

# Towards a Holistic Pedagogy

by Jamila Woods

My first spoken word teacher was incredible and amazing and sometimes terrifying. She wore thick rimmed glasses and tied her long dreadlocks in a cascading bun. When I was sixteen years old, I was practicing my very first slam poem in her kitchen. When I finished, she said, *That is not your voice, do it again.* I did not understand what she meant, but I did it again. When I finished, her face was not smiling. *Do it again.* I did my poem over and over again. It felt like hours and days. The kitchen was hot and smelled like avocados. All the other girls on my poetry team sat at the table, watching me. Eventually my teacher would not let two words out of my mouth before: *Start over, do it again.* I did not understand whose voice I was using. I did not understand what I was doing wrong. I did it again and again until I was crying. She waited patiently for me to dry up. *Do it again.* I remember exactly what shirt I was wearing. I remember the exact location of the tile I was standing on. I don't remember finishing the last line. I think I dropped a stone down my throat and heard it plop into my diaphragm. I think I shed a gray snake skin. I remember her face finally smiling, staring into my swollen eyes. *That is your voice.* She said, *You have to use that.*

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Before the classroom of my poetry teacher's kitchen, my understanding of "Poetry" with a capital P was limited to school settings. I attended a Jesuit college prep high school that's population was majority white, much like the canon of its English department. There was this sense of poetry being a very serious art form written by people who were usually white and old or already dead. I specifically remember reading John Donne's "The Flea" in English class and feeling like he was speaking another language from another time. Every line had to be deciphered with a dictionary. My teacher, who was very passionate and kind, was excited to explain the poem's hidden meaning to my fellow classmates and I. While the poem seemed to be an anecdote about a flea biting the speaker and his lady crush, it was actually an extended metaphor about the speaker wanting to have sex with her. Essentially, as my high school mind translated, the poem was an old English dude's wordy and kind of gross attempt to holler. I am certain the only reason I remember this poem is because of my teacher's passion and excitement in introducing it to us. I greatly appreciated her enthusiasm, but the takeaway for me was thinking of poems as having strict rules and needing to be analyzed and "figured out" in a very particular way.

It wasn't until I was introduced to spoken word and performance poetry in after-school programs and youth community arts spaces that I began to read more living poets and poets of color. Not only was the canon in these spaces more expansive, the way poetry was taught was less based in analysis and more about connecting to the text. Having grown up taking school very seriously, I prided myself on raising my hand, answering the teacher's question and watching the smile bloom on

their face as they accepted my answer as the “correct” one. In these spaces, the questions about poems were not “What does this poem mean?” but rather “What about this poem stood out to you?” There was no one right answer that my poetry mentors were looking for. The person next to me might notice something completely different in a poem, and both layers of meaning could coexist.

It was in these alternative learning spaces I finally found a language I felt fluent in. As a teenager existing between multiple worlds (the ostensibly white world of my school and neighborhood vs. the Black world of my church vs. the familiar yet somewhat sheltered world of my childhood home) I constantly felt like my language failed me. Conversations at school felt like double dutch, I was never sure where or how to enter the ropes. At church, I felt like my voice betrayed my brand of Blackness, which I didn’t feel was always accepted as legitimate. I found particular freedom in the power to invent a narrative of my life in my own words. There was freedom too in being able to write about taboo topics or unspeakable experiences in a coded language that only I could understand. My first poems were either imagined stories I thought to be more interesting than my actual life, or autobiographical poems so coded in layers of image and metaphor I doubt my mentors knew what I was trying to write about. There was an element of hiding or distancing happening in these poems. Reflecting on it now, I can see it was a way for me to feel safe telling the stories I was telling. It was also often a result of me associating poetry with needing to be “deep” or be hard to understand in order to be considered good writing.

Through my poetry mentors, I was introduced to the tradition of South Side legend Gwendolyn Brooks, who said: “*write what you know.*” This was a transformative idea for me as a young person who grew up thinking my life was pretty boring. It was through this reframing that I realized I had been surrounded by poetry and poets my entire life. Black language is inherently poetic. There was poetry in the way my Dad called my hair a bird’s nest when I neglected to comb it. There was poetry in the call & response between Reverend Love and the congregation of my grandmother’s church. There was the erasure poem Gramma J recited as grace before eating: *Jesus wept*, the shortest verse in the bible, thus the prayer that allowed us to get to the food with the quickness. Ms. Brooks’ lesson was an affirmation that my story was worthy of telling and not at all boring. It was up to me to document the depths and nuances of my life and my feelings about living it.

