Prospecting with the 'Poetry Pioneers': Youth Poetry Slam and the U.K.'s WordCup

Helen Gregory

I am waiting outside Manchester Piccadilly Train Station with a group of teenagers from The West Midlands WordCup poetry slam team. We are on our way home from the project's residential weekend. One of the group has just performed a new poem and they ask me if I will read next. I am surprised, flattered and a little nervous. As soon as I begin though I feel valued and appreciated. I have the undivided attention of three exhausted fourteen year olds, who have been performing, writing, listening to and thinking about poetry almost continuously for nearly three days. They click their fingers at lines they like (a response they learnt during the weekend), murmur appreciatively, and laugh in all the right places. When I have finished they quote sections back and ask how I got involved with poetry. It feels good.

Everyone I have spoken to over the weekend has a similar story to tell. Friendships have been formed here, contacts made, ideas and experiences shared, skills honed, fears overcome. We feel like part of a family, within which our poetry, ideas and experiences are valued. We are certain that our enthusiasm, love and hard work will be noticed and lauded. I share these emotions, despite being a mere observer; a poet-cum-researcher aiming to absorb as much of the talent, companionship and sheer, crazy energy as I can.

I began my research much more cynically. I was ready to discover that youth poetry slam events like WordCup exclude as much as they include, that competition is central (despite frequent claims to the contrary), that at least some teachers, poet coaches and young people are just going through the motions to keep others happy or earn their latest pay cheque. This may well be true, but I saw little evidence of it. What I experienced instead was widespread warmth, energy and enthusiasm. There will be a comedown I am sure, but for now we are riding the high, and these kids just want more *poetry.*

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The term 'poetry pioneer' comes from 'Kieran', a young WordCup (WC) participant, who declared in a focus group session that 'I wanna be a poetry pioneer, making my own style of poetry, and just inspire all them different people.' Such statements are not uncommon amongst students of youth slam programmes like WC, and hint at the great enthusiasm that these projects attract. Clearly, there is something here worth investigating. With this in mind, the current essay presents a social scientific analysis of WC, using this as a departure point to explore the nature, impacts and challenges of youth poetry slam programmes more generally. (The conclusions drawn here can also be extended in large part to youth spoken word programmes, which share many characteristics with youth slam projects, but lack their competitive structure.) A key focus of this analysis is the student-centred learning (SCL) approach favoured within these programmes. It will be argued that this approach serves to construct a supportive and friendly environment, within which many students develop, not only a love for poetry, but also the confidence and ability to express themselves and approach difficult life issues in new ways. Thus students of these programmes may come to see writing as a creative means for dealing with emotional 'blocks', learn to debate issues around identity, the environment, drug use or the family, or actively work to redress inequalities in their communities.

Such impacts may endure long after the programmes themselves have ended. Ensuring longer term benefits, however, requires some continuity of input, and securing funding for this can be tricky, especially in difficult economic climates. Youth slam workers need research they can draw on to support their work. Yet despite the growing popularity of youth slam programmes, there are very few studies that address their efficacy. Instead, the small body of writing which does exist in this area tends to focus on the many anecdotal claims that are made around youth slam and spoken word programmes. Further, there is a dearth of in-depth qualitative research exploring the subjective experiences of youth slam participants. This latter omission is particularly notable since many of the proposed impacts of arts education, such as enhanced creativity and well-being, are subjectively experienced, and difficult (if not impossible) to quantify. The current essay utilises a social scientific analysis of WC 2010 to build on the existing literature and address the concerns raised above.

Introducing Poetry Slam and WordCup 2010

Poetry slam is perhaps the most notable poetry movement of recent decades (Gioia, 2004; Gregory, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). As with poetry more generally, however, it remains a rather niche activity and thus requires some introduction. Slam can be described as 'a movement, a philosophy, a form, a genre, a game, a community, an educational device, a career path and a gimmick' (Greg-

ory, 2008a: 201). At its core is a knockout oral poetry competition in which poets are judged on the composition and performance of their work. Slam's history spans over two decades and thousands of miles. The first official poetry slam was held in 1986 by Marc Smith at the Green Mill Tavern, Chicago (Heintz, 1999). At the time of writing, this Uptown Poetry Slam still ran weekly, attracting poets from across the U.S. and beyond. Since its Chicago beginnings slam has expanded into multiple geographical and social contexts. The National Poetry Slam, held annually in the U.S., can attract audiences in the thousands, while slams and related events have been aired on U.S. television, radio and on Broadway. Slams are staged regularly in many other countries too, covering such disparate contexts as Singapore, Australia, South Africa, Sweden and the U.K.

Slam amongst young people is the fastest growing area of the movement. While young poets occasionally take part in adult slams, it is most common for them to participate in youth slam, in which all of those competing are aged nineteen years or under (although specified age ranges vary). Many adult slam poets participate in youth slam too, working with schools and youth groups to run workshops in poetry writing and performance. There are also a number of independent organisations worldwide that hold slams and coach young people in their art.

