

An Evaluation of the *Get Lit* Youth Poetry Program¹

Opportunities for Learning Public Charter Schools

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Introduction: The Aims of the *Get Lit* / OFY Program

The *Get Lit* youth poetry course of study is about language. It is about putting feeling and lived lives into words in ways that declarative sentences can fail to achieve. The poet expresses thoughts and views in ways that may reveal the mind of the author as the words were penned. A poem at very least suggests what the poet was thinking about and motivated by. The poet uses phrases we admire or tweak our feelings, for reasons we may scarcely sense. And perhaps most important, the poet conjures ideas that can reveal to the reader his or her own mind, and with a new language that allows and encourages exploration and self-understanding.

Watching *Get Lit* classrooms over the past year has meant watching youth encounter, and even collide with, works of classic poetry. Langston Hughes and Walt Whitman and Maya Angelou and TS Elliot and Carol Muske-Dukes. These and other names typically begin as familiar, or vaguely familiar, or virtually unknown words to our sixteen year-olds. Discovering that there are real people behind these names sets a stage for digging in and discovering stories about poets' lives and towns and friends and families; their dreams and fears; their champions and detractors. It's about hearing the beautiful or haunting ring of words, perhaps for the first time. It's wondering about how *so few* chosen words can say so much. It's about how the quiet between words can say as much as the words themselves.

Understanding and admiration for classic poetry is a foundation for what follows during the weeks teachers and students in *Get Lit/OFY* classes spend together. Learning a classic poem, coming to know the poet and the work, bringing personal connections to the poem, and preparing to speak poems aloud to the class provides depth of experience. Students build foundations for pushing boundaries and setting new personal paths. We see realizations setting in among students: famous poets are people first -- people with the joys, concerns, and travails that visit us all. With a little personal attention and encouragement, youth begin to glimpse that they too have things they could be writing about in their own lives, and that poetry could be an interesting and even exciting way to achieve this. Poetry? Exciting? Well, observing classes, listening to parents, and reading what students write about this course suggest that excitement is assuredly among the apt characterizations of this experience.

The curriculum design engages a well-founded learning principle, namely that acquiring knowledge is largely a matter of connecting the unknown to what is already known. This is a key element of the class. Each student gravitates to a specific classic poem and poet. The poem they work with provides a touchstone to a

piece of original work by the student. Since students have selected and worked with a poem that has meaning and resonance for themselves, they are poised to think and to write in response to their chosen poems. More than poised, the students are typically highly motivated to put their own pens to paper and try this business of poetry. A few have written poems before, but none reports being as immersed in a world of poets and poetry while giving attention to their own work.

What seems on the mind of the poet prompts questions and reactions from the student – why is this important to me? Does it provoke questions I have about myself and my life? Or my own views? Or offer suggestions to me? Do I have critical reactions to the work? Why would these be important? And for all these realms, are there poetic ways I can express myself, even ways that are inspired by the craft and expression of the original poet? Should something rhyme here? Why do these words sound so much better than what I first wrote? Should I go into *this* before *this*? *GL/OFY* teachers often bounce questions back to unsuspecting students. This class is as much about making it *you*. Making it *true*. Not so much about getting it *right* in a traditional classroom guessing-game. Well, make it your own! Own your words and you can own your life!

Of course, the chance to weld personal classic poetry selections to original poems becomes a waypoint in the journey for the students, and eventually structures the culmination of their initial class experience. And reciting both a classic work and an original response poem to the class serves as a dramatic moment of truth. Students cannot hide behind their work, as they might in a final exam essay in English class, a creation never to be seen nor heard from again. And raising the stakes, and the fun, is joining young poets from other classes for a final poetry slam, call it a concert, where both individual and class pride are on the line.

This leads to another important objective of the class, and one for which considerable evidence emerged in our systematic observation of classrooms and student performances this year, as well as in the views of students about things they learned. This is that the class has potentially significant impacts on student understanding and sense of self. Any time we learn to do something new, our regard for our own abilities gets a lift. When we learn things that are hard won, or to which we assign great importance, the feelings of competence we gain are that much more important, and are that much more likely to spill over to general beliefs about our ability, our agency, and our sense of efficacy.

Get Lit is about language, about reading and interpreting and feeling the language of others. It's about putting faces, motivations, and life experiences with the names of famous poets. It's about students coming to realize that they themselves may have similar experiences and feelings in their own lives and that something magical can happen when they put their own lives into moving and appealing words. And it's about accomplishment and personal beliefs about one's own ability to accomplish.

It's little surprise then, that the parents of students who have gone through a *Get Lit* class can be startled to discover their children at home writing on a Wednesday evening, instead of watching television or gathering on street corners. And not surprising that the youth say they plan to continue to write poetry when completing their end of class surveys. Or that students having finished a class jump on an opportunity to re-up and go further with the *Get Lit* teachers.

This is a nice story. It's good for the kids who are its stars, for the families longing for their children to bond to the education society manages to steer their way, and for the teachers finding a means to connect with the core of today's teens.

The Evaluation of *Get Lit* -- Testing the Story

The purpose of this evaluation study is to learn from an up-close view of the teachers and students in action. There are three main purposes:

Nature of classroom experience. We first document the nature of the setting and classroom experience, particularly the teaching practices, and student responses to the *GLWI* curriculum.

Student learning and development. We assess student development – the understandings and skills they gained over the course of the class, their appraisals of what they learned, and key aspects of their motivation that may have changed in course of participating in the class.

Suggestions for improvement. The evaluation team engaged education experts as classroom observers. Each observer was present for half of all *GL/OFY* classes. This was a natural opportunity for observers, not only to document events, but also to identify places where instructional practices, materials, or classroom management strategies were very successful and where they could be improved.