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Years later, as a facilitator, I’ve often reflected on what my poetry teacher was trying to teach me in her kitchen that winter evening. Even though spoken word has a long history outside of traditional education settings, within the spoken word community there are certain trends and methods of writing and performing that become canonized in a particular way. We all know the “poet voice” often represented in film and tv representations of “spoken word” or “slam” poetry. I had definitely

adapted that cadence in my own performance, and my teacher was trying to break me of that, challenging me to embrace the natural cadence and texture of my voice without trying to change it. This lesson was invaluable to me, more than I could possibly have recognized in that moment. It not only influenced the way I went on to perform poetry, but also affirmed me in my singing voice as well.

Still, this memory stands out in my mind not only because of the lesson being taught, but how embarrassed and ashamed I felt in the teaching. As an introverted, self-conscious teenager who prided herself in being “good” at things, I was uncomfortable with being called out as needing to be improved. I was uncomfortable crying in front of my teammates. I was uncomfortable not knowing what exactly was being asked of me in that moment and how to do it “well.” I often romanticize the memory in the telling, because it’s been so valuable to me. But I wonder if there could have been a different approach to teaching this lesson that didn’t result in tears.

As a teaching artist who has lofty goals of creating safe spaces for students and also fostering their creative and personal growth, I often feel like I am failing at one or more of those goals. I am often asking myself questions like: What modes of discomfort are productive? How can you create room for a discomfort that is also nurturing? How can I be aware of the specific challenges my students face in different growth areas, and find a variety of approaches to developing those areas?

As a facilitator, my goal is to create a learning environment that encourages self-reflection and invites students to be active participants in their learning and architects of their own creative process. My poetry pedagogy is centered around viewing the creative process holistically and making space for experimentation and play in the learning process.

This essay, like much of my writing, is partially inspired by my experience and part by my aspirations. As a teaching artist and human, I am constantly critiquing myself, every moment I did not enact these ideals was a moment that guided me closer to being able to articulate them. What follows is a collection of compasses, or guiding principles that have led me to my pedagogy.

## **Pedagogical Compasses**

*:: Poetry as crate-digging, collage*

Much of my creative practice & teaching pedagogy is influenced by hip-hop cultural practice. In my work I often use sampling as a way to layer narratives and emotional landscapes to create something new. Similarly, when teaching I introduce my students to model texts and encourage them to borrow elements from these works. The most common examples of this is reading a model text and asking students to use a line from the text as a “ghost line” or start line. The idea is for the students

to begin writing off of that line and later erase it once they flesh the poem out. For beginning poets, part of finding your unique voice is trying out different writing approaches and experimenting with what feels authentic to you. It is important to emphasize the distinction between plagiarism/biting and sampling/borrowing. In the spirit of Jean Michel Basquiat, sampling is like his concept of “boom for real,” it is “someone’s old idea going through your new mind.” In this way, sampling is a form of authorship, a way of using found materials to collage something new.

:: *Poetry as presence*

Mary Oliver writes: “Attention is the beginning of devotion.” It has been said in many ways by many people that the task of the poet is to pay attention: poet as witness, poet as observer. In an interview with *V.S. Podcast* Angel Nafis said, “paying attention is the rent we pay for being alive.” I try to emphasize to students that poetry is not only happening when we sit down to write. Instead, we can think about poetry as a way of being in the world, a way of observing and being present to the world around you and its happenings. In teaching practice, this looks like talking about the process of writing in an expansive way. The writing is not only happening during the 20 minutes at the end of the workshop when students are told to write. The writing begins with how we develop regular practices to be present in the world around us.

