



Critical  
Approaches  
to Arts-based  
Research

Volume 5  
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UNESCO  
Observatory  
Multi-disciplinary  
Journal in  
the Arts

# UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts

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## ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

# Critical Approaches to Arts-Based Research

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Anne Harris

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## THEME

Arts based research (ABR), its products, processes and critical theorising have come a long way in recent times. Nuanced distinctions indicate the development of the field, as arts-informed research, arts-based research, practice-led research, applied research, and creative participatory action research all claim different relationships with the art and criticality present in such innovative scholarship. Finally, it seems, we are moving away from a defensive stance regarding arts based research and its ‘validity’, and toward a celebration of this proliferation of diverse ways of knowing, theorising and doing research. This ‘coming of age’ is evident in this special issue, which urges readers to move beyond binarised notions of scientific ‘versus’ arts based research that still at times dominates academic research environments and conversations, and outmoded practice/theory divides. For we co-editors and for the authors here, theorising is indeed a creative practice, and goes hand-in-hand with the epistemological and ontological potential of arts-making methods. This issue celebrates the opening of new doors in theorising innovative arts based research from a range of global contexts, theoretical and epistemological frameworks, and inter/disciplines. We avoid any attempt to codify or limit the parameters of what contemporary arts based research is or can be. Indeed, we seek the opposite: to highlight its ever-expanding possibilities.

The essays here aim to encourage critical analysis and dialogue about the objects and subjects of arts based research for contemporary times, poststructuralist, posthuman and other critical approaches to arts based research, and the interdisciplinary application of performative and practice-led research in transferable methodological models. We are pleased to be able to include digital assets with many of the articles in this special issue. Indeed, the layered and multimodal complexity of arts based 'outputs' or artefacts is one of its rich distinguishing features, and it requires commitment from editors and publishers to not always demand a 'reduction' back into text-based forms, a diminishment of many forms of ABR. For this we thank the UNESCO editorial and production team, and hope you enjoy this contribution to the critical development of the arts based research field.

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# Slamming In(to) the Ivory Tower: A Consideration of Slam as Method

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the boundaries of Slam or competitive performance poetry as a method of arts-based inquiry and critical research representation. Many slammers are already wrestling with important issues like poverty, education, and social oppression, but their art is not considered part of the scholarly conversation. This article argues the value of tracing this development, offers practical suggestions for how to develop slam-as-research, and introduces ways of considering slam as data and process for research projects.

1.  
*As a naming  
convention,  
I use Slam in  
lieu of slam to  
emphasize that I  
define Slam as the  
competitive act  
and not the poem  
construction.*

## **SLAMMING IN(TO) THE IVORY TOWER: A CONSIDERATION OF SLAM AS METHOD**

In bars and back alleys, classrooms and coffee shops, on television and in theatres, America is slamming. In three minute spoonfuls of rhyme-laden syncopation, children and geriatrics alike are stepping up to the mic and spitting social commentary. Their poetry in tandem with their performance is a unique method of gathering, analyzing, and reporting research. This article seeks to explore Slam <sup>1</sup> (poetry) as a viable and valuable research tool for the social sciences.

After a brief (poetic) introduction of Slam, I provide a history, description, and example of this competitive poetic form. Next, I examine Slam's presence in the academy, its challenge to traditional notions of knowledge ownership, and the eye-shaped intersections of Slam and academe that show promise. A third section is devoted to the extant literature on both poetry and performance as arts-based research and an exploration of how Slam fits inside and outside both of these categories. Next, I explore the utilities and possibilities of Slam as a method of critical inquiry. The penultimate section helps readers understand the craft of Slam and suggests how poet/researchers may try to incorporate this form into their own research, writing, performance, and/or community building. Finally, I include my own Slam piece and explain how it was borne out of my own



research. I define Slam as the competitive act of performing a poem in a Slam competition where a judging audience is present. As many works on spoken-word, performance poetry, and even rap use the term “slam” loosely to describe poetic scenes associated with the slam movement, it is important to note my chosen (even if limited) definition. To clarify this distinction, I use the capitalized “Slam” when referring to the competitive, audience-engaged performance. Please note that much of what I argue in praise of Slam as research echoes to slam, spoken word, and performance poetry as well.