How we went about the evaluation work.

We pursued our work in four, ten-week *Get Lit* classes. Each class met once a week for one hour; the class involved 12 instructional hours. Students typically worked 3-4 hours in preparation for each class, and program teachers frequently spend several hours communicating with students by e-mail between classes. The classes also engaged in a culminating poetry performance after classes were finished. The four classes were in Los Angeles County, three in south-central Los Angeles and one in Long Beach. The classes were conducted under the auspices of the Opportunities for Learning Inc. Charter Schools, taking place in the large urban storefront centers hosting the more general independent study and dropout

recovery programs operated by OFL.² Students at these school range from 15 to 19 years of age; they typically pursue one class (some do more – we do not have data for this) at a time on an independent study basis; and most seek to earn a high school diploma. The students reflect the urban, inner city demographics found in the Los Angeles region – economic disadvantage, large concentrations of Hispanic and/or African American families. Most students had dropped out of prior schools before enrolling at OFL schools.

Poetry artists/language teachers with significant experience teaching substantive poetry and spoken word workshops in Los Angeles area high schools taught the classes we observed. A teacher from Opportunities for Learning, generally one who actively worked with one or more of the enrolled participants in their general studies, regularly checked in students at the start of classes. OFL teachers gained familiarity with the course through these interactions.

Instruments

One instrument was a classroom observation protocol, a document designed to guide observers to consistent areas of inquiry as they observed classes. Three observers participated over the entire 12 weeks. All observers had urban school teaching experience (Los Angeles, Boston, Oakland, New York City, and Las Vegas) all possess masters degrees and teaching credentials, and brought 30 years of school counseling and administrative experience. Two observers are in the midst of Ph.D. education programs at UCLA. This observation protocol is appended

Another instrument was an analysis and reflection guide designed to help our observers direct their key observations and insights toward a set of questions we wished to inform directly in this study. This consisted of a set of six guiding questions that effectively convey the nature, workings, and impacts of this program.

Finally, we enlisted a pair of pre- and post- survey/tests that students completed at the start and completion of the 12-week course. This survey included topical background and experience questions, scaled questions related to student motivation, and open-response items asking students to appraise various aspects of their classes – such as what important things they had learned, what they felt about writing and performing poetry, and their plans for the future. These two survey forms are attached in the appendix.

We report content and frequency analyses of student responses to the background and self-descriptive questions. We used five specific questions to provide indications that student motivation and/or opinions changed between the start and end of the course, and possibly because of participation in the course

² The appendix contains a more detailed description of OFL Charter School programs.

Who are the GL/OFL students?

Figure 1

Pre-survey. The pre-survey asks *Get Lit* students background questions that portray the study population on familiar characteristics and also their prior experiences with poetry. We these data in Figure 1.

Get Lit / Opportunities for Learning 2010 Student Background Information			
<i>Female</i>		38	60.30%
<i>Male</i>		25	39.60%
<i>Mean age</i>		16.5	years
<i>Mean enrollment at OFL</i>		11.4	months
<i>Mean grade level</i>		10.6	
<i>Ever written a poem?</i>			
	More than one	32	50.8%
	One	18	28.6%
	Never	13	20.6%
<i>Ever "performed" a poem?</i>			
	Yes	17	27.0%
	No	46	73.0%
<i>Do you have a favorite poet?</i>			
	Yes	19	
	No	44	
<i>Mentioned as favorite</i>	Maya Angelou		
	Tupak		
	Langston Hughes		
	Frost		
	W.E.B. DuBpis		
	Young Jeezy		
	Jill Scott		
<i>How Imptrtant has poetry been to you in the past?</i>			
	I'm not familiar with poetry	6	
	I've read some poetry	22	
	I enjoy reading poetry	19	
	I read and enjoy poetry frequently	13	
<i>Based on 63 pre-surveys that had matched post-surveys</i>			

Get Lit students in this study were generally in the middle of their high school programs – between 16 and 17 years old and about half way through the tenth grade. On average, they had been students with OFL for about one year. And about 60 percent were female, 40 percent male.

Participating students came to this class with some experience with poetry. About 80 percent had written at least one poem before and just over half had written more than one poem. Only about a fourth of the students had ever performed a poem – recited a work in front of some sort of audience. Most did not name a favorite poet at the start of *Get Lit*; for those who had a favorite poet, commonly mentioned names are shown in Figure 1. As the program began, many of these poets showed up as selections studied by the students.

We asked students about their reasons for taking the *Get Lit* class. Table 1 shows their responses. Participants cited various reasons, the leading one being simply to learn more about poetry – interests in expression and writing also appear.

Table 1

Most Important Reason for Taking the Get Lit - WI Class
 Number responding and Percentage Distribution of Responses

<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	
19	44.2%	To learn more about poetry
7	16.3%	To learn to express myself
6	14.0%	I need the academic credits
4	9.3%	To learn something new
3	7.0%	To become a better writer
2	4.7%	To gain confidence
1	2.3%	Because it sounds interesting
1	2.3%	To expand my mind

Get Lit - Words Ignite/ OFL Pre-survey, 2010

We turn from this overview of the basic assumptions, intentions, and student descriptions of the *Get Lit* class to reports based on our efforts to observe and assess the operation and outcomes of the program (the four classes) over the 12-week course of study. As a reminder, we enlisted detailed and sustained observations of the classes (we observed 24 of the 48 classes involved), we had access to all class materials, and we asked students to appraise the class experiences, and we used post survey questions matched to pre-survey questions to attain certain measures of student growth over the experience.

