



Citation for published version:

Gregory, H 2008, 'The quiet revolution of poetry slam: The sustainability of cultural capital in the light of changing artistic conventions', *Ethnography and Education*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 63-80.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17457820801899116>

DOI:

[10.1080/17457820801899116](https://doi.org/10.1080/17457820801899116)

Publication date:

2008

[Link to publication](#)

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The Quiet Revolution of Poetry Slam: The Sustainability of Cultural Capital in the Light of Changing Artistic Conventions

This is a draft of an article whose final and definitive form has been published in the *Ethnography and Education* March 2008 Vol. 3. (1): 61-78. [Copyright Taylor & Francis]; *Ethnography and Education* is available online at: <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/17457823.asp>

Abstract

This paper considers the educational and theoretical implications of an analysis into the artistic movement of poetry slam. Slam is a successful and growing global phenomenon, which both directly and indirectly sets itself against the dominant literary world. As such, it could be viewed as presenting a challenge to dominant literary conventions and thus to the cultural capital of those who rely upon such conventions. Using data drawn from an ongoing ethnographic study, employing semi-structured interviews with forty-four poets, promoters and educators active in the slam community, and participant observation of twenty-one slams in four cities, this paper explores what poetry slam can tell us about the ways in which members of dominant art worlds and new artistic movements interact and the implications which this has for the sustainability of cultural capital in the light of newly emerging artistic conventions and discourses.

Poetry slam is a movement, a philosophy, a form, a genre, a game, a community, an educational device, a career path and a gimmick. It is a multi-faceted creature, meaning many different things to many different people. At its simplest, slam is a kind of oral poetry competition in which poets are expected to perform their own work before a live audience. They are then scored on the quality of their writing and performance, by judges who are typically randomly selected from this audience.

The story of slam reaches across over two decades and thousands of miles. In 1986, at the helm of 'The Chicago Poetry Ensemble', Marc Smith organised the first official poetry slam at The Green Mill, Chicago, under the name of the 'Uptown Poetry Slam' (Heintz, 1999). This weekly event still continues today. Slam reached England in February 1994, when the first U.K. poetry slam was held in London by 'spoken word and performance poetry organisation' Farrago Poetry (Farrago Poetry, 2007).

Whilst it remains a somewhat marginal activity, slam has become arguably the most successful poetry movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first

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centuries. Despite the prevalence of slam and the number of intriguing research avenues which this phenomenon presents however, it has received very little academic attention and practically none from the social sciences. This paper aims to begin to redress this balance.

An analysis of the emergence and development of poetry slam, in relation to the dominant literary world, could help to shed fresh light on the sustainability of cultural capital when faced by challenges from new artistic movements. In particular, such an analysis enables us to begin to explore how existing artistic conventions may develop to incorporate the discourses and practices of new movements, without causing the cultural capital of participants in dominant art worlds to decline in value.

It will be argued that, whilst slam seeks to establish new artistic conventions for the poetry world, which both directly and indirectly threaten those already in place, it also offers a potential resolution to this conflict in the form of youth slams. Within the context of youth slams, members of the dominant literary world, whom slam poets often dub 'academic' poets (or in the United States, the poets of the Academy)¹, can work alongside slam poets to mutual benefit, without either group appearing to have lost ground or compromised the beliefs and values which they hold around poetry.

Introducing Youth Slam

Slam amongst young people is the fastest growing area of the movement. Youth slams are held across the U.K. and the U.S.. Young poets occasionally take part in adult slams; however more commonly they participate in youth slams, in which all of those competing are aged nineteen years or under. Many adult slam poets work in youth slam as organisers and educators, entering schools and youth groups to run workshops on the writing and performance of poetry. There are also a number of independent organisations which hold youth slams and coach young people in their art.

This paper draws on data relating to youth slams and related events held in and around Chicago and New York in the U.S. and Leeds, London, Bristol, Bromsgrove and Plymouth in the U.K.. (The nature of this data is discussed in greater detail in the Method section below.) Slams are regularly held in the first four cities, whilst the remaining sites host youth slams on an irregular school-by-school basis, depending on the individual bookings which poets receive. There are also national youth slam programmes in both the U.K. and the U.S.. In the U.K. the first of these events (The Word Cup) was run by

¹ In line with this, poets who work in the dominant literary world will be referred to as 'academic' poets throughout this paper. Conversely, poets who are associated with slam as past or present performers, will be referred to as slam poets. Whilst it is acknowledged that this latter term is not always used unproblematically within the slam community, it is adopted here for the purposes of clarity.

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performance poetry organisation Apples and Snakes in 2006, whilst in the U.S., The Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival, organised by Youth Speaks, has run annually since 1997².

Youth slams, and the wider programmes within which they operate, vary on a case by case basis, and there really is no such thing as a 'typical' youth slam. Indeed, one of their apparent strengths is an adaptability to the needs of different contexts and individuals. Youth slams are commonly fast-paced events, in which order and purpose is seemingly carved out of a churning hubbub of activity. The audience (where young people often significantly outnumber adults) are frequently vocal and participatory; the young poets at turns confident and nervous. The poems themselves may be delivered as group or solitary pieces, and cover a huge variety of subject matters and styles, though they often err towards performance, rather than recital, (a distinction which will be explored in greater depth later).

