

PENNING POSSIBILITIES: NARRATIVES OF POETS' PERSONAL AND  
COMMUNITY LEARNING EXPERIENCES  
PRACTICING SPOKEN WORD

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
with a Major in Adult, Professional, and Community Education  
May 2018

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## **DEDICATION**

To my family who have built me and believed in me. To my father, Roger, who exemplified authenticity and instilled in me a sense of endless curiosity and a deep love for stories. To my mother, Carol, who embodied foundations of love and compassion and taught me to live with fierce, unapologetic passion. To my sister/best friend, Gretchen, who stands beside me no matter what obstacles we face, I can accomplish anything with you at my side. To my brother-in-law, Chris, your unwavering support and calm insight means so much. To my husband/better half, Reggie, who showed me what true partnership is and believed in me every step of the way. To my son, Jevon, you are my heartbeat and my greatest, most precious story. I love you all so much.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First and foremost, I would like to thank poetry. You have been a lifeline and my lifesaver more than once. You have helped me navigate and make sense of my life, love, pain, and path. You have welcomed me with open arms, no matter how many times I have walked away. I do not know where I would be without you.

I would like to thank my poetry family and community. When I started into the art of Spoken Word, I found a home away from home. A community of individuals who opened their hearts, lives and love to me and so many others. Simply, there are not enough words to share how you have impacted my life. Thank you from the bottom of my pen. B Ayers, you were the first one to take me to a Spoken Word venue. That evening changed the trajectory of my life and allowed me to find the power in my own voice which led me doing this work, personally and professionally.

My deepest love and appreciation to some of my dearest friends and colleagues who pushed, believed and supported me in doing this work: Ken Bader-Breslow, Shawn Baker, Sherri Benn, Andre Brown, Christopher Collins, Alvin Curette, Brian Francis, Todd Hall, Chris Henry, Ted Ingwersen, Destiny McKinney, Iliana Melendez, Rosanne Proite, Stella Silva, Ebony Stewart, Anthony White, and Michelle Zulaica. Also, I wish to acknowledge my grandparents, Florence and Kenneth Uphoff, who preserved our family histories through stories. Growing up, listening to my grandmother share her memories about our family deeply impacted my own love for stories.

To Cohort 2011, you were an amazing group of people and I am better for having worked, learned, cried, and laughed with you. This experience made me a better person in every way. I could not have asked for better teammates in this journey.

To the participants in my study, thank you for your time and trusting me with your stories. Your willingness to do so allowed this work to be possible. I deeply appreciate you.

To my committee, I have been blessed to work with some of the best educators in the field. Dr. Guajardo, thank you for being an unapologetic, out-of-the-box thinker. By doing so you gave me the same permission, which often freed me from trying to fit into boxes I thought I needed to squeeze myself into. Your commitment to community and education is something that continually changes the world and those touched by it for the better. Thank you for welcoming me into your community and allowing me to learn with you inside and outside the classroom. Dr. Arlene Serrano, thank you for your willingness to say yes. Your unyielding positivity and compassion constantly speaks to my heart and touches those who are blessed to work with you. Dr. Ross-Gordon, thank you for your introspection and supportive nature. Your gentle nudges, strong support and depth of knowledge has provided a sense of security for me as a learner from my first day in your classroom. Truly, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Finally, I would like to thank the absolute phenome I was lucky enough to get to be my committee chair, Dr. Clarena Larrotta. The love, compassion, dedication, and commitment you give your students speaks to the unique kind of educator you are. If I

can be even half the educator I see you be for others, I will consider myself a success. From the first day of class, I knew you would challenge me to be a better version of myself and I was not wrong. You inspire me so much. You have been the calm in my chaos. The necessary kick in the pants. The cheerleader on my team. The exact person I needed to lead me through this journey. Thank you for not giving up on me. Thank you for not letting me give up on myself. Thank you for being a better role model and mentor than I could have imagined Truly, I cannot express my gratitude enough for everything you have done. You are simply amazing.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Using narrative and poetic inquiry as methods for data collection and analysis, this dissertation documented the stories of four poets and their engagement in Spoken Word practice as well as how they utilized this art form to engage in learning individually and collectively. Each dissertation participant shared stories through conversational interviews, a writing workshop, artifacts, and poems. The research questions guiding this qualitative study included: (1) What are the stories of four adult poets becoming engaged in Spoken Word practice? (2) Why is Spoken Word an important pedagogical vehicle for learning at the levels of self and community? (3) How can Spoken Word be used as a learning tool?

As study findings emerged, ways in which each participant engaged in Spoken Word as a vehicle for learning and educating others materialized. Thus, study findings are presented by discussing the following concepts and themes: Storytelling, finding voice, healing, informal/nonformal/formal learning, democratic praxis, and community. Throughout these themes, study participants reported how they have utilized Spoken Word to engage as adult learners and educators. Additionally, the dissertation documents their impact as agents of change through the Spoken Word practices they reported. Study findings suggest that Spoken Word can inform arts-based community education and adult education practices. This dissertation adds to the current body of literature regarding the usefulness of the arts in community building and adult learning, particularly the potential

for transformational learning through the implementation of arts-based educational practices.

## I. ROOTED IN WORDS

*Build me bridges; break through the barriers which silence me.  
I've got deep roots here and no matter how many times you may pluck me,  
plant me amidst sidewalk cracks,  
I will continue to bloom.  
My voice brings life to that which was once unknown...  
unspoken...into meaning.*

I have written poetry since I was in my early teens. Whether they were my own original poems, song lyrics that touched me or poems I had read by other authors, pages of notebooks and books were spaces I felt heard, understood and made sense of my world. Especially when I felt that, others could not, would not or did not hear me. As experiences early on in my life at times silenced me, writing them in poems gave me voice, strength and illustrated the worlds in which I navigated. Often feeling like I never quite fit within the social and cultural margins I was expected to adhere to, writing poetry gave me permission not to have to choose between my multiple identities but could be whole through the worlds I created with my words. However, it would not be until I was well into my thirties that I would discover a community of writers who not only constructed their worlds through their words but also invited others into them by sharing them publically. In 2004, a couple of friends and I saw advertisements for two Spoken Word poetry events and decided to go. Once there, poets were already on the stage performing. The first poem I heard was a poet describing her experiences growing up with her grandmother. She spoke elegantly of moments her grandmother passed down family history through stories when she was doing the poets hair as a child. She was one of the best writers I had ever experienced. As someone who, at a young age, began helping my Grandmother cook when we would visit in order to hear her stories about my

father or aunts and uncles growing up, I could understand why these memories were ones she cherished. From her poem, I could surmise her Grandmother was no longer living and it affected me deeply. I remember calling my own Grandmother the next day to check on her and to hear some of her stories. I felt so much love and connection to the words many poets shared throughout the night. It truly was as if I had found a place where people used writing to express or make sense of their world and experiences in similar ways that I did. In addition, that truly meant something to me. In some way, it validated ways I had survived, celebrated and navigated my own life experiences.

As I continued to listen to the poets and watched them interact with each other, it was clear that many of these people came from the same communities or this was a community in itself. During a poem performance, I was particularly inspired to write one of my own. Therefore, I did -on the back of a flyer. I introduced myself to a few people and asked to be put on the reading list. Scared and shaking, I got up and shared my first poem in public.



**Figure 1. Performance at my home venue in Central Texas.**

*In corners and circles,  
Hiding in spaces clearly seen,  
A photograph of the negative,  
Nothing clear, just contrasted  
Real Life hidden in hues of sienna and brown  
Void of my loud words that fake the funk  
And this heart  
Does more than just beat and hide the truth  
And these eyes tell lifetimes of  
That which has become stories  
Lost in hope and cynicism  
What are those streaks in my windows?  
They've been cleaned a 1000 times,  
And the rain outside sounds....beautiful  
I can cleanse my soul  
In the darkness  
And I can let loose my demons  
Into the sky  
So that God can fill me  
With moonbeams and angel wings.*

The response to my poem was overwhelming. I had moved to Texas in 2001 and had yet to really feel really engaged in any particular community since I had arrived. After I ended my poem one of the regulars, the one who did the poem about her Grandmother, yelled: "That's my Cousin!" Her acceptance and embracing of me as "poetic family" changed my life. It further embedded the role poetry and writing had served in my life at personal and professional levels. Moreover, it would be in this moment it now formed a role at the community level which writing, and poetry had never done before. In finding Spoken Word, I not only found a space for my voice; I found connections to myself and others which have led me to be a member of a community which uses the art form to transform themselves and others, particularly in community settings.

Writing has always been a method in which I was able to express my thoughts freely, explore difficult topics, issues or events happening in my life; however, it was not



until the moment shared above that I learned others used it this way as well and shared it with an audience. In this space, I began to understand the potential effect Spoken Word and poetry has in the lives of this diverse community and its members. My initial experiences within this community were incredibly moving as I shared in the friendships, struggles, and celebrations with those who had been part of the foundation building in the Spoken Word community. I watched the metamorphosis of my own work as I wrote and engaged in sharing and listening as we weekly shared our stories with vulnerability and passion.

For the purposes of this study, influenced by Sommers-Willett (2009), Spoken Word is defined as an art form in which the writer composes original works within an informal poetic structure that is then shared or performed before an audience. Writing with the intent to share forces the writer to consider meanings authentic to themselves while also constructing it in a manner that those hearing it can also construe meaning and connect to the work (Sommers-Willet, 2009). In explaining the history of Spoken Word, Sommers-Willett (2009) makes reference to the article “Who Killed Poetry?” which spoke to the fact poetry far too often was only examined or explored in particular areas of elite educational institutions and had lost its connection with the masses.

Sommers-Willett (2009) continues to explain that Spoken Word as a modern art form is credited to Marc Smith, a construction worker who wanted a place and format in which to express his poetry, thereby creating the competitive practice of Spoken Word poetry slam. This author also states that similar to the works created within the Beatnik culture of the 1960’s, Spoken Word often shares the personal, political, social and cultural experiences of those who used loose poetic structures for expression, some with

and without musical accompaniment. From first-hand experience, I can say that Spoken Word is often performed in an open-mic setting, educational or community building function or poetry slam. Open Mic venues are spaces in which Spoken Word is shared with an audience in a non-competitive structure. In addition to Spoken Word's value as a creative tool for meaning making, it additionally contains components of adult learning principals. According to Merriweather (2011), "Spoken Word's educational goals are consistent with core goals of adult education such as meaning-making, transformation and critical reflection which I believe makes it an important yet overlooked practice of adult learning" (p. 51). In doing this, Merriweather illustrates adult learning through the use of Spoken Word complement each other in beneficial ways.

This was the only article, which I could find that specifically connected Spoken Word and adult learning principles. "Slam poetry has 4 defining characteristics-active engagement, pedagogical in attempt to influence/instruct the audience, authorship/authenticity, democratic practice in form and content" (Merriweather, 2011, p 56). Even when taken out of the competitive format of slamming, Spoken Word also includes these components. Spoken Word is a pedagogical tool, which in its essence, promotes important aspects of adult education. Spoken Word, regardless of the structure in which it is shared, promotes storytelling in a manner that engages both the reader and listener with the art and meaning. It is simply a sharing of work by artists who volunteer to do so and an audience who often pays to attend (Sommers-Willett, 2009).

As mentioned above, Spoken Word often shares the personal, political, social and cultural experiences of the authors who often use diverse methods when expressing the work through performance or public sharing. Freire (1970), Horton, Kohl, & Kohl

(1990), and hooks (1994) all argue the necessity for educational approaches to promote self-reflection and critical analysis of those forces, which oppress and limit learners and equip them with the tools to break down those dominant forces at individual and community levels. It is important then to note that in my own experiences, through the use of my words and voice, Spoken Word has provided me a space to develop self-advocacy and promote change at personal and community levels. Spoken Word provides the space to develop a voice, which gives life to self-advocacy and social change regardless of whether the oppressive forces and practices exist internally or externally of the individual writer. I know in my own life this has been true and my interests in this research grow from the desire to more deeply understand how others have utilized Spoken Word in their own lives and if such liberation, survival, and reflection have been present through this art as it has been in my own.

As a member of the poetry community, I grew as a writer from a myriad of experiences such as participating in writing labs with others, performing for social and political causes, and working with a poetry mentor all added to my learning experiences with Spoken Word. In and with my own community, I have participated in the utilization of Spoken Word as a tool for community building, social and political awareness. For several years, I participated with other poets in a fundraiser that promoted awareness around human trafficking by performing works with other poets at ZONTA events. ZONTA is a community organization that aids survivors and spreads awareness about the realities of human trafficking locally and globally. We participated annually because of the relationships made and the importance of the issue at hand. Because of those relationships, individuals we met through ZONTA began attending various poetry events

and bringing new “regulars” into venues, supporting the community while appreciating the powerfulness of the art being shared. They had witnessed its potential in their own community work.

Another example comes from a personal experience in 2006 where many poets came together to perform at a fundraiser to assist Hurricane Katrina survivors. A large showcase of poets was organized, and the money raised from those who attended the show went directly to assisting a family who had been displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Again, poets came together using their artistic stories to raise community support and awareness around important social issues.

However, one of my most profound and meaningful experience around Spoken Word and its impact on community began when I became involved with a youth-based education program as first a volunteer and then as a co-director of the program, I saw this youth program create community among those involved -both adult and youth alike. This experience also fueled a great deal of my interest in exploring this research. My primary responsibilities within the organization were to work towards developing a sustainable youth arts-based community educational organization, which had a strong curriculum utilizing Spoken Word. I was additionally responsible for planning engaging opportunities for youth poets to interact and learn with experienced poets with a focus on providing opportunities for self-reflection, growth, and development. This encouraged or allowed these adult educators to contribute to a pedagogical approach that is socially just and critically reflective in nature.

hooks (1994) states that educators “need to be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that

empowers students” to promote a critical and “engaged pedagogy” (p. 15). That is exactly what this organization seeks to do. Furthermore, I have a deep personal interest in creating an adult arts-based community educational programs using Spoken Word in Central Texas as currently, none exist. A goal that I hope the work of this study can assist in informing regarding the program development and curriculum.

Merriweather (2011) speaks to ways Spoken Word aligns with the principles of adult learning such as making relevant meaning in the adult’s current lives or using their voices for democratic praxis and change. Merriweather’s work and my own utilization of poetry, writing, and Spoken Word as methods for speaking up to foster change, about individual and global issues, supports my belief that Spoken Word can be utilized as critically reflective and transformational pedagogy deserves to be further explored. It has been the sum of these experiences that has prompted me to do this study. It is important to note that much of the current literature regarding Spoken Word in arts-based community and formal education settings is often connected to or in conjunction with Hip Hop programs and are most often explored in youth settings (Clay, 2006; Daspit & Weaver, 2001; Dewhurst, 2010, 2011; Forell, 2006; Herndon & Weiss, 2001; Hill, 2009; Low, 2013; Parmar & Bain 2007; Reyes, 2006.)

Hip Hop and Spoken Word share artistic principles such as a mode of artistically creative expression, critical reflection of social and political issues as well as personal narratives, often informing cultural experiences. While there is a difference in technical structures between Hip Hop and Spoken Word, the connections around the contexts of purpose and expression can often mirror each other. Due to this connection in the literature, it has been included in the discussion around the concept of Spoken Word.

Spoken Word and Hip Hop lend themselves to be more self-reflective, political, and experiential and critically conscious in their purest forms. While the body of work regarding the benefits of Hip Hop as a tool in curriculum use, political and civic awareness has grown over the last two decades, Spoken Word is still in its infancy.

There is a tremendous gap in the current literature regarding the potential of Spoken Word as a teaching tool to develop critical consciousness and transformational learning. Critical consciousness is the ability to recognize social, political, and economic oppression and to engage in praxis against oppressive structures (Freire, 1970). If adult learners have matriculated through educational systems that have not engaged them in liberating and transformational methods of learning, the opportunities to obtain skill sets to cultivate critical consciousness, reflection, and action, must be offered in alternate, accessible settings (Freire, 1970; Vella, 2002). It is my desire to provide just that with the exploration of Spoken Word as an arts-based adult learning method. First, in order to better inform this work, discovering the ways other adults have utilized Spoken Word in their own lives requires exploration. Narrative and poetic inquiry add to the academic literature regarding the power and usefulness of journeys, applications and experiences that Spoken Word has manifested in the lives of others. Furthermore, can inform the learning opportunities that could be provided to adult learners in this form of arts-based community education. This dissertation sought to explore the stories of poets who engaged in Spoken Word as a way of life and how they utilized this art form to create connections within themselves, in the communities they live, work, and learn.