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 slam's apparent strengths is an adaptability to the needs of different contexts and individuals. It is possible, however, to identify some shared features. Youth slams are commonly fast-paced events, in which order and purpose is carved from a churning hubbub of activity. The audience (where young people often significantly outnumber adults) are vocal and participatory, the young poets at turns confident and nervous. Poems 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. Youth slams generally operate within the confines of broader educational programmes, which include a range of writing- and performance-related activities. These programmes frequently work towards creating a community of young poets, as is readily apparent in groups like Slambassadors, which was established to allow students to continue learning and interacting following the London-based Rise Slam Championships.

Both the U.K. and the U.S. host national youth slam competitions. In the U.S. The Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival, organised by Youth Speaks, has run annually since 1997. In the U.K., meanwhile, WordCup represents the country's first truly national youth slam event. This was founded by performance poetry organisation Apples & Snakes in 2006. WC is intended to be repeated once every four years, coinciding with the football

World Cup. This essay focuses on an analysis of the second WC event, held in 2010.

Apples & Snakes (2010: Para. 1) describe WC 2010 as 'a national spoken word project for young people'. The programme involved almost three hundred young people working in collaboration with pairs of poet coaches from nine regions across England. Each poet coach pair was asked to recruit a slam team, consisting of two groups of around four students between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. Coaches then tutored their teams in a series of ten workshops, culminating in a residential weekend held at Manchester's Contact Theatre. During this weekend the teams came together to watch showcase performances from more experienced poets (including the coaches) in a Managers' Match, to participate in workshops and feedback sessions, and to compete in a slam competition. The slam itself ran in two heats, with one group from each team performing in the first round and the other in the second. Teams were asked to compose two poems for the event, one on the theme of 'Free to Write' and the other on a topic of their choice.

Many of the preparatory workshops were held in secondary schools, while others ran with Education Other Than at Schools (EOTAS) pupils,[1] at arts centres or in theatres. Teachers and staff from these organisations also attended the residential weekend, as did peer mentors from spoken word groups like Leeds Young Authors, Slambassadors and the Barbican Young Poets.[2] These peer mentors were alumni from previous slam and spoken word programmes and were present to encourage and instruct the young slammers through showcase performances, workshop participation and general pep talks.

Youth Poetry Slam and the Value of Arts Education

As the above description makes clear, youth slam programmes like WC take the popular format of poetry slam competitions and embed them within a didactic framework, coaching young people in poetry writing and performance. In addition, they often aim to build students' confidence and self-efficacy. Such educational/developmental applications of the arts have attracted much interest over recent years, as highlighted by the U.K. Government commissioned report *All Our Futures* (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, 1999). Research exploring this 'arts impact phenomenon' (Comerford Boyes & Reid, 2005: 1) has argued for multiple benefits of arts education for young peo-

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[1] EOTAS is a government scheme which seeks to provide formal education for pupils who have been excluded from schools in the U.K. (see for example Manchester City Council, 2010).

[2] See http://www.leedsyoungauthors.org.uk/, http://slam.poetrysociety.org.uk/ and http://www.barbican.org.uk/education/project-showcasing/barbican-young-poets for more about these organisations. (All websites accessed on 16.09.10.)

ple, proposing improvements in areas including: community participation (Gould, 1996; Matarasso, 1996a, b, 1997); to personal development/fulfilment (Harland *et al*, 2000); creativity (Burton, Horowitz & Abeles, 1999; Stumm, 1994); group cooperation (Burton *et al.*, 1999; Palmer Wolf, 1999); verbal fluency (Winner & Hetland, 2000); and problem solving skills (Burton *et al.*, 1999). Further, Heath and Soep's (1998) meta-analysis of research conducted between 1987 and 1997 suggests that arts education can enhance young people's personal and social skills, general academic achievement/motivation, and self-esteem.

In addition, there is some limited research indicating that oral poetry specifically could provide a range of educational and developmental benefits that stretch beyond the arts. Scholars have suggested that oral poetry may be used to: teach students literacy (Damico, 2005; Dyson, 2005; Fisher, 2003, 2005); nurture their creativity (Gehring, 2005); provide them with a space in which to engage with issues of identity, personal development (Fisher, 2003; Hall, 2007) and 'social justice' (Damico, 2005); sustain a mutually supportive community (Damico, 2005; Fisher, 2005; Gehring, 2005); and enhance their engagement with formal education (Damico, 2005; Dyson, 2005; Gehring, 2005). Slam practitioners and school teachers often make similar claims for youth slam (Gregory, 2008a). In addition, authors have claimed that youth slam can engage young people who are marginalised within the education system, giving them an opportunity to speak on issues they care about, and acting as a bridge to popular cultural forms like rap (see Bruce & Davis, 2000; Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2006; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Weiss & Herndon, 2001). Weinstein (2009; 2010) puts this attraction down to the way in which youth spoken word and slam programmes value the talents and voices of disenfranchised youth, encouraging them to be independent learners and creators. This highlights the emphasis placed on SCL in many of these projects (see for example Ellis, Ruggles Gere & Lamberton, 2003; Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2006; Kinloch, 2005).

SCL is based on a constructivist epistemology that views learning as an active, context-dependent process of meaning-making, which is typically goal-directed and collaborative (see Bruner, 1957, 1961; Vygotsky, 1978). While the term can be used in varied ways, this essay adopts a broad understanding of SCL, following Lea, Stephenson & Troy (2003: 322):

> [SCL incorporates a] reliance upon active rather than passive learning, an emphasis on deep learning and understanding, increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student … mutual respect with the learner-teacher relationship, and a reflective approach to the learning and teaching process on the part of both teacher and learner.

