

12

Students Running the Show: Performance Poetry Night

Lynne Ronesi

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF SHARJAH (UAE)

This chapter chronicles a student-initiated performance poetry event at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in the United Arab Emirates. The data suggest that performance poetry evening, as a student-driven initiative, was situated in the cultural context and literacy strengths of the student poet population at AUS. The students turned these evenings into opportunities for multi-vocalic expression that built community and good will across differences, and indeed, highlighted translingual strengths of “synergy” and “serendipity.” The accommodating nature of performance poetry—adjustable to local parameters and context—was suited to the participants’ affinity-space approach to negotiating an environment which was accessible, participatory, learning-filled, and evolving. Faculty encouragement of and interest in extracurricular student literacy practices can support multilingual literacy development, even when—as is often the case in English-medium institutions in multilingual contexts—the writing curriculum focuses strictly on academic English writing.

Keywords: performance poetry; extracurricular; participatory literacies; translingual; affinity space

One spring evening in 2012, I made my way to a campus lecture hall to attend a performance poetry event organized by a group of four friends. The four, my former students, were on the stage experimenting with stage lighting variations, debating the placement of the lectern, and decorating the venue’s white board. As students tentatively began to enter the hall, some with paper in hand, lured by emails and posters announcing a poetry slam, an expectant energy pervaded the room. One of students—referred to as Omar in this chapter—shared his initial reaction to the event in an interview in my office a few months later:

So I walk into the place a bit early because I’m, like, “I might as well go and see,” and I see the organizers setting up, and

I'm [thinking] "This is so exciting." And I find out then that 20 poets [had signed up], and I'm . . . "oh wow" . . . picturing it. The organizers [told me] they weren't expecting [many students] to come. But then people start coming in. I start kind of getting nervous, and I sit in the front row, because I am, I think, the tenth [poet], maybe? So when [it is my turn], I get up, and I turn, and I look, and I am . . . I am totally taken aback. This is a *full* room. (Omar, a student poet)

Omar's account echoes the surprise of the other interviewed poets and event organizers at the popularity of the first performance poetry event at the American University of Sharjah (AUS), an English-medium, co-educational university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). His description highlights an evidently erroneous perception that was shared by many of the event's participants—including myself—that few AUS students share an interest in, or are even familiar with, performance poetry, or spoken word—poetry written to be performed. As I observed the full lecture hall and the participants' enthusiastic response to the event, and later, listened to the poets and the audience members animatedly discussing the poems and requesting a second event, I could understand that the four organizers had located and drawn to campus a literacy practice that was a quiet interest of many.

My own initial surprise at the success of the event hinged on two notions of mine that I felt warranted examination. Perhaps because I am less digitally-oriented than my students, one element of my surprise concerned how much impact digital life has on students. As performance poetry had had a fairly limited scope in the UAE and no known presence at UAE postsecondary institutions—unlike its presence at colleges and universities in the US—I, like the organizers, thought there would be fairly limited interest in the event. Although well-aware that numerous websites, forums, and YouTube channels are devoted to performance poetry performances and competitions, I was still intrigued to learn that evening that student poets had developed their interest and capacity solely via digital means and embraced this first opportunity of a poetry performance night to make their pastime "live."

The second element of my surprise was more in line with that expressed by the students; like Omar and others, I was excited at the breadth of enthusiasm demonstrated that night. While AUS has its English majors and its share of excellent student writers, it was obvious to me, as I observed and interacted with the group of students that evening, that performance poetry was an interest that cut across majors, nationalities, heritage languages, or academic English proficiencies. This enthusiasm ran counter to an unfortunate

perception of “deficit” that exists on campus—that students generally dislike or are not proficient at writing—a perception about writing in English that seems perpetuated by students’ struggle with first year composition (FYC). This “deficit” label that accompanies students’ English academic writing fails to acknowledge the extent of AUS students’ linguistic abilities. In moments between classes, AUS student expression is linguistically rich; they chat or text on their phones, and joke and debate with their friends in languages and dialects from over 80 countries. AUS students transition easily between their languages and English, employing both almost simultaneously—switching between English and another language, perhaps Farsi, Urdu, or Arabic, or shifting from one of the many Arabic dialects to another—to accommodate the speaking patterns or preferences of whomever has joined them. This is a campus characterized by super-diversity (see Nebel, this volume) and linguistic multi-competencies, yet this richness seems overshadowed by the pervasive deficit attitude noted above. Because of that attitude, the enthusiastic and communal celebration of poetry in English during that evening seemed astonishing.

As I began to evaluate both my and the students’ reaction to the events of the evening, it struck me that performance poetry night constituted the type of emerging literacy phenomena that New Literacy scholars Lankshear and Knobel (2013) identify as an opportunity for “Let’s See” research, a practice: “with the primary aim of understanding in depth a “new” social practice and the literacies associated with or mobilized within this practice. . . . [that] encourages researchers to get as close as possible to viewing a new practice from the perspectives and sensibilities of “insiders”” (p. 9).

To apply a “Let’s See” approach to investigating the development of performance poetry night, I decided to undertake a naturalistic study to learn more about students’ interest and involvement in this participatory literacy event. This study was approved by the AUS IRB and funded by a small AUS seed grant. While the nationalities of the student poets and organizers ranged from Egyptian, Emirati, Lebanese, Pakistani, Syrian, to Yemeni, I have changed their names and omitted identifying details in the text to protect their anonymity. None of the informants were my students during this study. I conducted this research over several months during which I interviewed all four organizers—Jamal, Ahmad, Khalil, and Haris—and five poets—Sakina, Badr, Omar, Samir, and Amal—in two roughly hour-long semi-structured interviews after the first and the second performance poetry events. These interviews were digitally audio recorded, then transcribed. In addition, I engaged as a participant-observer—attending meetings run by the organizers—and I reviewed related documents—email exchanges between

the organizers, publicity emails, posters, and online event sign-up pages. Ultimately, my initial “Let’s See” approach evolved into the following research question: How did the student organizers and the poets situate the concept of performance poetry—a participatory literacy practice that participants were exposed to purely through digital media—to accommodate the AUS context?