## **Statement of the Problem**

In the current academy, there is a great deal around the potential of creative arts in relation to critical and transformational learning opportunities for adults. However, very little exists regarding the possibilities of Spoken Word in this body of work. Exploring the ways in which adult poets currently utilizing Spoken Word in their lives to make meaning and connection at the individual and community levels informed this gap in the academic literature. My personal experiences with Spoken Word as a writer, poet, educator and community member prompted me to want to more deeply understand how others who live this art found it manifested in their own lives. Merriweather (2011) acknowledges the creative writing and sharing process potentially holds rich spaces to examine and our stories and make sense of our experiences and the experiences of others.

This study informs the ways in which Spoken Word was meaningful in the lives of four adult poets. Insights like these contribute to the literature by illustrating the power this art form possess in building adult arts-based community education programs. Educators are responsible for engaging learners in liberating and transformational methods to have better equip them to affect change within their own social contexts (Freire, 1970). Transformational learning requires learners to critically re-evaluate their current ideologies values or beliefs, once they have been challenged through reflection, dialogue, and action (Mezirow, 1997). Freire (1997) defines praxis as reflection and action linked to certain values and ideas with the intent of creating social change (p.13). It is important for communities and community educators to create relevant and engaging educational options that create spaces for transformational learning and critical reflection to happen (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1997; Vella, 2002).

Through praxis, oppressed individuals can acquire a critical awareness of their own condition and with their allies in their struggle for liberation. Merriweather (2011) states that Spoken Word embodies democratic praxis for adult learners as it engages both the reader and the observer in social, political, cultural issues, as well as, stories about their own experiences within these contexts. The contexts in which Spoken Word occur are more often open and engaging with a diverse array of people than poetry had been in the past. Arts-based community education programs are informal learning settings, which can also promote a more open, and reflective space to explore concepts of change, individually or at the community level.

Freire (1970) makes the distinction between formal and informal learning settings and the opportunities they provide for pedagogical approaches. He notes that informal learning settings, such as those that could be offered in the community, often offer safer, more flexible spaces for educating and learning than the rigid confines of formal settings. When wrestling with the complexities of exploring the self while developing critical consciousness, it is important that spaces for learning allow the individual to explore meaning-making in ways that remain authentic to one's experiences, contexts, and realities. The essential nature of sharing the work with an audience through "open mic" or competitive slam settings differentiates Spoken Word most from other forms of poetry. Spoken Word as the tool for exploration within the contexts of an arts-based community education program has the potential to provide such a space (Merriweather, 2011). While this study is in no way generalizable to everyone using Spoken Word or who may use it in arts-based community educational settings, it does begin the dialogue and academic foundations to explore its possibilities. Through this deeper understanding, the



possibilities of Spoken Word (as a tool for critical reflection, individual and community transformation and meaning making) within a variety of arts-based adult educational settings are examined.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative study explored the stories of poets who engaged in Spoken Word as a way of life and how they utilized this art form to create connections within themselves and in the communities where they live, work, and learn. Furthermore, this study illustrates how Spoken Word can engage adult learners in a critically reflective pedagogy. The following research questions guided this dissertation:

1. What are the stories and journeys of the participating poets becoming engaged in Spoken Word practice?
2. Why is Spoken Word an important pedagogical vehicle for learning at the levels of self and community?
3. How is Spoken Word used as a learning tool?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The transformational and critically reflective benefits of utilizing the arts in adult education have been well documented (Brackenroth, Epstien, & Miller 2006; Butterwick & Dawson, 2006; Clover, 2006; Clover & Stalker, 2007; Hughes, 2009; Kerka, 2002; Kinsella, 2007; Wesley, 2007). However, Spoken Word as an art form has been minimally explored in current scholarship in relation to the potential for learning, particularly transformational and critically reflective learning. Additionally, this study documents how individuals and communities made meaning and engaged in critical praxis with Spoken Word. Study findings introduce an easily accessible and powerful

method of learning around identity, meaning making, and praxis with Spoken Word as critically reflective pedagogy. This study adds to the current body of literature regarding the usefulness of the arts in adult learning, particularly the potential for transformational learning through the implementation of arts-based educational practices.

### **Researcher's Perspective**

*We were vibin, you know-  
Like Dizzie and Ella,  
Just finding our strings  
and notes  
The light was shining through our conversation  
And it had us feelin'  
so... ....full.*

*I mean we were ego trippin with Nikki  
while we soaked our souls in Gwendolyn's brooks  
AND HE FELT ME----You know?  
Without warning, our attention was broken and*

*we*

*fell*

*into the humming frequency  
of Cole's trane and he made our tracks  
and our voyage was so fantastic  
He told us to come and ride  
and ride*

*and ride*

*and we did-*

*For miles and miles and through muddy waters  
and cloudy skies  
We spent our pennies from heaven  
to sip that tea to read our leaves  
that would tell us of centuries of connections unbroken  
and together we left our prints in  
dust tracks on a dirt road while  
"Our Eyes Were Watching God".  
We bumped into a Monk-*

*Thelonious's melodious hide away was just what we needed to regroup  
We bumped into Billie and she fed us her strange fruit  
We heard the pain in her soul as she sang us her deepest of blues.*

*We climbed Crystal stairs that glimmered with Hughes SO BRIGHTLY  
we became INVISIBLE MAN-  
We traveled to the land  
Of the Native Son,  
He told us "Things Fall Apart,"  
Taught us how to get back and where to start.*

*We returned in our travelin shoes,  
A day late and a dollar short,  
Over coffee, Bebe said "Your Blues Aint Like Mine,"  
Sula cried as she explained she felt violated by  
The Bluest Eye.  
We held her broken spirit and just wanted to see her to fly  
And that vibe,  
that vibe reluctantly brought us home  
and tho sad, it was unforgettable  
but it assured us it was just resting.  
See, that vibe provides that space,  
that place where we  
as artists  
are free.*

To pay homage to some of the most influential artists in my own development, the poem above was born. From as young, as I can remember I have been in love with music, reading, and writing. As a smaller child, I spent a great deal of time drawing pictures and writing stories for fun. As I began adolescence and teenage years, I began to write poetry, often in free form and without classical structures. These poems were my therapy, my views on the world. I often found the same relevance and connection to song lyrics and would spend hours writing them down. I never had a time in my life where I was not writing to process my feelings about my own experiences, understanding of the world and the challenges I found myself grappling with.

As a member of a Central Texas Spoken Word community, I have been involved with

Spoken Word and artists who do everything from simply sharing their art and stories with others to using their art as a means of community activism or education. I have found that many youth and adults used this medium to express stories of challenges, change, personal issues or exploring ideas relative to their experiences. Once I embarked on Spoken Word, I not only found a place for my voice but also became part of a community, a family, full of love, dysfunction, humanity, and support. All of us have grown individually and collectively, in so many ways. It is the belief and experience I have had with the transformational power of Spoken Word that fuels my own passion for this research; to understand others experience growth and change using this art.



**Figure 2. Spoken Word Slam in St. Louis, MO.**

Writing poetry has been an essential tool in my own life, one I have leaned on for as long as I can remember. As a young adolescent, pages of my notebooks held my stories, experiences, pain, and successes in which I felt I had no other avenues to express. It differentiated from journaling in that it used metaphors and symbolic wordplay to express my ideas, was written in stanzas and often with a rhyme or cadence scheme. While I did not follow traditional poetry standards, it was poetry and my way of creating voice and expression that represented my realities. My engagement in the Spoken Word

community and my growth as Spoken Word artist has been an essential part of my personal, educational and professional development.

### **Personal Development**

As I became more and more involved in the Spoken Word community, I found this group of people who had been making sense of their lives and the world around them in similar ways that I had throughout my life. I found myself transformed and challenged when I listened to the stories other poet has shared which clashed or coincided with my own experiences. Furthermore, the venue was a predominately African American venue and as one of the few regular participants who identified as White, I was often engaged deeply in the complexities around issues of race, gender and identity from listening and learning from the stories shared by the diverse members of my community.

Deep discussions about life experiences in the context of larger social realities were a frequent occurrence within our community. Wisdom not easily found or explored in common spaces of learning. I wrote through the loss of friends, difficult custody battles, challenges and successes that were significant in my life. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, I have used the art with other artists to take action in the community.

Sometimes, those poems were created to tell the stories of those who were struggling to have a voice. Below is an excerpt from one of the poems I shared during a ZONTA fundraising performance:

*Her pupils pinch tight  
Trying to narrow visions that creep in  
During daytime destruction  
Or nighttime navigations into her soul  
She hides away in corners of her mind  
Where madness plays  
It's the only thing that keeps her sane*

*Just conglomerated body parts  
Piecing property for production  
Human by human consumption  
Auction blocks now backs of 18 Wheelers  
Dirty abandon cellars  
Warehouses housing breeders, bodies and profit  
SOLD to the highest bidder*

*Quiet girl, we want no reminders that you're human*

*Injected, subjected, broken physically to submission,  
She remains unbreakable  
Even as he tries to  
Break her in  
Break her spirit  
Break her down  
She's found survival barely attainable  
Sometimes she prays for forever's darkness  
Imagines she'd find peace there  
Where hands can't find her-  
Mark her in her molestation*

*Moments he's away she mutters prayers  
To a Heaven she believes has discarded her  
Open fields colored on the back of her eyelids  
Allow her to run free from dark rooms,  
Chains which clutch her in his absence,  
Until the stench of his pores assault her imagination,  
He can no longer sneak up on her,  
She smells him coming long before he reaches her  
Touch is no longer something she longs for...*

This poem is among the more difficult I have written and shared. In doing the research for this work, I read the accounts of many women and children and it was heartbreaking. I felt it necessary to be as accurate as possible in sharing their stories. This

poem is an example of how meaning can be made and shared with the purpose of making others aware of a social issue and individual tragedies that we should not ignore. Our participation increased attendance and along with it, the donated monetary allotments increased. It was humbling and a great privilege to have used my own art and talents in such a meaningful way.

I have experienced the power of Spoken Word in my own life. It has personally helped me to make sense of my own lived experiences. Spoken Word and poetry have been essential to my own well-being and making sense of my world. For example, in 2008, I was engaged in a second ugly custody battle with my son's father. I have never felt so helpless, angry, scared and conflicted as I do times we have ended up in court over custody concerns. In helping my son, I felt I was also hurting him and it was difficult to be able to express that in any setting. Below is an excerpt from a poem I wrote at that time:

*I can tell he senses the pull  
He's not quite sure where the current's coming from  
he clings to two lifeboats,  
Not realizing each is being steered  
by opposing commander in chiefs  
Arrogantly trying to decide  
what's best for him  
between tightened strands of ignorance  
and our inability to call a truce  
and truly put him first*

*How can we see this so differently?  
How can we see HIM so differently?*

*Please I don't want to hate his father  
he's our baby, blueprinted in our union  
love now dissolved  
lays bitter in the back of throats  
struggling through acidic niceties*

*This-THIS is biological warfare at its pinnacle*

*And as with any war-torn people-  
Is there ever really a winner  
or justice  
when those of us,  
judges and lawyers,  
fathers and mothers  
leave less scathed  
than the innocent who have fallen  
to the battles of custody.*

When I walked off the stage, I was approached almost immediately by three women, two I knew and one I did not. All three surrounded me in a hug and thanked me for speaking “their” story. We stepped outside the venue and began to discuss how custody battles had impacted us as women, mothers and how it was impacting our children. We left with each other’s phone numbers and proceeded to remain a support for each other through the years. I share this example because I believe it illustrates how I personally have used Spoken Word in processing and making meaning of my life experiences, as well as, another example of the impact it can have regarding creating community and connections with others. Spoken Word has given me more confidence to speak up and find spaces to use my voice for change and connection. In fact, it is these moments of change and connection that the community forms, grows and continues to support each other. Additionally, these Spoken Word venues create space for critical reflection, dialogue, and action in the lives of those engaged with the art.





**Figure 3. Member of 2009 Slam Team Photograph.**

### **Professional Development**

As I began to experience the transformational power of Spoken Word personally, and its ability to prompt critical reflection and dialogue around various topics, I began to think about how it could be utilized in my professional setting. As a Resident Director and then as an Assistant Director in Residence Life, our focus is often to support the learning of transition and life skills within the Residence Halls and in conjunction with the academics, they are learning. During various educational programs conducted within the halls, I have at times, utilizing my own work or that on YouTube in order to engage students in dialogue. Moreover, students have shown interest in seeing poetry performances and engaging in it themselves. Often, I could tap into my poetry community and convince them to come and perform even when I could not always pay them to do so. They understood the potential their work could have among others as well. Not only did I utilize Spoken Word as a teaching tool, I often employed the art form to in an effort to process or make meaning around issues I have faced in my work.

One evening, I was called out to attend to a young, drunk, student who had been left in the hallway outside her residence hall room. She was half dressed and completely incapacitated. It was not the hall I directly supervised but responded as the after hour on-call staff member to the situation. One of the student staff members informed me that she had this problem earlier in the semester as well. I remained professional and called the ambulance for her so we could properly assess her. Once I was back home, my emotions as a mother came to the forefront. As a professional, I could not easily express everything I felt-fear, anger, and worry was very strong and I thought of my own son and my niece. From that situation, this poem was constructed:

*They left her there  
Lying on the floor  
Hair spread out  
Shorts short enough nothing was left to imagine.  
They left her there  
Barely breathing and unresponsive  
No indication how she got there or who left her  
They left her there  
Clutching her purse  
Snoring through her own vomit  
Too cowardly to get her help  
Yet willing enough to party beyond the limits  
Her seventeen year old body could handle.  
How could they have left her there?  
Possibly to die, in a hallway, early morning  
No idea how long she'd been there,  
Not even an anonymous call getting her some help  
They just left her there....*

We had checked all the cameras and could not identify who had brought her in and tried to prop her up. I thought about the possibilities if someone less caring and trained had found her. I had heard and experienced those stories. No amount of anger or outrage would get me the answers I wanted for her. It was through my writing and poetry that I was able to articulate and release my emotions around this situation. This is an

example of how Spoken Word was a method of making meaning for me personally regarding encounters I have had in my work within Residence Life.

Along with my role as a Student Affairs professional, I teach a few undergraduate classes. I began to use Spoken Word as a way to promote creativity, self-awareness, activism, critical thinking, writing-based skills, and empathy. This gave space for my students to relate to material in new ways. It encouraged them to be creative in their own approaches and to begin to think about ways to arrive at information that was not just locked into traditional instructional/learning methods such as PowerPoint presentations or basic memorization and sharing of information. I began using various Spoken Word artists and poems to engage residents in conversations about education, race, gender, social justice, and a variety of social issues, such as race, gender, and class. They began to see new possibilities in how they learned and shared knowledge with others, particularly around topics of social justice, inclusion, and oppression. Additionally, I found it useful to assist in even more mechanical aspects of learning and teaching I used. For example, I use Taylor Mali's poem "The the Impotence of Proofreading" from YouTube as an entertaining and engaging way to illustrate the importance of making sure students take the time to re-read and edit their papers (Mali, 2008).

In classes, where I have utilized Spoken Word videos as conversation or topic starting points, I have received positive feedback on my evaluations about its use. It is a medium that is currently relevant and growing in popular culture (Sommers-Willett, 2009). One of the benefits of utilizing Spoken Word is the accessibility and familiarity many have with seeing or hearing it on television or popular media. As an educator, I have found it a useful tool in the formal classroom setting.

Another professional experience in which Spoken Word was embedded was when I served in the role of Director of Education and Curriculum Development for a youth non-profit arts-based community education program. This non-profit program employed Spoken Word and Hip Hop as tools for learning and expression. In 2011, after the founder of the original organization passed away suddenly, another community poet and I stepped in to take over running the program. It has since changed and become its own entity fueled by the spirit and love in which the program was created.

In the last five years I worked for the program, I saw young people who were victims of abuse, came from difficult home situations or who had just never believed their voices mattered, literally step into their own power and voice through the experiences and support of writing and sharing their stories with their peers. Two years ago, one young woman who had attended several times shared with me that she had felt isolated, suicidal and having family issues when a teacher heard about our program and encouraged her to attend. She went on to share that finding this community and a safe space to speak her truth had saved her life from her perspective. Realizing she was not alone in her struggles, she explained this experience had connected her through stories and words more closely to strangers who she now refers to a family when she felt her own family had abandoned her. As her ride arrived, she looked at me and said, “Thank you, the work you all do really save lives-it has saved mine.” Quite simply, she expressed what I believe is the potential and importance of doing this research; it saves lives and creates connections with others. It promotes a deeper understanding and is a vehicle in which individuals can make and translate meaning and wisdom in their own lives. I began my role as a student in an Adult, Professional and Community Education doctoral

program a few short months after this conversation. Her words have remained an inspiration and motivation as I have continued through this work.