The GLWI Classroom Experience: Observer Points of View

We begin our report with presentations of our observers' reflections on six central questions important for understanding and appraising the *Get Lit* program. The questions focus on:

- 1) Student engagement over the twelve-week class.
- 2) Student interest and engagement with classical poetry.
- 3) Student interest and engagement with writing their own poetry.
- 4) Student interest and confidence in performing classical and original poetry.
- 5) The course of student affect over the 12 weeks of the class.
- 6) Observer commendations regarding things that worked well.
- 7) Observer suggestions for improving *Get Lit*.

Each of these discussions follows.

Student Engagement In The Class.

What was the general arc of students' engagement in the GL/OFY classes? We focus on attendance, being on time, not being distracted or distracting, listening to each other, listening to teachers, speaking themselves as class participants. Did these things change in any general way over the course of the class? For some, many, or most students?

Student engagement was initially high for the most part. In the early going, there were occasions of negative participation and ridiculing of some classmates – normal stuff in the annals of many high school classrooms. It took some students 2-3 class sessions to warm up to the class and the teacher(s). Engagement generally improved over the course of the unit. It appeared that students were motivated by the talent and energy of their classmates.. By the end of the unit, the group appeared to be unified and offered positive words of support to their classmates as they performed for class peers and as they banded together with team spirit at the SLAM (the final performance). The processes of student bonding and growth into a positive classroom culture turned out to be critical ingredient allowing students to take some risks that writing and performing poetry presented to them.

During the second week of classes the students were to recite a memorized poem and share information about the author. Typically, a few students had memorized a poem by then, and even fewer had corralled information about the poet. Some lose their poems. "My name is Donald. I lost my poem," Donald said as he bowed to the class. Another student swaggered to the front of the class and looked boldly at his audience

(while wearing earphones) and announced that he was “busy” – that he “wasn’t doing anything at all” – and thus did not have his poem. A third boy said he let his grandma read it and, “If grandma has it I’m not getting it back.”

Some students acted in the early to middle weeks as if they did not have enough to do while individual or pairs of students in the class were reciting poems or discussing their poets. These were times when some class members would engage each other in peripheral matters – flirting, jousting, rolling their eyes. But when the teachers spoke or did their own presentations, the students were almost always completely attentive and respectful over the entire class. Students appeared to enjoy these teachers’ direct instruction on the themes selected for their classes.

Student behavior early on stands in sharp contrast to later attitudes towards participation and involvement we observed. By the fifth class, students are actively listening and participating in a way that contributed positively to the goals of the four classes. As audience members, the class listened attentively and their interest manifests both in verbal and non-verbal actions, such as leaning in to the speaker as well as enthusiastic responses – “BAM! He got it!” someone exudes, in appreciation of a well-said line.

We observe improvement in punctuality and attendance as the class proceeds. During the second week typically half of the students arrive on time. In later classes most of the students arrive early and use the time to ask the teacher questions or take advantage of extra time for the teacher to coach them on their poetry performances prior to class.

Students seemed to sense the pressures involved with publicly reciting poetry, whether classical or their own. Their engagement with the class and their reliance on their classmates increase, understandably, as the time until classroom and final performances decreases.

Students commented on their feelings of engagement and interest in the class and poetry. At the end of one class, the teacher said that class would need to be cancelled the following week due to SAT testing at the school. One student said she didn’t want class to be cancelled because she “liked this class.” Another student asked if class could be two hours (instead of one) because, “we need help.” These comments characterize the overall sense of growing involvement and investment students experience as a participant in this class.

Student Engagement In Classical Poetry.

What were patterns of student engagement with the various elements of classical poetry? Their curiosity about poems being discussed, their participation in discussions of poems others might choose to perform? Their curiosity about the lives of particular poets or of poets more generally? Did these things change in any general way over the course of the class? For some, many, most students?

During the first class, twenty minutes was spent handing out poems that students could choose to work with – that is, to memorize and recite and eventually perform. As part of this process, the teacher reads a snippet of the poem and students volunteer to take a poem that strikes them. There was much excitement with the students calling out and laughing in response to the poems and with several eager hands raised to take claim to each poem. There were also positive verbal responses to the poem; one example was Ricky calling out, “I’ll take that one – it’s cool!” When a teacher first reads poems about the Harlem Renaissance, students say things like “That’s tight!” in appreciative tones. They seemed to like and identify immediately with the sentiment of the poems.

There was evidence that students develop an increased interest and appreciation for the poet they selected. For example, one student placed both hands on his heart prior to reciting his poem in apparent reverence to his poet, whom he announced to be Langston Hughes. Another student spontaneously declared Walt Whitman to be “the messiah of poetry,” interrupting the teacher’s explanation of the poet’s tremendous influence on the discipline. *GL/OFY* teachers focus on how a poem speaks to the reader. Teachers want students to “own” their poems, and encourage students to reflect on their own lives and where there might be common elements between their lives, or someone they know, or something they could imagine. We conclude that the featured engagement with classical poetry brought by this class is the invitation to students to find imagery, narratives, and lessons in poems that teaches them about themselves.

With that ideal in mind, students do not pursue their poets much further than their chosen poem, nor do they typically take very active interest in the poets their classmates choose. This may be a shortcoming; but it may be asking too much. This limitation seems more an artifact of the structure of class activities and what can be addressed in 12 hours’ time, and perhaps also of preoccupation with performing a classical work and getting on with an original poem to perform rather than any lack of interest on the students’ part.

A surge of interest in their poets – and in their poet’s works -- does occur when students find a hook that speaks directly to them in the poem. This comes out in how they present the poem (with emphasis on or delight in certain terms or phrases) and in how they work to compose their response poem.

