to help guide these diverse young poets to find their own exquisitely unique voices, because it is through their own voices where they make language theirs.

It is through their own voices where they discover that they have at least one thing in common; that they all have something to say. The voice is exactly what spoken word poetry summons. If we do not honor and encourage what our students

have to say and all the experiences that their thoughts have been rooted into, then we limit their whole being.

It is through working with our students' entire being where we unlock the true magic of their growth and learning, no matter from where they come. This is the existence where we find the opportunity to enable what bell hooks (1994) calls, "transgressions." This is the "movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994).

#### Five Years Ago

Five years ago when I first entered the classroom full time, after working only part time with youth in poetry, I was nearly brought to tears. Though, these were not the tears of frustration nor the tears of "what have I gotten myself into?" but the



13-year-old Lydia Calderon preparing to unleash her soul at the Youth Uprising Community Center in Oakland.

tears of joy in knowing that this 10-year old child who was writing poetry in my very own classroom was celebrating freedom. Five years from that first day, Kate McClatchy, a parent of one of my current students and a principal in a local continuation high school, brought to my attention that “all passionate teachers cry on their 1<sup>st</sup> day.” And so it was. But at what point does passion enable transgressions?

When I started teaching in a self-contained 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, I quickly discovered that despite how these children loved their poetic words, nowhere was there an opportunity to explore their identities as poets within the Language Arts content standards nor in the adoption of my district’s scripted (“scripted”= bureaucrat speak for “teacher proof”) curriculum. Nowhere in this pressure-filled, quick results, A.P.I. (Academic Performance Index), A.Y.P (Annual Yearly Progress) punitive educational climate was there much of a “business case” to journey beyond the towering and engulfing walls of high stakes numbers, and into the creative and natural world of spoken word poetry.

Just as it was back then, these are real obstacles that most teachers face today. In 2006, we are still backed up into an alley to leave out the voices of our students. It has been over 15 years since Jonathan Kozol critiqued school reform in saying “we had not been listening much to children in these recent years of summit conferences on education. The voices of children, frankly, had been missing from the whole discussion” (Kozol, 1991). So, like Kozol, who said, “I decided, early in my journey, to attempt to listen very carefully to children” (1991), I too made that decision in that 1<sup>st</sup> year of teaching.

Despite what I knew was right in my heart, I still had to consider how to make things right in my mind. I still had to understand how to navigate around the politics of education, for my students and myself, because it would be a disservice to all of us to remain naïve to the limiting bureaucracies that could limit our social access. So, it had to be (and still is) imperative for me to find ways to enable my students to get the access needed in order for them to liberate themselves from whatever limited them in their lives. These real obstacles have to be motivations to find the poetry within our solutions. For with poetry in our solutions, “we can be frank,” as Poet Gary Snyder (1995) once profoundly claimed. With poetry in our solutions, we “must be shameless, have no secrets from yourself, be constantly alert,

make no judgment of wise and foolish, high or low class, and give everything its full due” (Snyder, 1995).

Finding a way to adjust to the constraints of the institution of education should be not be interpreted as being forced into submission. Obstacles, as antithetical as they may seem to us, can make our solutions better. The poetry in a solution means to use one’s own base thesis as well as the antithesis of the obstacle in order to give birth to a new synthesis. The synthesis must be simple. It must be the truth. And it must give power. This is the truth and precision that June Jordan spoke of when she asserted what poetry is. This is the “taking life by the throat” (Von Ziegesar, 2000) that Robert Frost meant when he spoke of poetry. Poetry is beyond mere words. Poetry *is* action.

### Passions to Transgressions

Five years ago when I entered the classroom full time, I brought the poetry of my life into our learning community. Then, I let the poetry of the youth guide me into both organically and purposefully taking advantage of every opportunity possible to infuse poetry into our lives. I wish I could say that I had everything planned from the start, but like language and life, our poetic culture evolved through time. I integrated it into our classroom rituals. I integrated it into our Social Imagination 1<sup>st</sup> person perspective pieces of people like the Native American Tainos, La Malinche of the Classic Aztecs, or even the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius. I even found a home for poetry in remembering

the mathematical Order of Operations, the Elements of Conquest, and the life cycle of a tree. And when that was not enough, I opened up the opportunity to create more authentic products for a real audience with my school’s 1<sup>st</sup> Spoken Word Poetry Festival: *Voices on High*—“Where elementary voices turn it up high.”

*Voices on High* was opened up to not only the 5<sup>th</sup> graders of my classroom, but to the entire upper elementary school—4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> graders. That brought upon another challenge. I knew that my class was more unique with its culture of poets, so I had to ask 2 questions:

- (1) How was I going to get students who were not in my class interested in participating in *Voices on High*?
- (2) How was I going to make *Voices on High* more equitable for the poets who were not in my class?