This focus on student responsibility should not, however, be seen as an elision of the teacher's role, but rather a shift away from traditional, instructional forms of teaching, towards a model where teachers monitor and support students' active

learning within a safe, but challenging, environment (Elen, Clarebout, Léonard & Lowyck, 2007; Lea *et al.*, 2003; Silén & Uhlin, 2008).

The effectiveness of SCL has been widely supported in the literature, with scholars indicating that it can aid knowledge retention and understanding (Elen *et al*, 2007; Felder & Brent, 1996; Ingleton, Kiley, Cannon & Rogers, 2000) and enable teachers to cater to a broad spectrum of student needs (Biggs, 1999). More specifically, Damico (2005) argues that reading poetry within a SCL framework can encourage the development of critical inquiry, social engagement and literacy skills. Ellis *et al.* (2003), meanwhile, suggest that an active, experiential and collaborative learning approach to the reading, writing and performance of poetry can help students learn complex concepts and skills more quickly and effectively (see also Fisher, 2005; Kinloch, 2005). This essay seeks to explore some of these claims within the context of WC specifically and youth slam more generally, beginning with a consideration of how SCL is perceived and implemented in WC, and moving on to consider what this and other features of the project mean for its participants.

Method

The analysis that follows is based on data collected through participant observation of workshops, performances, feedback sessions and other activities held at the WC residential weekend and at one of the participating schools, and through interview and focus group sessions. One focus group was conducted with six 'Ridgeway School' students prior to the residential weekend. (This is referred to throughout the report as RF.) This was followed by two focus groups held towards the end of the weekend, with seven poet coaches (PF) and seven young slammers (SF) respectively, and one poet coach interview (I) conducted a week later. Between them these sessions included twenty-one participants from five of the nine project regions. Informed consent was obtained from young slammers, poet coaches and the young people's parents/head teachers. Pseudonyms for participants and schools are used throughout, except where referencing previously published poems.

The residential weekend focus group participants were recruited as an opportunity sample of available individuals. Since the SF coincided with a workshop for the 'most changed' slammers, young people whom coaches considered to have benefitted most from WC are underrepresented here. The reader may wish to bear this in mind when considering this analysis, especially given participants' many effusive compliments of the project. The remaining focus group participants and interviewee were recruited as a convenience sample from one of the project regions. The interview and focus groups were conducted as semistructured sessions, to enable participants to emphasise issues that were important to them and to encourage in-depth, reflexive discussion. Questions ad-

dressed evaluative aspects of the project, such as 'What have you got out of WC?'

Transcripts of the discussions were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis or IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). IPA explores participants' individual, subjective accounts, while recognising that these are produced in interaction with others, including researchers. It is thus worth noting that participants were generally aware of my status as a poet and event organiser in the U.K. slam and spoken word scene.[3] IPA involves an iterative process of close readings to identify salient patterns within texts. Initially, (relatively) unguided notes are made on interview/focus group transcripts. The preliminary patterns elicited from these texts are then sculpted into protothemes. These protothemes are gradually refined through a cyclical process of reading and analysis, until they produce themes that resonate across the data set without quelling important variation within it. In this study, the IPA themes were also reviewed and refined with reference to participant observation field notes. All materials were subsequently coded for the final themes and key passages highlighted.[4]

This analytic process has given rise to five themes that are elucidated below. These are: student-centred learning, supportive community, learning about poetry, empowerment and self-development, and continuity. Together, these themes tell of a remarkably successful project, which demonstrates many of the benefits highlighted in anecdotal accounts of youth slam and spoken word programmes. WC was not without its limitations or complications, however, and these are also discussed below.

Student-Centred Learning

Focus group/interview transcripts and participant observation alike provided considerable evidence for the kind of SCL approach described by scholars like Jocson (2006) and Weinstein (2010). During the workshops I observed, for instance, young people often took the lead, commented on each others' work and actively sought feedback from coaches. Collaborative learning was encouraged through the regional slam teams, while the slam acted as a central focus for goal-directed activity. Although curriculum parameters were pre-set, young WC participants were given considerable freedom to choose what to write about and how to compose and perform their work. Several participants distinguished this

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[3] My 'insider' status placed me in an enviable position in terms of knowledge of and access to this scene, yet it also inevitably raised concerns. I have written more about this in Gregory (2007a, b).

