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Auszug aus: *Working with slam poetry*

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Working with slam poetry – Analysis, interpretation and creative writing

by Linda Welland



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Slam poetry ist kurz, packend und direkt.
Slam poetry ist vielfältig, inklusiv und offen.
Slam poetry ist interaktiv und performant.
Slam poetry ist hip!

Es ist daher eine besonders geeignete Textsorte für Jugendliche, da in dem Poem auf eine lockere, unkonventionelle Weise Probleme und Themen angesprochen werden, die für junge Menschen einen hohen Wiedererkennungseffekt aufweisen. In der Unterrichtseinheit Working with slam poetry lernen die Schülerinnen und Schüler ausgewählte slam-poetry-Texte kennen und werden mit den typischen Merkmalen des Genres vertraut gemacht. Sie führen in das Format slam poetry ein und verknüpfen das Lernen mit eigenem Gedächtnis und Können zu erarbeiten. Und sie ermutigt die Schüler und Schülerinnen, ihr eigenes slam-poem zu schreiben und es in einem Klassen-slam aufzuführen.

RAABE
LEARNING

Working with slam poetry – Analysis, interpretation and creative writing

by Linda Weiland



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Competences and skills:

The unit *Working with slam poetry* first and foremost trains **listening, viewing and text analysis skills**. In each of the topics, students watch a video of a slam poem and analyse the content as well as the performance. In addition, every topic offers a creative writing task in which students get the opportunity to practise writing their own slam poems which culminates in them organising their own class slam. As slam poems are a combination of text and performance, alongside with their **creative writing skills**, students also train their **presentation and performance skills**.

Overview:

List of abbreviations:

A Analysis	C Comment	CT Creative task
D Discussion	G Group work	L Working with language
P Working with a photo	R Research	RC Reading comprehension
T Working with a text	W Writing	V Working with a video
VLC Viewing/listening comprehension		

Topic	Material	Methods/Skills
1: Family conflicts	M1–M2	A, D, L, T, VLC
2: Defining slam poetry	M3–M4	A, D, RC, W, T
3: Father and son	M5–M6	A, CT, D, L, T, V
4: Dealing with anxiety	M7–M8	A, CT, D, T, V
5: How to say no	M9–M10	A, D, G, RC, P, T, V
6: Spoken word versus slam poetry	M11	A, D, V, R
7: How to write a slam poem	M12	A, CT, G, R, W
8: Exam		A, C, CT, L, RC, T, W, VLC

Working with slam poetry – Analysis, interpretation and creative writing

Facts

Slam poetry is “the marriage of a text to the artful presentation of poetic words onstage to an audience that has permission to talk back”. This is how Marc Kelly Smith, who is often referred to as the “inventor of slam poetry”, defines the genre. Slam poetry is typically performed at competitions at which poets present their original pieces, without any props but within a time limit of three minutes. Judges randomly chosen from the audience award points to each performance and, thus, determine who wins the slam. The audience is allowed and asked to interact with the poets performing their work of art. Smith started poetry slams in Chicago in the 1980s. His aim was to establish a format in which poetry becomes alive and poets have an audience. Poetry slams were meant as a subversive movement – a break from a traditional, academic form of poetry that was connected to literature studies and, hence, considered elitist and high art. Smith’s idea was to give poetry an everyday life connection, to make it accessible for the masses and to transform it into a democratic event. His idea was successful during the 1990s when the idea of poetry slams became very popular. Many major U.S. cities started to run regular poetry slams and slam poetry developed into an accepted genre. National and international competitions were held, and slam poetry became a global phenomenon. Smith and the poetry slam movement are often credited with reinventing poetry. His commitment to performance poetry is said to have revived poetry from its metaphorical death and the stigma of being too dusty and too cryptic which academia had put it in. The huge success of the slam poetry movement can be seen, for example, in the fact that slam poetry has been “incorporated” into the White House. President Obama hosted performance evenings while he was in office, and President Biden had spoken word artist Amanda Gorman perform at his inauguration. The movement’s sustainable success can also be seen by slam poetry being incorporated into school curriculums and by having developed into a very popular genre in both language arts and foreign language learning. Slam poetry is an art form that students can easily connect to both content

and language. Especially youth and teen poetry slams, which developed as a sidetrack to poetry slams, offer teenagers an opportunity for self-expressions via words. The topics featured in youth and teen slam poems centre around typical young adult concerns and issues of social criticism that particularly the young generation support. The language used in slam poems is casual and informal, and the poetic devices applied are easily accessible. The three-minute time limit leads to slam poems being a quite short and, therefore, easily manageable text type, and the aim to catch the audiences' attention by talking about taboo topics or by voicing very direct and provocative messages is attractive to many young adults.

The fact that – because the performance is as important as the content – slam poem presentations should be watched and analysed in video form allows for a multimedia approach. Also, as the slam poetry community is very diverse, a slam poem can be found on any topic that standardly belongs to the English curriculum at secondary schools. As a result, slam poetry is a great authentic text type for the English language classroom, and the following unit can serve as an introduction to the genre.

Notes on the material

The unit introduces students to the characteristics of slam poetry and the rules of poetry slams (**topic 2**) and lets them encounter various slam poems (**topics 1, 3, 4 and 5**). The examples are first and foremost youth slam poems. The only two exceptions are Marc Kelly Smith's *My father's coat* (**topic 3**) and Brandon Leake's spoken word performance from *America's Got Talent* (**topic 6**). The first one was chosen to include a poem by the inventor of the format, the second one was elected to show the difference between slam poetry and spoken word – and to honour the fact that in the last season of *AGT*, a spoken word artist competed and won the show for the first time. With each slam poem, students are asked to analyse the combination of content and performance in order to understand that in slam poetry plot and presentation go hand in hand. As an additional task, students identify the poetic devices applied in each slam poem. This leads them to realise that "slam is poetry" – as Marc Kelly Smith stresses – uses the same tools as traditional poetry does. It is important, however, to understand how the poetic devices

support the content and performance. This is ensured when students analyse the effect of the poetic devices chosen by each poet. After each slam poem, students perform a creative task that allows them to write a slam poem on a similar theme. That way, they continually practise their creative writing skills until they write their very own slam poem in **topic 7**. Before students start writing it, this topic offers them a recap of typical characteristics of slam poetry. They can use the results as a guideline in their own writing process. The poetry slam they will organise as the last task of topic 7 can either be run in accordance with the poetry slam rules introduced in topic 2 or as a freer “open mic” set up that does not follow the rules and allows for spoken word performances including props or music as well. Participants can either be generated from an audition round like suggested in topic 7, task 6, or from a volunteer list. **Topic 8** consists of a draft for an exam that concludes the unit on slam poetry.

Before starting the unit, teachers should be aware of the fact that many slam poems use cussing and swearing as stylistic devices. Both *Friends With Benefits* (topic 4) and *Say No* (topic 5) are examples of this. As the poets’ word choice fulfills a purpose, the taboo words have not been eliminated from the poems in this unit; rather, they have been coded, and an appropriate way to talk about them in the classroom would also be to refer to them via encoded language (“the f-word”, “the b-word”).

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