**Figure 4. During Writing Lab at Poetic House Party.**

### **Development as Educator and Researcher**

For the purposes of this study, I believe it is important to briefly include my perspectives as a researcher and educator. As a researcher, I will be a participant observer within this study. Participant as an observer as defined by Merriam (2009) states, “The researcher’s observer activities which are known to the group are subordinate to the researcher’s role as a participant” (p. 124). It is my intention to be a study participant in this research. Contextualizing my own transformational experiences and my use of Spoken Word as a member of the community allows me to truly explore and analyze the similarities and differences among other adults who utilize Spoken Word in their own lives. As a researcher, by including in this study, my role as a participant observer, allows a deeper opportunity to determine if empirical evidence emerges that supports or contradicts my own experiences-individually and in others, regarding the critically transformational power of Spoken Word. In addition to my researcher role within this study, my philosophies as an educator are also important to note.

My own lens as a researcher is heavily influenced by the work of Freire (1970) and is consistent with radical teaching philosophies. Education should encompass and

include room for identity development and critical consciousness that promotes social change and liberation. I operate from a combination of humanistic and radical teaching philosophies. Humanistic philosophies emphasize the importance of human potential, self-growth and direction in student learning (Freire, 1970; Zinn, 2004). Radical teaching philosophies operate from the stance that skills needed for social change and resistance to oppression are developed (Freire 1970; Zinn, 2004).

Spoken Word, in my experience, has been a tool that allows both of these philosophies to be utilized. From my point of view, Spoken Word can be used to implement Freire's liberatory framework. Writers can construct original Spoken Word pieces to explore and make meaning of economic, political, social, cultural, and other personally relevant issues in their lives. Algarin and Holman (1994) suggest that the goal of Spoken Word is to dissolve the social, cultural and political boundaries that generalize the human experience and make it meaningless. The poems themselves become knowledge in constructing socially just learning and conceptualizing options for change. As these socially constructed boundaries of the human experience are broken down, re-evaluated, re-constructed and shared using Spoken Word, the argument can be made that the possibility for change and liberation at both community and individual levels can be possible.

Freire (1970) states that liberation only occurs when one can identify and name their oppressor. Here, Freire is referring to oppressors and oppression as the myriad of social and economic forces that marginalize people in our society. Spoken Word, in my own experiences, certainly has been used as a tool to promote and enact change around a variety of oppressive social ills. However, what if we apply this idea of naming our

oppression in an individual and internal way? We often spend a great deal of time attempting to liberate ourselves from our experiences, ideas or ways of thinking to promote self-reflection and growth. Spoken Word has provided this vehicle in my own life, through the exploration, consideration, and construction of stories through Spoken Word. As both an educator and researcher, I am deeply interested in exploring if others who engage in Spoken Word as a way of life also experience change and liberation at the individual and community levels in similar ways. By doing so, a deeper understanding of how we can learn from the construction and sharing of Spoken Word has the potential to inform new dynamic ways of educating others and ourselves.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Spoken Word begins to show its inherent potential as a pedagogical approach by promoting a deeper learning of the communities and ourselves we live through our art or utilizing the art to teach others about issues within our communities. To explore how Spoken Word can be a tool that promotes critical reflection, change and liberation at individual and community levels, the theoretical framework must compliment this goal. This study will build on the theories of critical pedagogy (bell, 1994; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1998) and transformational learning theory (Freire 1970; Mezirow, 2000). Critical pedagogy or “problem-posing education” promotes the understanding that:

people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (Freire, 1970, p.83)

Critical pedagogy argues that lived experiences carry valid and relevant knowledge in the lives of individuals. Furthermore, by examining these lived experiences, solutions to potential problems or obstacles can arise through critical reflection, praxis and evaluation at both individual and community levels. Freire's (1970) critical approach invites adults to question and challenge the system they live in and the knowledge offered to them, to discuss the kind of future they want, and how to change the system. It aims to encourage learners to become actively engaged in identifying problems, asking questions, analyzing, developing and implementing strategies for transformation through praxis. Finally, it is imperative that reflection and analysis regarding the results of the action taken also occur. This process is referred to as critical conscientization. Furthermore, it is a cyclical process.

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) state that the critical reflection assists in developing the understanding that "complex problems require complex solutions that must be revisited, revised and re-implemented to reach a solution" (p. 25). The writer often constructs spoken Word poems to make sense of or to express their understanding of critical issues that are relevant to their lives. Through writing the poems, people become more aware of their personal and social realities and then must use creative language in which to convey this understanding not only to themselves but the audiences they will share them with. The action of sharing the poem moves the writer from passive understanding into a catalyst for critical conscientization in themselves and others. It is through this development of conscientization that one can promote change and liberation at individual or community levels.



Transformational learning theory has much in common with critical pedagogy. At its core, to concepts of critical reflection, dialogue, and analysis are present. However, transformational learning most often tends to look more intently the individual transformation process where critical pedagogy argues individual transformation is necessary to be an effective agent for greater social change outside of the individual. Transformational learning focuses on how our experiences can push us into a necessary place of reflection and change within ourselves, particularly when coming into new knowledge that is in conflict with our current ways of knowing. According to Mezirow (1997)

Transformational learning is the process of affecting change in a frame of reference...A frame of reference encompasses cognitive, conative and emotional components composed of two dimensions: habits of mind and a point of view. Habits of mind are broad abstract, orientating, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by assumptions that constitute sets of codes...may be cultural, social, educational, economic, political or psychological. Habits of mind become articulated in a specific point of view—the constellation of belief, value judgment, attitude, and feeling that shapes a particular interpretation. (p. 5-6)

For transformational learning to take place, one's habits of mind, which have often become second nature, are challenged in such a way that prompt a change in those mindsets. Mezirow (2000) refers that which challenges one's habits of mind as a disorienting dilemma, an encounter that causes internal discord as the learner tries to make meaning of a new phenomenon within old contexts of knowing. Furthermore, Mezirow identifies four major concepts which must be present for transformational

learning to occur: experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action (Mezirow, 2000). Our habits of mind and points of view become challenged when we must make meaning around encounters that do not fit within our current understanding or viewpoints. Spoken Word as personal reflection and storytelling allows space for this to occur.

Mezirow (1997) states, that critical reflection around our points of view can begin to impact change and transformation. Spoken Word is often constructed by the writer in the effort to make meaning, inform, and convey a story about a topic or incident (Merriweather, 2011). Adult learners tend to engage best when the learning is relevant to their own lives; when it is self-directed and incorporates their own experiences and knowledge (Knowles, 2005). In Spoken Word, the writer must make meaning for themselves around the subjects and must build the poem in a way that engages the audience in their own meaning making. Thus, once a poem is spoken, it is expected for the audience to absorb the work and begin to reconcile the new perspective with the points of view they currently have. For example, in a qualitative study that explored why participants had a love for and engagement with poetry, Wright et al., (2011) discovered that the poetry lovers they interviewed used poetry reading as a “personal springboard to intentionally consider the social and political influences in their own and others’ perspectives” and “to engage intentionally in the process of critical reflection on their own lived experiences, as well as on societal structures and inequities...as a lifelong endeavor” (p. 117). This illustrates how for some, poetry fed their hunger and need to make sense of their own lives, identities, and experiences particularly in the contexts in which they operate.

Critical pedagogy and transformational learning theories both value critical reflection, dialogue, and action. Both promote a deeper engagement around learning which goes beyond what has been known or taken for granted and utilize contemplative practices to break through surface learning. Spoken Word itself is a critically reflective, dialogic art form that connects communities and individuals through stories, voices, and action. Chapter two will look more in-depth at Spoken Word as a tool for social change and liberation from the current literature. Additionally, I will more deeply explore how Spoken Word promotes and embodies the principles of critical pedagogy and transformational learning.

Spoken Word allows the writer to utilize language, concepts, ideas they are familiar with to construct new meaning and understanding through creating the poem. Spoken Word is written with the intention of being shared. Therefore, as the writer constructs their own new knowledge through the critically reflective process of writing the poem in a way that audience members can also take away meaning. Often poems are constructed through clever and imaginative use of wordplay, metaphors, and symbolism, all which encourage the listener and writer to engage in the content in ways that speak to both inner and outer knowing. These concepts of contemplation, engagement, reflection, liberation and creating new meaning are deeply embedded in Spoken Word transformational learning.

### **Dissertation Road Map**

The potential for Spoken Word to connect us more deeply with each other and ourselves in a manner that is authentic, and liberating, is an important consideration for adult learners. Poetic and narrative inquiry provided me the perfect vehicles for collecting

the data. Through methodologies that valued the importance and relevant ways, we story our lives, the authentic dialogue and poems from the participants manifested a vast and rich body of data. Reading each aspect of story repeatedly, I identified themes that emerged from each participant that spoke to the research questions and direction of this study.

In this work, the dissertation is not presented in the traditional format. Rather than relegate a specific chapter to the literature, the literature is spread throughout the document to support the study findings. In chapter three, the narratives of each participant's journey to Spoken Word is explored. While each story was unique, there were significant commonalities among the participants. Chapter four more deeply explores these commonalities as emerging themes. Furthermore, this chapter illustrates the ways these themes inform practices of adult, arts-based learning in individual and community spaces, through the use Spoken Word. Chapter five shares the highlights and implications of this study, as well as, suggests considerations for future research.

## **II. METHODS**

This dissertation documents the stories of four adult poets' journeys into Spoken Word and provides insight into the ways it has also provided spaces for adult learning to occur. Since my own emergence into the art form in 2004, I experienced deeply personal and life-changing moments of learning. This became particularly true when I no longer simply kept my stories between the loose-leaf pages of my journal and began sharing them with others. Through this sharing of stories, community and a sense of belonging developed. I have been deeply impacted numerous times when receiving and internalizing the stories others shared through their poetry as well. Creations of friendships, allyship, social change, and community have manifested in my own life in a multitude of ways, as I have listened to and shared stories through Spoken Word over the last decade. "Human beings are creatures who tell stories...and those stories serve as a function, namely to make meaning of our experience" (Clark & Rossiter, 2008, p. 61).

Narrative and poetic inquiry are methodologies that employ various forms of storytelling as rich sources of data, as well as, a format in which to present research findings. Using these methodologies made sense particularly when considering Spoken Word as a form of storytelling that allowed adult learners to make meaning about themselves and the world around them. Storytelling can take many forms, however, very little currently exists on the ways in which adult learners can utilize Spoken Word in this way, particularly as a teaching tool in art-based educational settings.

An essential focus of qualitative research is "understanding the meaning people have constructed...how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). Qualitative researchers "study phenomena and people's behavior attempting to make sense and interpret the meanings people bring

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).” Qualitative research focuses on the “how” and “why” of a particular phenomenon. It probes into the areas that cannot neatly fit into particular binaries and explores the spaces around and in between them. The following research questions guided this dissertation:

1. What are the stories and journeys of the participating poets becoming engaged in Spoken Word practice?
2. Why is Spoken Word an important pedagogical vehicle for learning at the levels of self and community?
3. How can Spoken Word be used as a learning tool?

This chapter presents the methodology, study design, and ethical considerations for the implementation of the study.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

As noted earlier in this chapter, Spoken Word is situated within a context of story writing and sharing. Clandinin and Connelly (2006) state:

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story in the current idiom is a portal through which a person enters the world by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, this is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative

inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study. (p. 375)

Arguably, Spoken Word is a method of storytelling for making sense of the experiences in and around one's life. Narrative inquiry is the method I will use to gather data and report findings because it makes sense for the nature of the study.

Clandinin and Connelly (2006) explain that temporality, sociality, and place are central dimensions to be considered when using the method of narrative inquiry. Temporality explains that people have a past, present, and future; they are therefore always in a state of transition. Sociality is concerned about the personal and social conditions such as "feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions" (p. 480). Finally, the place is "the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of a place or sequence of places where the inquiry and events take place" (p. 480).

In addition, Guajardo and Guajardo (2010), "The creative process of storytelling is critical to forming an identity, analyzing data, creating strategies for change and opening up imagination and creativity. Storytelling cultivates personal, organizational, and community change through questions and conversation" (pp.7-8). Poems, presented as stories, have the potential to promote change and reflection at individual and community levels. When writers choose to take their personal stories and go beyond open mic performances to competing in poetry slams, the language is crafted in a way to influence and connect with the audience. When poems are constructed to speak out against or for social issues that are personally relevant to a writer, the intention to move an audience into action becomes a crucial consideration in what words, metaphors, and imagery are appropriate to compel such movement. Narrative inquiry allowed for a

deeper understanding of the ways we can story our lives in critically reflective and consciously aware ways.

### **Poetic Inquiry**

Poetic inquiry is closely related to narrative inquiry. Both explore stories as both data and data analysis tools. Poetic inquiry however, focuses on the possibilities of poetry as a very specific form of storytelling and understanding. According to McCullis (2013) poetic inquiry is “a term that describes the use of both poetic and creative thinking to analyze and draw conclusions in research, as well as a way of understanding and communicating the subject matter being studied” (p. 83). By examining how people creatively represent their experiences, a richer, deeper level of understanding can be explored. We understand that as humans we more often share our stories with language that helps authentically share the experience both factually and emotionally. Poetic inquiry is a qualitative approach that allows us to more deeply engage in the stories of others. McCullis also states that:

to use poetic inquiry in research is to incorporate poetry in some way as an analytical device, whether in data collection, as a tool to view data in unique ways that can help yield new insight, or as a way of representing findings to peers and the general public (p. 88).

The very essence of this study explored the role that poetry played in the lives of those who deeply engage in Spoken Word as a way of being, individually and as a collective community. In this study, poetry was used to both collect data, as well as represent it. Each participant shared a few original poems they felt were particularly important to them and shared their stories around the creation, sharing, and impact of writing those



particular works. Furthermore, at the writing lab, each was given a selection of prompts, which encouraged them to express the role Spoken Word manifested in their lives and the world. During the writing lab, they shared their poems with each other. Both the written poems and the dialogues from the lab were used to inform this study. Poems were constructed to express some of my findings from the study.

In essence, poetic inquiry promoted a deeper level of understanding these experiences as I reflected on and analyzed the stories behind their stories. How did they come to write and share the particular experiences or “stories” that they choose? How do they choose to express their journey or story with Spoken Word through creative representation in a poem? How does engaging in the sharing of Spoken Word with others allow us to make sense of our own experiences? Additionally, how can it allow us to more deeply understand those experiences that are vastly different from our own Myers (2017) explains:

While a poem usually starts out with one person’s experience, it attempts to move beyond the study of one person to the study of many. Poetry is not generalizable in the statistical sense of the world, but generalizable in that it helps stimulate an empathetic understanding in the reader. The readers are able to locate themselves in the poem, and when there is a difference, they are able to transcend the poem and create that which is their own. (p. 16-17)

Spoken Word differentiates itself from free verse poetry because it is shared with others. Regardless of how it is shared, it goes beyond the written page and requires the author to share their story through written and verbally expressive means. This sharing of emotion and meaning through this dual method allowed for those experiencing the story to not

only situate themselves within its context, but they experienced the poet's perspectives as it was shared. Since both writing and sharing poetry was part of the data collection and analysis method, poetic inquiry only enhanced the narrative inquiry approach through a more focused lens. Congruent with the use of poetic inquiry in the data analysis process, poems were constructed directly from the data provided by the study participants. As a researcher, utilizing my skills and experience as poet and writer, I constructed poems and utilized them in this dissertation to report the findings that emerged from the data collected. This practice is an essential component when using poetic inquiry and to go beyond the poems themselves as sources of data. Thus, I used poetry as a medium to share the study findings in this dissertation document.

### **Study Design**

Using narrative and poetic inquiry, this qualitative study sought to explore the ways four individuals and the researcher have used Spoken Word as a way of telling and sharing stories to make meaning of critical moments in the writer's lives. This understanding shed light on the potential Spoken Word had as critically transformational pedagogy in the lives of adult learners as well as provide implications for arts-based educational practices.

### **Study Setting**

This study took place in Central Texas where I identified two venues that held adult poetry slams and open mics regularly. These two venues send teams to the National Poetry Slam, which happens in a different city annually. While there is a great deal of overlap in poets who frequent multiple venues, the community is still new and growing. As a member of this community, I have been able to watch multiple open mic events also

gain popularity since they are less competitive spaces for Spoken Word to be shared. The geographical area in which the study took place has a large artistic scene hosting several annual events including festivals around music, films, and plays. The poetry communities in this area have a great deal of diversity across many intersections within society such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, skills, age, disability and numerous others. As a member of this community, I have personally seen its tremendous growth in participation and interest since I became a part of it in 2004.