[4] Interview quotations are presented in the form of 'cleaned-up' speech, which omits the hesitations, interruptions and repetition of everyday conversation in favour of presenting a more lucid text. Abbreviations and notations are described in Appendix A.

from the approach they typically encountered in mainstream English class-rooms:

> HG: So what, there's more freedom with this?
> 'Ashley': Yeah.
> 'Tim': Yeah.
> 'Ashley': We can do what we want.
> 'Tim': We can write about anything. (RF)

Poet coaches, in turn, readily identified and promoted SCL in their youth slam work both in WC and elsewhere, positioning themselves more as facilitators or consultants than instructors. As 'Caroline' (I) puts it, 'we saw our role as, certainly not telling the kids what to do, but guiding them along the way.' This contrasts with popular perceptions of school teachers as uni-directional disseminators of learning, closely steering students through a rigidly bordered curriculum. While the extent of teachers' control over class decisions undoubtedly varies, it is certainly true that those in the U.K. and U.S. must adhere to a formal curriculum which restricts what and how they can teach:

> 'Ashley': … in the syllabus we're told to write. We just learn about different types of poems and things, like acrostic poems. …
> HG: Okay so when you're doing the syllabus stuff it's like in particular forms?
> 'Ashley': Yeah, and you have to do it. (RF)

Many participants viewed this lack of flexibility as problematic. In particular, several poet coaches worried that teachers were forced to set texts that had little relevance to their students:

> I always come back to the Shakespeare argument. I hated Shakespeare at school 'cause it had nothing to do with me. … But you had to teach it, and it was on the curriculum … and teachers have to find a way of making it interesting. ('Stewart', PF)

School teachers may thus face an uphill struggle when striving to engage young people's interest in poetry and literature. Conversely, youth slam workers' relative freedom from this curriculum allows them to focus on forms and topics which have greater interest for their students (Ellis *et al.,* 2003). Indeed, several authors have observed that youth slam and spoken word programmes frequently utilise youth cultural forms like rap, allow students to choose writing topics, and/or encourage them to write using familiar dialects (see for example Bruce & Davis, 2000; Fisher, 2005; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Jocson, 2006); such was certainly the case in WC.

This freedom from the curriculum and the different roles which poet coaches fulfil allowed them to build a more equal relationship with young people, something which many students welcomed. As 'Becky' (SF) says, 'normally when you have adults and stuff it's going along the stereotyping line. You think "Oh teenagers. Stay away." But here they're just like in with us and they feel as if they're one of us.' This was apparent in the way that young people used coaches' first names when speaking to/about them. Interacting with pupils outside of the rules and restrictions of their schools also allowed participating school teachers to adopt a more egalitarian relationship with students. As 'Caroline' (I) puts it, 'everyone got on with each other as friends, as opposed to sort of teacher-pupil, you know. That relationship seemed to go, because you're out of the school environment. You're in somewhere completely different.' Ellis *et al.* (2003) observed a similar dissolution of power differences between school teachers and their pupils in a U.S. youth slam programme (see also Fisher, 2005).

Some coaches suggested that this SCL approach allows them to reach individuals who are marginalised within the formal education system:

> So you come in with a creative style of non-traditional teaching that affects the disaffected kids, the kids that [teachers] can't reach, 'cause they're too busy getting the gifted and talented through … The ones that drop through the net, all of a sudden they're writing two pages. ('Will', PF)

Weinstein (2010) and others have suggested that this ability to benefit marginalised groups could be achieved partly by allowing students to take the lead in their own learning, and partly by respecting the language, knowledge and skills that they use and value in their daily lives. This is supported by Gutiérrez's theory of 'hybridity', which suggests that learning can be enhanced by facilitating connections between 'official' and 'unofficial' space (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez & Tejeda, 1999; Gutiérrez, Rymes & Larson, 1995). Thus, the argument could be made that youth slam programmes like WC create a fruitful 'hybrid space' for the study of English literature and language, by bridging between an 'official' educational space populated with core curriculum texts and an 'unofficial' youth cultural space characterised by rap and other popular poetic forms. Weiss & Herndon (2001) emphasise this hybridity in youth slam, noting that it represents a substantial departure from mainstream education, where 'unofficial' space is typically either disregarded or actively discouraged.

This analysis, then, supports anecdotal claims that youth slam programmes like WC operate with a SCL focus. There is some suggestion that this approach may serve to reach disaffected and marginalised young people, providing a 'hybrid space' within which they can work. This may be aided by WC's more egalitarian teaching style, in which poet coaches and others actively work to break down the status hierarchies separating teachers and pupils. This dissolution of power differences is both spurred on by, and helps to create, a supportive com-

munity, within which adults and young people can safely share their words and experiences. It is to this latter theme that I now turn.

Supportive Community

> 'I am one of you – together we are fearless.'
> ~ Moven *et al.* (2010: 29)[5]

WC was characterised by positive, friendly interactions between participants, and this was an important feature of the project for many. In the lead-up to the residential weekend young slammers, poet coaches, school teachers and others worked together as teams. The weekend itself saw these groups congregate in a kaleidoscope of different ages, classes, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Teenagers and adults from Afro-Caribbean, Asian and British backgrounds created and performed with/for one another; young people from inner city London swapped life stories with those more familiar with the relative safety of suburban streets; raw tales of unemployment and poverty met comic poems about Count Dracula and parents' embarrassing dancing.

