SchoolTime Performance
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A Program of Arts for Learning

Hip Hop Music & Spoken Word Poetry

STUDY GUIDE

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Tony Styxx, an Indianapolis native, is a Spoken Word Artist/MC/Human Beat box. An entertainer since age 18, Tony Styxx has taken his time to cultivate his talents in the Indiana soil opening doors for him to share his gifts all throughout the Midwest.

Hip Hop

Hip hop is a multi-faceted cultural expression. It encompasses music, dance, fashion, and language. The music evolved from Jazz, Blues, and R&B music and is closely tied to street dancing and dance clubs. A distinguishing facet of hip hop is the prominent role of the DJ. Street dancing was called Breaking or Break Dancing because individuals would show off their style during the breaks (instrumental only) parts of a song. To extend the breaks in the music and give dancers more time to freestyle, DJs began to use two turntables to switch back and forth between the breaks in songs. This technique led to the development of scratching and beat-boxing, creating rhythmic non-verbal sounds through technology and the human voice. Hip hop is more than just dance and music with its own fashion style. The fashion associated with hip hop developed so dancers could easily move in street clothes, such as loose fitting pants. Lyrics of hip hop songs are considered to be both inventive and controversial. Hip hop artists will use double entendres, parody, reference artistic and cultural conventions, play on words, and invent new terminology to express their meaning. Many hip hop artists grow up in neighborhoods with gangs—street dancing was an alternative to street fighting—and often depict in their lyrics the drug culture, prostitution, and gang violence they witnessed. Critics have felt that the lyrics are too explicit and at times glorify that culture. Despite the controversy, hip hop has become popular throughout the world with other cultures infusing Hip hop’s musical style with their own indigenous music.

Spoken Word

Spoken Word is a dramatic performance of poetry. The term spoken word developed out of poetry slam competitions. Although poets have always read their poetry to an audience, poetry slams and spoken word added an emphasis on performance. The poet performs the words not just reads them. Some poets write poems with performing in mind. Spoken Word is associated with hip hop and rapping because it focuses on the rhythm of the words—rapping without the music.
A History of Poetry Slam

Poetry Slam began in the mid-eighties in Chicago as a way to enliven poetry readings. Marc Smith, a construction worker and poet, decided to revamp the standard open mic poetry format by placing more emphasis on performance. He may have been influenced by poets who, in the late-seventies and early-eighties, had performed poetry readings dressed in boxing gear as if their readings were a bout. In Chicago there was an atmosphere of not only making poetry readings more entertaining but gaining the interest of people who would not normally go to poetry reading. Generally, poetry readings were attended by academics and other poets. The poetry slam tried to change that. Since its inception there has been tension between academic poets and slam poets.

In 1984, Marc Smith started a poetry reading series at Get Me High Lounge, a Chicago jazz club. He “wanted to maintain the idea of the responsibility the poet had to communicate effectively” and sought to balance poetry with performance. A year later, he started the Chicago Poetry Ensemble, an informal group of poets interested in learning about performance.

Dave Jemilo, who also owned Green Mill and Déjà Vu clubs, bought the Get Me High Lounge. Smith approached Jemilo about continuing the poetry readings. Jemilo agreed and offered the Green Mill as a venue beginning in July 1986. Smith had the whole Sunday evening to organize as he willed. He divided it into three sets with a break in between each. The first set was an open mic format, where anyone could sign up to read their poetry. The second set was reserved for featured poets, and the third set was the responsibility of the Chicago Poetry Ensemble. However, a problem soon arose. The Ensemble was saddled with the task of developing new poetry every week to encourage a regular crowd to return each week. Smith developed the idea of a poetry competition, or slam, to keep regular customers entertained. “The Uptown Poetry Slam” was born, and it continues to this day. The first slams where more exhibitions than a competition to select an overall winner. The poets would even create pseudonyms and costumes like wrestling. The judges were selected from the audience. After each poet presented their poetry, the judges held up score cards. The audience as a whole was also encouraged to express its option of the poetry. The winner was whoever had the highest score after totaling the judges’ scores.

The idea of a poetry slam quickly spread throughout the country. Ann Arbor, Michigan set up a slam in 1987 and was followed by New York, San Francisco, and Fairbanks, Alaska. The Nuyorican Poets Café in New York’s East Village became one of the best known places for slam. In 1990 the National Poetry Association organized a national festival including a slam. There were team and individual competitions. However, only two teams were invited—Chicago and San Francisco—with Chicago winning the title. Chicago’s Patricia Smith won the individual competition. Within the next year, she moved to Boston and established its slam. In 1991, Chicago hosts a National Poetry Slam with eight cities competing. The three-minute rule is introduced but rescinded under protest; it is reestablished for future years. The National Poetry Slam becomes an annual event, hosted by a different city each year. The number of teams participating continues to grow with each competition.

Sources

**Performing Poetry**

- Using any poem, such as poems students are studying in class
- Have students select a poem to read/perform
- Students should rehearse before performing the poem

**What to think about:**

- What is the tone of the poem (joyful, mourning, in love, etc.)? How to express that tone with the voice?
  