Student Composition of Original Poems.

How do students take to composing their own poem or poems over the course of the class? For example, from expressions of skepticism that they would be able to write a poem at all, or one that mattered to anyone, to pride that they in fact did. Do these things change in any general way over the course of the class? For some, many, most students?

Composing original poems appears to capture the students' interests and talents to a greater degree than any other element of the classes. The most seasoned of our observers writes: This was probably the most critical aspect of the class. I don't think many students have had this kind of work that is academic while at the same time being personal. They were able to bring themselves to the table and the teacher skillfully kept them safe. Many of the responses were amazing – very powerful and also aligned to the original poem indicating a depth of understanding. One of the students had a very short poem and lacked confidence in memorizing or performing. But this student became engaged and eventually wrote a long response poem with an excellent delivery.

The task of composing a response poem to the students' selected classical poem was introduced in the second class. In the time frame of only ten minutes, many students are ready with an original poem to share. When the teacher asks who would like to read their personal response to the class almost all hands are raised. As students read their responses, the rest of the class becomes completely absorbed in listening. One student, Mauricio, walks to the front of the class and announces his title, "*Flirtation*," which elicits laughter. After his reading, the teacher asks him to share more about his response poem and he explains lyrically, "I have temptation of flirtation every day. It comes in many forms but I'd rather discuss it in a poem." This comment illustrates this student's interest in using poetry as a way to communicate his personal experience as a young man. Each response poem written by the students achieves this objective – they are personal statements of being a youth with feelings, dreams, frustrations, and so on.

Students continue working on response poems through the course of the unit. A lot of work goes on behind the scenes. The teachers encourage students to e-mail work in progress for comments along the way, and students widely seize on this offer. Adele has difficulty getting started on hers and during week five is being disruptive, talking frequently as other students worked on their poems. The teacher works with Adele individually at this time and suggested that she write about her city. Adele replies, "I hate Eagleton!" The teacher responds, "All the better!" and suggests that she make a list about what Adele hears, smells, and feels in her part of the world. Adele sits down and focuses on her response poem that over time develops into a powerful poem, which she performs emphatically and confidently at the final slam. She begins, "I'm from Eagleton. Anger is how I express myself... no one listens to you when you are out of breath."

It is through composing response poems as well as listening to their peers' original poems that appears to excite students through the course of the unit. The performances of these poems are authentic and heartfelt, with students speaking loudly or with strained voices and involving their bodies in articulate meaning. In contrast, the performances of the classical poetry are more matter-of-fact. During the SLAM, the audience gasps as Jarrod shares how a suburban, white mother fears the sight of an African man. A student is overheard saying, "She gives me chills!" as a peer reads her poetry, "I know a lot and through my words I show it." These examples show the young poets understanding of how words can be powerful as well as their confidence in creating poems and sharing them with others. .

Student Performance of Classical and Original Poems.

How did students respond to the prospects of performing (reciting) poetry in class, performing their own poetry, and to performing before groups beyond their immediate classes?

Early in the program most students are very timid in their attempts to recite poems in front of the class. Deirdre and Alvi have memorized their poems for the second week of class. During this first performance, Deirdre stands with her hands in her back pocket and her eyes scanning the floor while saying her lines. Alvi, nervous and barely audible, recites his memorized poem and then sits down with a smile suggesting some pleasure, at least that the experience is over. Adele is also nervous to be in front of the class and stops frequently to say she doesn't remember the poem or "It's hot in here!" as she squirms under the pressure of performance. However, by week five, despite Adele announcing she is nervous as she walks to the front of the class, she performs her poem confidently. The teacher commends her, saying Adele did not let her nerves get the best of her and make the audience suffer. By the time of the SLAM, Adele was cool and calm in front of the audience and earned the most points for her round. As well, though Alvi did not become the strongest performer, a team member told him, "You really stepped it up," following their group performance at the SLAM.

The final slam appears to be motivating for several students. For instance, Angie missed several classes and did not have a poem memorized. However, as the class begins more formally rehearsing for the final performance, she insists that she wants a role in the SLAM. In general, all the students are more intent on improving their performance in the classes immediately before the SLAM. This is evidenced in improved focus in class and a willingness to practice poems repeatedly.

Interestingly, it is some of these early-strugglers who shine brightest in the final performances.

Impacts On Student Motivation and Affect.

How did student affect appear over the course of the class -- their apparent thoughts about themselves as students, as individuals, as members of a collaborative group? Their levels of self-confidence?

This is probably the greatest area of personal growth we observe. A first element of affect is the fun that students have in these classes – a spirit that grows as the purpose and focus clarify, and as students realize they will need each other to perform as a team at the end of things. A common issue for the students when they begin to memorize their poems is that they have limited presentation or public speaking skills. What to do with hands, where to look, how to pace works, how to organize what they say. By the final performances and the slam students are able to “take the stage.” They feel and act like different people – as far as their confidence and sense of competence are concerned.

Group performances of poetry illustrate other things that are going on for the students. For group presentations, often involving a half dozen students, a lot of give and take is required, as well as support for fellow students, and accommodations to team member mistakes in rehearsals and performances alike. Students work well together; they do not seem to mind moving lines around if someone else proves better at delivering one thing as opposed to another – there is a lot to go around and a lot to celebrate.

Although *GL/OFY* classes students do not typically express desires to become a group, or for recognition that they are a group, the process of becoming a cohesive unit is indeed clear as we watch these classes. It is startling to think that when they begin the *GL/OFY* program, most of the students do not know each other at all. Within a few weeks, they show a lot of support for each other, especially as the course-end performances approach. Students also hold each other accountable, and don't let anybody get away with not practicing or participating. Confidence about performing with others and alone definitely was higher at the end of the ten weeks.