## **A BRIEF (POETIC) INTRODUCTION**

*Slam got started in Chicago (Chicago)  
At the Green Mill Bar (the Green Mill Bar)*

*And Marc Smith took a working man's wage  
bought a poet-sized piece of the stage  
woke poetry up from librarian graves  
and metaphorically ripped it off the page.*

*See Slam got started in Chicago (Chicago)  
At the Green Mill Bar (the Green Mill Bar)*

*And it is blue collar America with 64oz chuggers  
It's pedestrian prophets calling out mother-fuckers  
It is Thanksgiving dinner with my sisters and brothers,  
'Cause I am there as another not there as an other.*

*Slam got started in Chicago (Chicago)  
At the Green Mill Bar (the Green Mill Bar)*

*And it grew roots in the city, a poetic pandemic  
There were outbreaks in Oregon and outbreaks in Texas  
The angry, the funny, the fabulous spread it  
No it's infecting us slowly till all of us get it.*

In the mid 1980s, Sunday nights at the Green Mill Bar were Slam nights. A format created by Marc Smith, a Chicago construction worker, Slam invited a series of poets to perform original poetry in front of an interactive audience. The audience was then given the opportunity to “rate” or “assess” the performance. Boos and applause were later replaced by numerical scores. The scores were given at the sole discretion of five randomly selected audience members. The rules for the slam shaped and shifted over the years terminating in what is now known in Slam venues as “the schpiel.” The schpiel explains (among other things) the origin of Slam, a reminder of the three-minute time limit for each poet, and the judging criteria. After each performance, judges (selected at random from the audience) are expected to “score the piece anywhere from 0 to 10 evaluating such qualities as a performance, content, and originality” (Somers-Willett 2009, p. 149). Of the ten scores, the high and the low are dropped. Depending on the size of the tournament, poets or teams of poets compete in bouts whose winners move on to a final competition where scores determine who advances and, ultimately, who wins.

A typical Slam scene is hard to describe. My first Slam was in an arts center. There were rows of chairs in a predictable matrix. Mediocre paintings hung on the walls with poorly-fonted attribution plates. The first poet spoke about her grandmother’s cooking and how learning to cook was equivalent to learning her grandmother. I remember she was a light skinned Black woman and her hair exploded in a nimbus of tightly-curved ringlets. The second poet, a young Latino, gave a romantic ode to his masturbating left hand. I was less impressed. I carried my small black and white composition book to the front of the room. I performed a piece that included both singing and speaking. The first verse resonated.

*My soul was hungry...*  
*Her voice was slow and sweet*  
*Like molasses that passes over a stack of flapjacks*

*It was thick and buttery, a darker shade of warmth  
A methodic drip of honey that gathered and lathered  
Down the fluffy golden cakes  
Her notes seeped into every crevice, every hole  
Every slightly browned soul  
Stacked, high upon her plate*

I was not trying to say anything. I just liked the way the words sounded.

My second slam was in a bar in downtown Bryan, Texas. The walls were red brick, and people were packed like words in a Beau Sia poem I watched as the Slammaster took the stage and the mic and started explaining the rules of the Slam. That night, in the second round, I gave what was to be my calling card Slam. After working three years at the GAP, I saw something that disturbed me. I wrote a poem about it. More specifically, I wrote a Slam poem about it. To the women in the audience I explained that

*I work in the fitting room. I see you walk through the doors  
With 25 sizes, not one of them yours,  
And I'm sad because I've got to pick them up off the floor,  
But more so because you don't see how pretty you are.  
If you're curvy or slender, voluptuous, trim.  
If you think you're too thick, if you think you're too thin,  
I just needed to tell you, and I promise I'll end,  
But you won't fit in those jeans till you fit in your skin.  
Ma'am, could you put those jeans down.*

There were times in the Slam that I could not start the next line because of screaming. When I finished, the judges held up scores. I didn't have enough points to win the night, but I won enough time to make my point. This is Slam.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF SLAM