As will be discussed, youth slams typically operate within the confines of broader educational programmes. These are often student-focused and participatory. Thus, students may be given the opportunity to style workshop syllabi, present their work in small groups and take part in a range of writing and performance related activities. These programmes frequently work towards creating a community of young poets; a focus which is readily apparent in groups like Slambassadors, which was set up to allow students to continue attending workshops after having competed in the London-based Rise Slam Championships.

Method

The current paper arose from an ongoing study into slam. This wider piece of research seeks to analyse how slam is recreated within local, translocal and transnational communities. Prior to beginning this study I was already active as a poet, event organiser and audience member in slam scenes in Bristol and around the U.K.. My 'insider' status placed me in an enviable position in terms of knowledge of and access to these scenes, yet it also inevitably raised a number of concerns. I have written more about my experiences studying this topic as a poet and academic, and the personal and professional issues which this raised, in Gregory (2007a,b).

The research which I conducted into slam is based predominantly in four key sites: London and Bristol in England, and New York and Chicago in the United

² For more information on these programmes see the following websites: applesandsnakes.org/wordcup/; londonteenagepoetryslam.net/; www.digitalbristol.org/members/poetry/; www.poetrysociety.org.uk; www.urbanwordnyc.org; <http://youngchicagoauthors.org/>; and www.youthspeaks.org/

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States³. Whilst there are a number of key differences between slam in these four sites, these will not be explored in this paper. Rather, it is the similarities between the ways in which youth slams operate in such disparate locations which are of key interest here.

The study takes an interactionist stance and operates on the understanding that art should be viewed not as a disembodied product, but as a collection of dynamic social and interactional processes (see for example DeNora, 2000: 38). In line with this epistemological position, the research draws on tools of ethnographic enquiry, to produce a rich, in-depth account of slams, which aims to be sensitive to the situated meanings of participants. The data on which this analysis relies is derived from forty-four semi-structured interviews with poets, promoters, event organisers and educators involved in slams⁴, and participant observation of twenty-one slams over a twelve month period. This is supplemented with participant observation of teacher training sessions and youth workshops geared towards slam, and the analysis of secondary materials (including scoring guidelines, video recordings of slams, promotional materials, and newspaper articles).

Introducing this Paper

This paper begins by explicating the pivotal concepts of cultural capital and artistic conventions. It goes on to discuss the challenge which slam may be seen to present to the conventions of the dominant literary world, and the consequent tensions which exist between members of these two communities. It will be argued that the divisions between these worlds are not as rigid as they may at first appear, and that youth slam provides a key site in which they may interact to mutual benefit. In support of this contention, the paper will discuss the use of dominant literary conventions in youth slam, before expounding on the form's educational applications. School teachers' perception of youth slam as a bridge between popular culture and the traditional school curriculum will also be considered. Finally, it will be suggested that this is a reciprocal relationship and that, just as youth slam may be seen to take on the discourses and conventions of the 'academic' world, so too is the impact of youth slam on the education system clearly visible.

Cultural Capital and Artistic Conventions

The term 'cultural capital' was introduced into the sociological lexicon by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) in his seminal work 'Distinction'. He used the concept to refer to the cultural currency, embodied in language and conventions, which is

³ The other U.K. sites which have been mentioned were incorporated into the research at a later date, in order to allow the collection of additional data relating specifically to youth slam.

⁴ Interview quotations are presented in this paper in the form of 'cleaned-up' speech, which omits the hesitations, overlaps and repetition of everyday conversation in favour of presenting a more lucid text. See Appendix A for transcription key.

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associated with high status groups in society. The richer an individual's cultural capital, the more he or she can be said to have absorbed the dominant culture. Bourdieu theorised that certain genres and art forms are perceived as being more 'legitimate' than others. Individuals with high status acquire tastes for and competencies in these 'legitimate' arts, giving them power over members of lower status groups, who lack such competencies. They maintain this powerful position by restricting access to cultural capital.

Both 'legitimate' and 'popular' arts are characterised by conventions, which govern all stages of an artwork's creation, distribution and consumption. Conventions are 'generally accepted and shared, habitual, taken-for-granted ways of understanding, communicating, cooperating, and doing' (Hall, 1987: 13). They dictate everything from the materials used in artworks, to ways of representing ideas and experiences, the relations between artists and their audiences and the manner in which an artwork should be appreciated and evaluated (Becker, 1982).

Sets of conventions determine both the production and consumption of poetry. The conventions governing the 'formal poetry readings' (Stern, 1991: 73-75) associated with the Academy, for example, dictate that the audience should be quiet during the reading itself, marking the end of the recital with polite applause. The poet, for his or her part, is expected to avoid the use of theatrical devices, such as flamboyant gestures or props.