Observer Commendations – What Works Well?

Here are the words of our observers about what seems particularly effective in the *GLWI* program:

- a. Student growth is a huge part of the positive impact of this program. I had my doubts about the intention to memorize the poems by many of the students. They were not putting in the time and some probably did not know how to memorize.

The fact that they did get off-book was an accomplishment. But students also owned the poem by personalizing it during the delivery or with the response.

- b. This is a student-centered project that allows students to learn the academic material (poetry, structure, history, background of different poets) and be creative in how they present the poem (performance skills) and how they respond (writing skills).
- c. For many, this was a highlight of their education career. Some will continue writing poetry. Others will
- d. The director achieved a profound connection with her students. This is best expressed in their words (offered at the SLAM). One student shared the following sentiment: “Grandma taught me to read when I was two. Diane taught me to breathe.”
- e. Another student expressed his newfound appreciation of poetry, “I never liked poetry. I liked rapping. I like poetry now thanks to you.” This appreciation of poetry also extended to families who were participating as audience members at the final event and likely listened to their sons or daughters practice their poems at home.
- f. Though only a few students from each center formally shared their gratitude to Diane at the event, there was much evidence of student’s attachment to the director in the classes. Their enormous efforts often seemed geared towards meeting her high expectations. She was adamant for students to achieve. Consequently, the students did not mind her demands to say a line over and over until they accomplished the desired effect. Her teaching was lively and animated and likewise the students were energetic in their involvement. She spoke to the students in an authentic manner that they understood. She’d ask a student to be “more cocky and less precious” and this student would immediately read his lines as if he was a different individual.
- g. In sum, the director challenged students to take risks and explore new identities. This devoted attention from an adult appeared to be exactly the ticket for them to affiliate with learning and explore aspects of poetry and theater that otherwise may not have interested them. The opportunity for performance and the sense of accomplishment related to taking this risk also seemed to be significant to many of the youth.
- h. Eagleton offers a great example of the director (principle GWLI teacher and program founder) taking a group of students *without* a natural propensity for poetry or performance and making the process truly work and be beneficial for students. This is huge as far as replicability is concerned!

- i. The culture created by the teachers allowed poetry to be accepted as “cool” from the first day, which greatly helped the process move forward.

Observers’ Suggestions for Improving *Get Lit*

Here are the words of our observers about how the *GL/OFY* course might be improved in the future:

- a. Teach students how to memorize more effectively (or manage memorization expectations more effectively). There was lots of struggling with this. Students seemed good with memorization when it became very important to them, i.e. toward the end of course performances.
- b. Students selected poems in the first class and were asked to memorize them for the next week. They were also asked to bring in information to share about the author. Very few students memorized the poem or brought in information about the author early on, and there was a lot of negative behavior surrounding being put on the spot in front of the class to recite the poem.
- c. It is possible that many of the students who dropped the class did so as a direct consequence of the negative interactions that resulted from their *supposed* lack of preparedness to recite a memorized poem (many of which were very lengthy). In the future, questions of how memorizing the poems might be scaffolded as well as exploring ways to have students perform for their classmates that are less threatening can be addressed.
- d. As part of this inquiry, a plan for creating a supportive classroom environment for taking risks and learning will help achieve these aims. This supportive culture was evidenced in later classes but given the early challenges for students to take some risks, developing a supportive culture from the start seems essential, given the class design. This is a tough challenge. Trust takes time. Many *GL/OFY* students have dealt with a lot of distrust in their lives and this is not easily countered.
- e. The program is ambitious. These 12 hours afforded little opportunity for meaningful discussions of poetry, even though such discussion clearly fit with the purposes of this class. It seems that having developed the cohesion that emerges in these classes, it would be smart to offer a second class that would allow going into the many processing elements of the agenda at greater length. It is apparent the class is geared towards performance and is very successful at this objective. However, it is worth considering as the program evolves how a better understanding and knowledge of poetry can be developed.

- f. Among topics and extended class could pursue is thinking more deeply about the historical connections related to the poems included in the unit. Also, more explicit and deeper work with the themes of the class, such as “Race and Revolution” or the “Harlem Renaissance.”
- g. The ways in which students responded to each other’s work or offered feedback were informal – generally in the form of calling out enthusiastically after an impressive performance, or with snapping and clapping. Student knowledge, experience, and interest in their peers’ progress could have been drawn into class activities to make the learning more collaborative. Students make fine audiences for each other; but they have a lot more than this to give each other.
- h. This class could have been improved by the use of structures to facilitate student engagement. Often when the teacher was working one-on-one with a single student, the others were off task. Instituting something like peer feedback forms or small group work rehearsal work may help remedy this issue.
- i. One of the OFL centers housed the class in a large room that was typically very busy and distracting during the class. Three of the centers used smaller, self-contained classrooms that are more conducive to the activities required by the Get Lit program.

What we learned from the post-program student surveys.

Our post-program survey (a copy is appended) asked students to describe various things they learned during the program. The survey also asked particular questions related to aspects of student motivation, questions that were repeated from the pre-program student survey. We are able to capture changes or growth in student motivation through this design. (It is more accurate to say that these questions provide modest indicators of student motivation – we enlisted questions standard in the psychological literature, but we did not approach this work with a full battery of multi-item scales as we might in a rigorous research trial).

Performing classical poetry. An initial activity in each class was having students listen to, read, and select a work of an established contemporary or historic poet. And then to memorize a poem or section for presentation to the class. The performing aspect of the Get Lit course is central – it forces students to attend to classic poetry, to learn the words, and explore their meaning. Having to recite poetry in meaningful and expressive ways, an explicit goal within the class, is a powerful incentive to attend to the work. So we asked students about the meaning or importance of poetry performance after they had completed the class.