In the last 30 years, Slam has grown. The 2013 National Slam Competition held in Boston, Massachusetts entertained over 80 teams from across the nation. In 2013, Spokane, Washington will host the Individual World Poetry Slam, inviting individual competitors (and not the traditional teams) from across the globe. While growing, Slam still holds tightly to its roots. Aptowicz (2008), a Slam poet and researcher, organizes the history of the New York City Poetry Slam into three waves: 1990-1996, 1996-2001, and 2001-2007. While her work is focused on only one venue, New York and the Nuyorican Poets Café, her structure is useful in understanding Slam across the nation. The first wave saw a birth in small venues and went largely undetected by anyone who was not previously connected. Aptowicz (2009) explains that poets in the first wave were not particularly committed to the Slam community, “they saw poetry as another outlet for their creativity” but “something you would be involved in temporarily” (2009, p. 384). The second wave came with poets seeking to make a name for themselves. Media was making Slam more accessible outside of the traditional venues and poets were consciously seeking the fame and notoriety that came with Slam success. Poet Beau Sia is legended to have told Nuyorican Café Slam master Bob Holman that “he wanted to be a famous poet” (Aptowicz 2009, p. 387). When Holman questioned his preparation, Sia produced a “bound manuscript with over 200 poems” (Aptowicz 2009, p. 387). This preparation and focus on fame was not characteristic of earlier poets. The popular documentary *SlamNation* (1998) both marked and recorded the shift from the first to the second wave. The third wave was ushered in by HBO’s *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*. The poet performers were now taking Slam out of venues and onto a noncompetitive stage. The popularity of *Def Poetry*, however, helped to fill the venues where traditional forms of Slam were occurring. Aptowicz finishes her chronology in 2007. Whether the years since 2007 have been a continuation of the third wave

or the beginning of new wave has yet to be discussed. I would like to suggest that recent publications imply a fourth wave that sees Slam poetry as a vehicle for knowledge production as well as entertainment. Somers-Willet, when interviewed by Aptowicz (2008), observes that “slam poetry has had its apex” (2009, p. 350). Further, Somers-Willet “think[s] that because slam poetry audiences always demand something new and something fresh, that in turn there always is going to be something new offered in the poetry slam format” (in Aptowicz, 2008, p. 350). I would like to think that new turn may be a turn towards research.

## **SLAM AND THE ACADEMY**

Slam has two relationships with academic research; Slam is both a subject and a process. The majority of the work including Slam (usually used as a phrase to represent performance poetry and spoken word) discusses Slam as a product, a facilitator/challenger of identity, or a communication tool. This section explores the ways that Slam has been researched in multiple fields and then highlights one article that uses Slam as a presentation tool.

Research on the subject of Slam has flourished only recently (within the last ten years). The majority of work on Slam either incorrectly attributes the title of Slam to performance poetry or spoken word acts or collectively talks about hip-hop, rap, spoken word, performance poetry, and Slam as one interconnected art. While I concede important connections between these forms, I argue that Slam in its purest definition is a competitive act in front of an audience. Winnowing the aforementioned publications that do not align with my definition of Slam, research on Slam is still quite small. The two most cited authors of research investigating Slam are Aptowicz and Somers-Willet. Both authors studied an aspect of Slam in their doctoral studies (the history of the New York City Slam movement and the cultural politics of Slam, respectively and respectfully) and published the

findings in monographs (Aptowicz 2008; Somers-Willet 2009). An additional book examines Slam, spoken word, and hip-hop as pedagogy (Low 2011). While it doesn't reflect the hard line between Slam and spoken word that I suggest, its alliterative title *Slam School*, makes it hard to overlook. Apart from these works and Marc Smith's work on Slam (2004; 2009a; 2009b) the only other book-length publications are anthologies, poetry collections, and generalist information about Slam history, strategies, and examples (Holman & Algarín 1994; Eleveld 2004; Eleveld 2007).

Current journal and book chapter publications include work on humor as strategy and resistance in Slam poetry (Aptowicz 2009; Hoffman 2001), race, gender, and sexuality in Slam (Johnson 2010; Chávez 2010; Somers-Willett 2003; Somers-Willett 2005), the history of Slam (Dillard 2002), Slam and youth (Weinstein 2013), Slam as therapy (Maddalena 2009), Slam as identity construction (Rivera 2013), Slam's relationship with the academy (McDaniel 2000), and the cultural capital of Slam (Gregory 2008). Only Ragan Fox's (2010) "From *Heterophobia* to *Gayville*" gives an example of Slam as presentation—in this case, an autoethnographic response to being a gay male. "Faggot" (or "For Gay Boys Who have Considered Rainbows When Suicide Wasn't Enough) commands:

*Laugh at my words, but not who I am;  
I am not your punch line,  
so don't try to make a joke of me.  
Don't confuse me with your gay uncle, gay neighbor, or the gay  
trainer at your gym;  
I'm not a freedom P-FLAG, an upside down triangle, or the  
"uncle we never talk about"  
so, to the random man standing on the J-Church bus line who  
kindly  
referred to me as "faggot" before he punched me in the face  
without having the decency  
to collect my first name  
first, I say to you, "I am definitely not  
your faggot" (Fox 2010, p. 430)*

Fox's poetry is not the strongest poetry from a "page" perspective, but I've never seen it on the stage. The problem with published Slam poems is their inability to encompass the venue, the audience, and the performative skills of the poet. A published Slam poem is only a fraction of the intended medium. This limitation contributes to the infancy of Slam as research method and the current dearth of Slam as research. However, as new forms of research presentation including live performances, internet videos and recordings, and poetry readings become commonplace, Slam may also find a home. Peripheral to publications, Slam has a strong presence in university towns, and many Slam poets have faculty appointments, including Jeffrey McDaniel and Susan B. Anthony Somers-Willett. Others have won NEA grants for their work. The Slam community and the academy are not mutually exclusive, but dual citizenship is rare.

