I Just Want to be Heard: Developing Civic Identity through Performance Poetry

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This paper describes an integrated unit of study conducted with middle school students who—after being asked to consider the profound and potentially nebulous question, “What does it mean to be an American citizen?”—were directed to respond by developing performance poetry and highlighting themes with visual images they created, found, or manipulated. The goal of our project was to engage youth in what might be understood as a noncontroversial exploration of their conceptual considerations of citizenship. But we hoped to engage them in considering the topic more deeply and in new ways. We appealed to the tools of today’s visual culture, which resulted in creative outputs attentive to contentious early 21st century notions of national identity. We present findings and outline the steps taken to develop and deliver this unit to these students and thus aid other practitioners interested in helping young people to cultivate richer concepts of citizenship.

Key Words: citizenship, national identity, visual literacy, performance poetry, civic identity, civic-mindedness

Introduction

Figure 1. “It’s not all about you” student image.

“It’s Not All About You”  
Pay attention and take some notes  
Here we go  
Our country is overrun by illegal immigrants
Overweight babies with rabies
No cure for cancer
Or STD’s
We need more answers
No more problems, please
Gang members assisting in violence’s criminal mind taking over
Corrupt politicians and lawyers argue over pointless pieces of information
As war veterans oversee genocides in third-world nations…
And spray paint artists are branded as dangerous graffiti monsters
Leaders making us all followers without dreams
(Ryan, 2011)

This powerful and provocative image and poem combination was crafted by Ryan as a part of a concept formation project conducted by this paper’s authors; a university social studies educator, a university English educator, and a middle grades language arts teacher. Ryan and nearly 60 of his middle school classmates in a large suburban and ethnically diverse but socioeconomically homogenous public school participated in this cross-curricular social studies and language arts project where they developed and presented poems addressing one of the guiding questions of every social studies class in the USA: “What does it mean to be an American citizen?” These young adolescents discovered, adapted, or created images to elucidate the themes of their poems and shared these poem and photography combinations as multimedia presentations. Our goal was to engage youth in what might be understood as a noncontroversial exploration of students’ conceptual considerations of “citizenship.” We aimed to employ this examination in a way that utilized the tools of today’s visual culture and resulted in creative outputs attentive to contentious early 21st century notions of national identity.

Students crafted these poems as “slams,” a style of poetry in which writers express ideas rooted in their own experiences—notions that often challenge traditional societal norms. Based on our combined 30 years of middle and high school teaching, we know that conventional poetry often feels bromidic to adolescents. In contrast, slam poems, replete with expressive and introspective language and delivered in a provocative style, are inherently motivating forms for youth, allowing writers and listeners to address contemporary subjects and, thus, contribute to the public discourse about these topics. The nature of our fundamental question, “What does it mean to be an American citizen?” coupled with the engaging characteristics of slam poetry, enabled our students to freely share and illustrate their beliefs, proclivities, and experiences concerning citizenship. Our intention here is to share the rationale behind and some of the fundamental activities of this project for use in middle- and secondary-level social studies and language arts classrooms.

Concept Formation and Civic Identity

For social studies teachers who recognize the development of students’ civic identities as a foundational goal of our public education system, robust activities that enable youth to use their personal experiences to contemplate the conceptual nature of citizenship are of considerable utility. For the integrated social studies/language arts unit we describe here, we relied in part on the concept formation model of Bruce Larson and Timothy Keiper (2011), which describes learning as incorporating expressive communication about lived experiences and seeking examples and non-examples of conceptual attributes to articulate and illustrate one’s
understandings of a concept, in this instance, the evermore multifarious concept of citizenship. Central to this project were Beth Rubin’s (2010) design principles for effective civic learning and Lauren Woglom and Kim Pennington’s (2010) research on civic identity. Together, these ideas impart the notion that civic education should build upon self-explorations of our community lives and lead through these discourses to an efficacious conception of citizenship.

Rather than adhere to traditional notions of civics as the study of political systems and the interactions between those who wield widespread influence, we sought to broaden concepts of citizenship. In so doing, we espouse interactions and experiences that allow young people to develop mature and thoughtful attitudes and dispositions in their societal and cultural relationships (Dolby, 2003). Rubin (2010) asserted that “(i)nvolving students in active consideration of the problems they encounter in their daily lives as citizens allows them to directly consider and confront the tensions of U.S. civic life, promoting critical yet engaged civic identities” (p. 144). In our project these explorations emerged in the form of creative activities that expanded students’ conceptual development to include experiences of analysis, critique, and research on civic-mindedness.