Weiss and Herndon (2001) argue that this diversity is characteristic of youth poetry slam programmes more generally and is one of their key strengths, exposing students to a myriad of different voices. Indeed, much as these authors observe in the U.S., WC participants encountered poetry covering widely differing styles, subjects and perspectives. Many young people came to appreciate the merits of this:

> I've seen many different personalities. Like everyone's an individual in their own different ways and no one's looked at you because of this or because of that. Usually if your environment or where you live is kind of different, people look at you different because of the way they see themselves socially or [according to] class and [being] like different in a hierarchy. ('Jake', SF)

The supportive and non-judgemental environment which 'Jake' describes here certainly accords with my own experience of WC, and that of many others with whom I spoke. His observation is also reflected in accounts of other youth poetry slam programmes (see for example Bruce & Davis, 2000). Establishing such a climate is far from straightforward, however, and this cultural hothouse raised a number of issues. As 'Caroline' (I) remarks:

> … you've got a melting pot of young people, different regions around the country, as I said before stereotypes about regions that you're coming up

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[5] This quotation is taken from a poem written by young slammers for WC 2010, as are those that open the following two subsections.

against. Things like north-south division, class division, race division, culture division, anything like that is going to start to appear.

Given all these 'divisions', it is striking how well WC participants interacted with one another. Young people typically reported feeling comfortable approaching others, in the certainty that they would receive a warm welcome. Several participants even suggested that WC was like 'a big family' ('Carrie', SF). This family-like community helped to quell many students' nerves when performing in the slam:

> [When] you get on stage you don't need to worry about anything 'cause once you get here you're talking to people and you're making new friends. So like everybody around here is like cool, and they're not really gonna judge you harshly. ('Michael', SF)

Once on stage, the frequently vociferous response of the audience was apparently very rewarding for young slammers, boosting their confidence and enhancing their sense of achievement:

> And obviously I was really nervous and stuff but then like you've got everybody around you doing it, so like you just get up and just do your thing and like everyone claps and you can say "I did that." And that feels like "I made them do that. I'm making that happen." And it's just amazing. ('Carrie', SF)

Weinstein (2010) suggests that this warm, effusive and supportive audience reaction is typical of youth spoken word and slam events. Certainly, young people were generally very encouraging of one another both in the slam itself and throughout the project. This was apparent in the focus group sessions too. In the SF, for instance, one participant urged another to perform for his schoolmates:

> 'Michael': The teacher said I should perform in front of the whole year in assembly like. I was like – (I wasn't happy with that.)
> 'Jake': See that's something you should try, because here obviously you came with your friends, but it's a different atmosphere. Like if you was to be able to perform in front of your [other] friends it'd be a whole [new] level of confidence.

This peer reinforcement and feedback is often associated with SCL. As Elen *et al.* (2007) note, however, it should not come at the expense of teacher support. They advocate instead a 'transactional view', in which SCL is complimented by teacher-centred learning, with students and tutors negotiating activities and learning outcomes together. This approach better reflects the structures of the WC community than does a simplistic view which positions teacher- and student-centred learning at opposite ends of a continuum. Students were, for ex-

ample, given ample opportunity to express their experiences and understandings in their own words, but they did so within the boundaries of structured workshop activities. Similarly, young people made up the majority of the slam audience, and their vocal support for peers was very much in evidence, but it was adult judges who awarded the scores.

Evidently, the contributions of both peer and adult WC participants combined to create a safe, supportive community for young people. This is captured well by 'Stewart' (PF), who says, 'It's a supportive and healthy environment. So you sense that if somebody does sort of fall that there's a lot of people here to catch you.' Similarly, Jocson (2006: 706) borrows McCormick's (2000) term to argue that such youth poetry programmes create an 'aesthetic safety zone', within which young people are able to explore and express their identities. Jocson argues that these 'safety zones' can help young people to develop their skills as poets and performers, by exposing their writing to constructive public critique (see also Weinstein, 2010; Weiss & Herndon, 2001).

Learning about Poetry

> 'Poetry is …/Open./BIG!/And wide.'
>   ~ Gordon *et al.* (2010: 38), all punctuation in original

WC clearly instilled a love of poetry in many students. Their passionate engagement is evident in the vignette that opens this essay, and the encounter described here was far from unique. Indeed, it was notable that, during both focus groups with young people, students spontaneously performed poems or asked others to do so. The enthusiasm and support for peers' poetry that I observed here is reminiscent of Ellis *et al.*'s (2003) account of a weeklong Michigan-based youth slam programme. As they note, such intense engagement surprises many schoolteachers, who are used to poetry lessons attracting boredom and anxiety.

As discussed previously, WC introduced students to a wide variety of poetic forms, subjects and performance styles, which stretched far beyond the confines of many school curricula. Several young participants indicated that this had motivated them to improve their own work. Thus 'Becky' (SF) says: 'It's really inspirational to see different kinds of poetry in a way, how you can improve your poetry and your performance on stage.' Some poet coaches suggested that school teachers too may have had their eyes opened to a broader repertoire of poetic writing and performance: 'Certainly the teachers would have not seen anything like that before. … [but] they would have obviously seen now how poems could be performed, different ways of doing it' ('Caroline', I). Bruce and Davis (2000) contend that poetry slam has achieved this expansion of poetic understandings on a much broader scale in the U.S., where slam is more well known than it is in the U.K.. They argue that it is teachers' responsibility to har-

ness this popular interest and use it to engage young people in literature more generally.

Oral performance is central to this attitude change. Poet coaches, school teachers and young people alike returned to this repeatedly, as something which had surprised, inspired and engaged them during the project. Indeed, participants frequently cited this performative aspect of WC as a major factor in changing their negative preconceptions around poetry. As two RF participants put it:

> 'Tim': I used to think poetry was just like Shakespeare or love and roses …
> and like boring … but now I know it's got a different element to it, and it's a
> better element than what I thought.
> HG: So what is it that you didn't realise it had?
> 'Tim': Just that I didn't know performance poetry. I thought it was just -
> 'Ashley': Poetry that you put in a book and you read it.
> 'Tim': Yeah.