## **SLAM AS ARTS-BASED RESEARCH**

Slam exists both on the kitchen counter and in the small cupboards of America. While its popularity belies its modest beginnings, it is still in the local coffee shops and late night competitions that the "work" of Slam is done. It is in these most human places the "use of everyday, localized, and personal language...draws audiences into dialogue and opens the possibility for critical critique of social structures" (Finley 2011, p. 443). Drawing audiences into dialogues should be at least one goal of all research. Leavy (2009) argues that "the writing of qualitative research, as with the work of artists, is ultimately about (re)presenting a set of meanings to an audience" (p. 11). Barone and Eisner (1997) see arts-based research as a way to open up conversation, be inclusive, and avoid the "solid explanations and confident predictions" of traditional research (Barone & Eisner 1997). Qualitative research lends itself better to artistic expression than quantitative because as Richardson (1994) explains:

*Qualitative writers are off the hook, so to speak. They don't have to try to play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal, atemporal general knowledge; they can eschew the questionable metanarrative of scientific objectivity and still have plenty to say as situated speaker, subjectivities engaged in knowing/telling about the world as they perceive it (p. 518).*

While this freedom can be seen as an invitation for qualitative researchers to write freely (even profoundly), it is also a license to write dangerously and daringly. Richardson's (1994) emancipatory work on what "counts" as research invites researchers to research but also allows writers to write, formalist poets to form, scriptwriters to script, and, yes, Slam poets to Slam. If writing is truly part of the writing process and not, as Richardson (1994) warns, just the obligatory "mopping up" of themes and theory, surely Slam, a process in its presentation, should be entertained as a viable research method.

Poetry (including Slam) so directly connects with the author, it is impossible to write an objective poem. Poetry is an extension of the author. Poetry allows the poet-researcher a new way to understand and a new way to show. Prendergast (2009) argues that "the potential power of poetic inquiry is to do as poetry does, that is to synthesize experience in a direct and affective way" (p. xxi). Poetry offers researchers new ways to both understand and report phenomena (Cahmann-Taylor 2009, p. 16). I have argued elsewhere that poetry is an important form of research presentation because "the poet creates space inside the poem where readers can enter, dwell, consider, and retreat" (Phillips 2013, p. 458). Poetry invites the audience to wrestle with the material presented. Both Prendergast (2009) and Faulkner (2009) offer several examples of poetry as research. Work by Eisenhauer (2011) resonates as both a strong collection of poetry and an important autoethnographic piece about a mother's relationship with her adopted, foreign-born child.



Eisenhouer (2011) struggles with how her adopted Chinese child, born with a cleft palate fits into her life. Her poems are both memories and confrontations. Through poetry she simultaneously explores both, asking the reader to imagine and connect. Slam can be equally haunting and equally moving. Slam poet Ryler Dustin (2008) writes about children living in India who “do arithmetic at calculator speeds/ working for merchants in the market place” (p. 76). He describes how numbers become their language. He closes the poem by considering one boy.

*He might stir then, his dream shifting as he remembers  
a sister who passed away.*

*If we all inhale at precisely the same moment,  
he tells the shoppers and vendors in the market,  
and our breaths last four seconds,  
the sky will change color  
and my sister will come back from the river,  
counting her steps to meet me.*

*(Dustin 2008, p. 77)*

Dustin’s poetry is effective both on page and stage. Having heard him perform, there is a special pain that accompanies his performance. It is almost apologetic, knowing the poem will hurt. I argue that research should also touch readers this way.