*Figure 2. “Humanity” student image.*

“Humanity”  
Being a citizen isn’t about a piece of paper  
It’s everybody  
Everyone in the world  
Being a citizen isn’t about having a certain skin color  
Or having blonde or brown hair  
A citizen is like a multicultural race  
Of porcelain dolls and stuff animals…  
I LOATHE the way people are judged by their legal status  
It shouldn’t be about  
A small green paper  
Defining your life…  
Melissa (2011)

**Performance Poetry**

Our project involved students in using “slam” poetry to creatively express and interpret their understandings of what it means to be an American citizen. We introduced students to slam poetry as a derivative of performance poetry first developed in the 1980s. Typically, this
medium differs from traditional forms in its confrontational nature and dual emphasis on writing and performance (Glazner, 2000). Slam poems rely on emotion and draw from prior experience to stir questions, identify controversies, and contribute insights about topics ranging from the intimately personal to the distantly political (Gregory, 2007). Poetry slams are competitive individual or team events with discernable similarities to MC (microphone control) competitions in the hip hop community in which performers showcase rap skills in an effort to gain audience approval. Slam poets share their provocative poems with participatory audiences of fellow performers and interested listeners, which often include young adults. Organizations such as Brave New Voices (Youth Speaks, 2012) and Young Chicago Authors (2012) provide outlets for youth seeking entrée into the slam poetry world. We included a supplemental challenge, asking students to visually illustrate their poems to highlight salient themes. By the conclusion of the unit, we recognized that the combination of slam poetry and these image-oriented activities had merged beautifully to enhance our students’ contemplative explorations of citizenship.

**Lesson Overview**

To begin to examine citizenship though slam poetry, our students studied the writing mechanics of educators and poets including Taylor Mali and Kevin Derrig as well as several youth slam champions, relying on these examples to explore how they might effectively describe and portray their notions of civic identity. Eventually, students practiced using traditional poetic devices including simile, metaphor, rhyme, repetition, hyperbole, allusion, and other elements in their own poems. Fundamental to this approach were the disciplinary connections between social studies, language arts, and visual literacy, which provided students opportunities to examine their conceptions of citizenship through descriptive language and photographs (Ewald, 2011; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009). We looked to previous studies that have demonstrated how integrating multi-modal writing activities with social studies content can be powerfully engaging and spur students’ efforts to generate expressive writing about personal and profound notions of citizenship (Zagora, 2011). *Figure 3. Sample slam poem.*

**I wanna hear a poem by steve colman**

I Wanna Hear a Poem  
I wanna hear a poem  
I wanna learn something I didn't know  
I wanna say "yes" at the end, because I'm sick of saying "so?"

I wanna hear a poem about who you are  
And what you think  
And why you slam  
Not a poem about me and my poem  
Because I know who I am

I wanna hear a love poem  
A sad poem  
An "I hate my dad" poem  
A dream poem  
An "I'm not what I seem" poem
An "I need" poem
An "I also bleed" poem
An "I'm alone" poem
An "I can't find my home" poem
I just wanna hear a poem

I wanna hear a poem about revolution
About fists raised high
And hips twisting in a rumble like a rumba
I wanna follow the footsteps of Chê
And hear the truth about the days of CIA killed the mumba

I wanna hear a poem about struggle
So that when I open my mouth, I can step outside myself
I wanna listen to no less than the sounds of protest
In the factories where workers sweat and make Air Jordans and Pro-Keds because
If you wanna take shots at people
Target Phil Knight and Bill Gates
Contemplate how
They own the products
And they got the goods
How they act like they care
But they're just Robin Hoods

I wanna hear a poem where ideas kiss similes so deeply that metaphors get jealous
Where the subject matters so much that adjectives start holding pro-noun rallies at city hall

Because I wanna hear a poem that attacks the status quo
That attracts the clapse of the cats with the fattest flows
That makes the crowd pass the hat
And pack my cap with a stack of dough
I wanna hear a poem that makes this audience yell "hoooo!"