As my interviews with participants commenced, I also began exploring performance poetry through the New Literacies framework. New Literacy scholarship acknowledges the dynamic, technological, and multimodal nature of contemporary literacy practices, highlights the role of identity and social context in an individual’s determination to engage in them (Gee, 2004; Low, 2008; Selfe, 2009; Weinstein, 2010), and advocates drawing on student out-of-classroom literacy practices for classroom content. A fair amount of New Literacies scholarship treats integrating performance poetry into the language arts classroom (Camangian, 2008; Dyson, 2005; Fisher, 2005; Low, 2008; Reyes, 2006). Kinloch (2005) and Smith (2010) identify spoken word curriculum as beneficial for multicultural students and those struggling with academic English and writing.

In particular, the New Literacies construct of “affinity space,” theorized by literacy scholar James Gee (2004, 2005), seemed suitable for examining the development of the AUS performance poetry night. Gee describes affinity spaces as sites—either virtual or physical—where individuals informally engage in literacy practices that interest them. In coining this term, Gee deliberately sought to emphasize the primary role of affinity or common endeavor in drawing participants together, as opposed to the usual social characteristics around which learning communities are often based—even knowledge or ability. As such, there is great potential with affinity spaces for engaged learning and expression without interference from the usual barriers inherent in educational communities. Participant accessibility is another significant characteristic, and Gee refers to the inroads of accessibility as “portals”—“giv[ing] access to the content and to ways of interacting with that content, by oneself or with other people” (Gee, 2007, p. 94). In an interview with St. Clair and Phipps (2008), Gee elaborates on participant accessibility:

The play with real and virtual identities, the many different routes to participation and status, the recruitment of diverse skill sets, the ways in which “ordinary” people can be producers and not just consumers, and the porousness and flexibility of “membership” that these new digital (and often partly virtual, partly real) spaces allow holds out, for me, real promise of new practices for equity and a sense of belonging

and agency for people. (p. 94)

Due to the equivalent status of the participants, the rules of the affinity space tend to emerge through synergy rather than from imposition by leadership (Gee, 2004, 2005, 2007; St. Clair & Phipps, 2008). Context also plays a significant role in the development and maintenance of literacy practice, and particular emphasis is placed on the synergy between participants and their context:

Gee argues that the contexts in which literacy events take place are too often imagined in a way that is overly static. “Situations (contexts) do not just exist,” he writes. “Situations are rarely static or uniform, they are actively created, sustained, negotiated, resisted, and transformed moment-by-moment through ongoing work” (2000, p. 190). By insisting on the dynamism of the context, Gee advocates for a more active conception of composers. (Zenger, 2011, p. 41)

Affinity space thinking is also useful for conceptualizing performance poetry as a literacy practice. As an art form, performance poetry is characterized by a sense of accessibility and as authentic expression of its context. Performance poetry and its competitive form known as “slam” have a populist appeal, with proponents asserting that the nature of poetry written for the “stage” rather than the “page”—approachability, audience response, community building—has drawn poetry out of the ivory tower and returned it to the people (Somers-Willet, 2007). Transnational research concerning the effects of performance poetry and slam competitions in the UK, South Africa, and Barbados (see Gregory, 2008a; Mnensa, 2010; Nanton, 2009) on the native oral poetry conclude that these forms have been accommodated alongside—rather than in lieu of—native oral poetry, the resulting “hybrid nature allow[ing] for people from varied backgrounds of different ages, who are on the margins of society, to find a platform to be heard” (Mnensa, 2010, p. 1). Gregory asserts that performance poetry is “re-created to fit with local concerns and existing culturally contextualized art worlds” (2008a, p. 205).

Translingual scholarship offers an additional way to theorize poetry performance night—a way that is compatible with New Literacies work and which resonates with the linguistic strengths of the AUS students. Work in translingualism (Canagarajah, 2007, 2013a, 2013b; Hall & Navarro, 2011; Horner, Donahue, & NeCamp, 2011; Zenger, Mullins, & Haviland, 2014), in line with the New Literacies scholarship discussed earlier, calls for pedagogical approaches that allow students to “bring into the classroom the dispo-

sitions and the competencies which they have richly developed outside the classroom” (Canagarajah, 2013a, p. 184). In particular, a translingual approach “push[es] compositionists toward greater recognition, appreciation, and use of the heterogeneity of students’ language resources” (Horner, Donahue, & NeCamp, 2011, p. 291). Translingual thinking rejects the “deficit” label—referred to earlier in my discussion of AUS student writing—as the limitation of a monolingual orientation.

Another area of compatibility between translingualism and the New Literacies scholarship highlighted above is the emphasis on the interaction of context and composers. Theorizing participatory events in a linguistically diverse setting, Canagarajah (2013) underscores not only the multiple linguistic negotiations that take place in day-to-day encounters in translinguals’ (composers’) lives but also the disposition that accompanies their interactions in this multicultural contact zone. This disposition, which Canagarajah terms “dialogical cosmopolitanism” (2013, p. 196), posits that, given the variety of ethics and norms in linguistically and culturally diverse environments, translinguals tend to establish community around collaborative practices rather than shared values. This tendency requires translinguals to rely on their flexibility, sensitivity, and creativity to negotiate linguistically rich contexts. Further, Canagarajah (2013), drawing on the work of Khubchandani, highlights the dynamic of synergy and serendipity in these contexts:

“Synergy” captures the creative agency subjects must exert in order to work jointly with the other participant to accomplish intersubjective meaning. . . . “Serendipity” involves an attitudinal readiness to “accept deviations as the norm.” To adopt this attitude, one must display “positive attitudes to variation” and be “open to unexpectedness.” Subjects have to be radically other-centered. They have to be imaginative and alert to make on-the-spot decisions in relation to the forms and conventions employed by the other. (p. 41)

Indeed, the translingual attributes of “synergy” and “serendipity” also aptly characterize composer/context aspects of performance poetry and affinity space thinking.