There are two dominant venues that have been around for more than ten years each. Pseudonyms have been used for all the names of people and places in this chapter. Eclectic is the oldest, most established program within this area. Historically, Eclectic has been seen as the predominately-White venue as most of the audience members are White; however, there is a bit more racial diversity among the regular poets who perform. In any given week, there are approximately 20-30 performers and well over 100 audience members. In the last five years, there has been an increase in the racial diversity of its performers. The number of performers who are young adults is another significant demographic. Eclectic has been sending teams to national and regional competitions for over ten years.

The second venue, Kindred, has historically been seen as the predominately African American venue, yet still comprised of greater racial diversity among poets and audience. Over the last five to eight years, an increased overlap of poets regularly frequent both establishments. This added to more racial diversity in this venue as well. In any given week, this venue has closer to 20 performers and 50-60 audience members. Kindred began participating in the National competitions in 2006. While there are no

official documents providing statistical data regarding demographics of this poetry community, I would estimate that those participating, and attending, have at least doubled in the last ten years. Eclectic and Kindred have been mainstays in the development of the Spoken Word community and art form in this Central Texas area.

### **The Participants**

Four adult poets who utilize Spoken Word in their lives were identified and agreed to participate in this study. For this research, I utilized purposeful sampling which Merriam (2009) explains as the "...sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77).

<b>Table 1. Participant Chart.</b>				
Name	Age	Racial Identity	Occupation	Years involved in Spoken Word
Onslaught	37	Black	Social Worker/Artist	23 years
Professor X	39	Black and Latino	English Professor	12 years
Cable	32	Latino	Security Officer	6 years
Galactus	42	White	Educational Instruction Designer	14 years

For this dissertation, I set criteria to assist me to gain a broad insight and understanding regarding how Spoken Word had been used in the lives of adults who participated in this art form. I used Patton's (2002) concept of intensity sampling in which the purpose is to select practices that shed light on the phenomenon being studied. Intensity sampling includes exploratory work identifying participants that can provide "information-rich

cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely” (p. 234). That is why it was important for me to identify the characteristics of participants ahead of time. One criterion for all participants in this study was that they had utilized the art for no less than two years, as both writer and performer. Two years of involvement with the art allows the participant to be past initially learning how to navigate the art and have enough experience performing and writing to feel comfortable to speak about the role Spoken Word has played in their lives.

The second criterion is that all participants must be at least 18 years or older. In the State of Texas, 18 is the legal adult age and there are many poets who do not go to the university and are now young adults, making a living on their own. Third, each participant values Spoken Word as a form of authentic storytelling. Within the larger Spoken Word community, there can often be tension about what is “real slam poetry” (Sommers-Willett, 2009). When Spoken Word is performed within a “slam”, it becomes a competition rather than an “open mic” which is still performance, but open mics more for sharing the art form without the added component of the competition. At times, there are poets who are interested in slam for simply entertaining through competition and write poems with the focus of winning a slam in mind. This dissertation aimed to document authentic stories, viewpoints and how Spoken Word can be used to foster learning and community building. I am not researching the impact of slam on Spoken Word, but rather how Spoken Word is used to foster understanding and communication between the poet and the audience and how that can inform aspects of learning.

Characteristics of the participants are indicated in the table below. As noted, the participants range in age from 32 to 42 years of age. Participants represented a variety of

racial identities; Black, Latino, White and a Bi-racial identity of Black and Latino. Each contributed a wide range of experience and occupations. Their involvement with Spoken Word ranged from a minimum of six years and a maximum of 23.

### **Data Collection Sources**

Literature suggests that qualitative data can be collected using a variety of methods such as interviews, field notes, and review of artifacts or documents (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2002; Merriam, 2009). “Data collection is guided by questions, educated hunches, and emerging findings (Merriam, 2009, p. 150). Different data sources are necessary to bring rigor to the study and ensure triangulation of findings. The data collection sources for this study are listed below (see Table 2).

<b>Table 2. Data Collection Sources.</b>			
<b>Conversations</b>	<b>Writing Lab/ Performance</b>	<b>Artifacts and documents</b>	<b>Researcher Journal</b>
One 60-90 min one on one conversation  Second conversation was group dialogue within group writing lab  Informal follow up one on one conversations as needed	In group writing lab, each participant construct an original poem  Participants will perform new poem for group	Each poet submitted 2-3 additional original poems they identify as important to them and provide insight as to why these poems were chosen.	Thoughts, ideas, observations, additional questions, concerns, and intuitive feelings

Engage in understanding participant life stories and background	Illustrate meaning participant's meaning making	Provide insight to participant's narrative and learning	Insights to process and progress of the research
Audio taped	Audio taped/MS Documents	Photographs/ Documents	Notebook/ computer notes

### **Conversations/Writing Lab**

In this study, the main goal is to examine the narratives of four adult poets and their journeys into Spoken Word in an effort to discover the potential impacts their relationship with this art form has had in shaping their learning and their lives. While qualitative interviews can assist in achieving this, dialogue often opens the space in a more inviting way which gets at people's experiences and the knowledge gained from them (Freire, 1997). Dialogic approaches to learning allow for the mutual exchange of knowledge and experience between learner and facilitator and allows the conversation to be focused on different topics in critically reflective ways. This allows us to get at deeper levels of the stories being shared. For this study, the dialogic approach I used in this study is based off an approach called "platicas." Platicas are "an expressive cultural form by listening, inquiry, storytelling, and story making that is akin to nuanced, multi-dimensional conversations" (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013). Participants brought with them a variety of identities into this study. Using a plática-based dialogic approach, genuine efforts to honor and understand the stories of these individuals as they share their personal journeys with me was effectively achieved. Conversation sought to more deeply explore the stories that shaped their lives. Additionally, the writings they constructed and

shared with audiences provided the space for richer and deeper expressions in ways that value their roles as storytellers and Spoken Word artists.

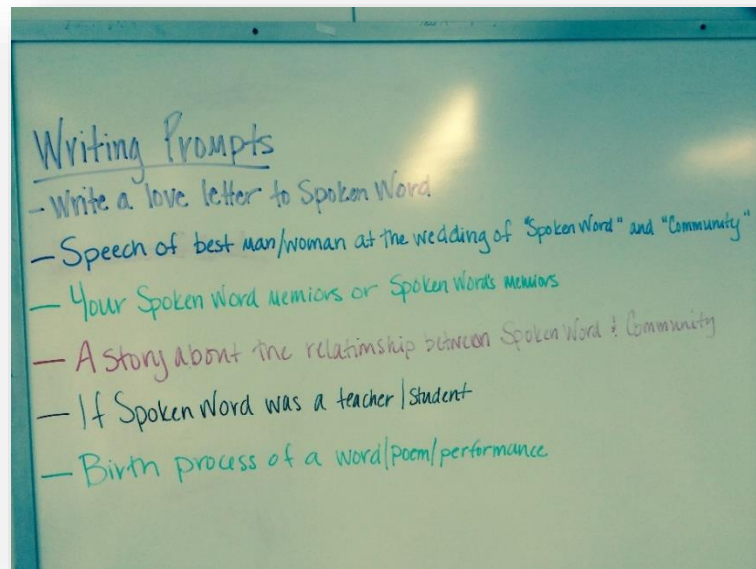
During the first conversation, we spent the first part of the dialogue exploring who they are, their backgrounds, how they became involved in Spoken Word and what interested them in being part of this study to better understand them as individuals. During the second half of this initial conversation, I had them identify the events in their lives they felt had been most critical in shaping who they are and who they are becoming. They were encouraged to divulge as much as they feel comfortable in sharing as to why they identified the particular moments as the ones that shaped them. Once the participant was satisfied with the content, they were asked to take it home and create a timeline of these events and fill in any gaps they wish to explain. They were given instructions to go home and build into their timelines, the development of their involvement with Spoken Word. Most participants were unable to provide me with a timeline. To address this, I took time during the writing lab to ask specific questions that would get to some of these experiences. I also asked them to bring me at least two poems in which the topic was related to one of the critical life events they identified. Each of the individual conversations was audiotaped and transcribed.

For the second conversation, we had a group dialogue among the participants as well as included the writing lab. Guajardo and Guajardo (2012) explain that *pláticas* as inquiry often begin individually and then lead to small group *pláticas*. The writing of the poems was initially done individually and then, as they were shared, created dialogue and spaces for reflection. In this coming together, the participants were encouraged to share stories of community, particularly as members of the Spoken Word community. Utilizing



information provided in their initial interviews, we started the group dialogue with critically reflective questions. We started with considerations about what brought each of them to the art form. From these questions, information about each poet's experiences with not just the art form, but with the community in connection to Spoken Word materialized organically. They shared their stories with each other and were given the opportunity to share a relevant poem if they felt comfortable enough with the group to do so. Most chose to share poems after the writing lab portion of the meeting.

After discussion for about an hour, we began the writing lab portion. In my own experience, informal writing labs have been constructed or hosted by various members of the communities to work on the practice of writing and having time to share and get feedback on their works in community settings. The participants were given several writing prompts and encouraged to choose from them during the writing lab. Below is a photo of the writing prompts provided to the participants for the writing lab.



**Figure 5. Writing Prompts Given to Study Participants.**

However, because poetry can be a very personal and organic process, I assured each of them that they had the freedom to choose a topic that more closely spoke to them in the moment if they did not find they were moved to write to any of the topics. One participant wrote a poem influenced by the prompt “A love letter to Spoken Word.” Two wrote to the prompt “Spoken Word memoirs”. The final participant chose the prompt about the birth process of a word/poem/performance but found they already had a poem started that they felt was related to this idea and built on that poem.

Participants shared their writing with the group. Rich dialogue and group processing occurred after the reading of each poem. The conversations covered a variety of concepts such as historical contexts of the poetry communities each navigated or personal experiences of growth, challenges, and successes as writers, poets, and community educators. The sharing of work encouraged to know more about each other individually and as poets. The writing lab and second conversation lasted for almost four hours. The lab ended because the participants had commitments they had to attend to, however, each participant noted they truly enjoyed the afternoon. One participant stated that this kind of moment or get together is something that used to happen often when the community was younger and still developing and it was something that they missed. The others agreed with this sentiment, acknowledging that the focus or energy had shifted somewhat when poets came together to write. The structure of the writing lab, of writing poetry and sharing works truly presented authentic opportunities for narrative inquiry with the participants asking and answering questions of each other without my having to continually guide the conversation.

After the writing lab, I followed up with participants individually to explore concepts they had shared more deeply or to provide the participants opportunities to share any additional considerations or thoughts they had about this work. As it was necessary, I revisited conversations or ideas shared with me by the participants to clarify or gain deeper insight to their meaning. I found this to be most true when analyzing some of the poems that each participant chose to submit to the study. While often they had shared, dialogue around events the poems represented, at times there was not as much to connect the poem choice to ideas they had shared

### **Artifacts and Documents**

Merriam (2009) defines artifacts as physical objects found within the study setting. She explains, “Anthropologists typically refer to these objects as artifacts, which include the tools, implements, utensils, and instruments of everyday living” (p. 146). Originally, the artifacts I intended to utilize for this study were advertisements for performances, poems, pictures, chapbooks, and awards. Chapbooks are often unpublished collections of original works of poems which poets often share or sell within the community or when they perform at various venues. Commonly, these are self-selected poems which the poet themselves choose to showcase in their works and could provide insight which helps depict or construct the narrative around how these poets have utilized particular works in their lives. These kinds of artifacts provided significant insight into ideas, concepts, and experiences the participants work and write in very self-defined ways. These were helpful in connecting themes observed or discovered in interviews. I did use poems as part of the triangulation of data within the study. Initially, I intended to

use photos of some of these artifacts in the study but had a concern that most of those items increased the possibility that the identities of the participants could be discovered.

Personal and visual documents were utilized in this study. Personal documents can be defined as “first-person narratives that describes an individual’s actions, experiences and beliefs” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 133). Poems are the primary personal documents presented by each of these participants. It is important to note that depending on the context in which they are presented, poems can serve as both artifacts and personal documents. Each participant was asked to submit three original poems that they identified as authentic representations of their own personal stories, experiences or viewpoints. Visual documents are defined as “film, video and photography” (Merriam, 2009, p. 144).

An example of visual documents that were used are self-identified video clips or photographs of past performances, which are significant to their own lives, were analyzed for content and themes. Furthermore, an explanation as to why they chose to share these specific clips or images as significant allowed for a deeper analysis of the documents and the participants’ stories with Spoken Word. Again, to protect the participants’ identities, these are not part of the document but could be used in the analysis of data.

### **Researcher’s Journal**

The purpose of the researcher journal is to keep a conscious record of important insights discovered along the journey (Merriam, 2009). I journaled after each interaction with participants. This space allowed me to document items and ideas that were not just significant to the participants but to myself as a researcher. When I found myself wrestling with the meaning of a event or shared idea, I was able to document those and

follow up as needed with participants. In fact, this was one of the ways that I found the journal to be most valuable.

Furthermore, it provided snapshots of what resonated as important, unusual, or unclear, after each interaction that assisted me in the data analysis portion of the study. More specifically, it assisted with theming my ideas. For example, I remember finding the storytelling theme begin to emerge in my journal. Each participant shared someone, they saw as a storyteller during their childhood. When I realized I had written this reflection for each participant, it encouraged me to explore the interviews more critically in the interview data themselves. The researcher's journal allowed me to explore not only the thoughts and ideas of the participants but my own critical reflections as a researcher.

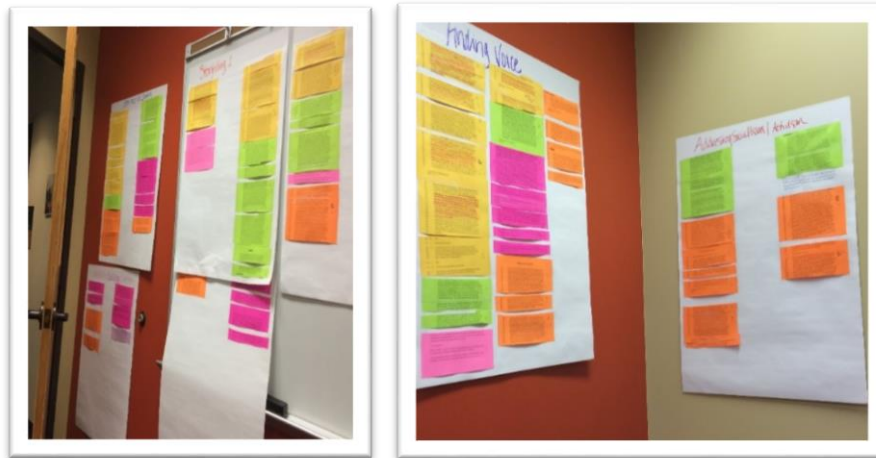
### **Data Analysis Process**

This qualitative study employed narrative inquiry for data collection and analysis. Narrative inquiry is an umbrella term that captures personal and human dimensions of experience over time and takes account of the relationship between individual experience and cultural context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Several narrative and poetic analysis approaches were used within this work.

In the first steps in the analysis was to transcribe all the shared oral stories will from the conversations with participants, both individually and as a group. Van Maanen (1998) states that stories need to be transcribed into written forms because “only in textualized form do data yield to analysis.” (p. 95). Once this was done, I began using a paradigmatic analysis of narrative, particularly “one in which concepts are inductively derived from the data” (Polkinghorne, 2006, p. 13). Simply, I sought to find the themes or concepts that emerged within each of the participant's stories. Polkinghorne also states

that “most often this approach requires a database consisting of several stories rather than a single story...to discover which notions appear across them [stories]” (p. 13).

Specifically, in my study, as themes emerged I began to categorize them on large post-it notes. I had photocopied participant’s interviews and poems along with the writing lab interview onto his or her own unique colored paper. As I found data that spoke to these themes, I cut these sections out and placed them on the post-it note pages that then allowed me to cluster relevant material in sections underneath the broader themes. An example can be seen in the photo below.



**Figure 6. Example of Emerging Themes During Data Analysis.**

Once I did this for everyone’s story, I did a similar analysis across collective dialogue and stories as well. This allowed me to understand what themes emerged for each individual, and similar or unique themes emerged among the participants’ stories as a collective. Additionally, it provided me visual representation themes that did emerge as significant and which were not. Since I sought to understand how Spoken Word has affected and shaped their lives and learning, I did not impose preconceived expectations or theories about their journeys. However, in addition to what commonalities and

differences this analysis found I was interested in knowing if any of the themes spoke to the concepts of transformation and critical reflection at both community and individual levels. Closely holding to the definitions for both within this study, I found the presence of both of these ideal within each participant's story. In addition to the transcribed conversations, the written poems and artifacts shared were also considered when analyzing the themes found within the narratives shared by participants.