Slam is performance. Performance as research/change agent already appears in the form of performance poetry, dramatic narrative, dance, drama, and staged readings. Denzin (2003) argues that “the current historical moment requires morally informed performance and arts-based disciplines that will help people recover meaning in the face of senseless, brutal violence, violence that produces voiceless screams of terror and insanity” (p. 7). Denzin (2003) calls for radical social change, and he positions performance as the necessary hammer. Saldaña explores both the use of ethnotheatre (2011) and ethnodrama (2005) as research methods. Anna Deavere Smith (1994) created both a collection of vignettes and a staged show from over 300

interviews with people connected to 1992's Los Angeles riots. E. Patrick Johnson (2008) composed an oral history of Black gay men of the South. I had the honor of watching Johnson perform selections from the work. To watch a person speak is moving. To watch a person recreate an interview can be brilliant. After hearing Johnson, I felt that I had interviewed these men myself. In traditional models of research presentation, the gems of revelation are not available to readers. Performances, especially those that recreate special moments in the interview process, give an audience the opportunity to share space with the researcher and the researched. The "information" is not "reported." Instead, the moment is recreated.

Slam poetry (as I define it) must be performed in a competitive moment. It is not awake until it is performed with a responsive audience. It is here that Slam diverges from both poetry and performance as a research method. Slam keeps the virtues of poetry as/in research but requires the performative moment to be fully appreciated. This flaw (or asset) makes traditional forms of knowledge production (journal articles, edited volumes, and monographs) inadequate. To accept Slam (and other medium-specific forms of art-based research) as valid methods of inquiry asks the academy to rethink how knowledge is both recorded and exchanged. The internet and multimedia offer some help, but I argue that to entertain all forms of research, the academy must move out of both the traditional media of research and the traditional spaces of research. I argue that:

*What we have to say to the world is no longer just the monographs of our mothers, the peer-reviewed pomp of our fathers. We are new creations from a generation of warriors that do not cling to the paper. We're at the edge of the water, and the sunrise we see may blind sisters and brothers, but you don't need to see to see what we're performing. You don't need to read to read into the moments that will soon redefine how we speak what's important. And one day our lectures will come down from the mountain, and one day all people will drink from the fountains, and I will speak*

*freely of what I have seen, a blood and bone human in the research machine.*

## **COMPETITION AND THE ACADEMY**

Slam breaks from traditional methods of performance through its immediately competitive format. When engaged in competition, Slam poets are “competing for an audience’s attention, but they are also competing for the cold hard math scores that will determine their ranking among their competitors” (Somers-Willet 2009, p. 26). Competition is not new to academia. Any scholar who has had a piece accepted or denied has understood the competitive nature of research. Slam, however, has the special distinction of being one of the few research methods whose content and presentation are judged not in triage but on the battlefield. This disrupts the nature of peer-review and research gatekeepers. The late poet Jack McCarthy, a giant in the Slam community explained that Slam poets do not need invitations. The process of stepping up to the mic is the only gatekeeper (Devlin 1998). If you are Slamming it, it is worthy. If you show up, it’s allowable. Indeed, one of the most important attributes of Slam in relation to its ability to criticize society is that it welcomes all voices. Bob Holman in “Praise Poem for Slam: Why Slam Causes Pain and Is a Good Thing” explains why people are drawn to Slam.

*Because Slam is unfair.*

*Because Slam is too much fun.*

*Because poetry.*

*Because rules.*

*Because poetry rules.*

*Because the poetry gets lost.*

*Because poetry is an endangered species  
Slam finds and revives.*

*Because you cannot reduce a poem to  
it numerological equivalent.*

*Because hey, it's poetry in everyday  
life every Sunday at 7:30PM.*

*Because I can do that.*

*(qtd in Willet-Sommers 2009).*

It is specifically because “I can do that” that Slam has no gatekeepers. McDaniel (2010) explains that because of the welcoming nature of Slam, its voice is “far more multicultural than the academy” (2010, p. 36). There are no hoops to jump through save courage and attendance. There are no limits save those expressed in the schpiel. Indeed, Slam is art (and research) open to everyone. A Slam poet does not need tenure to turn a phrase. A slam poet does not need a Ph.D. to suggest policy. In Slam, research is both inhaled and exhaled simultaneously. There is no time to check for rigor.

The audience’s ability to numerically judge performances while simultaneously being encouraged to yell, scream, clap, and snap during performances offers a unique moment of research reflection. The Slam becomes both research and an immediate evaluation of the research. The audience (by their numerical or sounded response) becomes a credibility check for the research. They are our “disinterested peers” to whom we expose our processes, our biases, our hypotheses, and our emotions (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 308). In this way, Slam can exist as research itself or a part of the research process. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue, “If the investigator is to be able to purport that his or her reconstructions are recognizable to audience members as adequate representations of [the interviewee’s] own (and multiple) realities, it is essential that they be given the opportunity to react

to them” (1985, p. 314). The audience participation of Slam offers a particularly interesting example of what Richardson (1994) calls crystallization, a multidimensional, structured but organic reflector that “deconstructs the traditional idea of validity” (1994, p. 522) and offers a multidimensional, multi-truthed, and multi-vocal machine for verisimilitude. Slam is art, and when performed or read as such, slam is research. As process and product, Slam offers a new way to know/think/speak.