Table 2

If Performing Classical Poetry is Important for you, Why?
Number responding and Percentage Distribution of Responses

<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	
15	53.6%	Performing helps me know what the poet was feeling
5	17.9%	Its fun, engaging
3	10.7%	Performing isn't that important
3	10.7%	Helps me understand myself
1	3.6%	persistence
1	3.6%	like to express myself

Get Lit - Words Ignite/ OFL Post-survey, 2010

Shown in Table 2, the leading student response about the importance of performing poetry was the association of “feeling” with performance. Somehow, the feeling the poet brought to a work or the feelings prompting the poem are more transparent when a poem is performed than when it is simply read, or committed to memory. Without documentation of this, we would say that the teachers of the Get Lit class and members of the poetry community would resonate with this assessment. Antonio Damasio and other cognitive neuroscientists argue persuasively that non-verbal cues such as body movement and facial expression account for much of what we transmit when we speak – especially feeling components.³ The students pick this up.

Students also report that performing is fun and that it helps with self-understanding.

³ Antonio Damasio: *The feeling of what happens*. Balance of citation to be added.

Performing their own poetry. We then refined this question. What about performing your own poetry? This step followed immersion in classical poetry. Students wrote their own poems – mainly responses to the classical works they had studied, learned, and performed. Students then performed their responses along with the original poems that had inspired them.

Table 3

If performing your own poetry is important to you, Why?
 Number responding and Percentage Distribution of Responses

<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	
18	58.1%	to express myself
11	35.5%	pride of accomplishment
2	6.5%	gets out my feelings

Get Lit - Words Ignite/ OFL Post-survey, 2010

Not surprisingly, student responses loaded heavily in two areas. The first was the power of their own poetry in expressing themselves. Students gravitated over the course to more searching and thoughtful regard for their personal takes on their classic poets and ways to convey their responses effectively.

Students also felt that the performance aspect of the class generated pride in the simply accomplishment of performing. This too seems a natural consequence of the class. Students learned to do something they had largely never done, and they learned (based on our end-of-class observations) to perform with good skills. And they received positive feedback from peers and teachers in doing this. Pride of accomplishment follows.

Student learning about themselves. We also asked students what they learned about themselves in the process. Since teachers stressed some personal searching and thought in student responses to classical poetry, students typically traversed some territory of self-understanding in the process. Student responses to this question shown in Table 4 were directed to topical matters of self-understanding (they learned things about themselves from expressing themselves) and also to their learning that they had abilities

they had not recognized before – the ability to express, the ability to write poetry, the ability to think better. And through it all, they report gaining confidence.

Table 4

Most Important you Learned about Yourself in this class
Number responding and Percentage Distribution of Responses

<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	
12	40.0%	I learned things from expressing myself
12	40.0%	I gained confidence
9	30.0%	That I can learn about myself
8	26.7%	That I can write poetry
4	13.3%	That I can improve my thinking ability, e.g. memory

Get Lit - Words Ignite/ OFL Post-survey, 2010

The very positive student reactions to learning and performing and composing poetry as the main elements of this class lead fairly seamlessly to their expectation for the immediate future. More than 90 percent of students reported that they would continue writing poems after the class (66 percent) or probably continue writing poems (26 percent), as shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Will you continue writing poems?
Number responding and Percentage Distribution of Responses

	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Yes	23	65.7%
Probably	9	25.7%
No	3	8.6%

Get Lit - Words Ignite/ OFL Post-survey, 2010

And students enthusiastically support the idea that their OFL centers (or other education programs) offer the Get Lit class in the future.

Table 6

Should this poetry class be offered to other OFL students in the future?
Number responding and Percentage Distribution of Responses

	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Yes	30	81.1%
Probably	6	16.2%
Probably r	1	2.7%

Get Lit - Words Ignite/ OFL Post-survey, 2010

Editor note: change to probably not.

Most students said yes to this question. More than 90 percent said yes or probably yes to the idea of offering the class in the future at *Opportunities for Learning*.

Growth in Student Motivation

We used a standard strategy for exploring student motivation in this study, although an abbreviated one. Experiences that promote gains in personal competence may contribute to growth in an individual's more general sense of ability and confidence. In the reports above, students showed various ways in which they felt that Get Lit contributed to enhanced competency. These competencies included ability to write poetry, the ability to understand them better, and abilities to think and express. Accompanying these developments, students report more general gains in confidence in themselves.

These areas lie in the domain of *achievement motivation* – an area of development focused on self-confidence, self-concept, beliefs in one's self-efficacy and agency, beliefs that one's efforts matter, and the roles of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to act in particular ways.⁴ Motivation is an important potential area of effect for a program like Get Lit because visible student accomplishment is at the heart of the enterprise, and tangible accomplishment in the midst of one's peers, teachers, and (ultimately, at the final slam) friends and family can have dramatic influences on anyone.

Aspects of motivation status and growth are typically estimated from individual responses to a battery of questions. A set of 5 or 6 questions might probe efficacy

⁴ See Deborah Stipek, *Motivated students*. Balance of citation to be added. Jere Brophy, *Motivating students to learn*. Balance of citation to be added.

beliefs, for example. And other sets of questions are each directed to other facets of motivation.