Informed by the scholarship on New Literacies, performance poetry, and translingualism, I situate the development of performance poetry night as well as the data from this study at the intersection of affinity space and translingual orientation. The following depictions of context and participant perceptions over the period of several months showcase the performance poetry night event as a cohesive accommodation of different and sometimes unex-

pected elements—often, synergy and serendipity—working in concert: affinity spaces’ porous parameters and flexibility in line with organic development; performance poetry’s participatory and adaptive nature; and translingual participants’ negotiation of diversity through collaboration and accommodation.

Because I want to underscore the intricate interactions between affinity space and translingual thinking in the development of performance poetry night, my findings appear below in two major sections. The first section is a recounting of the synergy and serendipity that led up to the emergence of the first performance poetry night as an affinity space, and the second presents the synergy between the participants and the translingual context that negotiated and sustained the poetry night’s position as an affinity space.

Synergy and Serendipity: The Emergence of Performance Poetry Night as Affinity Space

Affinity space endeavors evolve more organically than artificially; such was the case with poetry night, whose first-night success could be certainly be understood as the consequence of student organizers responding to perceived needs for informal and shared learning at their university—synergy—and the chain of events which were characterized by a bit of coincidence, happenstance, and even misnomer—serendipity. As such, background into the origin of performance poetry night attests to the serendipitous and synergistic connections that were to become meaningful to its development.

While the performance poetry night developed outside the classroom, it had its origins in the training class for the AUS Writing Center tutors. As part of a small unit on World Englishes, tutor trainees watch a YouTube video of renowned Jamaican-born dub poet, Linton Kwesi Johnson, perform a poem entitled “If I Woz a Tap Natch Poet” in Jamaican Creole (The Guardian, 2009). Johnson’s intense delivery, the ensuing discussions on “Arabizi,” “Hinglish,” or “Nigerian Pidgin” (English and local language “mixes” that are spoken by some of the students in the training class) make this activity one of the highlights of the semester. This video was the impetus for Jamal, then a tutor trainee in the class, to consider planning—with his friends—a staged poetry event at AUS:

I wanted so much for us to organize this because I remember, when I first saw Linton Kwesi Johnson [perform his poem], thinking how amazing it was to write something like that, you know, something that’s meaningful and cool, and perform it.

By happenstance, Jamal and three friends—Ahmad, Haris, and Khalil—had recently begun to discuss holding events on the AUS campus that would attract like-minded students interested in exchanging knowledge, particularly about their own various intellectual or creative sidelines. In his first interview with me, Khalil expressed the group's hope that the activities planned by the group would make “make a space [on campus] for learning for the love of learning, separate from learning for the sake of grades, degrees, or career.” Ahmad, who spearheaded this endeavor, did so in response to student interactions that he perceived as insularly academic-focused and to extracurricular activities that largely revolved around “career and making money and putting stuff on your CV.”

The group approached the AUS International Exchange Office (IEO) for sponsorship and support. While the Writing or English departments might have seemed more appropriate prospects for supporting a literacy event, Jamal had befriended some of the student workers and younger staff at the IEO that semester while applying to the semester-abroad program. As Jamal shared his new interest with the staff, some of them introduced Jamal to their favorite poetry performances on the internet and were enthused at the prospect of hosting such an event. Most importantly, the IEO director readily agreed to sponsor a performance poetry evening, reasoning that spoken word events were popular activities on the American campuses that partnered with AUS and that the event would provide a venue for publicizing the IEO.

Within the next few weeks, email announcements—sent out to AUS students, staff, and faculty—invited “poets, aspiring poets, poetry lovers, and performers [who were] willing to share an original poem, or to interpret/recite/perform a poem of their choosing, in any language, 3-5 minutes in length” to a “poetry slam.” Two links appeared in the posting: a link to an online sign-up sheet and another to a video of spoken word artist Sarah Kay performing one of her most popular poems, “Point B” at a TEDx conference. The organizers' familiarity with the TED Talks format led to the inclusion of what the organizers and poet participants would later agree was a significant part of the evening—refreshments in the lobby immediately after the show. Jamal explained their decision:

For instance, a big part of TED Talks is not only when the [presenters] go on stage, but, also the lunches and the general breaks they have, [so attendees can meet] a lot of people and make friends and connections and share ideas. So, I thought we should do the same thing for the poets.

Rounding out the event's marketing was Ahmad's poster, which, like the

email announcement, invited students to a poetry slam: dramatic and edgy—like much slam imagery—it featured a young man behind a microphone, enveloped in wings of fire.

The Big Night

As suggested by Omar's account at the beginning of the chapter, the poet and audience response to the poetry event was striking. The 20 poets Omar referred to included students, professors, and staff. In fact, there were so many attendees that students sat on the stairs and lined the back wall. A handful of poets who were obviously familiar with the conventions of spoken word performed their poems, but, poignantly, many more students announced that this event constituted the first time they had gone public with their poetry, some hands visibly shaking as their owners read their poems from papers and from phone screens, and in one case, from a laptop precariously perched on the lectern. Audience members called out words of encouragement, and warmly applauded each poet. Despite the fact that "any language" was specified in the announcement, every poem was delivered in English except one—a poem in Arabic. However, this poem became a notable part of the evening, as Omar explained:

[The poet] was talking about the woman that he loves, and he was, like, using lovely metaphors to describe her, but with every verse he would describe her in an Emirati dialect and then repeat [the sentiment by] switching to, like, Palestinian, then to Jordanian, then to Iraqi, then to Egyptian dialect—showing that we can say the same thing in six different ways. To hear someone perform it in, like, six different Arabic dialects was just something to hear.