:: *Poetry as play*

Toni Morrison said, “What’s the world for you if you can’t make it up the way you want it?” The word poetry comes from an ancient Greek word meaning “to create.” Inherent in the meaning of poetry is this idea of making. You can make up your own rules. You can write about your obsessions. You can play games in your poems. You can experiment with new ways to make poems happen. In his book *Creative Quest*, Questlove talks about the necessity of an internal “yes, and” for creative people. It’s the idea of letting your mind go where it wants to go, following a creative thought down the rabbit hole, and not banishing your ideas even if they seem weird or scary.

For many of us, our introductions to poetry are filled with traditional forms and syllable counts, which can give the false impression that poetry is not a space for play and experimentation. On the *V.S. Podcast*, Danez Smith talks about their introduction to poetic forms as a young person:

If you would have asked me at, like, 19 if I liked sonnets...I would have told you, like, fuck no bro, that boring-ass Shakespeare shit? But reading Marilyn Nelson's “A Wreath for Emmett Till,” which is, like, a beautiful, like, heroic crown of sonnets...it makes me cry every time I dive into that joint. It shows you that form isn’t dead, in a way...I thought poetry was dead in high school too. Because I never saw anybody living.

I felt a similar disconnect from the poetry I read in high school classrooms. In part because I was

rarely presented with poets of color or modern poets writing in form, but also because there was an overemphasis on the technical aspects of form, and much less conversation around how form related to content. I was rarely asked to reflect on questions like: Why did this poet choose this form to tell this particular story? What kind of story would I want to use this form to tell? When we think about forms as containers for stories in this way, even traditional forms can be approached with an attitude of play. An unknown poet once said, “You don’t always have to enter a poem through the front door.” I love this idea of there being multiple entryways to a poem. In this way, students can be encouraged to write about the same topic through multiple different lenses, from multiple different angles. There can be infinite poems about your grandmother: a persona poem in her voice, a portrait poem, a poem in the form of a sermon, a ghazal with each line ending on her favorite word, etc.

:: *Poetry as a practice*

When discussing the process of writing with students, the idea of writer’s block always comes up. I find it useful to explore the writing practices of well known writers and encourage students to seek out interviews with poets they like to learn about their processes and what works for them. At the beginning of my time with students I have a conversation about the writing process and their experience with writer’s block and how they deal with it. Following this discussion we read quotes from a variety of writers on how they work and/or what they think about writer’s block. Here are two of my favorite examples:

If you have writer’s block, you’re not reading enough. And you’re not thinking enough. Because there’s no such thing as writer’s block. What that really means is you don’t have anything to say. And everybody goes through a period of not having anything to say; you have to accept that.

-- Nikki Giovanni

I produce art in bursts, and I write when I have something that I need to work out or think through with language. The idea determines the form it takes. Sometimes an idea wants to be a cyanotype, sometimes it wants to be cut up and reassembled, sometimes it wants to be a poem, or a painting or a performance. Sometimes it doesn’t want to be anything, just an idea. My role is to listen and pay attention. Sometimes I don’t write or make art for what feels like long periods of time, and I don’t trip on that. That artistic silence is a part of the creative process to me too.

-- Krista Franklin

What happens when we look at a bunch of examples is the reality that there is no one set writing practice or approach that works for everyone. In terms of writer’s block, an idea emerges about it not being a “block” so much as an invitation. An invitation to switch up your approach, an invitation to walk away from the poem for a while, an invitation to read more, an invitation to be silent for a while and listen, etc. This idea of an artistic silence as an active, abundant silence. A necessary

process of *mise en place* and marination before the cooking (writing) begins.

One of the rituals I love to establish with students is Julia Cameron's practice of morning pages. In her book on creativity, *The Artist's Way*, Cameron describes morning pages as "three pages of longhand, stream of consciousness writing, done first thing in the morning. There is no wrong way to do Morning Pages— they are not high art. They are about anything and everything that crosses your mind— and they are for your eyes only." Starting each class session with 15 minutes of "pages" is a very accessible and low stakes way to get students thinking about what their regular writing practice could look like. I emphasize that the purpose of writing these pages is not to generate poems or even ideas for poems (though this may happen often.) Rather, the act of meditating on paper is meant to clear our minds so that we are able to be more present in our activities during the rest of the day.