For this study, we kept our motivation assessment brief, because of our needs to collect information in several areas. We wanted to keep the overall process to about 15 minutes in each administration; our past experiences suggest that interest and attention to in-class surveys such as ours are fragile. We used paired individual questions to explore each of the developments shown in Table 7; that is, we compared student answers to each question on the post-survey with answers to the same questions on the pre-survey. And we average all student responses on each pre- versus post- question to assess change. These are the survey questions and their related (*motivation scales*):

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

7. I feel like I am a part of my school. (*Bonding to school community.*)
8. I think I am doing pretty well in school. (*Academic self-concept.*)
9. I often focus on new ways to get things in life that are most important to me. (*Creative outlook.*)
10. If I'm stuck on a problem, I usually CAN'T come up with many ways to solve it. (*Divergent thinking; reversed scale*)
11. Luck or chance seems very important in achieving my goals. (*Effort makes success more than luck; reversed scale*).
12. I know that hard work is most important in order to do well in life. (*Belief in hard work to do well.*)

The results appear in Table 7.

Table 7 Get Lit - Words Ignite Opportunities for Learning Classrooms Winter-Spring, 2010 N=63 Psychological/Opinion Scales: Pre- and Post-Class Measures				
<u>Scale</u>	<u>Pre-score</u>	<u>Post-score</u>	<u>Growth</u>	<u>Significance</u>
Bonding to School Community	3.24	3.88	yes	0.05
Academic Self Concept	3.71	4.09	yes	0.05
Creative Outlook	4.00	4.12	yes	0.10
Divergent Thinking	3.77	4.24	yes	0.05
Effort makes success more than luck	3.29	3.37	trace	ns
Belief in hard work to do well	4.37	4.56	yes	0.05

Scores are based on five point scales.

GLWI / Opportunities for Learning 2010 Evaluation

Positive program associations with motivation indicators. Table 7 shows significant positive growth between average pre- and post- motivation measures for the 63 program students in the four *Get Lit/OFL* classes. The table points to these by showing pre- and post- scale scores, an indication of whether or not there was growth, (i.e. positive change between specific pre- and post-scores), and standard significance scores. The 0.05 indication in the right hand column means that the probability that pure chance caused the observed difference between a pre- and post- score is less than 5 percent. For only one indicator in the table, the effort and success measure, the scores grew, but not enough to be called significant. (*Trace* refers to this very small positive growth.)

These scores are impressive, but the growth is not surprising given the duration and intensity of the Get Lit experience. They are not surprising first because of what we see in the program through observations and what students wrote about the experiences in their post- surveys. A number of things in the program simply work, at least for a majority of students. And where student motivation is concerned, composing and performing poetry in a public space, when done well, can be seen to be uplifting in many ways for the students. They have learned to do something they have never done before; they receive supportive feedback from teachers, their peers, and audiences. Feeling better about yourself and your school experience are natural correlates.

Researchers using these scales to test motivation change in education programs often see some progress on motivation indicators in the context of high quality, but often shorter and less intensive programs. For some students, *Get Lit* was the only focus for participants over the time of the 12-week class. This design is rare in regular schools where students study several subjects at once, and where experimental studies attached to a curriculum are typically embedded a varied array of non-related student pursuits.

Student postscripts to their Get Lit teachers.

We affixed a simple question to the post- survey. *Any message or messages for your teacher(s) in this class.*

On the following page, in Table 8, we show the entire inventory of comments. Twenty-one of the students wrote in response to this question. The comments show a lot of praise and endearment for their Get Lit teachers, and for Diane Luby Lane, the program director and principal teacher. The students have been writing poetry for three months; while do not have a pre-measure on this, these comments show a lot of feeling and passion. These seem to symbolize the character and quality of the program in the minds of students.

As teachers during a substantial part of our professional lives, we would eagerly welcome comments such as these about our teaching efforts.

Table 8**Student Messages for GLWI teachers**

Program was great. Thank you for making this possible for the students and everyone else
Diane, you were a great teacher for us. Thanks for giving us this class.

Thanks for letting me come to this class.

thank you for everything

thanks for not quitting on me

thank you for helping me

thx for a chance to express myself in a positive way

thank you

thank you!

I luv this experience & Diane!

I am too scared n shy to perform!

Diane was my favourite teacher!

Thank you!

Diane is an awesome teacher and Chris is caring and awesome

this program was fun!

we going to win

thx for this opportunity

thank you very much

ms Diane is cool

thank you for this great opportunity

I love you

Get Lit - Words Ignite/ OFL Post-survey, 2010

Conclusions

There is a lot to like in the Get Lit/OFL program. We will tend more broadly to conclusions and recommendations after getting program teacher and OFL supervisor reactions to this draft evaluation report.

However, we do know some things about the focus and nature of our conclusions immediately and present the current inventory here.

Conclusions

- 1) The Get Lit Program is an attractive offering to students in the OFY centers. They have some attachment to poetry, especially to Rap styles, as they consider enrolling and find the work connected to their initial ideas about poetry.
- 2) The program seems to attract students who want a more collaborative experience as part of their independent study routines. OFL centers are doing more and more for small groups of students, and this is an example. We encourage this trend to encourage peer bonding and cooperative modes of learning.
- 3) The Get Lit program is very well organized, and rich in its designs. The four centers pursued similar programs, but with different themes and different literatures. The program director has the skills to work within such diversity and the other program teachers seem skilled in the classes where they were assigned.
- 4) Get Lit teachers know their stuff, they like poetry and are involved with poetry professionally, and they seem genuinely to like adolescents. This is a powerful recipe for success.
- 5) The program hits the ground running, with students and teacher reading classic poetry on day one and gravitating to a poet for the focus of their studies.
- 6) Students take to performing poetry immediately. It's a tough element of the program, with memorizing poems proving a challenge, and initial interactions between embarrassed student and amused classmates. But students gain performance proficiency fast, which keeps them at it.
- 7) The learning and polishing curve swoops upward in the final two weeks of the program. Students respond vigorously to the pressure of performing. They don't give up at that point.
- 8) Final student poetry performances are impressive. Students recited poetry they have learned well, with lots of personal interpretation and connection, and with great emotion.
- 9) It's little wonder that students themselves have good things to say about the effects of the program on their abilities to read and understand poems, to write poems, and to write and think more generally.
- 10) The program produced measurable associations with motivation developments – the program may cause these effects. We include here academic self-concept, beliefs that their efforts are important, creative thinking, and divergent thinking.