While logistically, the first poetry performance event went off without a hitch, it was brought to the organizers' attention that the event was labeled in a confusing way. Indeed, despite the reference to a "poetry slam" both on the poster and in the email announcement, this event could not be called a poetry slam—poets in competition with an audience awarding points—but was instead a spoken-word event accommodating a wide range of interpretations of "performed" poetry. This contradiction was made clear to the organizers after the event during refreshment time in the lobby—the refreshment-time concept that they had "borrowed" from TED Talks. Some students who were unfamiliar with the term "poetry slam" questioned its meaning, while a few students who were more knowledgeable asked organizers "why" the event was

called a poetry slam.

Later, in his interview, Jamal admitted that the organizers had not thought very pointedly about the distinction between “poetry slam” and “performance poetry” when drafting the announcements. Yet, despite this misnomer in the email and the fact that the event’s poster, both in title and in image, was strongly evocative of slam poetry as portrayed in digital media, the rhetoric of the emails suggested a wide scope of interpretation for the night. This email announcement still opened a number of “portals,”—in Gee’s (2007) words— or access points for participation in this first performance poetry night; students could read or recite or perform their own poem or the poem of another author, and in any language. Indeed, from an affinity-space perspective, the organizers’ confusion regarding the performance/slam distinction seems to have provided this initial poetry night the condition of accessibility, as the lack of specificity allowed AUS poets at all levels of spoken-word ability and interest to consider participating.

Another portal to accessibility was the sponsorship of the IEO, an example which provides a clear example of the interplay between serendipity and synergy. Sponsorship of the event by the IEO would likely not have been considered by the four as an option but for Jamal’s new connection with the program and its staff. While his involvement with IEO could be understood as serendipitous, the group’s decision to seek sponsorship for this activity was largely synergistic—based on their understanding that IEO was a student-focused program that, because of its interaction with universities abroad, might welcome the opportunity to sponsor the event. As a portal, IEO sponsorship likely opened the door to more participants. On a campus that is largely described by faculty, staff, students, and alumni as “culturally diverse” (American University of Sharjah, 2010), a poetry event sponsored by the IEO is potentially more appealing to wider group of students than a poetry event sponsored by the Departments of English or Writing.

Given the accessibility afforded by the portals that first evening, participants came away with a sense of the potential of the event: the organizers could ascertain poets’ level of interest and range of abilities; poets had the opportunity to perform their poetry to an audience and to learn from others; would-be performance poets seated in the audience could be inspired and motivated. Khalil, even in his capacity as an organizer, expressed surprise at the potentiality of the evening:

I think some of poets didn’t think they were good at all or they had any sort of talent and then from the response they got, they were like “You know, I can do this.” And it was re-

ally cool when, like, the poets were standing around [during refreshment time after the event] and then, one person would really like something about a poet's poem and they'd talk about it. That was really cool. And, another cool thing was—well, I didn't really think about it before—but I didn't expect that I'd remember someone's poem a month later.

While this may seem a mundane account of events, I argue that it is actually a complex interplay of synergy and serendipity, one that—partly by participant disposition and partly by happenstance—resulted in an accessible space for performance-poetry fans from all corners of the university, and it provided potentiality for further meaningful and enjoyable learning. While some of connections have already been made explicit above, analyzing the dynamics of its development expose the intricacies involved. I can assert, for example, that it was serendipitous that Jamal was exposed to performance poetry in his peer-tutoring in writing class. Yet, what was the disposition of the professor (me) who sought to introduce the class to the idea of World Englishes by showing a video of a Jamaican dub poet engaged in a participatory literacy act? This is an example of synergy. What were the dispositions of the students, like Jamal, Khalil, and Ahmad, who had at different times enrolled in peer-tutoring class to become tutors in the Writing Center? This is also synergy. That Jamal and his group of friends decided to become involved with informal learning opportunities is synergy. That Jamal became interested in performance poetry at the same time that he and his friends made that decision seems serendipitous.

The next section illustrates how, with the potential for an affinity space established, performance poetry night participants—both the organizers and the students—negotiated and sustained this affinity space to accommodate their diverse and translingual context.

At the Intersection of Participatory Literacy and Translingualism (Or “We Don’t Know What This Is, But We Like It”)

Once Jamal, Ahmad, Khalil, and Haris reconvened the following semester, the group decided to be more deliberate and clear in their second event planning, as this excerpt from Ahmad's email update to the organizers suggests:

I had coffee with Jamal yesterday and we were of the opinion that we should probably start moving away from the title

of “slam poetry” and redesign the poster with a sense of the actual event we hosted last time.

To help them “get a sense of the actual event” before proceeding with plans, the group decided to interview the poets for their insights on the first event. Jamal, Ahmad, Khalil, and Haris worked with the IEO office to contact and request group interviews with the poets. While the organizers’ interview protocol addressed a number of logistical aspects, the focus of the interview concerned the structure and content of the event—particularly, the poets’ perspectives on whether parameters should be set on the performance style of the poems. The interviewers sought to determine poets’ thoughts about planning for an actual slam, or if not for a slam specifically, about incorporating elements of competition or evaluation.

The five student poets who showed up for the organizers’ interviews were invested performers who sought to improve their performance styles for the following event; even so, they all favored maintaining an inclusive spirit rather than insisting on “performance over reading” or gravitating toward a slam model. Even as the poets admitted enjoying the excitement of slam competitions, they all believed that adopting a slam format was inappropriate for this event. To these student poets, it was more important to offer a venue to poets of all abilities and retain the warm, supportive environment of the first event—in short, to build a community for aspiring AUS poets. Evaluation—or being rated, poetry-slam style—was understood as a stratifying element that would drive away novices and remind the students too much of being graded. “I’m really only interested in critique [I might receive informally during the refreshment time after the event] or later when I see poets on campus,” noted Omar. To that end, the term “poetry slam” was removed from all reference to the second event.