### Enter Poetic High

Enter the *Poetic High* after-school program. Employing elements of the Youth Development model, Shirley Brice Heath’s *Art Show* (1999), Mark Statman’s (2000) models on teaching poetry, and my own experience with Spoken Word Poetry, *Poetic High* was born:

CLIMB HIGH  
FLY HIGH  
IDEAS FLY  
AT POETIC HIGH

While *Poetic High* was the after school program, its philosophical and pedagogical foundations, workshop methodology, and



The pictures behind the words.



culture were always prevalent within my regular class. So whether you have your own after-school program or classroom, the fundamentals of Poetic High remain the same.

### Culture of Poets

*"Is this good?" "Is this right?"*

Does that sound familiar? I don't know how many times a student who was new to my class asked me those questions about their work. Those are the questions asked by one who does not feel like an authority, one who does not feel like an authentic expert. Then how do we transform ourselves as teachers into being more as guides and mentors? How do we transform our youth from being passive students into being poets of learning and life?

*"Is this good?" asked Lydia tentatively, looking for affirmation.*

*"I don't know Poet Lydia. It's your piece, what do you think? What parts do you like? What parts do you have concerns about?" I quickly retorted.*

*"Well," she starts after taking a moment to carefully look over her piece, "this part here where I say..."*

To build a culture of Poets, I have found that it takes three interconnected elements:



"What's it like to be me in Oakland?" exhibit.

(1) Transforming the Physical Environment

(2) Holding the Spoken Wordshop

(3) Building Identity and the Language of Poetic Discourse

### Transforming the Physical Environment

One of the easiest things to do to create the culture of poets is to transform part of the physical environment where students work. It is not necessary to change the entire room, but I have found a lot of success with having at least a corner or small part that is dedicated for sharing. In my current room's "Lyricist Lounge," I have a modular stage that is composed of three 2'(w) x 2'(l) x 2"(h) black-painted wooden platforms. I used to have a 1-piece stage that was 3'x4', but I realized that if I made a stage that was composed of multiple smaller pieces, it could be more portable and configurable to fit in different spaces when needed.

Just above my current stage is a hanging lantern that acts as a spotlight, which gets enhanced by the hanging black fabric backdrop. The black backdrop and the spotlight create a clean look that not only enhances the poet's image, but also the experience for the audience.

What's a stage without a mic? Nate Walrod, a poet-educator friend of mine once said, "Microphones transform." So accompanying our stage is a mic stand with a microphone that hooks up to a small amplifier-speaker that I purchased used through the internet. With the microphone, even the tiniest voice can resonate throughout the entire room.

Finally, we have a music stand to hold a poet's piece so that hands, arms, and bodies can move freely. To set up all these physical changes takes only an up-front effort, and can be relatively inexpensive if one uses community resources and used equipment. When changes like these take place, it will prove invaluable. Then, the hard work begins.

### The Spoken Wordshop

My Spoken Wordshop has these essential elements:

- (1) Finding the Experts
- (2) Getting into the Discourse
- (3) The Wordshop
- (4) Writer's Rights
- (5) Community Share
- (6) Responding with Responsibility

(7) The Open Mic

(8) RE-Vision

(9) Move the Crowd

While these elements have unique names, essentially they utilize basic pedagogical principles: Assess Prior Schema, Conduct a Mini Lesson, Guided Practice, Independent Practice, Anchor Charting, Critique, Authentic Products, Real Audiences. However, while these basic pedagogical principles support the sequence of events and skills needed to teach, it is the philosophical paradigm behind my elements that is at the heart of the Spoken Wordshop. The Wordshop elements focus on empowering, creating experts, and ultimately bringing forth the "language of our lives" (Jordan, 1995).

### Finding the Experts

"Finding the Experts" is an anticipatory set that peaks curiosity, makes a personal connection, and draws out student background knowledge, ideas, and experiences. Big general questions are a key component of Finding the Experts, because it allows anyone to be able to respond in the way that connects best with them. "What have you been wondering?" "What is happiness?" "Why do we act differently around different people?"

Whatever the general questions are that allows students to be specific in talking about their lives, what takes place is a group of young poets showing that they



Poet Alex Hernandez drops verse on the mic.

are already experts on a topic. The teacher is not the only one with something to say. After all, "teaching is not really the right word for what takes place: it is more like permitting the children to discover something they already have" (Koch, 1999).