Suggestions for the Get Lit Program

- 1) Students find day one difficult. It amounts to an intensive blast of classical poetry followed by student selections that might better be based on at least a second day's work with classical poetry. That the course is only twelve classes long seems to prompt a move-along orientation up front.
- 2) During the bulk of the classes, students are working on memorization of classic poetry, then writing their own poems, and then learning to perform both. There are many times during the class where teacher attention is necessarily drawn to individual students, one at a time, for several minutes or more. This leaves the remainder of class members with what appears to be not enough to do. And attention can wander. The program should design ways for all-student involvement in something for most of the class. The group poem process seems to not have this problem. Having students work in pairs for more of this, up front, would keep more involved.
- 3) Memorizing poems for future performance is daunting and difficult. Students succeed in what the program asks for over the twelve weeks, but a lot of work and time in class seems wrapped around memorization issues. Our observers believe that the classes might turn to some specific memorization and memory techniques. There are a number of designs for this. Smoothing out the memorization processes would allow more attention to the more subtle, interpretative, expressive, and fun aspects of poetry.

Our postscript: And what about the story?

We introduced this report with a narrative that spoke to an idealized version of the Get Lit program. We won't at this time parse the story for fine-grained examination of the program's elements and philosophies. But, we encourage readers who have scanned this draft report to go back to the narrative, read through it, and to draw their own conclusions about how the evidence we amassed seems consistent with the story. There is good evidence of alignment. We see a lot in the story that actually materializes in the classroom. Student achievements in thinking about poets and classical poetry, probing what poets meant, and writing in poetic ways to connect their own lives – these are all evident. We also see some things that fall a bit short – not all students jump in with maximum engagement; a few leave the class mid-stream. But these things are inevitable – to some degree in all high schools and with more frequency in communities at risk.

End of draft report.

Appendix

Pre-Program Survey

GET LIT, WORDS IGNITE. 2010 OFL

OFL appreciates your responses to these questions. If you do not wish to answer any particular question, you do not have to. All surveys will be held in confidence by the research team and not shared with students, teachers, or any OFL employees. Thank you very much! Professor James Catterall, UCLA

Name _____ Check if: M ___ F ____ Age ____

1. How long have you been enrolled at OFL? ____ years ____ months
2. What is your current grade level? __8th __9th __10th __11th __12th
3. Have you ever written a poem? __ No __ Yes [1 or 2] __Yes [3 or more]
4. Have you ever recited a poem of your own before a school class? __Y __N
5. If you have any **favorite poets**, please write the names of one or two here:

_____ I don't have any ____

6a. How important has POETRY been to you in the past? (Check one.)

- I'm not very familiar with poetry. _____
I've read some poems from books and they're OK. _____
I enjoy reading poems _____
I read and enjoy poems frequently. _____

6b. What is your most important reason for taking this GetLit class? (Use margins or back of this page if you need to.)

more >>>

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Please check one:

12. I feel like I am a part of my school

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not like me at all	A little like me	Sort of like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

13. I think I am doing pretty well in school

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not like me at all	A little like me	Sort of like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

14. I often focus on new ways to get things in life that are most important to me.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not like me at all	A little like me	Sort of like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

15. If I'm stuck on a problem, I usually **CAN'T** come up with many ways to solve it.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not like me at all	A little like me	Sort of like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

16. Luck or chance seems very important in achieving my goals.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not like me at all	A little like me	Sort of like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

12. I know that hard work is most important in order to do well in life.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not like me at all	A little like me	Sort of like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

13. Anything else you feel like writing as you get started? Here or on back:

That's it! Thank you. Enjoy this class!

Post-Program Survey

Name _____ OFL Center: _____

1. If you have **favorite poets**, please indicate the names of up to *three* here:

2. What do you think about **reading POETRY**? (Check one.)

- I don't read much poetry. _____
- I've read some poems and they're OK. _____
- I enjoy reading poems at times. _____
- I read and enjoy poems frequently. _____

3. If performing **classical poetry** is important for you, describe how:

4. If performing **your own poetry** is important for you, describe how:

5. What are the most important things you **learned about yourself** in this class?

One important thing:

Another important thing:

6a. Will you continue to write poems in the future?

No__ Maybe__ Probably__ Yes__ Any comments about this?:

6b. Should this class be offered to other students at *Opportunities for Learning*?
No__ Probably not__ Probably__ Yes__ Any comments?:

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Please check one:

17. I feel like I am a part of my school

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not like me at all	A little like me	Sort of like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

18. I think I am doing pretty well in school

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not like me at all	A little like me	Sort of like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

9. I often focus on **new ways** to get things in life that are most important to me.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not like me at all	A little like me	Sort of like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

10. If I'm stuck on a problem, I usually **CAN'T** come up with **many ways** to solve it.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not like me at all	A little like me	Sort of like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

11. Luck or chance seems very important in achieving my goals.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not like me at all	A little like me	Sort of like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

12. I know that hard work is most important in order to do well in life.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not like me at all	A little like me	Sort of like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

13. Any message or messages for your teachers in this class?

Or for your regular *Opportunities for Learning* teachers and the school?