Elaborating on the organizers’ question about performance styles in a subsequent interview with me, Sakina recounted what she told the organizers: that the first event’s accessible approach promoted a relaxed atmosphere and relief from the “oppression” associated with being a student—lectures, deadlines, assessment—and highlighted how the event created an opportunity for important informal learning. She explained:

For example, I wouldn’t go [if I saw a poster announcing] a seminar on racism. I mean, [my response would be] “I know about racism. Okay. Finished. I’m not a racist.” Whatever. You [respond] with these preconceived ideas. Whereas if [a topic is presented with poetry] it’s someone’s experience, and it means more to the person who’s listening to it, who gets to

unwrap, or, like, unravel the layers with the poet who's speaking, as he's going along. You're like, you know, engaging in the presentation. You really feel that [the poets are] coming from somewhere, like maybe this has happened to them, so, you know, you take it personally. [Poets] need to be able to efficiently communicate if [the topic] is something serious like racism because people are more willing to learn this way than when put in a classroom setting.

Another poet, Badr, pointed out that an open and unrestricted poetry night offers a space where the multi-vocalic nature of their translingual community can be enacted, allowing for modes of expression not formally validated on campus:

The poetry slam should have come a long time ago, because there are a lot of poets here, and they never got a chance [until poetry night]. So, I don't want to interfere with that [by adding more parameters], because it's very nice, because we get a different flavor from everybody. And we can perform in different languages. I know it's going to be hard for non-Arabic speakers and everything, but it's also kind of an initiative, like, "Learn Arabic," you know? We Arabs know Arabic and English, you know, [so] non-Arabic speakers should also learn Arabic. And we should also learn Urdu for people who are going to be performing poems in Urdu. So if poets want to present their poems in Urdu, we'd be listening. We'd understand. So I think it's a very good idea that all of this [can be contained in] one event.

While learning Urdu to understand peers' poetry may sound excessive or exaggerated in a monolingual context, Badr's suggestion expresses a reality in the context of the UAE. Lots of languages, particularly Urdu, which is spoken by many of the Pakistani and Indian expatriates, are present in the UAE. Individuals here often "pick up" languages for trade reasons, or from watching entertainment media, or in the houses of friends. For these students, to acquire enough Urdu to appreciate the gist of a poem is not an unrealistic goal.

Even as the creation of a poetry community trumped the evaluation and competition the poets associated with slam, poets expressed in their interviews that improving for the next performance was definitely a goal. To that end, the organizers invited a faculty member from the English Department, a spoken-word poet who performs internationally, to present a workshop on

performance poetry. This event, offered a few weeks before the second poetry night, was attended by many of the first-event poets and provided an overview of oral poetry and its different forms and techniques. Contemplating the organizers' decision to host the workshop, Khalil referred to an affinity-space experience—his role as a tutor in the writing center:

It seems like we are drawing all these students in, even if they don't know what performance poetry is, and then helping them to bring [the event] up to a performance level, which is, I think, what we're doing this semester with the workshop, sort of addressing all those questions that the poets had, especially on performing their poems. It's the same way we do things at the writing center. You don't want to give too much content input; you want to guide [students] to learn on their own.

Ahmad, too, understood the poets' request for open and unconstrained learning, in line as they were with the organizers' earlier stated goals of promoting gatherings of like-minded individuals interested in exchanging knowledge. Like Khalil, Ahmad drew from an affinity-space experience as he discussed supporting the poets.

Sometimes you don't want to be part of a competition. You just want to present your stuff and get other people's opinions on it, and see. You know, I used to do my graphics work just as a hobby and I posted my work on the internet to get other people's opinions on it, and it was a good experience. There are a couple of good forums where you can post your images and people comment and critique and discuss them and [suggest] ways in which you can make them better. You know, I think that's a crucial part of developing your talent or your skill. So, [poetry night] is something similar to that, I guess.

To reflect the new understanding of performance poetry night, Jamal, Ahmad, Khalil, and Haris spent some time re-imagining the poster. Their debates about the poster frustrated the group a bit but also served to highlight the importance they assigned to getting the right message across. After speaking with the poets, designating the event as "Performance Poetry Night" was an easy decision; however, the group sought a motto to set an appropriate tone for the event. Finally, a joke made by Khalil half in frustration, half in jest—"We don't know what this is, but we like it"—was identified as convey-

ing the sense of the evolving event that had emerged serendipitously. That decided, Ahmad changed the poster design from what he joked “looked like an ad for a gritty, low-budget crime movie” to a whimsical look the group had decided on—a stylized graphic of green, blue and purple. The event name and motto encircled a sketch of a bird nestled in clouds—a simple bird sketch that Haris and Ahmad had drawn on the white board for the first poetry event. Appreciated by several poets and audience members that evening, the bird had become the event’s mascot. The words “lofty,” “soar,” “untitled,” “imagery,” “transcend,” “precipice,” “whisper,” and “stance” in quirky and fanciful fonts filled the background amidst purple curlicues. The new poster suggested imagination, growth, and potential.

Like the organizers, the poets also drew upon informal learning and affinity space practices for their role in the event. In the absence of a spoken-word community on campus and lack of easy access to the few events taking place in the UAE, the poet participants had resorted to honing their poetry and performance techniques through digital media. Sakina, Omar, and Samir engaged in watching poetry slams and spoken-word events on YouTube and learned about the occasional spoken word event through Facebook. Badr posted his poems on the site *PoetrySoup.com*, where he both provided and benefited from poet feedback. Amal had a blog in which she posted her poems and remained in contact with other poets through discussion groups and her Twitter account. However, as she pointed out, online engagement was, in this case, a poor substitute:

I want to see likeminded people gathered in one place, and, for once, feel like, okay, there are people who like poetry and, no, they’re not, like, 1,000 miles away, or a Twitter follower, or, you know, a person who likes my blog post, but that there’s someone that’s sitting right in front of me and we’re discussing poetry [face-to-face].