## SLAM AS CRITICAL INQUIRY

Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) write that “critical researchers often regard their work as a first step towards forms of political action that can redress the injustices found in the field site or constructed in the very act of research itself” (p. 305). Having attended many Slams and performed in my fair share, I have not met a Slam poet who does not want to affect some kind of change. Somers-Willett (2009) explains that “slam poetry begs to be regarded not only as a performance poetry movement but also—as Marc Smith once suggested—as a social movement. (p. 7). Slam is one of many critical methods that responds to what Denzin (2003) hauntingly refers to as “voiceless screams of terror and insanity” (p. 7). Slam accepts its role as a critic of the status quo. Beau Sia, a poet known for his proclivity for using as many words as possible in a Slam, humorously targeted the stereotypes of Asians in “Asian Men are Hung Like Horses.” In a more serious performance, Sia directly addressed Rosie O’Donnell after a racist impression of the Chinese language landed O’Donnell in Sia’s crosshairs. After claiming she was just doing an accent, Sia (2007) responded:

*Ignorance is not a crime. And believe me, when it comes to accents, you are ignorant. ‘Cause “ching chong ching chong” is not an accent. “Ching chong ching chong” is a racist interpretation of a language often associated with being buried alive in a mineshaft, or other such hate-crime fun.*

Though many Slam poems are introspective, focusing on the poet's experience or understanding of the world around them (Somers-Willett 2009), this does not lessen their contribution to the research community. As many Slam poems would be considered autoethnographic, I turn to Jones, Adams, and Ellis's (2013) definition of autoethnographic work. They claim that autoethnography must be "purposefully commenting on/critiquing of culture and cultural practices" (Jones, Adams, & Ellis 2013, p. 22) Slam poetry offers insight into the experiences of alcoholics (McCarthy, "Drunks"), women confronting issues of self-image (Makkai, "Pretty"), lesbians (Frohman, "Dear Straight People"), and technocritics (Jones, "Touchscreen"). Slam is a megaphone to the voiceless, and, moreover, the megaphone is pointed to a listening audience.

If we agree with Denzin (1999) and believe that research should "also work as cultural criticism, as tools for critique and political action" (p. 568), if we believe they should be "venues for ground-level guerrilla warfare against the repressive structures of everyday life" (p. 568), Slam poets are there in the trenches. Researchers, arts-based or not, would be wise to take note.

## HOW DO WE SLAM?

Slam poetry itself has given suggestion on how to Slam. Taylor Mali's "How to Write a Political Poem" advises

*However it begins, it's gotta be loud  
and then it's gotta get a little bit louder.  
Because this is how you write a political poem  
and how you deliver it with power.  
Mix current events with platitudes of empowerment.  
Wrap up in rhyme or rhyme it up in rap until it sounds true.*

He finishes by suggesting that a poet that ending a Slam is predictable

*Because all you have to do is close your eyes,  
lower your voice, and end by saying:  
the same line three times,  
the same line three times,  
the same line three times. (Mali 2006)*

Mali's oversimplification of political poetry creation is tongue in cheek from a poet critical of cardboard cutout competitors, but it is also a useful collection of many of the tropes used in slam poetry: repetition, current events, slandering politicians, singing lines from old hymns, call and response, and physical theatrics. Researchers are limited in methodology to what they are limited to in craft. As more researchers learn the craft of Slam, Slam will gain ground as a method. Several how-to manuals have appeared for Slammers-in-training. Marc Smith has authored or co-authored *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Slam Poetry* (2004); *Take the Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry Slam*, and *The Spoken Word* (2009); and *Stage a Poetry Slam: Creating Performance Poetry Events* (2009). In short, the advice revolves around understanding storytelling, rhythm, theatre, and language and using all four to create three-minute masterpieces. Because of Slam's underground roots, the best teacher is still experience. Many Slam poets will advise that the best way to learn Slam is to go to several bouts, try your own poems out on the audience, and try not to be discouraged. For those who need more direction, Slam advice can be summed into three main points: be poetic, tell a story, know your purpose.