### Getting into the Discourse

I heard a college professor once say, "You have to get into the dialog. If you don't know what's going on, you have nothing to say." "Getting into the Discourse" allows your young poets to contribute to the discourse that published poets have already been having. It is through discourse where knowledge evolves, so why not allow youth to participate in that? Let them connect with Nikki Giovanni. Let them connect with Langston Hughes. Let them connect with Tupac Shakur, with Saul Williams, with Naomi Shihab Nye.

It is these connections that allow young poets to be able to feel like they have good ideas too; that their ideas are similar to someone who has a poem printed in a book. It allows them to find a literary mentor. These connections invite young poets to know that they are not alone. According to James Kass of San Francisco's Youth Speaks, "Poetry brings clarity to thought, language to life, and each of us to each other" (Kass, 2003).

### The Workshop

The Workshop is the Mini-Lesson that gives instruction on a specific poetic technique and provides a writing opportunity to apply it. The instruction usually has a Model Poem from another poet where the student poets can observe a technique, form, idea, or frame in context. The Model Poem also serves a potential guide for students who need extra support in writing a piece, especially for 2<sup>nd</sup> language learners.

For instance, I have used "Ann's Poem" by Nikki Giovanni with my students as a model to write about oneself or another person (that they know/knew or that they are studying in history). To create a "frame," I removed certain key adjectives and nouns, and replaced them with blanks for students to fill in their own ideas that were applicable to them.

Another key element of the Workshop is to create what's called an "Anchor Chart" of what was taught. For instance, if specific poetic forms and techniques are being taught over time, then a "Talk like a Poet" chart could be made. Words like metaphor, line break, stanza, personification, onomatopoeia get added to the chart



Supporting their fellow poets at the mic at Youth Uprising.

as they get taught. Anchor Charts then become a reference in the classroom that a student poet can refer to anytime they are writing or participating in discourse. Other Anchor Charts could be "Anatomy of a Poem," "Types of Metaphors," "Elements of a Spoken Word Poem," "How to introduce your Spoken Word Piece," "Discourse Sentence Starters for Responding to a Poet," and so on.

### Writer's Rights

Writer's write. Writer's have rites. Writer's have rights. During the "Writer's Rights" phase, writer's use their right to write. After the Mini Lesson of the Workshop, they follow the rites of the writing process as it relates to their assignment. They might freewrite. They might prewrite. They revise what they write. They write. They think on the page. They manifest ideas onto paper. They write. They write by themselves. They write with each other. They write. There's no other way to put it.

### Community Share

After allotting a specific amount of time to write, then give an opportunity for the poets to share what they have written so far. Have them share everything they've written, or have them share a few of their favorite lines. The point is to get them to share with the rest of the community of poets who are in the room, so that immediate feedback can be given. One critical prerequisite to sharing is that

the norms for sharing *must be already established*. That could be through Community Agreements, Student Contracts, A Poet's Bill of Rights, or of course, the Writer's Rights. Either way, make sure there is a ritual that is done before any student poet shares.

One simple thing I do is to say, "Focus on the Poet," which means pencils down, face the speaker, allow only his/her voice to be heard, and keep still. Do not take for granted what it means to give attentive listening. Be explicit in teaching it, practice it, and expect it every time. With that relentless pursuit, something like "focusing on the poet" becomes part of the culture that every one not only expects, but commands.

### Responding with Responsibility

With a community of poets, everyone must understand that the *ability to respond—response ability—needs to grow into responsibility—the commitment to help every poet succeed*. With all the attention given to build awareness to the language of poets and discourse, this phase of the Spoken Workshop allows the community of poets to give specific and meaningful feedback to the writer that is sharing. Again, it is key to give a protocol for "Responding with Responsibility" so that each poet knows the expectations.

Once that protocol is established, I like to give a key phrase like "Let's ask the community to give specific feedback on your piece. Pick on someone who is offering their thoughts." With this direction, the poet



who shared then picks on someone who is raising his/her hand. The person offering his/her feedback needs to talk directly to the poet who shared, not the teacher.

Depending on the student population, an Anchor Chart might need to be created first that gives sentence starters for the type of responses that are acceptable. For instance, these sentence starters might be on the Anchor Chart:

- ◆ "I liked it when you said\_\_\_."
- ◆ "I noticed you used\_\_\_when you said\_\_\_."
- ◆ "When you said\_\_\_, I wondered\_\_\_."
- ◆ "Based on the fact that you said\_\_\_, I inferred you were talking about\_\_\_."

**The Open Mic**

At the very least, the Open Mic is an opportunity to allow the poets to read a completed piece on which they have been working. Announce Open Mics ahead of time, or have a regular recurring one, and the poets will take it upon their selves to have a piece completed and revised for the real audience that is expected to attend. Having the Open Mics scheduled also builds up suspense and anticipation. It allows shy poets to contemplate reading, as well as allows the outgoing poets to convince others to read.