Because I wanna guess your favorite color
Then craft rhyme schemes out of thin air
I wanna hear a poem about why the statute of limitations for rape is only five years
I wanna hear a poem
I wanna feel a poem
I wanna taste a poem
Give me your spot on the mic if you wanna waste a poem

I wanna
Hear
A Poem

-Steve Colman
Students were required to select a minimum of three images to illustrate, extend, and complicate the concepts of citizenship in their poems. The final products of our unit—students’ poems, photographs, and media presentations—revealed a wide range of compelling ideas about citizenship. While we engaged students in a series of in-class activities across our week-long unit as they crafted their poems, pictures, and presentations, three days’ activities seemed most important to the success of this unit and our students’ abilities to articulate and illustrate these complex ideas. Detailed below, these activities resulted in more engaged and intelligent conversations about citizenship than we have previously encountered with young adolescents.

*Figure 4. Sample “citizenship”-related photograph.*

Day 1: “I Wanna Hear a Poem,” Picturing Ideas, and the Slam Idea Generator

In preparation for the activities in this lesson, we gathered a bank of images illustrative of themes found in Steve Colman’s “I Wanna Hear a Poem” (Colman, 2007) (see Figure 3) and potentially related to the concept of citizenship. We eventually used these photographs to enable students to associate images (see sample photographs in Figures 4, 5, and 6) with ideas and in particular with themes found in poetry. We first passed out copies of Colman’s poem, asking students to read the poem silently and make notes about any reactions as they prepared to discuss how Colman portrayed “what he wants to hear.” We also asked students to share examples of images that they thought related to the ideas in the poem, asking “If you could take a picture of what Colman is sharing, what would you see?”

*Figure 5. Sample “citizenship”-related photograph.*
After a brief discussion of these ideas and reactions, we showed a “Vimeo” video performance of the poem to introduce performance poetry as a means of personal expression (see Web-Based References). We prompted a dialogue about how the performance affected students’ perceptions and understandings of the poem, what they thought made the poem and performance “good” or effective, and what elements of poetry they recognized. We then introduced the characteristics of slam poetry, including the purpose of slam poems and the differences between this poetry style and those more familiar to—and often detested by—middle school students.

To reinforce our students’ developing understandings of the connections between ideas and images, we again asked students what pictures they thought illustrated particular lines in the poem. We scaffolded students into a deeper appreciation of how pictures relate to their conceptual understandings by having them consider the bank of images we had compiled and assembled on desks in the classroom. Students paired up to discuss these images as they toured them. We eventually asked each participant to choose one photograph that related to a particular theme of their choosing in Colman’s poem.
“What it means to be an American Citizen”

Name:____________________________________________

I believe our country would be better off if people_____________________________________

To make our country a better place, I believe people need to stop_________________________

There would be nothing better for our country than____________________________________

I imagine an America where________________________________________________________________

I love it when I hear about people______________________________________________________

I hate it when I hear about people____________________________________________________

One of the most important things about being an American is____________________________

The difference between being an American citizen and a citizen of another country
is____________________________________________________________________________

The biggest challenge facing our country is___________________________________________

The definition of “citizen” should change to include____________________________________

People who should NOT allowed to be citizens include____________________________________
Finally, we informed the youth that they would be developing their own slams to address our unit’s guiding question of “What does it mean to be an American citizen?” We shared the “What It Means to Be a Citizen” Slam Idea Generator worksheet (see Figure 7) as an open-ended tool for students to consider what they knew and believed about being a citizen. In an effort to help students flesh out general topics and encourage thoughtful introspection, we asked them to begin this worksheet independently and then share their responses in small groups and eventually the whole class. Students left that day with a general sense of slam poetry, some nascent awareness of their beliefs about citizenship, and a clear intrigue about how pictures—again, media with which they are extraordinarily familiar—can be used in the context of social studies and language arts content.

Day 2: Slam Poetry Citizen Body Diagram
We opened our second class by calling on students to refer to their completed “What It Means to Be a Citizen” Slam Idea Generator worksheets and choose one-word answers from at least three of the eight questions. They then posted their responses on question-specific chart tablet papers posted around the classroom. We encouraged students to consider responses and queries that they thought were intriguing, controversial, or absolute. These choices helped students to identify the most important elements of their citizenship definitions, as it became clear that they were selecting those questions about which they had generated their most definitive answers or with which they were struggling most. We then used the “Slam Poetry Citizen Body Diagram” (see Figure 8) to aid youth in illustrating their concepts through specific characteristics and identifiable attributes.

Figure 8. What is a citizen? body diagram document.