While spoken word is, as Low (2008) points out, “awash in contemporary communication technologies” (p. 102), its attraction is the poet-audience and poet-poet interaction. While digital media could bring performances to these student poets, it could not provide a space for the skill development or the social interaction they desired. Indeed, this first AUS event prompted Samir and Omar to search other UAE venues to perform. For Omar, this event brought him into the realm of “imagined communities” (Norton, 2001; Norton & Kamal, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2005), as he perceived this experience as a step toward membership in the community of the spoken word performers he had admired online:

After the first poetry night, I wanted to perform again. Like, I needed to do it again, so I was Googling for places in Dubai, you know, open-mic nights, what I could find. And I found this place in Dubai called Global Youth Empowerment Movement, and, as it happens, like, a month later they were going to have an open-mic night. I went and I performed a poem there, and I loved it. Actually, someone there took a picture of me and just put it on Facebook and I found it recently, and I was so happy, because I felt like I looked how [my favourite performance poets, Shihan, Black Ice, and Gemineye] do, when they perform.

“Yes, Let’s Get This On”: Going Translingual and Forgetting Differences

Indeed, Omar was not the only poet who came to the second poetry performance much better prepared. It appeared the various efforts on the parts of the participants—the more deliberate planning and publicity by the organizers, the oral poetry workshop, and the opportunity of several months for poets to practice and plan—led to a second poetry night that retained the enthusiasm of the first, but included more linguistic variety and more skilful deliveries. Samir compared the two evenings:

We still got a lot of people, but [this time] a lot of people, like, knew what to expect. Because last time we were, like, okay, “We’re not sure what we’re really doing, but let’s give this a try.” But now it’s more like “Yes, let’s get this on, you know. Let’s make this the best night of our lives and stuff.” Even though I had an exam at eight AM the next morning, I still came. I was planning to, like, perform and watch a couple of my friends and then leave, but I just couldn’t leave. I sat through the entire night. And even we socialised afterwards for, like, another hour. And, this time, a lot of exchange students came. Like, there was Amy and she’s from Chicago, and she was telling us, “You guys are really good.” It was really good.

Sakina observed “a lot of poets who did it last time were a lot more confident than before—you could tell from their body language. They were like, ‘We’ll ditch the paper. We’ll perform it.’” As an Urdu and English speaker

with a grasp of primary-school Arabic, Sakina felt that the performance of the poems minimized the need for the language to be understood:

Yes, you could enjoy them, the feeling and the performance aspect, you know? Even if you didn't understand it all. I think that's the main thing about it being the performance poetry. I mean, you may not, like, have to dwell on the content all the time, and if it's not in your language, you can focus on how it's delivered, because these poets [performed] really well.

For this second event, "open-mic" time was added after the scheduled performances. The organizers added this component on the advice of poets who knew attendees who had brought poems with them to the first event "just in case," but received no invitation to perform. Open mic added another portal to the event, giving an opportunity to those would-be performance poets who might decide they want to join in, even if they had been too intimidated to sign up. One of the poets who took advantage of this opportunity was Badr, who volunteered during open-mic time to perform a hilarious but classic Arabic poem "Sawt Safeeral Bulbulee," ("The Song of the Nightingale") attributed to the renowned Arab poet Al-Asma'i, who performed the poem during the eighth century for the Abbasid Caliph Abu Ja'far Al Mansour. This difficult piece, a real tongue-twister, was appreciated by audience members, many of whom were familiar with the poem from their studies in Arab history. Badr, who had memorized it as a child along with his siblings at the request of their father, felt comfortable performing it in view of the number of Arabic poems that evening:

Poetry night was amazing, because poets came and they said what they wanted to say. It was just like "come with your poetry." All [possibilities were] there. That was the beauty of the night. People came, speaking in Arabic, English. People talked about love, talked about personal topics, talked about their countries, talked about society in general. People talked about their happy days. And there was even the kid who had the dark, the very dark poetry. Even that.

Another aspect that added to, in Badr's words, "the beauty of the night" was the event's effect on students' willingness to overlook, for the evening, those statuses or characteristics that to him appeared to be salient on campus and divisive to student unity. Badr reflected on those unique to AUS:

Now, in university, everyone has their own corner. Like, you

know, everything divides. For example, if you're not a party person, if you're not a clubbing person, if, let's say, you're one of the EMO people. Then you have the jocks. And then you have, let's say, the preps. And the thing is, here's the major clash in AUS: you have people who are strictly Arab, and you have people who are strictly Western, and you have people in the middle, and each one of them is even subcategorised into different groups. . . . and, it's bad, because these [members of these different groups] would never meet. And [at performance poetry night], we kind of broke these subcategories that I am talking about and we all united in one, under one flag, kind of thing. That was the beauty of it.

Sakina noted that interest in performance poetry seemed to cut across students' gender and major:

There were guys who were students in my lab, and I never thought that they would like poetry—and you know, like, that's the thing, it's like this weird perception [that] guys . . . and engineers . . . don't like poetry, which is just nonsense—but they were there, and they really enjoyed it. And they told me that they really liked my poem and that I should [continue performing]. So I asked, "Will you guys come if it's held again? They're like, yes, you know, we're even thinking that next time we will take part.

Samir appreciated the event's potential for community building:

I like the positive energy. I mean, other than coming to listen to good poetry, I like the whole fact that there's like social acceptance. You know? It doesn't matter who you are, what you are, what you look like, you're a human being in front of us, you're reading something which we know has value, or depth, or whatever. And like, you know, we're there with you. Like the girl who got up and she read the poem about her late grandfather, like, we could all relate. You know? It didn't matter if the poem was good or bad. We were there for her, and we clapped and we screamed. Every time now on campus I see her, we wave or talk a bit.