These formal poetry readings are structured around, and give primacy to, the written word. The poet typically reads his or her poetry directly off the page and audience members may follow this reading by referring to their own copies of the text. Further, the invited poet will often promote his or her latest publication/s at such events. Thus, whilst poetry readings are fairly common in academic settings, they are seen as secondary to the written text. As (Stern, 1991: 73) notes, these are 'poetry readings in which the emphasis by the poet is less on acting and displaying than it is on reading, that is on the text as voiced'. In this context, the printed poem is studied as the 'true' and 'authentic' version, and oral presentations of poetry seek to reflect this as accurately as possible.

The dominant, 'academic' approach to poetry is typically associated with university lecturers, school teachers, critics, published poets and the editors and writers working at literary magazines. This 'academic' world dominates perspectives on poetry in U.K. and U.S. societies, where many people's first contact with poetry is in schools, where poems are read off the page either silently or aloud. The conventions of such readings typically follow those of the 'academic' recital, rather than performance-based genres like slam. Partly because of this early exposure to 'academic' conventions, the image of a traditional poetry reading, with a solitary poet reading his or her work from a

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book, before rows of attentive 'boffins', dominates many people's perceptions of what oral poetry entails.

'Academic' poetry, then, is governed by a complex set of conventions, which not only determine the nature of poetry within this genre, but also influence the ways in which new forms of poetry are created, distributed and consumed. These networks of established conventions allow poets to follow well worn paths, using readily accessible and affordable materials and producing poetry which is easily distributed to audiences who, in turn, know how to consume and evaluate these works. Poetry which meets these established conventions is therefore easier to produce and more likely to gain recognition.

It is correspondingly difficult to find outlets for poetry which does not operate within these established conventions. For instance, some of my own poetry was once rejected for publication apparently because the text was centre, rather than left, justified. Whilst they are standardised however, conventions are not constant. Rather, they are continually changing and are often challenged by artists themselves. Poets like E.E. Cummings have breached the convention of left justified text to make their own work distinctive. Others have challenged this convention by creating pattern poetry or printed poetry which acts as a 'score' for oral performances. By reworking existing conventions governing the presentation of poetry on the page, these poets have helped to establish new genres within the dominant literary world, which are themselves structured by fresh sets of conventions.

The Challenge of Slam

Slam too presents a potential threat to some of these established academic conventions; although it has focused on poetry presented on the stage, rather than on the page. Many of the conventions which govern a slam are very different to those which operate at a more 'academic' poetry reading. For instance, audience members at a slam are expected to pay full attention to the poet on stage, rather than following the poem on the page. The audience is also expected to be more vocal during a slam, often participating in the poem itself, through devices like 'call and response'; a theatrical technique in which the audience is asked to call back a response to a key word or words which the poet utters. Similarly, techniques like singing, chanting and beatboxing⁵ are common in slams, but unheard of in more traditional poetry readings.

In seeking to establish new literary conventions, which focus on poetry as a performative rather than text-based genre, slam has drawn on the artistic conventions of the theatre, live music and other performance-based arts.

⁵ Beatboxing is a form of 'vocal percussion' (Carroll, 2006) in which the performer uses his or her mouth to create beats, rhythms and melodies. It is often associated with hip hop, but is becoming increasingly common amongst slam poets and other spoken word artists (see also www.beatboxing.com).

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These influences can be seen both in the kinds of techniques which slam poets use and in the language with which they discuss the genre. The very term 'performance poetry', which many slam poets use in describing their work, references theatrical traditions and classifies slam as something very different from the text-based readings of the academic poetry world⁶.

Challenging the existing conventions of an established art world is a risky business. Not only is it more difficult for unconventional work to gain recognition amongst critics and audiences, but the establishment of new conventions can be a costly and complicated process for the artists themselves.

Since artistic conventions belong to complex, inter-dependent systems, changing one requires the alteration of a host of other related conventions. For example, slam's emphasis on performance as an important dimension of oral poetry has resulted not only in the need for poets to acquire new skills, in order to adequately present their poetry, but also the introduction of staging devices to create the necessary lighting and sound set ups. This, in turn, has meant that new materials (amplifiers, microphones, spotlights) must often be acquired and transported to venues, personnel must be trained to use this equipment and venues must be chosen which can accommodate these more complex set ups.

Breaching established conventions also brings with it a certain freedom, as artists push back the boundaries of what is acceptable and encounter new materials and techniques with which to experiment. For instance, slam poets may make use of the microphone to create sound effects which would not otherwise be possible.

Nonetheless, new conventions are not introduced without a certain tension inherent in the process. Many slam conventions operate around new ideas of how poetry should be defined and valued, and thus aim to challenge existing definitions of poetry. If these new, competing definitions were successfully established, they could bring with them fresh criteria by which the quality of poems may be measured, and risk devaluing the cultural capital associated with the dominant literary world (see Bourdieu, 1984). Some members of the Academy would therefore seem to have a great deal invested in defending the genre against the invasion of slam.

