

Poetry Slam in the Classroom

by Bob Holman

The surge in interest in competitive poetry readings, led by the fastest growing grassroots arts movement in the country, poetry slams, brings some heavy freight when introduced in a classroom setting.

To describe a poetry slam is difficult, not because it's hard to describe (a poetry olympics comes quite close) but because it's hard to imagine poets subjecting their poems to scores as if they were divers or gymnasts. The raucous slam is the antithesis to the general, genteel conception of poetry. Which is the idea.

Poetry slams were created by Marc Smith, a Chicago construction worker/poet, in 1986, as one act in a performance poetry cabaret. They have since evolved into a rallying cry for those who believe in poetry as a muscular, activating art, born in utterance, signaling the reemergence of a populist poetry in the oral tradition. More than 50 cities in the U.S. and Canada send teams to the national slam tournament every year.

Slams usually take place in bars or coffee shops, often in conjunction with an open mic and/or a featured (straight) reading. Slams borrow the Olympic formula — judges rate the poems from 1-10, using decimal points. The main difference is that it's regular members of the audience, not experts, who are the judges. And the audience is urged to get vociferously involved, reacting both to the poetry and to the scores. Just as much of today's performance poetry is of the In Your Face School, the whole idea of slam is to engage.

The point is clear: by selecting random judges, what's important is not a hierarchical notion of poetry, but a personal relationship to the poem. Suddenly we're all experts; we all are judges. The argument goes that when reading we are consciously or unconsciously saying this poem is great, that one boring. It's just that in the slam, in public, we put specific numbers on them and become part of the show.

Scoring results is oppositional dynamics, being simultaneously supremely absurd and a do-or-die motivator. In *Dead Poets Society*, Robin Williams has his students rip out the pages that teach how to find the perfect poem by making a graph of content and form. It is impossible to reduce a poem to its numerological equivalent, which is why slammers do it. On the other hand, try telling that to a poet who just lost a close slam, or who was eliminated in the first round. Slamming is not for the faint of heart.

Which is why slamming in schools needs to be contextualized very carefully. A discussion of pros and cons is a necessity.

PROS

- Poetry has been a forgotten art in the USA. Slams are helping to bring the art back into public consciousness.
- Slams are part of a movement that includes hip-hop and performance that have created a renaissance for the spoken word.
- Slam teaches students how to use voice and body techniques to help convey a poem's meaning.



Photo by Martha Cooper

Bob Holman at the People's Poetry Gathering

- Slams encourage students to develop poems with powerful rhythms and sounds and to write for the ear and not only the page.
- Slams allow for communities to form around what has sometimes been considered a "sullen art" (Dylan Thomas).
- Slams draw a big crowd, creating a built-in audience for a reading.
- Slams allow you to question what a poem is, and what competition is. How is having your poems rejected by a publisher different from losing a slam?
- Slams are fun. Bring back the lost art of heckling!

CONS

- Slams emphasize performance over writing, and can lead to sloppy poems.
- Competition is the opposite of poetry, turning art into a sideshow.
- No matter what you say, it hurts to lose. Poetry is to be associated with depth of feeling and thought, not with victory and defeat.
- Slams dictate poems, emphasizing victim poetry and playing to stereotypes (it has been said that slam poems have two parts: a. I have been violated; b. I will never be violated again.)
- In trying to win, poets resort to crowd-pleasers rather than trying new work or taking chances.

A key element in minimizing some of the negative sides of slam is the emcee. The best emcees create a lighthearted, jovial tone for the event that may help ease sore feelings by not taking any of the scoring too seriously. When I run slams, I always give my slam disclaimer — "The best poet always loses." A sense of humor about the ultimate inconsequentiality of the scores is beneficial. Most important, though, is a listening engagement, the host's ability to hear things in a poem and comment upon them, to open audience's ears is the essence of slam.

One thing for sure: poetry slams are a brilliant marketing strategy. Going to a poetry reading can sometimes reek of the dust museum, but going to a slam, wow, that is cool, now you're talking! Slams make for great photo ops — judges with scorecards, audiences up in arms, poets taking flight. By adding the competitive frame, you attract audience, you attract press. But the trade-off is that what is discussed is generally the "Phenomenon of Slam," and not the poetry.

All across the U.S., slams have given young people a public site where their voices can be heard. Groups such as the Writers Corps and Youth Speaks have had extraordinary success in bringing poetry to teens, and in letting teens be heard. The new documentary *Poetic License*, by Dave Yanofsky, is a good introduction to the tradition. The organization Youth Speaks, with branches in San Francisco and New York, takes as its motto, "The next generation can speak for itself," and slams and other poetry readings provide the venue where that happens. Anne MacNaughton's teaching poetry in a slam context at a Taos high school on an Indian Reservation has resulted in taking the slam one step further: her slam team gets actual letters, just like the athletes.

Competitive poetry is not defined by slams; in fact, making up your own rules is one way to teach the farcical elements of the idea. Anne is an organizer of the Taos Poetry Circus, which produces the annual World Heavyweight Championship Poetry Bout: two renowned poets go head-to-head and poem-to-poem for 10 rounds, the last round is improvised, and scores are only given at the Bout's conclusion. There are poetry game shows, SellOut PoBouts (audience votes with money), Competitive Poetry Balls. Poetry Slam itself is now incorporated, has strict rules with penalties (after 3 minutes and a 10-second grace period you lose .10 every 10 seconds. No props/costumes) and a Board to settle disputes.

Slams are much more than a hoot, but unless they are a hoot, they fail. *Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*, edited by Gary Glazner, Manic D Press, 2000, contains many great slam poems and essays on the form. The movies *Slam* and *SlamNation* both give insight into the form. When I worked at Mouth Almighty/Mercury we released a CD, *Grand Slam*, that is a good listen, and the anthology I edited with Miguel Algarin, *Aloud! Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* is now in its seventh printing.

In these days of what I call the Horrendous Triumph of Capitalism, slam is a way for young poets to get their work seen and learn the survivor's mix of artist with entrepreneur, organizer, activist. The Web allows for text/audio/video versions of poetry. Whatever their other merits and pitfalls, the new technologies are poetry-friendly. We've got cheap at-home printing, Kinkos, MP3 poetry — I'm reminded of the energy around the mimeographed "little magazine" world in the sixties. Slam as today's collating party!

It's an old American tradition, poets taking control of their own work. Walt Whitman, you will recall, self-published his first poetry collection. He was a printer, and had easy access (how many chapbooks have been surreptitiously typed at work?). But Walt's story doesn't stop there. He also reviewed the book himself (under another name), and got the review published. And guess what? His book got a 10!

Bob Holman was the slam impresario at the Nuyorican Poets Caf, for seven years. He founded Mouth Almighty, an all-poetry label, and produced the PBS series, The United States of Poetry. His own most recent collection is The Collect Call of the Wild, and his CD is In with the Out Crowd.