  Exercise: select a word and have students practice saying it in different tones. For example, the word is "dog." Have students say the word (or create a phrase) in a happy tone then in a frighten tone.

- What is the pace of the poem? Should the words be spoken slow and deliberate or quickly?

- Traditionally, when reading a poem one should slightly pause at the line breaks. Should the line breaks be emphasized? How does a longer pause affect the performance of the poem?

- Should certain words be emphasized? How can one create a rhythm with speech that mimics the rhythm of the poem?

- When should one breathe?

- How should one stand when delivering the poem? What, if any, arm gestures should be used?

**Sound Patterns/Composition**

- Patterns: Have students work in groups to create patterns with clapping and snapping. The teacher may want to do a few patterns with the class to get the students started. Examples: “clap-clap-snap clap-clap-snap” or “clap-snap-clap clap-snap-clap clap-snap-clap clap-snap-clap.” You may also want to throw in a slap on the thigh.

- After the groups have had time to experiment, have the students translate their clapping patterns into visual patterns using different colors, shapes, or sizes. Example: if clap = red and snap = blue, then the “clap-clap-snap clap-clap-snap” would be “red-red-blue red-red-blue.” Or shapes “square-square-circle square-square-circle” or combine the two. Then have students repeat the process experimenting with making the sounds faster and slower and translating that into a visual pattern. Then trying longer and shorter sounds, or higher and lower.

- Have students take the patterns they have created and put them together to create a composition. Students may also want to incorporate different sounds, such as, vocal sounds, a shaker can, or drum.
IMPROVISATION

Improvisation is the spontaneous creation or performance of a work of art. Through improvisation the artist can let his/her mind freely make connections. In one sense improvisation lets the mind wander and see what it discovers. In another sense, improvisation draws upon knowledge already gained to create new connections.

Incorporating improvisation into the classroom will allow students to develop their creative thinking skills and give them an opportunity to discover ideas they did not realize they had. It can be incorporated into any discipline. Often artist will use a ‘trigger’ to begin the improvisation process. A trigger can be a word, image, sound, movement, etc. related to the subject matter the students are studying. The key is not to make it feel like a test, let the students respond naturally. They may respond by either writing, visual art, creating sound/music, or through movement. As the students evolve in improvisation techniques, you may want to encourage them to combine the different forms of art, e.g., writing and drawing in one response. You may want to try improvisation activities before you have begun lessons on a subject. These activities will begin students thinking about the subject, but students will not be in the mode of reciting what they have been told about the subject. Give students time to allow their minds to wander. There may be an initial ‘letting go’ period. The teacher begins the process, but students take it to its full development. Let things happen as they will.

Samples:

**Word Triggers:** Either write a word relating to the subject matter on the blackboard for the entire class to respond to or write several words on separate slips of paper and have students draw a slip from a hat or box.

- Have students write their ‘reaction’ to the word, whatever comes to their minds. It can be personal feelings or memories or academic pondering.
- Have students respond to the word by drawing, sound or movement. Example: The trigger word is “molecule.” How would a molecule move, feel, etc.?

**Image Triggers:** Select an image – photo or diagram – related to the subject. This can be a class activity or you can select several images and break the class into groups. Sometimes an abstract image can create more interesting responses than images with which students are familiar. Have students respond by writing, drawing, sound or ‘putting’ the image in motion.

- Example: Pull a battle or exploration map from a history period. Have students respond to the image in writing, sound or movement.

**Sound Triggers:** Play music or ordinary sounds related to a specific subject matter you are studying in class. Have students respond.

- Example: your class is about to study the Doppler Effect. Play a recording of a sound coming toward you and a sound moving away. Have students respond by movement or visual art.

**Movement Triggers:** Do a spontaneous movement during class.

- Create a movement chain – one student does a movement and the next student responds to the movement and then the next, similar to dominos. Then have them respond to what they just did by drawing or painting.
RESOURCES

SLAM/SPoken Word Poetry

www.poetryslam.com
    Poetry Slam, Inc. website with information poetry slam competitions.

www.slampapi.com
    The official site of Marc Smith affectionately dubbed the Slam Papi. Excellent information here about and from the perspective of the father of the slam, including slam philosophies.

CLASSROOM Application

www.poets.org/poetsorg/materials-teachers
    Lessons plans for teaching poetry in general by American Academy of Poets

www.webenglishteacher.com/poetryslam.html
    Here are several articles/pages with ideas/instruction(s) for the practical use of slams, the study of the poetry slam and spoken word with a wide range of grade levels

http://bostonteachnet.org/irwin/sigproj.htm
    This page presents rationales for using a poetry slam in the classroom, including standards, materials, and career connections

www.educationworld.com/a_curr/voice/voice069.shtml
    A teacher reflects on a poetry slam held in her classroom. Scroll down for links to additional information. You will find classroom, community, and career activities here

Related Sites

www.gotpoetry.com
    misc. news, events, happenings, etc.

www.nuyorican.org
    home site of one of the premier spoken word/poetry venues in the nation

HIP HOP