⁶ The relationship between slam and performance poetry is a complex one, which I have developed more fully elsewhere. For the present purposes, it is sufficient to consider slam as a performance poetry movement, in that proponents of slam emphasise the oral performance of poetry, rather than poetry on the page. 'Performance', in this sense, is juxtaposed against 'reading', since it possesses just the elements of 'acting and displaying' which Stern (ibid) notes are lacking from 'formal poetry readings'.

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This investment has not escaped the notice of many members of the slam community. As New York poet and teaching artist, Lynne Procope⁷ observed:

People who are aspiring to academia are afraid to be aligned with slam ... I mean, academia in this country particularly is so elitist and so much the bastion of the privileged that if you can get your leg in there, you certainly don't want your work to then be labelled either as 'spoken word' or as 'slam poetry'.

Conversely, a number of poets and critics moving in these circles have been vociferously opposed to slam poetry, seeking to exclude it from the pages of anthologies and the programmes of literature festivals. As 'stand-up poet'⁸, Jude Simpson noted:

It's interesting that a slam will usually be part of the fringe of a literature festival, sort of looked at almost like the noisy toddler of the poetry world.

Poetry slams have received much criticism from the 'academic' world. Many critics consider them to have devalued poetry, through emphasising performance and competition over the writing itself. Middleton (1998: 263), for example, cites David Wojahn's (1985) critique of slam as comprising 'methods of delivery and gimmickry that owe more to show-biz than to literature', whilst critic Harold Bloom famously dubbed slam the 'death of poetry' (see Infante, 2007). Through statements such as these, the critics of the Academy seek to negate the challenge presented by slam and exclude it from the legitimate art world.

The slam community is equally critical of 'academic' poetry. Whilst a number of theorists (for example Adorno, 1991; Bourdieu, 1984) have discussed the 'high' culture critique of 'popular' culture however, few have acknowledged that this hostility can work in both directions. Poetry slams are often conflated with scholarly readings and slam poets feel that they must ward off this (mis)conception, striving to create an identity for themselves which contrasts sharply with the 'academic' image. In creating this distinctive identity, slam poets have tended to reject 'academic' notions of what poetry is and, just as

⁷ Interviewees' real names are used except where indicated. This decision was taken following a discussion with participants, many of whom argued that, as writers, they spend much of their time engaged with issues of authorship, and that it would effectively be unethical *not* to credit them for their statements. Whilst all interviewees were given the option of using a pseudonym therefore, very few decided to take this up. The descriptions of interviewees given in this paper are also the interviewees' own, except in the few cases where this information was not supplied.

⁸ The term 'stand-up poet' references the stand-up comedy tradition, emphasising the performative and comedic elements of these artists' poetry. As Jude Simpson remarked: "I describe myself as a 'stand-up poet' now, as my act is a fusion of poetry, comedy and music."

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with previous performance poetry movements, like the Beats and punk poetry, anti-academic narratives abound in the slam community.

London-based poet and poetry promoter, Brett Van Toen echoed many of the interviewees when he said:

It's very difficult to get people into poetry, and the reason for that is very, very, very simple, which is that most poetry readings, quasi-poetry readings i.e. not performance poetry, not performances, are dreadful and tedious and the poetry isn't very good.

Thus, defining slam as an engaging performance, which is distinct from the mainstream poetry world, enables it to be packaged and branded as a marketable product, removed from the stigma which is perceived to plague public perceptions of poetry.

Slam is frequently depicted by its proponents as an exciting force for change, which will revitalise poetry, dusting off the 'academic' detritus, dragging it off the page and making it relevant and entertaining to those sections of society to whom it has been made foreign and remote (see for example Makhijani, 2005; Smith and Kraynak, 2004: 15-16).

That's the one thing about slam, it supports poetry in a way that is accessible to anybody, and it's exciting and it's fast and it's furious and it's fun. (Kat Francois, London-based performance poet and promoter)

Despite such evidence of mutual hostility between members of these communities, slam and 'academic' poetry are not as isolated from one another as many poets and critics would claim however. Rather, there are indications of increasing cross-fertilisation between them. Contrary to the oft-quoted academic argument that genres like slam have devalued poetry, authors like Bell (2004) and Kaufman and Heinz (1999) suggest that the success of slam in America has led to both increased audiences for academic readings and to a greater proliferation of poetry books containing the work of slam poets. The interaction of slam and 'academic' poetry can be seen in other quarters too. The number of poetry workshops, writing programs and literary magazines has ballooned throughout America in recent years and many feature collaborations between slam and 'academic' poets. Most American states now have poet laureates and, in 1996, April was declared National Poetry Month by the Academy of American Poets. These moves have been interpreted by members of the slam community as evidence of the increased popularity which slam has brought to poetry across the board.