Graffiti writing images fired to inspire social change.

Then, once the Open Mic starts, the MC (master of ceremonies) needs to turn on the energy. For the first several Open Mics, I usually MC because of my experience within the community of adult poets. I have also been around other exciting MCs, so I have a good framework for what it takes to hype a crowd. After awhile, a student poet will emerge as a brilliant and dynamic successor.

Here are some key elements to MC-ing and introducing a poet:

- ◆ Personalize your introduction of the poet that is about to come on stage to read. Say something about his/her personality as a poet or about the piece that they will perform.
- ◆ Use energetic language like "blessing the stage" or "show your love" or "give it up for..."
- ◆ After a poet reads, genuinely say something that connects to something specific the poet said.
- ◆ After the poet reads, tell the audience to "give it up one more time for..."

**RE-Vision**

RE-Vision is about re-looking at the original vision of a piece. It is about trying to see and re-see what has been written, and whether it is on track for what was originally envisioned or whether it needs to be refocused. RE-Vision happens all the time. It is not part of a linear process. Sometimes, depending on the writer, it never ends. Something can always be re-seen and improved.

RE-Vision is about making something better. It is not a correction process. Everything done to build the culture of poets cultivates RE-visioning. Because a student poet wants to make his writing as good as can be for the Open Mic, he revises. Because a student poet knows that her work will be published in an anthology, she revises. Because a student poet discovers he has ownership of the language of his life, he revises.

**Move the Crowd**

Spoken Word Poetry is about the crowd. Yet, in reality, all writing is about the crowd, the audience. As writers, what voice and form do we use to meet our purpose and our audience? As educators, how do we create authentic experiences for student poets to create products for real audiences, and not just for the "teacher"?



Poet Imani Jordan collaborates with educator-musicians Jonas Juhlin and Angelina Vergara to their rendition of Tupac's "Thugz Mansion."

"Moving the Crowd" is about having student poets work towards something real and authentic: a spoken word poetry show, a Hip Hop Theatre piece written in poetic verse, an anthology of their best work, a political rally at City Hall, a reading at a local café, an audio CD. Moving the Crowd is that magic that a poet feels when she hears the applause. Moving the Crowd is that warmth of pride in seeing someone buy an anthology or CD that traces the written footprints of a poet's heart and soul. Moving the Crowd is a high. It is one of the Poetic Highs, but it is certainly not the only Poetic High. The entire process contributes to making "Move the Crowd" possible, and should therefore be honored for the highs it brings.

**Building the Language of Discourse and Identity**

While the idea of building the language of discourse and identity is imbedded within the Spoken Workshop elements, I want to be explicit about what this means. As an educator, to authentically help create an identity within our students requires us to relinquish the idea that we are the only experts in the classroom.

It matters how we speak to our students. It matters what we call them. So let's call them Poets. Let's call them Writers. Let's give them the titles that have traditionally seemed to be reserved for profes-



Poet Edgardo Martinez stands proud on stage preparing for the show to start.

sional adults. And with that change in the language we use with our young poets, let us then give them the opportunity to “live the questions now” (Rilke, 1934).

Yes, often times we have to be explicit with our instruction, but we also have to give our youth the opportunity to construct their own meaning. Asking purposeful questions, while not accepting the easy-way-out-answer of “I don’t know,” has the power to liberate students from the dependency of always relying on someone else to be the “depositor” of information into their brain (Freire, 1970).

Asking questions allows students to be thinkers, to be discoverers, to be life-long learners. With purposeful questioning and calling our youth “Poets,” we start helping them realize their identities, so that someday they “will gradually, without noticing it, live into the answer” (Rilke 1934).

Giving these student poets these opportunities to find themselves through this culture of poetry helps them take more control over growing into the

person they want to become. There are so many things in our society that will inadvertently raise our children if we do not explicitly do it. Building this culture takes us one step further to helping our youth become authorities, to feel active in their own education, and to “take control of the language of their lives.”

### Still Searching for Poetic Highs

Poetry reveals the process of life. Since that first year, “Finding the Poetic High” has revealed things I would never have imagined. I have worked with youth ranging from 4<sup>th</sup> grade to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I have done teacher education for Poetic High through the Bay Area Writing Project, Americorps, KIPP Schools, and Bay Area Scores with pre-service teachers, new teachers, and veterans who have served over 30 years. I have asked questions that led to more questions.

The Poetic High has certainly NOT been illusive, but without a doubt, it has

been an endless cycle of infecting others into searching for new highs along with me and without me. And really that is what the Poetic High is about. It is about the journeys within and the progress made outward. The Poetic High is about loving the process of life through language and communities that intersect with minds, hearts, and, of course, voices that rise up to warm us all.

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