This suggests that other poetry projects with a performative focus may share WC's ability to combat young people's apathy and distrust of poetry (see Weinstein, 2010).

Damico (2005) explores a similar revelatory process in his work, considering how SCL in general, and group discussion in particular, can be used to challenge the portrayal of poetry as a feminine (and therefore undesirable) activity. We should be wary, however, of assuming that it is just boys who hold these negative stereotypes. Rather, many of the girls I spoke to echoed 'Tim' and 'Ashley's' sentiments. 'Susan' (SF), for example, says that 'teenagers usually cower away from writing poetry 'cause they think it's sad or something like that. But after this it's just, it's been so much fun.'

WC, then, clearly offered an effective means of engaging young people with poetry. Rather than being presented as an alternative to classic and core curriculum texts, however, slam and spoken word were proffered as accessible entry points into these for young people who perceived poetry as boring, irrelevant or impenetrable. Ellis *et al.* (2003: 49) echo this observation, suggesting that slam can help to instil a love of poetry in young people, which ultimately motivates them to engage with classic literature. They note that young slammers in their research 'testified that their desire to write good performance poetry drew them to the resources of the poetry canon that once felt alien' (see also Bruce & Davis, 2000; Fisher, 2005; Gregory, 2008a; Weiss & Herndon, 2001). Jocson (2006) goes even further, suggesting that the writing skills and attention to craft that young people learn through spoken word can extend to other forms of academic writing.

While this essay focuses primarily on outcomes for young people, it is important not to overlook the impact on adult participants, especially since this

latter area has received relative little attention to date. As suggested above, WC enabled some schoolteachers to expand their knowledge of poetry, and poet coaches also indicated that they had benefitted from their involvement. Given the SCL focus of WC this should not be too surprising. After all, proponents of SCL frequently emphasise the bi-directional nature of learning, suggesting that teachers can learn from their students as well as the other way around (see for example Weiss & Herndon, 2001). In WC this was apparent in the use of young people as peer mentors and in the respect that poet coaches displayed for slammers' writing. As 'Rowan' (PF) joked, 'you work with young people and you steal all their great ideas.'

Because WC is a large national event, it also provided an opportunity for adult poets to network with one another and to exchange ideas, knowledge and skills relevant to their work as poetry educators. Thus, coaches commented that they could 'pick up workshop tips, find formats that work, that don't work … see how we can further do poetry in schools, who's funding what, what format they do' ('Will', PF). Since much of this work is carried out on a self-employed basis, networking opportunities like this are relatively rare. As 'Stewart' (PF) remarks, 'this is the only time I've done it in five years of doing this [work]. This is the first time I've had a real good skill swap.' Such outcomes are important, not least because the more poet coaches are able to develop their ideas, skills and networks, the greater the benefits are for the young people they teach.

As this analysis makes clear, youth slam programmes like WC enable young and older participants alike to develop their skills and knowledge in the writing, performance, consumption and teaching of poetry. There is mounting evidence to support the contention that the performative aspect of these programmes in particular has the power to fundamentally revise participants' perspectives on poetry, overturning perceptions that it is boring and irrelevant. Indeed, authors like Ellis *et al.* (2003) note remarkable changes in young people's approaches to poetry after participating in these programmes, highlighting a passion amongst participants that reflects my own observations of WC.

While teaching young people about poetry is clearly a central tenet of these projects, however, it is certainly not their sole aim. Rather, youth slam and spoken word programmes are widely credited with an astonishing array of impacts on young people's academic and personal development. Foremost amongst these are the ability to empower young people, to enhance their self-confidence, and to give them the space to explore/express salient issues. Such secondary benefits should not detract, however, from the fact that, as with the arts more generally, poetry has an inherent value and is well worth teaching in its own right.

Empowerment and Self-development

> 'I am free to/Liberate my mind with/Obscure thoughts, shatter padlocks/
> With words.'
> ~ Merzougi *et al.* (2010: 19)

In common with their counterparts in other youth slam and spoken word pro-grammes, WC poet coaches were keen to emphasise the project's ability to em-power young people. Thus 'Stewart' (PF) argues that 'It's giving them other life skills, confidence. I mean we're seeing all sorts of stuff, self-respect, self-esteem, self-worth, the whole shooting match.' Weinstein (2010) links these increases in self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy to youth spoken word programmes more generally, arguing that these outcomes can have a knock-on effect on stu-dents' engagement with the formal education system.

   As indicated earlier, one of the principle means through which WC served to boost young participants' confidence was via their successful onstage perfor-mances. Audience approval clearly has a major role to play here. As Weinstein (2010: 22) notes:

> The applause at the end of a performance, the appreciative comment from an audience member, the pat on the back from classmates and friends - these are the external rewards that generate internal confidence and make the risks worth continuing to take.