More fundamentally perhaps, these emerging similarities between the worlds of 'academic' and slam poetry suggest that individuals in the 'academic' world are beginning to accept slam as supplying valid forms of poetry and to

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incorporate some of its conventions into the Academy. Bringing slam into the fold in this way allows 'academic' poets a measure of critique and control over slam which they would otherwise be denied. Similarly, slam has increasingly accepted academic conventions, with many slam poets performing in traditional academic settings or running formal courses teaching the composition and performance of slam poetry. As Chicago poet, Kurt Heintz noted:

In the early days I remember clearly we felt like we were trying to tear down the ivory towers. Now we're actually looking to them for our paychecks.

Youth Poetry Slams: A Meeting of Minds

The convergence between the worlds of slam and the Academy seems to find its ultimate expression in the youth slam scene. Here 'academic' and slam poets are able to work together to mutual benefit. This interaction is only possible when members of both worlds are prepared to adapt their conventions and discourses to fit more closely with each other. Following Turner (1969), it is therefore possible to view youth slams as being 'types of cultural performances', which operate 'as sites of negotiation where disagreements with the normative established order are played out.' (quoted in Sibley, 2001:182).

(i) The Use of Dominant Literary Conventions in Youth Slam

Interestingly, poets working in youth slams typically adopt a line which is more accepting of dominant literary conventions. This inevitably entails a rejection of some of the features of adult slam. Thus, poets working in the youth slam scene are often highly critical of adult slams, viewing them as overly competitive, providing poor mechanisms with which to judge the quality of poetry, and producing work which lacks the variety and depth of youth slam poetry.

I do think the writing in youth slams is superior to the writing in adult slams. I think adult slams have become very much rant based, stand-up comedy based, and they become a big cliché. ... I would put on the page your better youth slammers' writing, up against your better adult slammers' writing, pretty much hands down. (Peter Kahn, Chicago spoken word educator)

Poets often seek to overcome these perceived limitations, many youth slams use professional writers and slam poets as judges, for instance, rather than randomly selected audience members, and it is not uncommon to give judges a set of guidelines to follow when scoring poets:

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We made it important that there is some sort of rubric involved, that stresses imagery and metaphor and aversion to cliché. While on the adult scene, my sense is a lot of the clichés are the buttons that get pushed to get audience response ... (Peter Kahn)

and: It's a cliqued complaint about slams [that they emphasise performance over writing], and it's one of the things I really try and subvert with the youth slams that I work on. I really try and make sure that there is an equal emphasis on the quality of writing and the quality of performance right down to the way that things are actually judged. (Jacob Sam La-Rose, poet and artistic director of the London Teenage Poetry SLAM)

Poets who work in youth slam could therefore be understood not as representatives of adult slam seeking to infiltrate the dominant literary world, but as the primary agents through whom the conventions of slam and 'academic' poetry are reworked. Their outsider status is highlighted by the fact that many of these poets carry out their work through organisations which pre-existed the youth slams. Thus they would seem to owe their allegiance neither to the world of slam nor the Academy.

(ii) Youth Slam as an Educational Tool

Whilst rejecting some of the conventions and discourses of (adult) slam, these poets also embrace many of those associated with the dominant literary world. Slam's role as a competitive, entertaining event is downplayed in favour of more enduring, overarching aims.

Discourses around youth slams have a strongly didactic quality. Teaching is seen as being an integral part of these slams. Unlike the adult slam scene, youth slam programmes rarely emphasise the quality of new participants' work. This reflects the idea that performance and writing skills can and should be taught to young people. Adults on this scene work to encourage students to develop and grow, both within and beyond the context of the slam.

Youth slams are seldom held as isolated events, but instead are used to highlight a range of other activities, providing students with an opportunity to demonstrate what they have learnt in workshops, and organisers and educators with a high profile advertisement for their work and institutions. Poets working in youth slam are keen to emphasise that slam is only a small part of a broad programme of activities; a magnet to attract young people into this wider project.

The backbone of Leeds Young Authors is the slam. That's the one thing that keeps the kids coming is the poetry slam, but there's a range of things behind all of Leeds Young Authors that we do. (Kadijah Ibrahim, performance poet and Director of Leeds Young Authors)

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The learning and development opportunities which precede and succeed the slams hold youth slam's true meaning for many slam poets. Thus Steve Tasane expressed reservations about one slam, which was not accompanied by any follow-up activities:

To me it seems to have no context and as such it might as well just be a game of 'Connect Four'. If the kids don't have anywhere to take it afterwards, like any way of developing it, then it's simply pleasure.

Youth slams must thus be seen as having a function which is greater than mere entertainment. This wider purpose often centres around teaching young people new subjects and skills. In this educational context, youth slams can be portrayed as a means of enthusing young people into poetry, improving their creativity and literacy levels.

We work more towards using slam as a way of making poetry accessible for young people. (Jacob Sam La-Rose)

Rather than opposing the Academy, then, youth slam may operate to assist its members in their aims, encouraging and supporting young people to succeed within the traditional education system. As Urban Word NYC, organisers of New York City's annual Youth Speaks slam, note in their promotional materials:

Our many workshops are designed to enhance critical thinking skills, leadership and to ignite a personal commitment to growth and learning which leads to heightened in-school performance and greater interest in pursuing higher education. (Urban Word NYC, 2006)

Thus, youth slam is viewed as performing a valuable role in the dominant literary world. It can engage young people who would otherwise fall through the gaps of the education system, being unwilling or unable to benefit from the ways in which literacy and other subjects are traditionally taught in the classroom.