:: *Poetry as truth-telling*

One of the most beautiful things about poetry is that it allows you to tell your truth, on your own terms. As poets we get to decide not only the stories we want to tell, but the way we tell them. I view truth-telling not as the act of writing what is absolute fact, but rather writing about true experiences and emotions in a way that feels most authentic. Even as my teenage poetry was shrouded in layers of imagery, or invented stories about people other than myself, I was still truth-telling. My method of using abstract imagery or imagined stories was my way of distancing the audience from my story in a way that felt safest to me at the time. While it was invaluable for me as a young poet to learn to write in the tradition of Ms. Brooks, it was also important for me to explore traditions of storytelling such as surrealism and magical realism that make space for imagination and fantasy as modes of truth-telling.

In her essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury" Audre Lorde writes about the deep places within ourselves where we hold "unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling." She urges us to cherish this non-eurocentric way of knowing, a kind of knowing that is not only based on ideas but also on our intuition. "This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of 'it feels right to me. We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared.'" In June Jordan's *Poetry For the People*, she writes, "Good poetry requires precision: if you do not attempt to say, accurately, truthfully, what you feel or see or need, then how will you achieve precision? What criterion will guide you to the next absolutely 'right' word?" I love the idea of letting both intuition and precision guide our diction. In the editing process, the rubric for students should not only be based on what makes "good" poetry, but also what elements of the poem are working to get the poet's truth across. They should be able to read it outloud and see if it resonates truthfully in their body. In this way, literary devices and vocabulary can be presented not simply as terms to be learned and understood, but as a toolbox to help students speak what they mean to say

most effectively.

:: *Poetic Ethics*

In youth poetry spaces there are often “safe space” ground rules around language, such as: no racist, homophobic, gender-biased, or otherwise derogatory speech, etc. These ground rules are important tools for us to begin to talk about the power and responsibility of wielding language as poets. It’s so important for poets of any age to be aware of their intentions and to also be able to have conversations about moments when our writing might undermine our intentions.

It’s important to discuss the tendency of reinforcing stereotypes in imagery, or flattening characters that we mean to uplift. When editing poems, ask students to “read for power.” Have students ask themselves: What power dynamics are being set up in the poem? What subjects are taking up more or less space on the page? Is anyone being empowered through your language? Is anyone being victimized or villainized? Is anyone being essentialized or flattened? Be thoughtful and intentional about any power dynamics that emerge in your poems. Be wary of the ways we can use biased language or imagery without realizing it. Remember that nuance and complexity are brilliant tools for us as writers. If there is a ‘villain’ in your poem, how might you use empathy to paint a more complicated picture of them? If there is a ‘victim’, how might you avoid re-victimizing them on the page? When writing about a person’s trauma, how can you also honor the joy and fullness of their life?

:: *Poetry is not therapy.*

My friend and mentor Krista Franklin, a brilliant poet and visual artist, once gave me sound advice: “Poetry is therapeutic, poetry is not therapy.” I hear her words in the lineage of Lucille Clifton who said, “My poetry is not my life. My life is my life,” and Toni Morrison, who wrote “You are not the work you do; you are the person you are.” In youth slam poetry communities, points are assigned to poems that are often based on young people’s lived experiences and traumas. For young people in these spaces, the act of “leaving it all on the stage” can be cathartic and feel liberating in the moment, but can also be potentially retraumatizing without the proper care resources. A common trend in slam is that personal stories of trauma tend to score higher, which can give students the idea that they have to disclose something of great emotional gravity in order to be successful in slam. In Kai Cheng Thom’s essay, “A School for Storytellers,” she writes:

The story is a dream of healing, but it is not healing in and of itself. The spirit must heal itself...The story is a dream of love and the seed of love and a map for love, but it takes people, not stories, to love each other. And here, the storyteller learns that the life of the story and the life of the teller are separate, though intertwined. The storyteller comes to understand that the telling of a good story is not the same as living a full life, though one informs the other. The storyteller learns that the love a

story-listener has for the story is not the same as the love of one person for another. And so, the storyteller is at once freed to tell their stories and to live beyond and outside of them.

In my teaching practice, this looks like carving out space for check-ins and emphasizing that self-care and healing are not passive byproducts of creativity. Rather, self-care and intentional healing practices are integral to sustainable creative practice. As teaching artists, it's also important to acknowledge that we are not therapists. Normalize resource-sharing. Being able to say, "I don't know how to help but I will help connect you to someone who can." It's also important to talk about the connection between self-care and community care. When we are individually conscious of and responsible for the energy we bring into a space, the collective benefits.