While events leading to the second poetry evening seemed less serendipitous, clearly the organizers and the poets engaged in synergy with the

context—they sought to negotiate a learning community that was supportive, flexible, unstratified, and accommodating to each participants' level of proficiency. The AUS performance poetry evening, as a student-driven initiative, was situated in the cultural context and literacy strengths of the student poet population at AUS. The participants turned these evenings into opportunities for multi-vocalic expression that built community and good will across differences, and, indeed, highlighted translingual strengths of “synergy” and “serendipity” (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 41). The accommodating nature of performance poetry—adjustable to local parameters and context—was suited to the participants' affinity-space approach to negotiating an environment that was accessible, participatory, learning-filled, and evolving.

Performance Poetry Night: Still Evolving

Performance poetry night is an evolving story. The original organizers have graduated, and currently, IEO student staff have taken on the planning, demonstrating the same inclusive spirit the founding organizers and poets established. During the refreshment break after the most recent event—the fifth performance poetry night, in which poems were delivered in English, Arabic, Farsi, and Urdu—my discussion with a new organizer-poet who had assisted the IEO staff in planning the event revealed a proposed change for future poetry nights. He envisioned starting the evening “as per tradition” with sign-up spoken word performances and open-mic opportunities, followed by a “proper” slam for poets who wanted to compete. I was excited by his ideas—AUS poetry night is evolving with continued emphasis on making room for all poets and abilities.

There is another new development. Some of the poets—including Omar, Amal, and Badr—have participated in the performance poetry events sponsored monthly by the Rooftops Rhythms group in Abu Dhabi. In fact, there is a synergy developing between the two performance venues. AUS participants who had attended the Rooftops Rhythm events introduced a new Rooftops Rhythm practice into the fifth AUS performance poetry night—a mid-performance challenge to create a poem using audience-brainstormed words. This component resulted in a richer sense of poet-audience engagement and community. At the same time, “seasoned” AUS performance poets were encouraging novices to investigate Rooftops Rhythms as another venue for their creativity. At this point, I am pleased to state that “a culture of performance poetry” has formed in the UAE, and some of those poets got their start at AUS.

Implications for Writing Programs

Many chapters in this book have addressed the level to which our MENA students are not considered prepared for English-medium, university-level writing. They cite the variety of educational models which comprised our students' secondary education, the lack of emphasis on learner independence or critical thinking in the curriculum, and the varying degrees to which English in general, and English academic writing in particular, are addressed (see Annous, Nicolas, & Townsend; Hodges & Kent; Jarkas & Fakhreddine; Miller & Pessoa; and Rudd & Telafigi; , this volume). As such, there is a daunting sense that students have a lot of "catching up" to do which must be accomplished as quickly as possible because writing assignments in their other courses require students to have already assimilated these skills.

To respond to this need, my Department of Writing—whose purview covers only the first-year writing requirements—has, over the past few years, steadily refined writing course content to a strict focus on argument and source-based writing. However, this focus may have come at a price, where students perceive writing at university as stripped of creativity and self-expression. While there are a few opportunities for creative writing in upper-level English department courses, many students do not consider those as options; indeed, four out of the five poet participants in this research were engineering students who felt the rigors of their coursework would not permit enrolling in creative writing classes. Yet, a significant number of AUS students have poems tucked away in their laptops or phones, or even spiral-bound notebooks—and many of these students would not be characterized as "strong" academic writers, even as their poems reveal that they can be wry and insightful, even skilful, commentators on life in English and other languages.

In our limited capacity as a first-year writing program with a strictly academic writing focus, how can the Department of Writing—and other departments like it in the MENA region—display an openness to and support for students' out-of-classroom use of English or translanguing practices? How can we provide a platform for students who want to share literacy and linguistic practices that are different from the types of writing we require in our classes? And, significantly, how can we invite affinity spaces on the campus, which put the reins in the students' hands, empowering them to drive their own learning, which was certainly the strength of performance poetry night? This last point is especially important, as developing learner independence is a need of MENA-region students; many have come from largely authoritarian or regimented educational backgrounds and would benefit from opportunities where they are responsible for their learning.

As such, it appears necessary to broaden our approach in different ways. In view of the endeavor under study—the student-driven poetry night—it seems appropriate to look to the extracurricular realm, a place where, for many students, academic and personal interests meet with limited guidance from faculty. Supporting a student activity or club can translate into service for writing faculty who are expected to fulfill such requirements. Of course, a logical spring-board for encouraging similar extracurricular endeavors is the writing center, especially if it is staffed by undergraduate tutors who can take responsibility for organizing the activities. Writing centers are known sites of innovation, and their status as spaces for writing-across-the-curriculum easily opens doors to undertakings with different units and departments on campus; this is particularly so if the tutors represent a variety of majors and are cognizant of the variety of literacy activities that their peers engage in. Keeping in mind the role of the IEO in lending an international, cross-cultural legitimacy to performance poetry night, writing-center-sponsored activities that are pointedly interdisciplinary—for example, collaborating with computer engineering students on a “code poetry” event—would make such undertakings more relevant, and thus, more interesting to students.

While our writing courses may be standardized in terms of goals and outcomes, faculty may be able to drive at least some of the courses’ content. Introducing a unit—with readings, an assignment, and perhaps presentations—on popular out-of-classroom literacy practices like blogging, fan fiction, and spoken word, to name a few, would help elicit discussions on the literacy acts students engage in outside of class. This kind of a unit could perhaps also generate interest on the part of some students to interact with peers to learn more about writing. Basing writing assignments on the topic of participatory literacy practices in English or in other languages may also compensate for the little room allotted to free or creative writing by validating, as a topic worthy of class attention, the practices students engage in on their own time. These topics may also mitigate the “deficit atmosphere” in the writing classroom if students understood their professors as valuing their own literacy practices, which will, in the MENA region, almost certainly cross languages. Moreover, the ensuing class discussion and the inherent learning can create inroads for student exploration with like-minded classmates and lead to activities similar to that of performance poetry night. As explained earlier in the chapter, Jamal’s interest in spoken word—the driving force behind the event—was sparked by his exposure to a spoken-word performance in his tutor-training class; that half-hour classroom exercise played an undeniable role in the student-driven chain of events that ensued.