I see an educational benefit [to youth slam], where it's using competition to help get kids to work on their writing and performance skills, and through the process, it often engages kids who aren't normally engaged in academics and it gives them an avenue to show off essentially an academic skill, writing ... and it usually builds their academic confidence and engagement and they become better students. (Peter Kahn)

This line is adopted by school teachers and slam poets alike. As one teacher commented, when evaluating the London-based Westminster Poetry Slam:

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The performance side encourages children of all abilities to participate fully and enthusiastically. (Unnamed teacher quoted in East-Side Educational Trust, 2006: 7)

In this context, slam is seen as aiding, rather than opposing school teachers, in their quest to teach young people the literary canon. As Catrina Garratt, Advanced Skills Teacher at a Plymouth secondary school, remarked about one of the pupils engaged in the youth slam programme there:

... his passion for words and the quality of language that he uses in his work is astounding. It really is. And if anyone was to suggest to him "Well, what you do isn't proper poetry, and what about this?" I think he'd laugh. He is making and creating art, and I believe that he would approach anything like Yeats or Shakespeare with an awful lot more confidence than others, because isn't there an appreciation?

Poetry slam, then, is often viewed, by poets and teachers alike, as providing a tool for teaching literacy in a way which is relevant and interesting to young people. The fact that slam is perceived as supplying something which the traditional education system is lacking in is highlighted by the teaching materials and workshops which numerous youth slam organisations provide for schools.

(iii) Youth Slam and Hip Hop

Just as youth slams operate, not as isolated events, but as high profile elements of more long term educational programmes, the utility of slam poets too is portrayed as extending beyond the bounds of slam itself. Whilst slam poets may work in schools, they remain outsiders, typically hired on temporary contracts. Because they are outsiders, both to the dominant literary world and the educational institution, they are able to use tools which are not so readily available to members of these dominant communities. For young people, this outsider status can also give slam poets an air of coolness, which their teachers may lack. As Serena Brooks⁹, Leeds-based singer-songwriter and inspirator¹⁰, remarked:

[Young people often] don't think that the teachers really know what's going on, and I think people that actually do come into schools and do after school projects, I think the young people really think that they know what they're talking about or they see them as a bit more hip.

Slam poets, then, may find it easier to gain the admiration and respect of young people in schools. They also have more freedom to perform poetry and

⁹ Name changed on request of interviewee.

¹⁰ Serena defines an 'inspirator' as "somebody who inspires young people".

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use teaching methods which diverge from traditional forms. Youth slam's association with hip hop provides a highly visible illustration of this.

The influence of hip hop culture is readily apparent in many youth slams, with young poets performing in the improvisational rap form of freestyle, composing rap poetry, using beatboxing or sporting hip hop fashions. This reflects, in part, the influence which hip hop has had on the development of adult slam; however, whilst many on the adult slam scene are keen to distance themselves from hip hop, youth slam workers typically have a less problematic relationship with the genre. Many workers recognise the potential of hip hop as a teaching aid and seek to capitalise on its popularity, mobilising hip hop forms and culture in their slams, workshops and other events (see for example Low, 2001). Thus, youth slam is often packaged up with hip hop.

Schools want us to come and teach teachers how to utilise hip hop in the classroom, how to get kids to write by using hip hop (moves) or how to get kids to study history by using hip hop. So validating the things that are closest to the young people is really what's important to us. (Jonathan Yates¹¹)

Similarly, one teacher whose school participated in the Westminster Poetry Slam praised the programme for helping 'me to understand the importance of recognising rap.' (Unnamed teacher quoted in East-Side Educational Trust, 2006: 7).

Slam poets are often brought in by schools to teach literacy and other subjects to young people, not simply by holding slam events, but also by using associated forms and approaches. Youth slams, then, provide a bridge through which schools can connect traditional curricula subjects to youth culture. As one interviewee said of a fellow slam poet:

He does a thing in the schools, where they teach about how hip hop is spoken word and how hip hop can be used to get kids more into English, and schools are all into that, because they have whole sectors of our society where the kids are so much into hip hop and they can literally recite every lyric from their favourite rap artists, but they can't tell you, for example, what they're reading. Obviously they're smart enough that they can remember five or six rap songs in a row. They can be just as smart in maybe memorising some of their written material in English class. (Soul Thomas Evans, National Poetry Slam finalist and former owner of spoken word label PoetCD.com)

This sentiment is echoed by many school teachers who have used slam in the classroom. As Catrina Garratt noted:

¹¹ Name changed on request of interviewee.