One of the ways in which poetic analysis is employed in this study is the focus on the use poetic language such as metaphors and imagery when exploring and categorizing the themes that emerge from the participant's poems and dialogues (McCulliss, 2013). According to McCulliss (2013), this allows the "researcher/learner/listener with a different lens to view the same scenery and thereby understand the data and themselves in different and more complex ways" (p. 108). Due to this complexity, several approaches were used to get familiar with the data. Within this study, I read and re-read interview transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the data. As these interviews were also audio-recorded, voice inflection and intonation were readily available to compliment the written format as I considered meaning for analysis. Reading the transcriptions while listening to the same content spoken allowed me a greater familiarity with the data as well as the feeling behind the words themselves. This coupled with the poems, interviews and, artifacts shared by the participants also assisted in this process. Through these methods of becoming deeply familiar with the research, I employed poetic inquiry in presenting the data findings as well. In chapter three, near the start of each participant narrative, a poem is present. These are original poems I constructed to present the data based on the information provided by the participants about their backgrounds and

journeys into Spoken Word. By doing so, it incorporated the same expressive approach in discussing the findings that were used to gather the narratives constructed in the first place. Finally, I kept the research questions at the forefront at each stage of analysis

Bazeley (2013), states that narrative analysts “seek to understand the author as well as the text-to develop empathy with your story-tellers, to see the world they describe from their perspective, but also to challenge and question their perspectives, seeking deeper or latent meanings” (p. 214). Through interviews, poems and dialogue, I constructed the participant’s narratives in such a way to accurately represent their stories while also remaining consistent with the data findings as well. By implementing ethical and rigorous data analysis, trustworthiness and credibility can be achieved.

### **Building Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Three important objectives for building trustworthiness in regards to a qualitative study according to Yin (2011) are transparency, methodic-ness, and adherence to evidence. Remaining clear in how data is collected, coded and used to support the findings is imperative to a qualitative study. One way this study-demonstrated transparency was to be clear with the participants about what data will be collected and thoroughly discussed the consent form with each participant prior to them signing the agreement. I worked closely with my dissertation chair and supporting committee to be sure the approaches to collection and coding were clear and appropriate for the study. This consistent support and review helped to provide me further support and expertise regarding this study.

As for methodic-ness, consistency inflexibility is a challenge regarding qualitative research. The importance, however, of a clear and thorough approach, which in its own



consistency provides validity, cannot be stressed enough. By conducting analysis for emerging themes both within the individual participant narratives, as well as the themes across individual narratives, allowed for a deeper exploration of how Spoken Word has or has not affected or shaped the lives of these individuals. By establishing and following thorough record keeping and clear, concise explanations around concerns of data, transparency can be achieved (Yin, 2011). My research journal and field notes assisted in this rigorous data analysis process. I found it to be incredibly helpful throughout the data analysis process.

Regarding adherence of evidence, I acknowledge multiple interpretations and perspectives was vital when working to assess the data. The very nature of this qualitative study's use narrative inquiry as a methodology lent itself to primarily speak from the voice of the participants by interpreting the data and using their language, words and works to support those findings. Ensuring consistency across different sources is essential in providing evidence for your findings (Yin, 2011). The most prominent way I adhered to the evidence was to consistently and constantly revisit the guiding research questions through the theoretical lens of transformational learning and critical pedagogy.

Triangulation is a principle that "pertains to the goal of seeking at least three ways of verifying or corroborating a particular event, description or fact being reported in the study" (Yin, 2011, p. 81). In this study, triangulation of data sources occurred through the individual interviews, the products collected from the writing lab and subsequent poems guided by writing prompts, and participant's individually submitted poems. Looking at all these data I was able to identify major events that participants found to be significant or promoted deep change in their understanding of self and/or the world around them.

These chosen poems also indicated when Spoken Word complimented or accompanied this self-identified milestone.

The individual interviews allowed for a more intimate space to explore their lives and stories in relation to self and Spoken Word. Conversations allowed for a deeper explanation of the artifacts and poems around the role of Spoken Word as a tool in their lives that were collectively explored. Having the audio recordings of dialogues added depth to the meaning of the written transcripts. How they choose to verbally convey what they have written, whether through performance or conversation, adds layers that can assist in triangulating the data. Furthermore, the poems and other identified artifacts that they shared also help to corroborate or contradict the moments they share through the creative expressions in their writing. The writing lab allowed these individual ideas to be shared and explored as a community of poets that further added insight to many aspects of participant's stories. Finally, original poems were analyzed individually, as well as, across participant's selected works. As the data was collected and coded, conversations with participants to clarify responses or pieces of data that were unclear also assisted in keeping true to what the participant attempted to express.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are always a vital part of any study. Before beginning any part of the study with the participants, as a researcher, I had updated the status of my Collaborative Institutional Training Institute certification which assists in reviewing the ethical expectations and rules when engaging in research with human subjects. I passed the formal assessment after participating in this training is an expectation before submitting the study request to the Institutional Research Board (IRB). IRB's purpose is

to assure all research studies are adhering to appropriate and ethical research practices.

People's journeys and experiences as shared through stories, delving into how they came to make meaning in their lives around critical moments is an extremely personal process, even when they are shared stories. Despite the reality, Spoken Word poems were written to eventually be shared or performed in public, the frequent depth, impact and intimate space these works are born from are still very individual and often deeply personal situations in a writer's life. Therefore, one important ethical consideration when reporting the study findings was to be mindful of the level of vulnerability the participants are willing to share by letting me into private insights of their personal journeys.

To assure and promote trust between the participants, and myself I provided clear and concise consent forms that clearly outline what was expected and how I conducted and protected the research to each participant. Respecting their stories and deeply listening to what they share and how they tell them was essential to promoting trust. Being present and reflective was extremely important and the researcher's journal along with field notes assisted in this process. Since each participant was allowed to have some decision-making power in where the interviews took place, it allowed the setting to assist in promoting a sense of safety that encouraged them to share and feel comfortable doing so. Additionally, as appropriate, as a participant observer, I did not ask them to participate in activities that I did not also engage in. By participating along with them, I worked to build deeper levels of trust and create some equity in the vulnerability shared.

Confidentiality speaks to another essential ethical consideration for this study. One important aspect regarding confidentiality is keeping data safe and protected. I kept

all data files, poems, pictures, and other related documents and artifacts in a locked computer storage space. Each participant was given an alias in order to protect their identity within the document itself. Another important aspect to consider regarding confidentiality was the reality that many poems they share in the study may work they have shared in public, and therefore could potentially make them recognizable to a reader. We discussed this reality during our consent form conversation. While every possible step to protect their identity will be taken, I also made it a point to remind them more popular the poem they share, the greater the possibility of a reader identifying who they are. Using metaphors or poems that have been performed less often but which speak to critical moments in their lives was one tactic suggested in assisting maintaining confidentiality.

In this chapter, I described the ways this study was designed, data was collected and the methodologies in which it was analyzed. With Narrative and Poetic Inquiry, I was able to explore the ways in which four adult learners have utilized Spoken Word in their lives. The next chapter delves into the participant's narratives and the start of the data findings.

### **III. STORIES OF FOUR POETS BECOMING ENGAGED IN SPOKEN WORD PRACTICE**

In this chapter, I present the narratives of four adult learners who participated in this dissertation and their journeys into Spoken Word. One of the guiding research questions of this study is to examine the stories of four adult learners and their engagement into the world of Spoken Word. In honoring the essence of narrative and poetic inquiry, the participant's stories are shared through a combination of their own words, poetic imagery, and interpretation. By presenting the chapter in this way, it allows the reader to begin to see not only the ways in which they story their lives but also how moments of transformational learning and self-reflection resulted throughout their journey. If we understand the potential for this type of informal learning at both individual and community levels, it allows us to more deeply consider the potential for Spoken Word as an arts-based educational tool.

As a researcher and poet, I created poems based on the data from interviews, dialogues, and poems. Poetic inquiry encourages representing the data in poetic formats. As previously stated, poetry is a foundational component of the art form Spoken Word. Merriweather (2011) states "the power of arts has 3 key purposes: pedagogical strategy, a way of knowing that honors creativity, and emotions and a conduit for social change" (p. 52-55). Spoken Word can be used as an educational tool that honors how the writer has shaped and shared their emotions, stories, and experiences.

By presenting the participant stories in a combination of poetry and narrative, we begin to see how this study can inform the practice of Spoken Word and poetry as a tool for arts-based learning. Participants shared their own critical and often emotional experiences and these connections to their development as writers, artists, and poets. The

reflection, which is required during the writing process and the impact on audience members who receive it, create change at the individual and community levels.

Butterwick and Lawrence (2009) “found that incorporating various art forms into our practice can enhance learning and create spaces for transformation” (p. 35). The arts create a place where deeper revelations of the self and provide insights not easily obtained in traditional academic texts or approaches. The participant’s stories shared through dialogue or through artistic works, such as poems, create such a space. While this chapter will focus on the journey to Spoken Word, the following chapter will delve into some of the community aspects.

Consistent with the artistic and creative nature of this study and work, I came to the names of my participants through a shared, creative commonality. Each of my participants has a deep love and appreciation for comics. This creative commonality was the catalyst for choosing the names for each participant in the study and each participant had said in which persona would be used to characterize them.

### **Galactus**



**Figure 7. Image of Comic Character Galactus.**

*In the Marvel Comics universe, Galactus is a space god. He's enormous. He's bigger than a building and purple. And he eats planets. So that's his thing. He just travels the universes and finds planets to eat. He's not really evil. He's a force of nature...I thought it would be fun if there was a person who really liked Galactus. ...Then at the end of the story, Galactus comes and eats the earth. That's what I was working on, trying to build a narrative that could support the actual eating of the planet. But at this point it's abandoned, I didn't finish writing the story.*

The participant referred to as Galactus grew up on the U.S. East Coast with his family, in a middle-class neighborhood. As a young adult, Galactus got his undergraduate degree at a university in New York and majored in History with a minor in English Literature.

Knowing there were limited career options with these degrees, he decided teaching was his best option.

Before beginning a career in teaching, the relationship with his then-girlfriend would bring him across the country to Texas. Once here, he began a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction while also acquiring a Social Studies certification. During his student teaching, he was placed in a ninth grade classroom. The high school was one of the best in the nation; however, teaching was not at all a comfortable fit for Galactus's personality. *"I was super nervous, just talking. I talked all day with students. The students were fine but I was just so uncomfortable I developed a twitch in my eye"*

Immediately following student teaching, he took a job in the private sector working for an educational company looking for someone with an expertise in early American History. In this position, he worked more autonomously creating curriculum materials. Over eleven years, he moved from part-time contract work to becoming a Director of

Academic Standards within the company. He notes that his identity became very tied to his work. He shares a memory that even on his last vacation home, he went to the library several times in order to meet work deadlines: *“When I am not doing that, it is a great vacation but I am not able to turn off. I think it is kind of who I am and I don’t see that stopping; I don’t know when that will end”*.

As we return to the conversation around his journey with writing, it is interesting to see the role this realization played in his journey into Spoken Word. The following poem captures the main events that led to his participation in Spoken Word.

*As a young boy from the East Coast  
I can’t say I knew then what role words would play in my life.  
I found solace in books,  
Especially comics  
Words had power,  
created spaces for me to live in  
To see them differently  
Than punks who hurled them in my direction  
To feel bigger, better  
At the expense of others,  
Without realizing it until later,  
I began to understand there was power in words.*

*I lived among stories,  
Dinner time was filled with conversations,  
Escapades or challenges from our day,  
It was simply our way of communicating-telling stories,  
Our home was never without books,  
Writing was a part of my life for as long as I can remember,  
In grade school,  
It created GI Joe, Cobra, Rambo-esque inspired fantasylands  
Rag-tag teams of misfits, fighting aliens and terrorists,  
Saving the world behind the  
\*bada bada bada bada\*  
Shots of fictitious, world saving weapons  
I never needed permission to write...*



*And I remember the day I knew my dad was impressed with the stories I could weave  
A poem in elementary school,  
One I can barely remember now,  
Yet one my dad still talks about,  
His surprise at my capacity for the morose,  
To share possibilities infused with imagery  
His pride and encouragement taught me it was acceptable to write.*

*As I got older, writing morphed  
Along with the stages of my life  
Classes or work always required words  
But wasn't what I would necessarily call writing  
I remember a love poem I wrote in college,  
I was proud of it,  
It was a newer space for me to ink in.  
Comics were some of the most influential writing coaches,  
Marvel introduced me to Galactus,  
Purple and the size of a building with a diet of planets,  
Others saw him as evil,  
I saw him as a force of nature  
And I just thought,  
"What if Galactus had a follower?  
Who loved him like religions love God?"  
And of course she needed a boyfriend,  
The nice guy to balance out the Pixie Dream Girl  
Who worshipped the big purple Space God  
Whose current appetite now set its sights on Earth,  
I tried to create the bridge of words  
That explained how I knew this should end...  
I realized later-- I was really talking about myself  
The stereotypical nice guy,  
Inventing the Pixie Girl I dreamed of...  
As a grown up, I realize this story was still left unfinished  
And that feels like growth*

*Sharing my journey with audiences wouldn't come until later,  
Living in a new city,  
Minus the reason I had moved here  
Losing her,  
Yet, still quite tightly bound to the lifelong relationship I had with shyness,*

*I hid in my work—so often  
It had become dangerously comfortable in isolation  
And I knew change was needed  
10 years after I had attended my first poetry slam,  
I was introduced to it again,  
Contemplated if this was a way I could at least get a little distance  
From Shyness, as she'd long made it clear  
She wasn't going anywhere,  
And sometimes, she really made it difficult to see anyone else-  
Let alone talk to them,*

*So I wrote a few things,  
Swallowed all the things that had kept me more reserved,  
And slammed.  
I needed the change,  
To break free of the self-imposed Law and Order  
I'd come so accustomed to,  
But had limited my freedom to live out loud.  
Learning how to talk to people in wide open spaces  
Started with screaming vulgarities into a microphone  
Moved through my fears and into something new,  
Someone new, or at least newly renovated  
Open mics gave safety to practice,  
Slamming because I deserved a stage for my stories  
A platform to reassure my voice it mattered,  
To open possibilities to something new in my ways of living.  
Funny thing is, people back in college,  
Wouldn't even recognize me here,  
Behind this microphone,  
Loud, gifted and confident in being vulnerable  
In public,  
They knew me as I was with Shyness as a partner  
And it is not to say she isn't still living inside me somewhere,  
But she no longer determines my path,  
Or when I share my stories.  
I grew exponentially*

*Small stages became big platforms,  
Earned a place on a national slam team,  
The experience wasn't what I had imagined,*

*Some weren't who they had appeared to be  
It was a learning experience in many ways  
The next year, I became a coach for a rival venue's team  
No one could have warned me the number of hours  
It would consume,  
How it would bring tension at home,  
How my absence would be a fruit of my artistic success  
That my love at the time was not equally experiencing,  
Unspoken jealousy became a third roommate*

*When we find ourselves on the final stage,  
Incredible and fulfilling,  
I had helped guide voices of five poets  
To reach the hearts and minds  
Of a national community of poets.  
Of total strangers.  
We placed in the top 3 of the nation,  
The testament to hard work pays off,  
We are grasping the trophy and I break hold  
To meet her at the diner,  
Now nameless and unimportant  
I remember thinking "What am I doing here?  
All this work, there's no celebration here."  
Just being the boyfriend,  
Which apparently came without a microphone,  
Or open stage....*

*So the next year,  
I didn't coach,  
Because being her boyfriend meant I couldn't put in that kind of time  
And keep her,  
So I spent the next two years,  
Coaching a youth team,  
Where performing fell back to focus on developing writing,  
Helping them to begin to find their voice  
Had to first start with understanding how to weave their words,  
That bared less of a timely burden,  
And less of the shine  
That seemed to blind my partner,  
Shine that invited jealousy to live with us.*

*So I stopped competing.  
Stopped writing.  
But I don't believe forever.*

Spoken Word became more relevant in Galactus life in the late 2000s. Recalling attending a poetry slam while in college, he had been invited to go up on stage but at that time was not really interested in sharing his work. He enjoyed the event but states he really did not have anything to share. Ten years later he would find himself invited to do Spoken Word again and would begin to become involved in the art. It would also be where he challenged himself to grow outside his work only identity.