**Slam Poem Citizen Body Diagram**

Name:__________________________________________

**What is a citizen?**
Everyone thinks about what it means to be a “citizen” differently. Please respond to the questions below based on what YOU think about what it means to be a citizen…

1) What does a citizen SAY? Share this in the dialogue bubble below…
2) What does a citizen THINK? Share this in the thought bubble below…
3) What does a citizen DO? Draw and label at least TWO actions next to the hands of the diagram below…
4) What does a citizen wear? Draw and label at least THREE items of clothing on the diagram below…
5) What does a citizen SEE? Sketch at least TWO items on the back of this page…
We assigned students to small groups to create collective body diagrams on chart tablet paper by sharing their individual worksheet responses using a round-robin approach. That is, each student in the groups of four or five took the lead sharing and transferring to their group’s chart tablet illustration at least one element of their individual body diagrams. Such a straightforward method allowed each student to describe and illustrate an approximately equal number of ideas on this quickly developed collective visual. This strategy ensured that students saw, heard, and inquired about a range of others’ perceptions and pictures of what it means to be a citizen, helping them to refine their own thinking. We recognized that some students were able to generate ideas quite easily, while others initially found the task of exploring notions of citizenship daunting. Even—or maybe especially—in our community so near the nation’s capital, this concept is more and more narrowly defined in public circles. Moreover, we are ever more conscious of what seems like an increasing political polarization amongst adults and even youth, perhaps exacerbated by listening to and learning from those whose opinions only reflect our own, including our families, parents, friends and the media. These semi-structured peer interactions clearly served to draw out ideas from reticent students. Finally, students shared their collective body diagrams with the whole class, again using a round-robin method, with each individual participant presenting one idea or illustration suggested by another member of their small group, rather than one of their own notions.

Additional activities. With the foundation of their brainstormed and variously shared ideas about citizenship and what we recognized was a re-introduction to poetic devices and
We agreed that we had arrived at the ideal time to detail the requirements of students’ slam poems. We highlighted the image and presentation elements of this assignment and also invited youth to eventually share their poems via a class “slam”-like event. Students were given a number of exhibition options for sharing their final poems and images, including PowerPoint, Prezi, and similar presentation software, all of which allowed for voice-over recording and were, again, media forms that seemed to make intuitive sense to them and with which they were generally familiar.

Days 4 and 5: Slam Planning Sheets and Slam Picture Planner

In our instructional sequence, we then began facilitating work on the students’ poems employing Kevin Derrig’s “1st Period” poem as an engaging example of poetic features (Derrig, 2005). While reading the poem aloud, we attempted to further assist our students to appreciate word flow and encourage close readings to acquire meaning from poetic texts. We began with the following first stanza of Derrig’s poem:

half way through first period
dust accumulated on the sweaty palm of my raised hand
must be a centimeter thick by now
as the chicken-legged teacher goes around the room
defacing students’ homework from last night
with red pen graffiti
that focuses more on missed commas than the
content of the sentences…

While reading these opening verses, we called on students to consider the tone or mood of the poem, e.g., were the ideas funny, sad, inspired, or guilty? As we continued through the poem, we asked, “What are the 3-4 major points of the slam?” and “What does the poet want the audience to get out of the slam?” We modeled how to utilize this planning strategy with Derrig’s poem by addressing the aforementioned questions, subsequently requiring students to consider the questions with their own developing poems, which enabled them to formulate the main focus, theme, and purpose of their slams. For homework, students began to construct their slams to present in draft form the next day. The following day’s activities included peer interactions to review these rough copy versions, with students reading classmates’ drafts, asking for clarification of themes, and providing helpful suggestions. We modeled the role of constructive critics, engaging with students in one-on-one reviews of their poems, interactions during which we primarily read lines aloud to offer students an opportunity to hear their words spoken. These exchanges often resulted in conversations about youths’ intended meanings of the language they were using and enabled them to clarify words and even make choices about new language and points of emphasis. Most importantly, we employed the “Slam Picture Planner” (see page one of this tool in Figure 9) to facilitate inclusion of images in students’ poems and presentations.
Figure 9. Picture planner document.

Name:___________________________________________

**Directions:** Write down ideas about the picture you would like to take or include. Think about taking or choosing pictures that represent key ideas in your poem. Remember that at least TWO of the pictures you include must be ones you have taken yourself.

**Picture #1:** Write down the line or lines of your poem that you will illustrate with your picture
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

What would you take a picture of? _________________________________________

Briefly describe the picture as you see it in your head_________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

*Use the space below to sketch out a picture you have in your head*
Concluding Notes and Activities

Over the next few days students integrated suggestions their peers and we offered on second and final drafts of their poems. Students began to integrate photographs they had taken, discovered, and manipulated into their poems and presentations. While we were initially concerned about participants’ access to cameras, today’s mobile phones typically have good quality cameras and downloading images requires just sending a text or email or use of a memory card reader. Additionally, websites like “Google Images” are very user-friendly.