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It's interesting that boys, a lot of boys, have really loved this, and you know, one might find that quite surprising, but maybe that's the rap element, certainly the beatboxing. I work in a school where working class boys particularly underachieve, particularly in English, as opposed to science and maths. This is one of the ways in which they can raise their aspirations and also find their own voice.

Since they are able to meet this demand and provide a means for educating more 'difficult' students, slam poets can legitimately work in schools alongside 'academic' poets, without being absorbed into the academic institutions of which they are often so critical. Such youth work is more likely to be long-term, providing a relatively regular and secure source of income for poets.

I think that's where they [slam poets] see the future financially, is like "Let's get this into the schools, and then people will pay us to teach in the schools, and then we can do workshops and affect a whole 'nother generation." (Soul Thomas Evans)

(iv) Slam and the Confines of the Curriculum

Youth slam may be perceived by slam poets and school teachers alike as offering a novel route to creativity, literacy and other skills and subjects. Slam can thus be used to present literacy in a way which is exciting, relevant and accessible. In this sense, it is portrayed as offering a means to escape the confines of a strictly regulated curriculum, which many school teachers perceive to be stultifying.

From the school's point of view I suppose, it's inspiring in a way to give the kids something outside the box that's extracurricular, and it feeds your imagination. And I think, speaking on behalf of teachers, the national curriculum at the minute ... is really, really dry. There's not much scope for creativity in there, which is a real shame ... you're basically teaching them skills to jump through hoops. "Do x, y and z to get x grade in your exam." (Kate Midgley, English teacher in a Leeds secondary school)

Workers in youth slam are often keenly aware of how unpalatable the restrictiveness of the school curriculum is to many teachers and students, and promote youth slam as a means to overcome these limitations, allowing teachers to tick the necessary boxes, whilst teaching important skills which are otherwise neglected.

The school slam is special, because I think, like I said, it really gives a voice to young people in an environment where education is led by "You've got to do this module, and you've gotta do this". I think in

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poetry, spoken word, they really have the right to say how they feel about their world, and that's very rarely said I think. (Serena Brooks)

Slam is thus seen as providing a means for school teachers to fulfil the demands of the curriculum, whilst offering something beyond the everyday grind of the classroom. It is portrayed as a way in which learning can be placed in the hands of young people themselves, enabling them to fulfil their potential within the formal education system.

Within an English-based classroom there's so much pressure to get through the curriculum - and x, y, z criteria has to be taught for them to pass – that it can often be difficult to get the creative edge in there as well. But this is just totally outside the box, and it allows them to express themselves and be free and it's just fantastic. (Kate Midgley)

From the perspective of many youth slam workers, slam offers more than simply the ability to succeed within the parameters of the academic world however. As Kadijah Ibrahim said of the Leeds Young Authors' poets:

A lot of them, whether they stay in school or not, sometimes their grades are not so good, and they can't actually see a better future in terms of work.

According to Kadijah, slam presents them with an alternative possible future; one in which they can use their skills as spoken word artists to succeed, regardless of academic qualifications. She tells of a former member of Leeds Young Authors, who left school with poor academic qualifications and became a dinner lady, but is now beginning to realise that there are other possibilities open to her, and that her activities as a radio deejay could provide more than simply a hobby:

She's the youngest deejay on the pirate radio station. She's been doing it for five years, and she said to me the other day, she went "I realise, you know, what I've been doing is I've actually developed this skill as a deejay, and I'm a poet and I'm a performer." I think she's nineteen now and she's saying "What can I actually do with this?" you know "Where can I actually go with this?"

(v) The Permeation of Slam Conventions and Discourses into the Academy

This interaction between slam and the dominant literary world presents not only a means through which the cultural capital associated with slam poets and schools may be enriched; it also provides a point where 'academic' poets may cross over into slam and reap the benefits of its (relative) popularity. Rather than face the risk of being drawn down to the level of mere competitors, as is the danger in adult slams, 'academic' poets are here able to take up a

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position of authority, by acting as mentors, patrons, judges or critics. Further, they can do so in institutions conventionally associated with the dominant literary world, such as theatres, schools and universities, avoiding the club and bar settings typical of adult slams. The U.K. Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, for instance, recently reviewed the Rise Slam's quarter final for *Time Out* magazine (Motion, 2006). Similarly, youth slams frequently use 'academic' poets as judges, alongside rap, slam and spoken word artists.

An increasing number of organisations in the dominant literary world are becoming involved in youth poetry slams, not least amongst these is the long established and highly respected British institution, The Poetry Society, which organises and helps to fund the Rise Slam (see The Poetry Society, 2007). The involvement of such organisations lends the movement an air of respectability and paves the way for other respected groups in the dominant literary world to embrace slam. This development is apparent in the growing number of 'academic' journals and anthologies publishing the work of slam poets. As Joelle Taylor, performance poet and coordinator of the London-based Rise slams, remarked:

Poetry Review recently got two of my slambassadors to write an article about their work, which has been fantastic, 'cause Poetry Review is the posh poetry, what people mostly call a 'quarterly body', slim volume, in the U.K., and it's an international publication as well, and it was giving, not only young people a voice for the first time, but young spoken word artists.