*I gave it a shot and I wrote just a couple things for the slam master. And then I competed in the slam. And part of it was, I had broken up with my girlfriend and I didn't know a lot of people and just living in an apartment. I didn't get out. I didn't do a lot. I was really, really shy. I came home and watched a lot of TV. I could watch Law & Order forever. I was also really shy and needed a change. Getting up on a microphone was a really scary thing but wanted to figure out how to make my life better.*

Galactus acknowledges that people who had known him just a few years earlier in life would have been surprised to know that this is something that he not only did but something for which he would be seen as a leader. Within his second year of performing and competing in slams in the venue Eclectic, Galactus would make team compete nationally. Eclectic had already had a several years history of sending teams to this competition.

Although the challenges and reservations that Galactus had about getting in front of people and performing, his talent and authenticity made a place for him in an already

established community. The following year, the venue known as Kindred, selected their first team ever to also compete in Nationals and asked Galactus to be the coach. Out of 75 teams, Kindred came in second in the nation the first year they competed with Galactus as their leader.

Despite having a good experience with the team, the hours that it required put a great deal of strain on his relationship with the girlfriend he had at the time. As his girlfriend struggled in her art form and he was excelling in his, more tension was placed on the relationship. He recognized that the relationship would not survive if he continued. As a result, he did not take on a coaching role the following year. However, two years later, he did take on the coaching role for the local youth organization that sent a team to the national youth slam that happened each year. In this role, things were dialed down in comparison to the adult team as the participants were teenagers and simply could not devote the same amount of time to practice and preparing. Writing and encouraging them to write was a much greater focus where the adult team spent more time blending pieces and preparing for performance.

Work would again begin to call his attention. Taking on a new position and being in a new relationship that had its own unique demands began to pull him away from writing, and subsequently from performing in Spoken Word. It has been several years now since Galactus was regularly involved in the Spoken Word community. During various times over the last few years, he has hosted or attended some Spoken Word events and conducted writing workshops. However, even those are rare. His personal life and workload remain particularly demanding and has kept him from really participating.

When I asked him if he engaged in writing, now that was not work related-poetry or otherwise, he smiled and joked:

*Recently, I wrote a Facebook post I was proud of. No, no, I don't. It's funny 'cause I promised myself the next time I competed, I would only bring new pieces. I'd only come with new pieces. And I'd written three new pieces and still haven't come back yet, haven't competed. Since then I've not tried. It's just life gets in the way.*

In addition, Galactus has assisted others in editing their writing as they work to publish books of Spoken Word. He assisted fellow poets individually at times with feedback and insight about performance ideas. Without question, his mark has been left on the community. Even though he had been inactive in the community for several years, the youngest participant shared during the writing lab that he had heard about Galactus and his work well before ever meeting him. Recently, he has been present in the community than in recent years. Working again with a youth through arts-based community program and performing himself now and then. While he attends somewhat sparingly, it speaks to the home he has found in the Spoken Word community.

When considering the journey Galactus shared with me, several significant concepts that deserve highlighting as we continue to move through this study. The presence of storytelling in Galactus's life seems to have deeply influenced his love for writing as a mode of creativity, communication, self-reflection, and expression. Most noteworthy is the insight into ways Spoken Word was a form of healing for Galactus and ultimately the connection between the art form and transformational learning. Galactus specifically shares that Spoken Word provided the vehicle for him to quite literally find

his voice, overcome his shyness, and gain connections within this community of poets by sharing his own stories.

This is noteworthy because it is consistent with the literature regarding the use of arts in adult learning, particularly as a conduit for potential transformational learning. The importance of understanding the self and the opportunity for reflection is imperative when considering transformational learning. Art provides a creative space that promotes opportunities for critical reflection, dialogue, and creative expression. The role of arts in relation to transformational learning can be found in the research (Beattie, 2009; Dirkx, 1997, 2001, 2006, 2008; Mackenzie, 2012; McGregor, 2012; Prince, 2010; Selkrig, 2011).

Much more research on this topic has emerged in recent years. The importance of creativity and reflection, particularly when engaging in the sharing of people's stories is a common theme in the literature. Johnson-Bailey (2010) explains that by hearing other people's stories we begin to search how we might connect and relate to each other. She further explains, "We make sense of our lives based on our own narratives of experiences we have had throughout life" (Johnson-Bailey, 2010, p. 77). Several of Galactus's shared experiences regarding his motivation for engaging in Spoken Word align with the current literature regarding the potential impacts of arts as a tool for critical reflection and transformation in adult learners. Understanding this potential, Galactus has played a mentoring role in the community with adult and youth poets alike, engaging others to find their own unique voices and stories through Spoken Word as well. In the spirit of exploring unique stories, this is a good transition into the journey of our next participant, Onslaught.

## OnSlaught



**Figure 8. Image of Comic Character Onslaught.**

*Call me Onslaught, I'm magnetic, telekinetic, I'm marveled by fellow geeks and  
revered by those poetic, feared by the pathetic, they walk around apathetic, cause  
I keep things moving phonetically energetic, 7th letter alphabetic, too real to be  
synthetic, no cosmetics just me, a warrior that's prophetic.*

As with Galactus, Onslaught has often found stories and characters he identifies within comic books. In the X-Men marvel comics, Onslaught is created by the consciousness of two extremely powerful mutants: Professor Xavier and Magneto.

(<http://www.superherodb.com/onslaught/10-13/history/>) In a very simplistic summary of these two characters, Professor Xavier and Magneto grew up extremely close and both were committed to creating a just society that was accepting and safe for mutants.

However, as they grew up, their lived experiences caused a divergence in their approaches. Professor Xavier who seeks peaceful forms of resistance while Magneto



believes in practices that are more assertive and is willing to engage in violence for the necessary changes to garner equal rights among humans for mutants.

When Magneto attacks and wounds another mutant, Professor Xavier has had enough and through telekinesis, puts him in a coma. By doing so, Professor Xavier absorbs some of Magneto's qualities and Onslaught becomes a separate personality within his being, a personality that is a combination of both men and the powers they possess. Peace and war within one being. I think it is important to share the meaning behind his pseudonym at the start of his story due to the influence it has on his sense of self. In interpreting and understanding his journey, it is important to respect his acknowledgment that he often feels he is at odds with himself yet sees those dichotomies as both his strengths and weaknesses. This personal tension will ultimately play a role in Onslaught's engagement with Spoken Word. Let's begin to learn more about his story.

*A 70's baby,  
Texas born and bred,  
Oldest of five,  
Only brother to four sisters,  
We had our share of love,  
And loss,  
When our matriarchy fell,  
Our young age did nothing to shield us  
From the reality of forever,  
It would teach us to hold on,  
To brave storms together.  
To love.*

*My first love was martial arts,  
Beautiful and brutal,  
The fight was everything  
Both my escape and reality,  
Too often the tone of my skin*

*Clashed with cowards concepts  
Of who they felt I should be,  
Fists foraging for freedom  
Despite preferring peaceful walks home,  
Clenched and ready,  
Self-defense would be the first art I perfected,  
Practiced without prompt,  
Simply walking to school  
Provided plenty of possibilities for improvement,  
Proving yourself takes practice,  
And there was never a shortage of opportunity.  
However, funds for formal training often were,  
So I studied, watched endlessly,  
Read incessantly,  
This would not be the last time I learn to build myself up,  
Not be the last time the accumulation of wisdom  
Would take priority over playtime,  
Grown folks called me an “old soul” as long as I can remember*

*Maybe,  
Maybe I learned it from my Great-Grandparents,  
Raised in the richness of stories and wisdom  
Only living it can bring,  
Papa made sure to pass it on,  
Retelling of recollections filled evening living rooms,  
Tales of his journey,  
Fighting fascism,  
Sacrificing for freedom overseas,  
While Jim Crow held it hostage at home,  
A war that would wage long after his return.  
Birthed in the realities of being both Black and American  
He told us about the hate he faced as a soldier,  
Knowing Justice was the bigger picture,  
Papa, understood knowledge is power,  
He schooled us often,  
Taught to always know the road ahead,  
The importance of being prepared,  
Having a strategy,  
Knowing who is with you and who is against you,  
I’m pretty sure he is the reason*

*The Art of War is to this day,  
One of my favorites,  
I learned not to wait for anyone else to save me,  
Find allies and identify enemies  
He taught me to be a warrior.  
And warriors are often called to fight*

*I am reminded,  
At the core we are all animals,  
We fight to live or we become death's prey,  
Like when it came to me at 7  
In the form of two fists multiplied by 8,  
Damaging the orbital bone in a way,  
I just never really saw life the same*

*Like when death came, dressed as the dealer  
Trying to claim what he was owed through the end of a snub nose pistol,  
In broad daylight  
Life can leave you,  
Discarded,  
Like those bodies I found so young by the dumpster,  
Or the corner of abandon buildings,  
Creating something from nothing  
Would be a skill I could master,  
Inherently creative,  
Mixed with Papa's lessons on preparedness,  
I saw possibility in everything,  
Mop handles and duct tape became swords,  
I learned by doing,  
My hands have been my best teachers,  
In middle school,  
I built sets for theatre,  
Landscaped fantasy,  
Happier to be behind the scenes than in front,  
Introverted and introspective,  
Words became therapy,  
Space to spit what didn't make sense,  
What fell on deaf ears,  
What no one could see.  
They would hold my secrets,*

*Become my voice.*

*In high school,  
My warrior artist would begin to bloom,  
Pushed by those who saw potential,  
I began spending time on stage,  
My clan of warrior artists began to grow,  
Trained me to develop my tools,  
For art,  
For change,  
For voice,  
Words morphing to structure,  
Like poetry,  
Like Hip Hop,  
Like Ideas  
Like Community,  
Like connection,  
And I learned to build.  
Like seasons,  
Art forms of choice change,  
One foot always rooted in love,  
Desire for self-growth with a community on my back,  
It is my duty to find meaning  
In all that blossoms,  
And burns.  
Life is ugly,  
Hard,  
A fight that never ceases but constantly changes tactics,  
Requires new maneuvers,  
Battle plans for resistance emerge,  
Behind cameras,  
On composition pages,  
In the noise of a film reel,  
Art is a revolutionary manifesto,  
One that I am always rewriting.*

Onslaught was born and raised in Central Texas. As we began our conversation, I asked Onslaught to tell me about himself and how he became involved with Spoken Word. In his first sentence, he states his name, but it is not his real name but rather the

artistic moniker everyone in the art community knows him by. I note that when asked to share his story, he clings to the identity that represents his life as an artist, and not the one on government forms. He describes a blended family, *“I’m the oldest sibling, a brother to five sisters. I’m also a second son by marriage because I don’t like saying ‘step’, through that marriage I was blessed with an older brother and younger sister”* It is quite clear that Onslaught is family and community oriented as he shares insights from experiences throughout his life. Onslaught and his siblings spent much of their time being cared for by their grandparents.

In his reminiscing on experiences with his grandparents, it becomes clear that storytelling was a tool utilized for the transferring of wisdom and a method of communication. Complex contextualization and critical reflection of the world was part of the way Onslaught’s family often communicated. This would influence Onslaught’s tendency to reflect, observe and make sense of the world around him, often through various forms of art.

During this portion of our conversation, Onslaught recounts several traumatic moments in his youth where he was exposed to extreme violence at a young age. Describing the diverse racial make-up of the neighborhood he grew up in, he shares that being the lighter-completed son of two black parents was too often a catalyst for physical altercations with others in the neighborhood. Additionally, his neighborhood was heavily impacted by the drug epidemic in the 1980’s. Throughout our conversation around his youth, moments of being forced to fight or defend himself or his sister emerge. At times, he had tumultuous moments at home as well. I felt it important to share this context as Onslaught indicates it has some direct influence on his involvement with the arts,

specifically poetry. While he is describing his background, he pauses and it is clear to see he is reflecting on his thoughts and the stories shared.

*All of this was a long way of saying, I had an understanding of violence at a very young age, probably an unhealthy understanding of it. My father was not an abusive man; however, I can remember a few times where the discipline was extreme. But he was not an abusive father. This is when I started writing poetry, you know? I didn't know what to do with all these bottled up emotions with everything that was going on. I mean I can't beat everybody up, and I really wasn't. But there was respect given because people knew I would fight if I had to. No one ever really wins a fight, nothing is ever really solved nor is a greater understanding obtained when you fight. At the end of the day, there is still the belief that the other is wrong and now we have lumps on our head, but what does it solve?*

Poetry, for Onslaught, was literally a space to vent. He smiles and jokes that it certainly wasn't Shakespeare that he was writing; rather it was bad poetry. However, he also shares that making it sound good was not the point. When he lost his mother during his eighth-grade year, poetry remained a method of therapeutic release for him. Writing served an instant purpose when he needed the space to write out his thoughts or feelings as a method to process them. Often, shortly after a poem had been written, it promptly ended crumbled up and on the floor. He didn't keep journals of his writing until several years later. Even then, poetry was not the primary art form he engaged in.

While he dabbled in drawing and wrote for release, martial arts remained his first artist love for a good part of his younger years. He states “*I was interested in learning*

*what my body could do, how it could be pushed. Looking back now, I'm seriously lucky I didn't kill myself trying to figure that out with some of the monkey bar flips I tried."*

Creativity was something that seemed to be present within him from a very young age, even when it was outside the confines of traditionally defined art. As he continued to grow up and change, so did his own engagement with creativity and art.

Involvement in performing art would come because of mentors and experiences he gained towards the end of middle school and through high school. Recalling a time in elementary school in which he was in a play, he remembers being terrified to be on stage, even when he had no lines. Fast forward to freshman year in high school and he is in a technical theatre class where he is learning to craft and build sets for school plays. Shortly after the class began, the teacher decided that they would also focus on learning lines and acting, in addition to building the set. This push into acting was one of the pivotal moments for Onslaught in his development as a performing artist.

In our conversation, he is clear to note that this teacher was a life-changing for him. During this story, he also shares meeting another mentor through church. While he no longer identifies as religious, it is through his church experience that he met a mentor turned big brother, Jimi. Onslaught shares that Jimmy is the reason he became a poet. Jimi, who was into Spoken Word, in addition to being an emerging playwright, brought Onslaught into the space of performing poetry, often through Spoken Word. At the same time, his cousin who was heavily involved in the local Hip Hop community encouraged Onslaught to also take roots there. In high school, Onslaught's writing and performing would begin to take off.

He doesn't recall the first time he performed poetry, but he remembers the first time he performed Hip Hop for an audience. As he continued to develop his skills as an MC among his peers, a Hip-Hop group he was part of decided to try out for the talent show. After selecting the perfect beat and many hours of practice, he soundly embarrassed himself while rapping offbeat in front of his high school crush. Recalling that he was extremely nervous, his friends teased him but ultimately wondered what had happened to him.

Onslaught was known among his peers as someone who was lyrically sound when it came to perform or engaging in rap battles among his peers. It was important back then that one's lyrics have a level of social consciousness and awareness to be taken seriously by his peers. As he continues to talk, he recollects a time shortly after when he performed at a festival and had a backpack stolen with a notebook containing over a hundred rhymes; *"while it hurt then, in retrospect, maybe those stories were never the ones that needed to be told."* Some of his most memorable moments in his work as a Hip-Hop artist was meeting one of his Hip Hop heroes, as well as, being the opening performer for several big names in Hip-Hop.

Writing was always a constant for Onslaught. While cannot pinpoint the first time he performed poetry, he does begin to take me through the various venues he remembers performing in, mostly open mics in the beginning. In 2000, a fellow poet told him he was taking Onslaught with him to attend the National Poetry Slam in Rhode Island. Onslaught describes it as the first time he was away from home. While he didn't make a team that year, he describes it as an incredible experience. The opportunity to meet poets from all over the country continued to expose him to new sides of poetry he hadn't seen before.



During an open mic event there, he nervously took the stage and that he performed a very heavily metaphoric poem, one he says is “the most Saul Williams-like poem” he ever wrote. He recites the lines:

*I’ve already held court with the wounded minds, Saturday nights we smoked like hematite on the blows, beyond sight, the darkened alleyways, starlight ho, the glasses of an old soul died older than the coldest night.*

Recalling the audience’s response, he was shocked by the love and support of the poem. Bewildered he remembers questioning others, “*you know that was about a crackhead, right?*” When it was clear they did understand that was the point of his work, he remembers feeling like there was a community of people who got what he was trying to say, could understand the language and ways he constructed his stories.