In our first experience with this unit we discovered that students required only a surprisingly brief time to visually illustrate the ideas described in their poems in a thoughtful manner, as they found such an activity reasonable and compelling. Many students took time to stage scenes where they then shot pictures they believed captured themes in their poems. Others spent their time electronically manipulating found images to represent ideas they wanted to highlight. We were surprised and pleased to discover that students were both very open to and adept at considering alternative illustrations of their ideas. Students seemed to enjoy these discussions of the relationships between their words and the ways the concepts they were considering could be shared visually.

The final days of the unit were spent on students’ development and sharing of presentations. We provided access to computers during class time—with other self-directed activities available to those who finished early—and required young people to complete their presentations outside of class, given that youths’ proficiency with such software can be so varied. Finally, since the essence of slam is performance, we required students to share their poems in some fashion. Because performing can be an intimidating task for even an experienced poet, we allowed students averse to such a public routine to record their readings into presentation software, synching the audio and slides and then playing these for the class.

Implications

Figure 10. “To be a citizen” student image.

“To Be a Citizen”
In this position
Inside this condition
The only thing we worry about is if “Glee” will be airing on Monday
“I hope so”
I want the troops in Iraq out!
And this economic trash what is that about?
    I just want to be heard!
This is my way of a change,
    What is yours?
Even as KIDS we should try harder!
Because this is your life not mine.
Raise your fist and make an impact,
    This is your act!
Those people who hold up their signs are heroes.
So if you want an economic and political change in your life ahead,
    Then how about we make that first step out of our bed.
Trapped in a cage,
In your own comfy room,
Just try to be like perfume and spread everywhere.
    Get into people's life just to change ours.
Jonah (2011)

As social studies and language arts teacher educators and teachers, we are troubled by many US adolescents’ restricted understandings of what it means to be a citizen, limited abilities to utilize traditional English language conventions, and narrow and negative concepts of poetry. As a result of this project, we are more convinced than ever youths’ notions of citizenship should be a concern of every educator, given the prevalence of public discussions around often-xenophobic concepts. Our cross-curricular project aimed to foster students’ consideration of civic identities and an awareness of the ever more complicated nature of citizenship at a time in their lives when self-awareness and societal roles are emerging as critical to social development (Harris, 2000). Our efforts were based on the assumption that contemplative exercises that challenge students to actively assemble and creatively express conceptual development allow for deeper and more meaningful learning (Brozo & Simpson, 2007; Syzmanski Sunal & Haas, 2008).

Through engagement in this project, our students shared, and perhaps gained, a deeper understanding of citizenship as they and their peers experience it. We discovered the best evidence of these significantly altered perceptions when we compared the concepts of citizenship students listed in pre-project surveys with those found in their slam poems. For example, more than ten percent of students responded “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure” when asked about their ideas of citizenship on these initial surveys. Nearly 30% of these early replies included terms such as “loyal,” “obey,” and “manners.” Students’ responses in their illustrated poems and in post-project interviews revealed no such ambivalence or notions of compliance. As the poems we have included in this article demonstrate, students who participated in this project eventually revealed a range of more complex notions about citizenship, related to feelings of hope, fear, frustration, and responsibility. While we did not explicitly ask about issues of equity on these surveys, in interviews, or even as guiding questions for their slam poems, these ideas permeated their responses. Though we do not report in detail on our comparisons of youths’ pre- and post-project concepts here, the sample poems we have included throughout this article reveal the wide
range—and occasionally profound nature—of the ideas of civic identity that resulted from our unit.

We believe that these example poems reveal that exploring what it means to be an American citizen through such image-driven written self-expression also allowed our students to discover a deeper appreciation for language and the fundamentals of poetic devices. This evidence suggests that the use of photographic artifacts to illuminate poetic themes provided our students with visual literacy experiences that enhanced their awareness and use of visual expression as communication. And finally, it seems clear that giving students opportunities to present their slams fostered an effective, collegial learning environment where youth felt supported to express their newly developed conceptual understandings of what it means to be an American citizen. In our increasingly media-saturated world, social studies and language arts teachers and teacher educators might unite—like good educator citizens—to help students learn to be critical consumers of visual media and use youths’ proficiency with these visual tools to help them to develop writing skills and richer concepts of citizenship.

Authors’ Bios

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