Slam performances offered intrinsic, as well as extrinsic, rewards, and many students spoke about having made themselves proud: '…you just come off feel-ing "Yeah. I've done that to the best I can. I don't care what anybody else says. It's like I've done my best. I've tried my hardest."' ('Michael', SF). Similarly, young poets often reported a great sense of achievement from overcoming their pre-performance nerves. Thus, 'Caroline' (I) relays that her team 'felt so pleased with what they'd done. They felt that they hadn't bottled it, and that was what was giving them the real confidence boost.'

   In addition, participants argued that writing and performing poetry may empower young people by giving them an opportunity for self-expression. 'Jackie' (PF), for instance, contends that 'slam poetry' is about giving young people 'a voice and being listened to', adding that 'that's really immensely im-portant, being listened to and having that expression.' A similar emphasis is evi-dent in youth slam and spoken word programmes elsewhere (see for example Bruce & Davis, 2000; Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2006; Weinstein, 2010). While one coach remarked that 'every kid's got something to say about something' ('Will', PF), emotive and politicised issues were particularly salient here. These fre-quently touched on key facets of young people's identities, especially race, sex and sexuality. Such issues feature prominently in other accounts of youth

slam/spoken word programmes (see Gehring, 2005; Kinloch, 2005; Weinstein, 2009; Weiss & Herndon, 2001) and in U.S.-based adult slam (Gregory, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009), though they are less dominant in U.K.-based adult slam (Gregory, 2008b).

The prevalence of such identity work suggests that poetry/slam may help young people to deal with painful and problematic issues. This was strikingly evident in one young participant's account:

> It's just like poetry for me, it's like part of me now, because I use it as a release. I used to like cut myself, self-harm and stuff to get it all out. Now I don't. I will be writing a poem about it … ('Carrie', SF)

As 'Carrie' makes clear, poetic self-expression can enable young people to explore difficult issues, learn more about themselves and change the way in which they approach the world (see also Bruce & Davis, 2000). This is certainly true for 'Kieran' (SF):

> I actually never knew that I could actually get up on stage and look at all these people and think like "This is just like (anything). I can just do this." I never thought I could do that. I thought I'd be like just not really living up to my full potential.

Importantly, several young people contrasted this with their more familiar experience of being unable or unwilling to say what they think:

> … people think that poetry is pointless and that, but like young people, they don't really get a voice, so that they don't get a say in what goes on, because they're always stereotyped as yielding knives and stuff like that. But then poetry gives you a chance to say what you feel. ('Becky', SF)

This is reminiscent of Weinstein's (2010: 20) quotation of Edward, a participant in the Baton Rouge youth spoken word programme, WordPlay, who says, 'I finally feel like I have a voice, that people are actually listening to me '.

It is not easy to think of many other contexts where teenagers are given this respect and opportunity to speak, where they are 'free to FEEL, LOVE, EXPRESS OURSELVES and WRITE/…free to THINK, to PROTECT and to SPEAK OUTRIGHT' (Blakeston School Pupils, 2010; emphasis in original).[6] Indeed, it could be argued that, in the U.K. and U.S. at least, we are increasingly silencing and criminalising young people (see for example Monbiot, 2010; Weiss & Herndon, 2001). Youth slam and spoken word programmes typically underscore this contention that young people are marginalised/ignored in con-

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[6] These lines are taken from *Island*, a poem written by Blakeston School pupils for WC 2010 and published on the WC website.

temporary society, promoting poetry as a means to remedy this. This is exemplified in mottos like 'Because the next generation can speak for itself!' (Youth Speaks), 'Speak up . Make some noise. Take the challenge.' (WC) and 'Come prepared to be heard' (Spoken Word Masters, cited in Fisher, 2005: 124).

Not everything about these programmes is necessarily empowering for young people however. Indeed, some WC poet coaches reported that their teams were intimidated by the residential weekend poetry showcases, with students worrying that their work would pale in comparison to that of the adult poets and peer mentors. As 'Caroline' (I) says:

> After the Managers' Match on the Friday my role as a poet coach was definitely as an encourager, because quite simply the team wanted to go home. They felt very worried. They felt out of their depth. … So it was certainly then up to me and the teachers to really pep them up and to keep them believing that what they had done is valid and good.

It is clear, then, that the line between inspiration and intimidation can be a shaky one, and that organisers of these events must pay close attention to programme delivery if they are to remain on the right side of this line. This is not the only issue raised by the implementation of these programmes however. One further concern is how poet coaches and others can ensure the continuing impact of their work, especially with short-term interventions like WC.

Continuity

The relatively short duration of WC concerned many participants. Several coaches and young people, for instance, suggested that the residential weekend could have been held over a longer period of time. As 'Rowan' (PF) notes, 'it's already a transformative experience for the young people, and I think … it would be nice to do it for a week. I think that would give more time, everything doesn't have to be so hectic then.' 'Michael' (SF) echoes this, saying 'I'd love to do it for like a week in the summer holidays or something.' While a longer culminating event would almost certainly help to bolster the sense of community and increase the amount of time available for workshops and performances, however, this would have practical and financial implications. In addition, a longer event may exclude participants with other commitments, such as childcare.