## **BE POETIC**

While the Slam field is open to all participants, knowing the traditions, gimmicks, and tricks of the trade ensure both longevity in competition, and clearer communication with the audience. Slam sits in the mind's eye. To engage with the audience, the poet must use concrete language that evokes an image. The added presence (in body and voice) of the poet

can further solidify these images. In qualitative research, the arbitrary or abstract is never as poignant as the specific. To say that young adolescents pressured to conceal their sexuality often experience suicide ideation does not resonate the same way as the following lines by poet Ragan Fox:

*I know the paradox of wanting to kiss  
the fist hitting my face, to lick  
lips that spit the words “fairy” and “fag,”*

*(Fox 2010, p. 432)*

Researchers wishing to write and perform Slam should carefully choose their language so that it “reads well.” A good practice is to read poetry out loud several times in the drafting process. While rhyme and word play are more common in Slam than other poetic forms, writing Slam is like writing any poem—the writer must write, draft, and repeat.

## **TELL A STORY**

At its base level, Slam is more closely aligned with storytelling than poetry. The rise and fall of the plot within the piece is as important as the rhyme and rhythm. Dustin (2008) begins “Maple Seeds” with the lines:

*There was no gravestone for boyhood  
No service in the forest by the trailer park.  
Someone should have sent wordless invitations,  
filled our mailboxes with maple seeds—one to each man  
who’d know their source (Dustin 2008, p. 80).*

His poem then recounts his childhood and the troubled childhoods of his friends. His work discusses notions of masculinity and class. Most importantly, he tells a story. When writing, a Slam poet must be connected to a story. The audience expects to be both entertained and engaged. The entertainment earns the right to engage.



## KNOW YOUR PURPOSE

An important part of Slam (like research) is that the poet must say something. It is not enough to link alliterative language or entertain with the profane or profound, the poet must say something. In the same way, statistics without analysis, context, or discussion are not particularly useful. The interview transcripts of a participant become research when imbued with purpose, when juxtaposed to a research question, or when viewed with a particular theory in mind. Slams also begin with questions—some overt and some covert. Taylor Mali's now famous educator battle cry begins when he is asked what he makes. He responds:

*You want to know what I make? I make kids wonder,  
I make them question.  
I make them criticize.  
I make them apologize and mean it.  
I make them write.  
I make them read, read, read.  
I make them spell definitely beautiful, definitely beautiful,  
definitely beautiful  
over and over and over again until they will never misspell  
either one of those words again.  
I make them show all their work in math  
and hide it on their final drafts in English.  
I make them understand that if you've got this (pointing to his  
head),  
then you follow this (pointing to his heart),  
and if someone ever tries to judge you  
by what you make, you give them this  
(extending his middle finger) (Mali 2002).*

To be able to sell a poem, a poet must know why he or she is performing it. To Slam, a poet needs to know why they are Slamming. This third point should connect especially for researchers interested in Slam as method.

## AN EXAMPLE

Finally, I offer an example of a Slam created from qualitative data. While the written poem (product) is incomplete without its presence in a Slam, the following steps will prepare other researchers to turn their own data into Slam poetry.

## GATHERING DATA

Interview transcripts, personal experience, and journals or diaries make for interesting material when composing Slams. The data I use comes from reflective writing exercises. I teach developmental mathematics classes at night. As an introductory exercise, I ask my students to write about their experience with mathematics. As my courses serve students identified as not academically prepared for college mathematics, the exercise is often embraced. They cannot wait to tell me how much they hate mathematics, how hurt they were by a teacher, or how much life has happened between the last time they added fractions and my class. The reflections help me to understand each of my students better as well as help me further explore multiple student experiences in developmental mathematics. Prompting questions include:

*What is your first memory of mathematics?*

*What do you like about mathematics (if anything)?*

*What do you hate about mathematics (if anything)?*

*How do you feel when someone says  
they are good at mathematics?*

*How do you feel when someone says  
they are bad at mathematics?*

2.  
*I describe the performance of the poem as a slam and not a Slam as it was performed for my class but not in the competitive Slam environment.*

The reflections are rarely more than a page. After years of teaching, I have more than 400 of these reflections. For the purposes of this project, I focused on just the most recent (p=90).

## **ANALYZING DATA**

The analysis process is relatively standard. I employed a thematic analysis to understand interwoven themes in the reflections. Using Schwandt's (2007) definition of thematic analysis, I read and marked the reflective writings text "according to whether they appear[ed] to contribute to emerging themes" (p. 291). As the themes emerged I needed to make a choice. The poem I was to create could serve my research in multiple ways. The poem could be written, performed to my students as a slam<sup>2</sup> giving me early feedback on whether I was accurately characterizing their experiences. Alternatively, the poems could be taken straight to a competitive Slam where I would be able to speak my research and hear audience respond. I elected to compose the former, choosing to write an introductory work that highlighted some of the themes of the student reflections. In this way, I could give my students' words back to them.