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From these compasses, from being a student who experienced various teaching styles from a young age, and from many years teaching in alternative learning spaces, I have been fortunate to observe many approaches to teaching and learning from which I have collaged together my pedagogy.

My goal is always to create a student-centered, participatory learning space, which involves giving students agency to co-create both the learning process and the learning environment. This has looked like inviting students to create a collective writing playlist, inviting them to bring in pieces of art that inspire them to share with the group, discussing their goals and things they want to learn about and incorporating their desires into the curriculum. I am developing an evolving counter-canon, a multi genre repertoire of model works that provide both "windows" and "mirrors" for participants to engage with.

I also believe it's important to pull back the curtain as much as possible and share the mechanics behind facilitating space and building poetry workshops and prompts with students. Teaching young people how to build their own poetry workshops can be a tool for democratizing the classroom and also a useful strategy to dispel writer's block. Communicating with students about the intention behind facilitation methods allows them to buy-in to the space-making process and become active agents in maintaining the culture of the space.

In the spirit of bell hooks' engaged pedagogy, I think a lot about centering joy and pleasure in my teaching practice. I want both teaching and learning to feel exciting. She writes, "Excitement about ideas was not sufficient to create an exciting learning process. As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence." As teachers, our enthusiasm and excitement is often contagious. For example, I love playing games (you cannot touch me in UNO!) and I am obsessed with finding ways to create poetry prompts involving game play. My students know this and I am often transparent about testing my creations on them. The point of a workshop

is not only always to produce a poem, but also about the experience of making connections, having new thoughts, learning more about each other and about poetry, and having fun. hooks writes, “As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence.”

In this way, creating a “safe space” to me means creating a space where everyone feels that their presence is valued, where students feel safe to be vulnerable and also express their personal boundaries. It is important for me to establish rituals, particularly around sharing. I like to model healthy vulnerability and boundary setting as a facilitator, so students feel empowered to share but not pressured to overshare. hooks writes, “Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive. In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share.”

Part of my pedagogy also involves self-care (for myself) and an acknowledgement of the performative nature of teaching and the energy it requires. Holding this space of care for myself allows me to better show up for my students and dedicate my full presence to the classroom. The ongoing process of finding my voice as a teacher involves not only incorporating things I love into my workshops, but also being aware of my insecurities in the classroom and ways I can openly acknowledge and own them.

In a cover letter for a poetry submission I once wrote, “My poems are inspired by the space between my practical-by-the-book-doctor father & my mother who talks to angels & heals people with her hands.” I think of my teaching as also existing in this space between ideas/healing, theory/emotion, mind/body. Thich Nhat Hanh’s idea pedagogy similarly emphasizes “wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spirit...striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge of how to live in the world.” I am reminded of this when I meet former classmates from youth poetry programs in Target or in the airport or other random places. Often they have not chosen to become professional poets or even pursued ostensibly artistic careers. Still, they always speak about how transformative poetry was for them and how it gave them tools to move through the world with more confidence in ourselves and more effective tools for self-expression and self-actualization. I aspire to create opportunities for myself and my students to grow as artists and thinkers, to become more in touch with our intuition, and to connect deeply with each other and with ourselves.

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## Sources & Further Readings

*June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint* by June Jordan

*The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Friere

*Teaching to transgress : education as the practice of freedom* by bell hooks

*Creative Quest* by Questlove

“A School for Storytellers” from *I Hope We Choose Love* by Kai Cheng Thom

**JAMILA WOODS** is a musician, poet and teaching artist from the South Side of Chicago. She served as the Associate Artistic Director of Young Chicago Authors for many years, where she designed professional development for teaching artists, wrote poetry curriculum and led a poetry apprenticeship program for high school students. As a songwriter and vocalist, she has toured internationally in support of her two albums HEAVN and LEGACY! LEGACY!. Jamila is also a member of Dark Noise, a collective of interdisciplinary poets & educators of color. [www.jamila-woods.com](http://www.jamila-woods.com)

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