Nonetheless, almost all of the participants with whom I spoke emphasised the need for more sustained input. Many expressed concern that students had no way to continue their work after the project's end, and several contended, along with 'Will' (PF), that 'We need something annually though. There's no point raising young people's expectations and then dropping them with nowhere to go, 'cause now there won't be any format for another four years.' Similar con-

cerns are raised in the arts education literature, where scholars have highlighted the limited impact of short-term projects compared to more long-term interventions (see for example Burton *et al.*, 1999; Robinson *et al.*, 1999).

Despite its short duration, however, many participants suggested that certain outcomes of WC, such as increased confidence and self-efficacy, were likely to be maintained. Thus 'Jackie' (PF) enthuses that young slammers are 'gonna carry this for the rest of their lives and believe in themselves.' Others discussed how young people might follow youth slam alumni like the WC peer mentors to pursue an active involvement in spoken word/slam, perhaps becoming the next generation of poetry educators. As 'Will' (PF) points out:

> There's been a few cases of the elite from the last WordCup moving on and being mentored over four years. Some of them have gone into work as slam poets in schools, teaching kids themselves now. There's success stories all round, different ones about artists that've carried it on.

Certainly, many of the young people with whom I spoke expressed a desire to continue writing, performing and promoting poetry:

> When I get back home I am going to like get all my friends and I'm just gonna do some poetry for them … make 'em laugh and everything and hopefully get them joining in. So like in the next four years … there will be a lot more poets here. I'm gonna bring them. That's a promise. ('Kieran', SF)

Participants like 'Kieran' spoke with an almost evangelical zeal about slam/spoken word, dubbing themselves 'poetry pioneers' ('Kieran', SF) and suggesting that 'we are the people that these kind of poets are depending on to carry this kind of thing on' ('Becky', SF). For these young people WC was clearly about much more than simply writing and performing poems. It was about identifying with and being part of something. To use Weinstein's (2010: 11) term, these young slammers have developed a 'literate identity', as poets and bearers of the spoken word torch.

Weinstein contends that youth spoken word and slam programmes build these 'literate identities' by providing young poets with a sense of belonging to a wider artistic community, and sharing a collective purpose. Fisher (2005) agrees, arguing that this group identity inspires many young people to pursue poetry as a way of life (see also Weiss & Herndon, 2001). This suggests that any continuity of impact for programmes like WC is due in large part to the supportive communities they create. Yet the problem remains of what happens when these communities break down; how, rather than dying out, the intense flames of community created by short-term, large-scale projects like WC, can act as sparks, igniting smaller, slower-burning fires around the country. One answer proffered by WC participants, was to propose setting up poetry clubs, competi-

tions and other projects in local schools, theatres and community centres. Accordingly, one coach reports school teachers saying "'We have to carry this on. We have to develop something … using the kids that have come to WordCup as an example to others'" ('Stewart', PF). The work begun in these programmes could thus live on through the events and projects that it inspires.

Conclusions

It is clear that youth slam programmes like WC have much to offer their participants. The SCL approach adopted here combined with a friendly and supportive community to create an environment within which young people could thrive both personally and artistically. Coaches benefitted too, particularly from the residential weekend and the rare opportunity this offered to exchange knowledge, ideas and skills. Programmes like this also present challenges however. Foremost amongst these are the delicate balance that must be struck between inspiring and intimidating students, and the need to provide some continuity of input/impact.

This analysis has widespread implications for the design, funding and implementation of youth slam programmes, and many of the issues raised here are also relevant to youth spoken word. Indeed, most of the themes discussed above are reflected in accounts of youth spoken word organisations in the U.K., the U.S. and elsewhere. The websites for Leeds Young Authors and the Slambassadors, for example, both stress the importance of SCL, community, empowerment and self-development, as do those of U.S. based groups like Young Chicago Authors and Youth Speaks (see www.youngchicagoauthors.org and http://youthspeaks.org/word/ regarding these last two organisations). Further, scholars like Fiske (1999: ix) have suggested that SCL is an important feature of arts-based education more generally, indicating that the relevance of these arguments may extend far beyond the realms of oral poetry.

While there are many valuable insights here, however, this account is merely the tip of the iceberg. We need to know more about these programmes, the benefits and challenges they present, and the processes through which these operate. Currently, hundreds of young people participate in U.K. slams every year (and numbers are much greater in the U.S.), but provision is sporadic. Some programmes have lost funding and been forced to downsize, while others are expanding. To counter such inconsistencies, we must understand more about how these projects affect young people. For scholars, there are a multitude of intriguing questions raised by these programmes and the possibilities for future research are myriad. Further study of this area could allow us to address more complex questions such as whether, in empowering young people, slam reinforces or subverts established identities. Is it the case, for instance, that slam encourages boys into literacy by re-defining poetry as a masculine activity or by

challenging the male-female binary which positions 'feminine' subjects like literature as inferior? Further, how does gender interact with class, race and nationality in this context? We are still some way from understanding such complex and fascinating issues. The journey has only just begun. It is time we did our own prospecting.

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Appendix A: Key to Abbreviations and Transcription Notations

" "   Reported speech
…   Text omitted
[ ]   Researcher's words
( )   Transcription doubt
-             Cut-off speech

I   Interview with poet coach
RF   Focus group session with 'Ridgeway School' students
PF   Focus group session with poet coaches
SF   Focus group session with young slammers at WordCup residential
weekend

HG   Helen Gregory (researcher)

WC   WordCup