## **PENNING THE POEM**

When I write poetry, I pace. I walk up and down halls, across campus, and down deserted midnight streets. I repeat the lines as I write them, making sure they fit on my tongue the way they fit in my head. For this poem, I began with some provocative lines from the reflections.

*"I was factoring in a new country and a new language."*

*"...relearning math now has been a bit like trying to start a car that's been sitting in storage for 35 years."*

*“I remember how my older brother got pinched on his hand if he didn’t memorize all of the multiplications, until finally he learned all of them, maybe that is why older brother is really smart when it comes to math. When it was my turn to learn my multiplications I guess my parents didn’t care because I never got pinched like my brother.”*

The themes of fear, jealousy, and embarrassment are prevalent in the reflections. Gender discrimination, challenges of non-native English speakers, race, poverty, and classism permeate the texts. As an introductory piece, I start with a strong line that plays with the phrase “developmental mathematics.” In typical Slam fashion, I reuse this idea to visit the many themes I want to suggest.

After several drafts, this is my final poem.

### ***Developmental Mathematics***

*I begin my developmental mathematics classes by reminding  
my students  
that it is not the mathematics that are developing—  
that it is not the mathematics that are developing—  
that it is not the mathematics that are the evil thing  
that called them slow when they could not  
get it before the bell would ring.*

*I remind my students that it was not mathematics  
that shook them by the shoulders,  
that it was not mathematics  
that made them feel lower,  
that it was not mathematics, the precision, the order;  
it was half-assed teachers and  
their own fear of failure.*

*I say this is a war,  
and we’re all brand new soldiers.  
I say this is a team,  
and we’re all power forwards.  
I say this is my job, but I’d do it pro bono*

*if you'd let go of your worry  
and hold on to what I know.*

*You see I know that classrooms  
aren't all created equal,  
and I know that around here,  
we're still developing teachers,  
and I know that we're all  
still developing as people,  
but I can't mathematically mature you  
when your position is fetal,  
when your attempts are so feeble,  
the consequences so lethal.*

*And I know that tests scare you,  
and I know you hate fractions,  
and I know quadratic functions  
cause allergic reactions,*

*but I wouldn't be here if I didn't  
believe that subtraction  
of your fear and anxiety  
would add up to an action.*

*Cause you said your first memory  
was counting chicken eggs while your grandmother made  
cornbread,  
and you said, your first memory  
was learning that  $2+2$  is 4, and knowing that  
no one could take that from you.*

*You're right, math is power,  
and you should know to respect it,  
but it only has power over you if you let it,  
and this isn't a game where the winner's preset;  
it's a well that offers water  
to those who come up and get it.*

*And I remind my students that  
it is not the math that is developing.  
And I remind my students that  
it is not the math that is developing.*

*And I remind my students that  
it is not the math that is developing.  
It's the situation.*

## **FOLLOW UP**

When the slam was performed, I listened to the class and determined how it should be reshaped. I considered the responses and determined if it was a gauge of my performance or of the poem's content. For me, Slam (and slam) operates as presentation of research, a formative process for research, and catharsis. One of my students wrote "I remember my teacher taking me out in the hallway and she seemed really frustrated. She put her hands on my shoulders, shook me and said, 'What do you not understand?'" I cannot undo these moments. I can however, shake these moments on a stage in front of others who have been abused or embarrassed by poor teachers.

## **THE FUTURE OF SLAM IN THE ACADEMY**

My hope is that this article will help researchers recognize the work that is already being done in the Slam community and the promise it holds for reaching new audiences. The Slam community and the academic community can both benefit through mutual understanding and collaboration. Slam has been criticized for being just a form of entertainment; let researchers raise awareness of how Slam can (continue to) effect social justice. The academy has been criticized for dizzying themselves up and down the stairs of their ivory tower, never connecting their research with change agents; let Slam help the academy learn another way to bring knowledge to the people. Instead of research, let us have reach-search, such that efforts are never in vain.

As more researchers consider Slam as a viable and valuable research method, the research that can best be gathered, synthesized, or presented through Slam will finally come to light. Other artistic forms of research may re-conceptualize audience participation in their particular forms. Let the fourth historic wave of Slam be the one that washes up on the shores of the ivory tower, not to knock it down, but to beg academicians in for a swim.

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