The Classroom Slam/ Poetry Unit Culminating Event

The following ideas are based on the middle school classroom poetry slams that inspired *Jumped In*. These events were fun, energized, celebrations of poetry and celebrations of a classroom community that had worked hard building up to the day they could share their stuff. You, as a teacher, have graded your students on their writing and effort throughout the unit. This event should feel like a celebration of the work the students have done, as opposed to a final exam, or an assessment of their performance ability.

One of the middle school slams took place in a self-contained special ed. language arts class and the other took place in a super diverse (economically, culturally, academically) regular ed. class.

This stuff works.

1) **Make a Change in the Environment.**
Students arrive to class the day of the slam and they know this is going to be special. How? The lights are low. Jazz music wafts from speakers. There is coffee and the kids may drink it. There is a music stand up in front of the class. (Maybe a mic?) Tables and desks are moved to the side. A stage area has been carved out of the classroom space.

The specific changes don’t matter so much. Just make them work for you. Make them work for your classroom. Even one little alteration can make a huge difference. Enlist students to help plan the change. They will love this.

I think this might be the most important thing you can do to make your slam work. Make the environment special and kids will step up to the challenge as performers and as audience members.
2) **Norms**

Have students come up with norms for audience members. Ask your kids to imagine how they would like to be treated during and after their performance. Make the list as short as possible while stressing the importance of respect. This is not only a poetry-sharing event; it’s an opportunity to practice RESPECT and unbridled positivity.

3) **Everyone performs/Anything goes**

Everyone performs. *Everyone*. This is the culmination of the poetry unit so all students have material. It can be two lines from a quick-write exercise they’re proud of, or they can bust out a full 3 minute poem (you make the call on time limits). It can be something they wrote that wasn’t a part of the unit (as long as you’ve checked it out before-hand).

The word *slam* brings to mind a style. This event should have the exciting vibe of a poetry slam, but the styles of poetry should be as eclectic as your students. Budding Sylvia Plaths and quiet haiku poets are as welcome as the hottest hip-hop slamsters.

Anything goes. But there are no outs. No excuses. *Everyone* gets the opportunity to rock!

4) **No volunteers. The bucket decides.**

Save a ton of wasted time. All names go in the bucket. Have a student who would benefit from having an important job pull the names. Your name gets called; you are up. *Now.*

5) **The un-slam, slam**

Some folks will say that the following idea makes this a poetry reading, as opposed to a slam. However, if this classroom event is going to work for all your students, there should be no one rating the poems with number cards. *No judges.* (I’m not saying you shouldn’t ever put on a traditional
slam that turns poetry into a sporting event—I love poetry slams—but if you do this, you can’t ask everyone to perform because the judging element is going to freak some kids out and they’ll refuse to share their stuff."

6) Reflections

Students should reflect on the work of their peers on paper. Create a very short reflection sheet in which students let their classmates know what worked well. Keep these things positive.

Don’t have every student reflect on every poem. Spread out the work. Maybe each performer will receive reflections from only five students. This way the work of writing reflections does not bog down the pace of the event.

Have fun and let me know how it goes. I’d love to post video or positive feedback about your class poetry slam. These suggestions are also a work in progress. Feel free to help me tweak.

Also, if you’d like to share your reflections sheets, classroom norms, or even poetry unit ideas, I’d love to share those with other teachers.

Thanks for all the hard work you do every day, and thanks for continuing to see the value of poetry and performance in these test-centric times.

And thanks to Ms. Christenson-Wong and Ms. Cassidy from Pacific Middle School in Des Moines, Washington for the slam ideas. You two rock!