The fellowship he created was important to him and one that remained long after he returned to Texas. When he competed in the National Poetry Slam in 2003 as a member of a team, they were connections he still had. While Nationals provided him a larger picture of the Spoken Word community, it also afforded him the opportunity to perform in front of audiences of hundreds of people. Onslaught finds a great deal of value in these experiences but does share he wishes that he could have shared his Hip Hop with the same level of audiences and community.

Nowadays he does very little Spoken Word or Hip-Hop, and openly admits he truly misses the community aspect it had in his life. It is quick to share he doesn’t miss the competition of it all, but he does miss the community, which he feels was so different then. “*It was just time to walk away, to venture into new forms of expression.*” His attachment is to the story; to the authentic representation of self, community, society-

whatever is one's truth, *"Write something that is true to you, that nobody else can deny and then make it a nuke, because you can't compete with a nuke. Everything dies when you drop a nuke."* It is telling that for Onslaught, telling your truth is the essential component for a poem to be a nuke. Currently, he spends his time learning cinematography, as well as producing and acting in films. When explaining the transitions between arts he uses his phone as a metaphor:

*I think this phone is very representative of me because I do a lot and I do a lot to the point where I get in my own way sometimes. And I don't know if that's ever going to be something that I am able to address and get past. But I can't just do one thing and everything has seasons with me. This phone is cool now, but it won't be in 20 years, we will have different needs, different visions. So I'll have to get another one. It's just like I did poetry for ten years, I think I've done enough poetry. I think I performed on enough stages. I've done rapping for twenty years, I think I have done enough. It is time to move onto something new, you know? Fighting, martial arts for thirty years or so, it's just time. And to me it will seem seamless, there are just different mediums that we present it in but at the end of the day, it's all expression. And it's all about trying to build those bridges and connect to people.*

For Onslaught, his purpose as an artist has always been the healing of self, the sharing of stories and the connections between us all. It is a way of life, a way of living. Even as he has begun to work in films, he calls on the community to participate, to be part of his vision and share in the expression. Supporting and building community is a core value for Onslaught as an artist and individual. In fact, when you ask people in the community that

Onslaught lives and creates art in, people describe him as someone who is committed to art that brings in a level of awareness and consciousness meant to benefit those he shares it with and lives among. Both his career path and the spaces he volunteers his time is in support of those who need to find a voice or be heard. From volunteering with a youth poetry organization to performing music and poetry as fundraisers for community causes, Onslaught is dedicated to those committed to showing up and in need within his community. It's clear his love and commitment to building those up around him is an inherent part of his inner-self.

In considering Onslaught's journey and engagement with Spoken Word, I want to focus on a few of the important concepts that emerge. Storytelling as a form of communication in the home is something that is also present in Onslaught's youth and upbringing. Furthermore, whether through theatre, Hip Hop, poetry or Spoken Word- authentic storytelling in relation to his art has always been something that is of the utmost value to Onslaught. Community development and activism as part of his interaction and emergence in Spoken Word and other art forms is also a very relevant theme in Onslaught's story. When considering the academic literature regarding transformational learning and storytelling, we can see how these concepts complement each other.

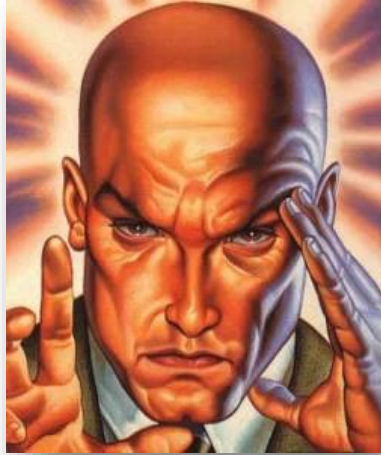
Pa"ssila", Oikarinen, and Kallio (2012) speak to the use of storytelling as a technique to engage in critically reflective dialogue. Caminotti and Gray (2012) also document the effectiveness of storytelling as a tool for critical dialogue as well. When considering Spoken Word as a form of storytelling, it's potential to promote and engage both the writer and audience in a discourse which is a necessary component of transformational learning as well as the development of critical consciousness.

Storytelling engages learning and encourages dialogue across communities and individuals. When artists perform their art and the audience is given the space to engage in dialogue, new knowledge, understanding and new perspectives can emerge for participants. New knowledge in this context aligns closely with the principles of transformational learning theory.

In Onslaught's story, he specifically connects his engagement in poetry and Spoken Word as an opportunity to more meaningfully understand himself and others while also connecting and building relationships through the sharing of stories. Finally, a related concept that emerged that I think it is incredibly important to note is that Onslaught came to writing as a form of healing and space to be heard. While fueled by different motivations, this is also a significant theme in Galactus's story as well.

Initially, Onslaught's writing was to release and process many of the challenging and difficult moments he faced. He self-defined it as a form of therapy in his life. This emerging theme of Spoken Word as a tool for finding a voice and for healing is an important one that will be explored more deeply in the chapter on data findings. For now, it is important to note the commonalities emerging from the participant's narrative. With this in mind, let us transition to the next participant in this study.

## Professor X



**Figure 9. Image of Comic Character Professor X.**

*Well for one, I AM a professor. I love comic books. And, the X-men concept, in particular, was an artistic commentary of the civil rights movement. The character Professor X was a representation of Martin Luther King, Jr. As a professor at an HBCU (Historically Black College or University) who embeds concepts of equal rights and speaking out in my teaching, as well as my writing, Professor X seems like the perfect character to represent me; that's what I am thinking*

As noted earlier, during our interviews, each participant shared stories about a love for comics. When asked why she chose the character Professor X to represent her, she shared the above quote. Intelligent, introspective and to the point, Professor X is a person who values knowledge and the opportunity to share it. A poet, a mother, an educator, a wife, a teammate, a daughter, and a sister are all major roles in Professor X's life. One's that she deeply values and finds a great deal of joy in.

*My roots  
Well-grounded in the strength of women,  
My home knew of  
    beauty,  
    struggle,  
    sisterhood  
    and promise.  
Love filled our empty spaces  
I learned the possibility of woman  
    In the faces of my mother,  
    My sisters,  
We villaged our way together,  
Creating foundations that would sustain us.*

*My mama was a Renaissance Woman,  
There was not a task she couldn't accomplish  
    Not an art form she didn't love,  
My mama knew what creation meant,  
    taught us the power of our voices,  
    Showed us the beauty in words,  
    I remember,  
Hiding between hardcover escapes,  
    In the libraries we frequented,  
    I remember  
Accompanying her to meetings,  
Where women filled pages with their stories  
    And spoke themselves whole,  
    "Texas Women Writers"  
    Building bridges  
    I remember  
Learning what community felt like,  
    What vulnerability looked like,  
    Watching healing in hearts  
    And mouths wide open  
    The poetry of their lives  
    Marking pathways,  
Blazing histories in penning their purpose,  
Come together to outreach to community  
    I remember  
When I learned stories could be survival,*

*When we lost her,  
There were not enough words to put things back together,  
But together, my sisters and I began to create  
In worlds she had opened up for us,  
Where she had once created too  
Our art, a gift from her that would stay with us a lifetime  
She is never any further than my nearest pen*

*Writing was a safe space,  
Where chaos could make sense,  
Sometimes, words would arrive as poetry,  
Compose memories in metaphors and similes,  
The first time I shared my writing,  
I was a soldier,  
Deployed with baby girl at home,  
Still in her pumpkin seat,  
Writing was the closest thing to my heartbeat,  
In the absence of my daughters,  
My first public poem,  
Subject 9-11,  
Id submitted to a post-wide competition,  
Words won me awards and hearts  
I knew I carried my Mama's gift in that moment,  
Stories mattered,  
I had them to tell,  
Poetry became therapy,  
community,  
Connection,  
And necessary.*

*Open mics  
Holding hands with anything goes,  
I drove hours,  
To share stories,  
Disguised as poems,  
Sometimes I wrote to rock the crowd,  
Others for myself,  
As I grew,  
I learned one didn't have to cancel out the other,  
And I'd be lying*

*If I said I wasn't slightly addicted  
To the thrill of slam  
Of creatively crafting reality so convincing,  
Judges feel compelled to score me a success.*

*From pen, to pad, to sound  
Words blended,  
complimented perfectly,  
much like the duality of my cultures,  
I color outside the lines,  
Creating new angles and lines,  
Each piece coming together,  
Building this home called me.*

Professor X grew up in Texas with her family. As a child, Professor X loved to read. When her mother had events at the local library, she would bring Professor X along. Finding a corner or big chair to hide in, she would spend time curling up with a book of her choice. Her mother was a poet and member of Texas Women Writers. So when Professor X tired of reading a particular book, she would wander back into the meeting room where her mother was, along with many other women sharing their poetry and discussing life. Mostly she remembers them sharing their personal stories and struggles around relationships, family, dreams, community, and hopes of change. Together, these women wrote and published a book comprised of their stories and spoke to the strength and purpose of their voices. Professor X remembers that was what got her interested in poetry. In the beginning, it was not something she shared with others, but something that was between her and her mother. Professor X describes her mother as a Renaissance Woman:

*She was a master of all these different things; she was a painter, clothing designer, wrote poetry, all of these creative things. My sister was interested in art but never picked up a paintbrush or anything. After my mom died, all of the*



*sudden, we picked up these talents. It was weird how it happened. That was when I started really writing and sharing poetry. My sister started painting-all after my mom died. It was just weird how that happened.*

Right before her 9<sup>th</sup>-grade year, at the age of 14, Professor X lost her mother. Reflecting on the extreme difficulty of getting through that, she acknowledges that writing was one of the things that helped her get through it. It would be from her mother that she would fall in love with the beautiful complexity of words and how vividly she could paint a picture with them. Professor X recalls a poem her mother wrote about Jamaica that was so full of imagery, she has dreamed of going to Jamaica ever since. As a writer, she shares that her mother was incredible with wordplay. Working in community outreach programs, her mother was a regular on a local community radio show. One time, a local radio station asked her to write something to read on air. *“I wish I could remember the exact line, but she said something about being a Kamikaze in this poem she had written for them. I remember my reaction was like-whhhaaaaat?!?!?”* Professor X smiles and softly laughs as she shares this story and concludes it with *“Yeah, my mom was really dope.”*

As she begins to share with me her own journey into performing poetry, it is easy to see her own evolution as well as the influence the experiences with her mother had on her development as a poet. Voice and hands shaking, she remembers the first poem she ever read to an audience. Telling the story of a woman who was in jail, an experience she shares that was not her own. In the beginning, she was more often writing about other people’s stories, it wouldn’t be until later that she would really start sharing the ones she wrote about her own experiences. Prior to graduating high school, she shared her work

infrequently. It would be once she was in the military that she would begin sharing her poems regularly with an audience.

Shortly after the birth of her third daughter, the 9-11 terrorist attacks on the United States occurred and her unit was mobilized. She had to leave her children and relocate to a base about an hour and a half away from home. *“When I had to leave my babies that is what really made me pick up my pen and start writing again. I mean, I would write every now and then, but I was writing all the time being away from my kids.”* After her first month away at the base, she was able to begin seeing her children again on the weekends but really attributes that experience as to what really emerged her back into writing and becoming part of a larger poetry community.

A few months after being mobilized, there was a poetry contest advertised that was going to occur in the post. Writing about 9-11, Professor X decided to enter the contest-and won.

*I’m out in the field, dirty as hell, we had been doing tactical activities and we were just DIRTY. This Humvee rolls up and these people wearing their best uniforms get out and announce they need her. I asked ‘What is this about?’ and they tell me I had won this contest and I was going to a ceremony to be presented with an award. I had no idea. The wife of a three-star general gets out, she’s crying and hugs me and all I can think about as she is hugging me is ‘Oh my God, I am so dirty right now.’ After the ceremony, it sinks in, I won a post-wide contest, maybe I am pretty good at this. That gave me the encouragement to really start regularly sharing my writing; feeling like I really should be sharing my writing with other people. So I started seeking out opportunities to perform poetry. Most*

*of them are back home, so I start driving two to three hours round trip to perform at these open mics. I was hooked at that point.*

Initially, the first venue she attended was Eclectic. Eclectic was not an open mic venue as she had expected, but rather a competitive slam venue. Poets started getting out of their chairs to begin their poems and had them memorized. Professor X recalls it was beyond simply sharing poems, but rather truly performing them. Thrown a bit off guard and equally amazed, she pushed herself to go up and share her poem anyway. At Eclectic the first poem she had shared was about a woman in jail but describes the poems as very “*green eggs and ham-ish*.” Acknowledging she is quite competitive, even with herself, she was determined to improve her delivery and memorize her work.

That same evening, she received a flyer for an open mic event at Kindred, a new Spoken Word venue. Deciding to try to new spot, the following week she attended the event at Kindred instead of Eclectic. Immediately, there was a sense of community and family Professor X felt there and it drew her in; “*I was hooked*.” Driving to and from the military base each week, often with fellow soldiers in tow, gave her time to practice her poems and to spend time with friends. At this point, she was writing new poems every week to come down and share. Her boyfriend at the time said, “*Do you ever write poems about sex?*” Always up for a challenge, she wrote and shared her first erotica poem at Kindred. Professor X said the crowd went crazy for the poem, so for a period, she found herself writing these funny, creative poems about sex and relationships. She recollects that while she was nervous initially, Kindred, became a safe space to share her work. Noting that the open mic setting was more suitable to her own level of development as a

poet during this time, it also promoted a sense of family and sharing stories for the sake of sharing them.

It truly does become a family affair after a brief period. Professor X's sister was supportive of her Spoken Word and often accompanied her to the venue. Initially a "closet poet" her sister never shared that she was writing as well with the community but became a fixture in the audience. Several of the regular poets from Kindred had started meeting up and carpooling to Spoken Word venues in surrounding cities on nights, they had open mics. On one of these trips, her sister came and got the courage to get on the mic for the first time and perform. Poetry remained more of a consistent passion for Professor X, but her sister has always continued to support her work in it.

Professor X became an influential figure at Kindred. She is considered one of the earliest members of this venue's community of poets and is part of the history of its development. However, as life happened, like other participants in this study, there would sometimes be gaps in her presence. Returning to school was often the catalyst for her disappearances, but it does not mean that she stopped writing. When she could return, she did. The first slam team she made would be near the military base where she had been previously stationed. Due to conflicts with schedules, she was not able to try out for Kindred's team. The Eclectic Team was not the place she felt she quite ready to attempt. She would make that initial team a few times before competing and making the team at Kindred. She recalls her return as a moment to teach new folks about the history of the venue.

When Professor X had been first coming to the venue, her presence created a name for community member, which had carried on. Those who referred to themselves

with that name had no idea she was the where the name had been born. As she retells me this story, she laughs as she describes the shocked faces of the current regulars of Kindred learning she wasn't in fact, a rookie, but rooted in the venue's history. In this moment, she again notes the sense of family that occurs from the community at Kindred. As with most families, time and space ebb between visits but the love doesn't really change.

In addition to being on her own teams, she had some experience working with the youth poets in the community as well. Each year there are national slam competitions, one of which is for poets who are under the age of 21. For a couple years, Professor X assisted as coach for the youth team. These are not the only youth writers that she works with. *"My kids are so supportive of my poetry. I'm the cool mom now ya know? My two youngest write and have actually gone with me to the youth slams when I have attended. The two youngest are still too young to be on the youth team, but they still slam."*

However, she sees the impact of her work in poetry have an effect beyond writing:

*I think seeing me get up on stage and not be afraid, I think they learn too from that. They started speaking up. Before they would ask Nana to go to the restroom with them or quietly say excuse me. Now they are like 'I'll be right back.' I think a lot of that has transitioned from me showing them they don't have to be afraid of anything.*

As an educator, Professor X can see the deeper, ripple affect her participation in Spoken Word has had on her family, and furthermore, is a commentary on part of what those watching the poets can gain from the experience. So much so, that it is something she uses in her classroom.

*My students think its dope. Usually, when I introduce myself to my students, I tell them teaching is my side job to being a poet; it is what pays the bills. I have a select group of poems appropriate for school. So I will do one. The students are so impressed they ask for another. I tell them I will do another when we finish this task. It helps keep them interested. Sometimes, I use poems to introduce a topic, to get the discussion going.*

As she continues to discuss the ways in which Spoken Word is used in her classroom, you can hear the passion in her voice and the connection poetry has in her life. Her ability to use it in a variety of ways is an example of her familiarity and use of it in her own life.

When I asked her what she is writing about these days, she tells me it much more about life these days and less on a set topic.