Slam is not simply seen as a way to attract young people into the dominant literary world however. Not only do poets working in youth slams use methods which diverge from those more typically associated with educational establishments, they also emphasise different aims, seeking to promote young people as poets whose work exists on the stage as well as the page. Thus, Joelle Taylor sees the Rise Slam as a way of enabling young people to develop a career in performance.

It's the only slam that I am aware, I feel very strongly about this, that works to create professional spoken word artists.

and: If they win I mentor them for a whole year, and that includes getting them gigs, trying to get them book deals, trying to get them CDs, matching them with producers ...

Similarly the organisers of the Westminster Poetry Slam note that:

As well as fulfilling the demands of the curriculum with enriching literacy work, the Slam process engaged children in all stages of producing,

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listening to and performing live performance poetry in a real theatre to a large public audience. (East-Side Educational Trust, 2006:.8)

Other poets emphasise the popularity of youth slams and their ability to attract large paying audiences, which allows them to be self-sustaining.

We get huge audiences. For the past three years we've sold out fifteen hundred seat auditoriums. This year we're gonna have a two thousand seat auditorium, a big opera house in Brooklyn, and it's gonna probably be the biggest slam in New York City history. (Jonathan Yates)

In this way, youth slam is not simply swallowed up into the Academy, but continues to emphasise many of the artistic conventions and discourses of slam, such as the oral performance of poetry and the importance of writing and delivering poetry in a way which is accessible, not only to young people, but also to the 'man on the street'.

The poetry which is produced in slams can be restructured to fulfil the conventions of the dominant literary world and, in being so altered, may potentially be accepted into its institutions as legitimate. As Joelle Taylor said, when discussing the work of a recent Rise Slam winner:

He writes in his mouth. He doesn't write on paper, but he allowed me to write it down, and I wrote it as a page poem. It's a rap. You know, you just divide it up in a different kind of way, just restructure it, and Poetry Review were really, really impressed by it.

It would seem, then, that slam is beginning to be accepted into the dominant literary arena, as members of both worlds work to adapt their conventions, to enable a relationship based on co-operative interaction, rather than conflict. Youth slam scenes provide a key site in which this interaction is able to take place. Thus, slam can be more readily accepted as a legitimate art form by members of the Academy, allowing slam poets access to its prestigious institutions, whilst 'academic' poets can capitalise on slam's growing appeal with a more broad audience base. In this way, it could be argued that slam is slowly becoming part of the Academy, and that members of the Academy are adapting their conventions and discourses to incorporate this new movement without damaging the value of their own cultural capital.

As London performance poet and youth slam coordinator, Joelle Taylor (2002) puts it, youth slams may represent the 'meeting point of the traditional and the new, the open page and the well-thumbed mic.'

Conclusions

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This paper has explored the relationship between poetry slam and the Academy. It aims to shed some light on the ways in which dominant art worlds may seek to retain the value of their cultural capital in the face of threats from new artistic movements, and on how such movements may comfortably become part of the dominant art world which they initially defined themselves against.

Before concluding, a point should be made regarding research limitations. This study's interview sample was comprised wholly of school teachers, youth slam workers and other slam participants. Due to practical constraints, I was unable to interview 'academic' poets, critics and promoters. Instead, I was forced to rely on secondary data sources and the accounts of slam participants, whose discourse was undoubtedly shaped by different interests to those affecting members of the Academy. Research addressing this omission would add substantially to this analysis.

Members of the 'academic' poetry community may deal with the challenge of slam in several different ways. They may attempt to: exclude slam from the dominant literary sphere, absorb slam into this sphere or exact a compromise, in which members of both worlds adapt their discourses and conventions to enable them to successfully interact.

The extent of the (direct and indirect) opposition which slam presents to the dominant literary world, and its increasing popularity, make outright exclusion or absorption extremely problematic. Interaction thus becomes the most realistic solution. Youth slams provide an arena within which this may safely occur. Youth slam workers may thus be understood as a site for the reworking of the conventions and discourses of these two worlds.

The success of slam in educational contexts across the U.K. and U.S., suggests that practitioners may stand to gain a great deal by exploring what youth slam has to offer. As a bridge between popular and 'legitimate' cultures and a creative means of engaging young people in core curricula subjects, youth slam has the potential to provide an effective and innovative tool.

This paper has thus argued that poetry slam is enacting a quiet revolution in the literary world, giving rise to a new generation of poets, whose perceptions and applications of poetry often fuse together the conventions of these two worlds. Whether the changes effected by this revolution will be radical or slight, transient or enduring remains to be seen. Only time will tell to what extent the interactions taking place within the 'safe' site of youth slam will permeate beyond the bounds of educational institutions to effect changes within the wider dominant literary world.

Acknowledgements

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I wish to thank Professor Grace Davie and Dr Maggie O'Neill for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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Appendix A: Transcription Key

() Transcription doubt

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- “ “ Reported speech
- ... Missing text
- [] Researcher's words