Supporting out-of-classroom literacy development in our rich translingual

environments is becoming increasingly important even as we in the MENA region may find our resources to that extent limited for a variety of reasons. In response to those limitations, we should seek creative ways to engage our students in this undertaking. MENA students need to be encouraged to participate in their own learning, as Haris, one of the organizers noted:

There's only so much the university can do; then it's up to the students. It's a two-way road: The university provides us with good professors, good auditoriums, a good library; we have good rooms to hold events. So now it's up to us [students] to actually take a step, and do our part.

Indeed, there is a great deal to be learned by letting students run the show.

References

- American University of Sharjah. (2010). Chancellor's Snapshot
- Camangian, P. (2008). Untempered tongues: Teaching performance poetry for social justice. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 7(2), 35-55. Retrieved from <http://education.waikato.ac.nz/research/files/etpc/2008v7n2art2.pdf>
- Canagarajah, A. S. (2007). Lingua franca English, multilingual communities, and language acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91, 923-939.
- Canagarajah, A. S. (2013a). Negotiating translanguing literacy: An enactment. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 48(1), 40-67.
- Canagarajah, A. S. (2013b). *Translingual practice: Global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations*. New York: Routledge.
- Dyson, A. H. (2005). Crafting "the humble prose of living": Rethinking oral/written relations in the echoes of spoken word. *English Education*, 37, 149-164.
- Fisher, M. T. (2005). From the coffee house to the school house: The promise and potential of spoken word poetry in school contexts. *English Education*, 37(2), 115-131.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). The New Literacy studies: From "socially situated" to the work of the social. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton, & R. Ivanič, R. (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context* (pp. 180-196). London: Routledge
- Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2005). *Language, learning, and gaming: A critique of traditional schooling*. New York: Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2007). *Good video games and good learning: Collected essays on video games, learning, and literacy*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Gregory, H. (2008a). (Re)presenting ourselves: Art, identity, and status in U.K. Poetry Slam. *Oral Tradition*, 23(2), 201-217.
- Gregory, H. (2008b). The quiet revolution of poetry slam: The sustainability of

- cultural capital in the light of changing artistic conventions. *Ethnography and Education*, 3(1), 63-80.
- Hall, J., & Navarro, N. (2011, December 21). Lessons for WAC/WID from language learning research: Multicompetence, register acquisition, and the college writing student. *Across the Disciplines*, 8(4). Retrieved from <http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/ell/hall-navarro.cfm>
- Horner, B., Donahue, C., & NeCamp, S. (2011). Toward a multilingual composition scholarship: From English only to a translingual norm. *College Composition and Communication*, 63, 269-300
- Kinloch, V. (2005). Poetry, literacy, and creativity: Fostering effective learning strategies in an urban classroom. *English Education*, 37(2), 96-114.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (Eds.). (2013). *A new literacies reader: Educational perspectives*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Low, B. E. (2008). Slammin' school: Performance poetry and the urban school. In M. Hoechsmann & B. E. Low (Eds.), *Reading youth writing: "New" literacies, cultural studies & education* (pp. 99-127). New York: Peter Lang.
- Mnensa, M. T. (2010). *Speaking out: African orality and post-colonial preoccupations in selected examples of contemporary performance poetry* (Unpublished master's thesis). Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa.
- Nanton, P. (2008-2009). Protest and performance: New orality in Barbados. *Shibboleths: A Journal of Theory and Criticism*, 3(2), 97-104.
- Norton, B. (2001). Non-participation, imagined communities and the language classroom. In M. Breen (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research* (pp. 159-171). Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.
- Norton, B., & Kamal, F. (2003). The imagined communities of Pakistani school children. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 3(4), 301-317.
- Pavlenko, A., & Norton, B. (2005). Imagined communities, identity, and English language teaching. In J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *Kluwer handbook of English language teaching*. Dordrecht, NL: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Reyes, G. T. (2006). Finding the poetic high: Building a spoken word poetry community and culture of creative, caring, and critical intellectuals. *Multicultural Education*, 14(2), 10-15.
- Selge, C. L. (2009). The movement of air, the breath of meaning: Aurality and multimodal composing. *College Composition and Communication*, 60(4), 616-63.
- Smith, A. M. (2010). Poetry performances and academic identity negotiations in the literacy experiences of seventh grade language arts students. *Reading Improvement*, 47(4), 202-218.
- Somers-Willet, S. B. A. (2007). Can slam poetry matter? *Rattle: Poetry for the 21st Century Issue #27*, 13(1), 85-90.
- St. Clair, R., & Phipps, A. (2008). Ludic literacies at the intersections of cultures: An interview with James Paul Gee. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 8(2), 91-100. doi:10.1080/14708470802270950
- The Guardian. (2009, January 6). Linton Kwesi Johnson performs If I Woz a Tap Natch Poet [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W->

mijkaVztqY

- Weinstein, S. (2010). "A unified poet alliance": The personal and social outcomes of youth spoken word poetry programming. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 11(2), 1-24. Retrieved from <http://www.ijea.org/v11n2/>
- Zenger, A. A. (2012). Constructing local context in Beirut: Students' literacy practices outside of class. In B. T. Williams & A. A. Zenger (Eds.), *New media literacies and participatory popular cultures across borders* (pp. 33-43). New York: Routledge.
- Zenger, A., Mullin, J., & Haviland, C. (2014). Reconstructing teacher roles through a transnational lens: Learning with/in the American University of Beirut. In T. M. Zawcki & M. Cox (Eds.), *WAC and second language writers: Research toward linguistically and culturally inclusive programs and practices* (pp. 415-438). Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press. Retrieved from <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/12/>