*A video on Facebook could trigger an experience I have had. Honestly, now it is all about experiences I have had. And I write more about present experiences than past ones. In the past, I wrote about things I never did or for the audience so I was writing sex poems or venting and talking smack. I think there is a little bit of smack talking in all of my poetry just because it is part of who I am.*

Never at a loss for writing things, she describes a list of prompts or topics or moments that sparked an idea to write about on her phone. Once a topic truly takes root, the rest moves more quickly; sometimes it is just deciding which topic is most fighting to be told. When an audience member tells her that they can see themselves in her poems, it only confirms for her that it was a story that needed to be written and shared. That it was a bridge that needed to be constructed, for herself and anyone needing to hear it. In recent years, Professor X has continued to spend more consistent time in the poetry community

as a poet, a performer, a coach, a mentor and a board member of the local youth organization. As a professor and community educator, she continues to use Spoken Word, poetry and other forms of creative writing as an educational tool for self-reflection, critical dialogue, as well as, community building and action.

In Professor X's journey into Spoken Word, the concepts of storytelling, learning, and relationship and community building are clearly important themes that emerge. Professor X's mother was the first storyteller that influenced her interest in poetry and Spoken Word. It is through poetry that she begins to deal with the loss of her mother and it becomes a tool which she defines as therapeutic and a place for her to work out her feelings. Influenced by the community of women storytellers she observed as a child, Professor X had seen the power of Spoken Word to bring people together in community and fellowship. A community that supported and validated the lived experience, as explored and shared through Spoken Word and subsequent dialogue. These women spoke of change, determination, love and strength, all characteristics prominent in Professor X and the work she does as an artist and educator.

One thing that is unique to Professor X's story is that she most clearly and thoroughly connects the possibilities and potential of Spoken Word in educational spaces both formal and informal. There is little question that her position as a University Professor plays a role in that awareness. While other participants denote how they have learned from and with Spoken Word, Professor X speaks most specifically about its potential as a pedagogical tool. In sharing her own experiences of its success in the classroom, there are clear parallels in some of her stories and the impact of using of arts

in adult learning found in the current literature. I will explore this concept further in the next chapter.

### Cable



**Figure 10. Image of Comic Character Cable.**

*When I asked, “Why Cable?” He responded “I picked him because he is sort of a flawed Prodigal son of Cyclops and Jean Grey from the future. A mission-oriented soldier and slight telepath. He’s forward-thinking, thinking focused individual willing to fight the good fight and help others understand and articulate their emotions. And these are qualities I seek to have, as an individual and a poet.”*

Another study participant with a love for comics, my last participant selected the character Cable to represent him. One of Cable’s main gifts was a way of being able to read what people need and helping them to get there. With these qualities emphasized, it becomes clear in talking with him why this character was a good representation of my



participant, Cable. The importance of story as a mode of communication and a tool for change, Cable engages in Spoken Word with these considerations in mind.

*Home  
As a child,  
This space often changed  
like the seasons  
We followed Dad's combat boots  
Where the assignments took us  
Sometimes overseas, sometimes inland  
The double edged sword of it all,  
A world explored gave my imagination  
More material to work with,  
And some moves,  
Some moves required a preference for fantasy over reality  
So I began crafting imaginary worlds to reside in,  
Whether between the pages of Shel Silverstien  
Or drawing pads that allowed me to erect a world as I wished  
I guess art has always been, home.*

*Settled longest in a little town  
Where you know everyone and no one,  
Drinking was recreation  
And an escape that was all too easy,  
But never took the place of words  
Sung, spit or written,  
I was smitten with the ability to pose prose  
As a life jacket  
I can't tell you how many times it has saved me.*

*Voracious reader,  
Storyteller-it is in my blood  
Hungry to consume syllables  
Before I even understood their potential  
My building blocks  
To pop and lock my way into Hip Hop  
Loving linguistics ripped to a bass line,  
Until the fader reminded me  
How quickly my lyrics could become business propositions  
And I wasn't for sale,*

*My soul resides in these letters married together  
Dancing as I have choreographed  
My grandfather conversed in stories  
Illustrated ways words could be composed to speak truths, hopes, challenges  
And history  
Yet never acknowledged for the art it was  
And the art was where I lived most comfortably  
And from where I wanted to make my living*

*Be Practical.  
How can you support a family as a writer?  
As a hobby ok, but how will you survive day to day.  
What they could not understand was it was my calling  
Ink as my blood,  
Pen in hand,  
Words-the weapons towards my own liberation  
It was the thing my soul has always most known how to do  
Make sense of the world,  
Build new tomorrows and new potentials  
From the tips of tongues,  
To change the world,  
We must first understand it.  
We are not simply artists  
But warriors and revolutionaries  
Spilling ourselves open with the world  
Seeking to connect the promise of tomorrow  
In the works of today.*

*My grandmother's belief in my passions,  
Losing her and promising to pursue my dreams,  
I took the leap  
And fell in love with Spoken Word  
Nothing had ever felt quite like being with her.  
She taught me to believe my stories were worth telling beyond my living room.  
I watched her change my life and the lives of those around me.  
She never minded we needed her this way  
And I have never stopped believing in her power  
To help change the world,  
And together,  
We re-commit to fighting the good fight every day.*

As the child in a military family, Cable moved around a great deal as a child, both within the states and abroad. His life and experiences would be shaped by these moves.

He recalls moving from Hawaii, where he was the odd kid in cowboy boots on the beach,

to a city in Central Texas where much of his extended family was located. While his father was in Panama as part of a US Operation, he and his mother went to stay with family in Central Texas. He recalls this was the first time he really began to see the differences in socioeconomics. Where he was living was impoverished and had a high crime rate. Cable recalls times when he heard gunshots at night. At just under the age of 10, Cable and his mother relocate to Panama where his father was still stationed after the war. He recalls that experiencing third world poverty overwhelmed him as a kid.

*Seeing third world poverty up close, blew my mind on an even more ridiculous level. Like I mean I knew what America poor was. I'd seen it, I'd been a part of it. But seeing third world poverty poor made me actually appreciate America poor. You still have so much privilege and opportunity they don't have in their countries. I'll never forget. I even have this one poem about it, it's called Plátanos. On my dad's commute to work, it was not uncommon at this one red light right before he'd go out to the military base, you'd see kids as young as myself, so eight, nine and seven selling bananas. And they wouldn't have any shoes. It would be hot as hell. Their clothes were just disintegrating on their bodies. And you know he would say all the time, see how lucky you got it? You see how lucky you have it? And it was just this weird reminder of like, like I didn't feel lucky in the moment, you know what I mean? It's so hard to kind of see that and then absorb it when you're a kid. But that's what I had. It was a huge mind warp. Seeing shanty towns and stuff like that. You realize like, I remember as a kid we went to an orphanage once. I was almost going to give a kid my sneakers because he really liked them and they were like Spalding, which are nothing in*

*America. I wanted to do it but they told me no, don't do that because one of the kids would beat the shit out of him and take it. Like really, really or maybe could potentially kill the kid. You're just like – that sort of like realization like how bad it is for other people. Sat heavy with me for a long time.*

And it truly must have as the poem he refers to was written many years after this experience. The story he saw those children live stayed with him, urging him it needed to be written. It reminded him to be grateful for the loving home and family he had, even in the moments of struggle.

Cable describes a variety of written art that spoke to him throughout his life.

During this time, and at a fairly young age, Cable began reading ferociously.

*I really fell in love with reading at a young age. So, there was the more academic or even just entertainment value of books, poetry and plays and stuff like that. I loved Shel Silverstein as a kid. He was just so awesome. I don't know if it's sacrilegious or not to say it, but I love Shel Silverstein way more than Dr. Seuss. As a kid I thought Dr. Seuss was great, but I was just like no, this guy was just like, he was like my Tupac. He was my dude. So, I love Shel Silverstein. And I was an only child until about the age of eight. Even though I was an only child I really liked attention. And when my parents weren't about that life, I always had to entertain myself. So, I'd always make fantasy stories up in my head and I was always on adventures and things like that.*

It was while he was in Panama he read “Dracula” for the first time, along with Stephen King novels. He began writing his own short stories and playing with various forms of

writing as well. He shares that he had drawn a lot as a smaller child, but then his love for music, writing and books really began to develop.

During this period, he began to gain a better understanding of how language could be used to express stories and messages. He recalls the first time he found out Metallica's song "Mr. Brownstone" was about heroine; *"It opened a whole new door for me, then it became poetry, and then all this other stuff."* The power of metaphors and language continued to pull at and intrigue him in a variety of ways. The first poem he wrote would be in the sixth grade for an assignment. They were told to write a poem and share it with the class. With his personal interest in reading and writing, Cable was truly excited and confident about the possibilities of this assignment. He jokes;

*My teen angst started earlier than most, so I wrote this dark little poem about death. The class really responded well to it, and they were like 'Yeah way to go Dr. Death!' It was the first time it would really be reinforced for me that I liked writing and I liked sharing what I wrote.*

While the concept of Spoken Word was still foreign to him at this time, he was engaging in it without even realizing it. However, this is one of the more pivotal moments in Cable's life that he identifies himself as an emerging storyteller. A trait he may have come by naturally.

*My Grandfather and Uncle were great storytellers. And to this day, I don't know if some of the stuff he said was true or not, because some of it was just, so fantastic. Have you ever seen Big Fish? It was like that. There is not a huge age difference between me and my Uncle so he is more like a big brother. He just had this way at family gatherings everyone would stop and have them tell a story and*

*we would just be fixated on him. He just had that way and I always thought it was just so cool. And I think a lot of that landed in me too.*

Cable's love for storytelling only continued to grow for him throughout his life and still does so now. He mentioned his family had a love for Tejano music, which he also says holds a lot of storytelling at its roots. His love for writing just continues to grow.

In 1997, they moved from a very diverse military base to an extremely small town in Texas during his high school years. *"It was like disaster had struck and everything sucked."* He shares he felt his parents had moved him to the sticks, where he was the only Mexican kid he knew for a long time. *"It was hard for me to get my own footing. A lot of self-identity battles at that time because I didn't want to assimilate."* It is also when he began to miss the one place he did call home, a city in Central Texas where his extended family resides. Writing would emerge for him in the form of Hip Hop during this time. He started writing raps that he kept to himself, until the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

*A teacher gave us an assignment; pick a poem, paint something about it. A good friend who was in the class with me asked 'can we use rap?' She told him yes. He asked 'can we write our own rap?' And she says yes. He said 'I'm going to write my own rap music.' He was sort of like my hero. I'm going to do that, too, man. So I was there and I was like working out and I was like really into RZA and so I made this weird complex ridiculous--it's probably terrible now. But I was really into it, just all polysyllabic like crazy. And I'm going nuts, loving it. Then the day of the class my friend asks, 'hey, man, did you write your rap? Let me hear it. I didn't do it. I just picked a rap from like Inspectah Deck or something.' I was already really, really nervous. He kept pushing me to read it and at first I was*

*hesitant. Finally, I read it and he was real quiet and I'm thinking 'man, he hates it.' And he says 'I hate you, like that was great. Why are you writing this?' And he just got mad and left. So that encouraged me for like a year and a half; I was writing raps like all the time in class but keeping it to myself still. So I did that and then it wasn't until after high school that I would start doing freestyle battles. And I love battling. It was great. Then I started learning more about like the technical side of music. It was always like opening new puzzles and I was like man, this is awesome. Like what's a hook? What's a bar? How many bars is this? And stuff like that, and it was always interesting and still trying to stay on top of like being an artist and writing. It was incredible.*

The love that Cable found in Hip Hop really had more to do with the lyrical make-up of the art than anything else. He loved the competitiveness of participating in freestyle battles and ciphers. Hip Hop continued to be a space where a lot of Cable's writing took place through the end of high school and for a while after graduation. He began attending a community college; however, he was struggling personally at the time.

*I was not myself, I was very unhappy, really into alcohol. I actually ended up on academic suspension for a year. At that time, I moved to Kentucky with my Dad who had a job for me there. So, I moved from one really White area of the country to another. The conservatism was palpable, and I was clearly the other. Even though both my parents are from Mexico, my Dad has a very light-complexion with hazel eyes and blondish hair. People would often mistake him for a contractor and me for his Mexican help. It happened a lot there, and a lot*

*throughout my life. Race and culture began being an even more prominent topic in my mind.*

A short time after this, Cable would return “home” to Central Texas, the city where his extended family resides. Despite the diversity of the city, it was still very segregated along class and racial lines.

In 2005, life continued to produce difficulties for Cable. He got himself cleaned up, drinking less and began getting ready to re-enter college. He lost his grandfather, whom he was close to in September of that year. Describing him as a salt of the earth kind of person, who worked the earth for his family, he expressed a deep respect love and admiration for him. He shares a story with me about a special moment where he had given his grandfather a nickname as a result. After losing his grandfather, he took on the nickname himself and continues to use it as his poetic name in the community.

Spoken Word really did not take the firm hold in his life until 2010. He had seen the film “Slam” ten years prior and that would be when he first became aware of the art form. However, it would not really be until ten years later that he would begin his journey into Spoken Word and Slam. He recalls his grandmother was really the only one who really nurtured and encouraged his artistic talent. In his observation, the Mexican community does not always see the value in art as a career. It can be seen as impractical and less likely to provide a solid living. But, however, his grandmother always encouraged him to follow his passion.

*I don't want to say they weren't supportive; again, they were like it's not practical, it's a hobby. Go to college. Get a business degree or something like that. It was really only my grandmother who nurtured my creativity and she loved*



*that I loved to paint and draw, and she loved to paint and stuff like that. A lot of her paintings still hang in this house. It's like our family's house. It used to be my grandfather's and he left and now I live here.*

He graduated in 2010 with a degree in English, however the coinciding of graduation and losing his grandmother, took a toll on him. And it also pushed him to pursue his dream of writing, particularly Spoken Word.

*Near the end of my college career, my grandmother got hurt and she was basically dying. And it was right around, like graduation was a week after. So the first thing that happened was my grandmother passed and I had to first have like a week of like going to the hospital and you're helping family and trying to keep people up. It's a heavy loss. So, a week of that and I'm missing work. Then the following week was finals, so I had to study, and I had to take a couple days off of work for that. Then after that was all said and done, I couldn't get off for my graduation because I'd used all the time for all these other circumstances. And I'm like there's no way I'm going to miss my graduation. So I basically quit and I miss it, well they were like we're going to fire you unless you want to quit. So I quit, that summer I was decided I was going to investigate poetry and I'm going to do this. I'm going to try it out and really see what it's about and do this, kind of for my grandmother but more for me. I love it. After a whirlwind romance and subsequently tough break up, I wrote a poem about it. I wrestled with the idea of whether to perform this poem or really venture into Spoken Word. But I'd promised my grandmother and myself I was going to explore this. So, I went, performed and then I was hooked. There was this whole chain of events that*

*happened. I mean 2010 had to sort of happen I guess. I don't know how else to put it. I just started making changes in my life because I wanted something more-- something more enriching. And there it was. It all felt like one after another, things were falling from the sky. Some of it bad, yes. Grandma died, but she was really old. She had diabetes since I was born and just truck through that and stuff like that. There's a lot of times where you just, I can't even describe it, you know what I mean? And that happens with performances, too, and competitions. Like there's sometimes when you go and there's something in the air and you just pick up on it. And you're like oh yeah I'm crushing this round or I'm winning this. And it just happens and you do and it's great and you feel great. And I love it.*

When Cable talks about Spoken Word and writing, he gets this excited smile, a twinkle in his and begins talking more rapidly. It is clear to see that he has a love affair with creating and sharing stories, most often through Spoken Word. He goes on to share that even though he has not lived there in over 8 years, the small all-white town they moved to after Panama, still shows up in a lot of his poems. It helped him process the lasting impact both positive but mostly negative that still sat with him. He found that even when he performed the poems at “home” in the venue there, many people, related to his work. He worried about his friends who are still there, it does not make sense to him why they would stay. Cable says *“I think I have this very misplaced rage against the machine, just fury like I wish my words could unhinge the set up in that town. That somehow my poems will permeate that town and it will experience an awakening.”* He acknowledges that the roots of his activism within poetry likely stems a great deal from those experiences.

Cable would continue to be part of the poetry scene regularly over the next two years. Never missing poetry night or the opportunity to perform, Spoken Word began to morph into his life in really big ways. In 2012, he and another poet started a second Spoken Word venue that is not structured in the competitive slam format but instead is an open mic space. This space provided those who had less experience to come into a safer space to begin to work on their words. Furthermore, they created this organization with the purpose of reaching out the community. Sometimes, that help comes from providing a space to write and others it is using the space to advocate and care for the community as a part of the culture of the venue. Cable shared he probably spends no less than 2-4 hours a day writing or organizing events centered around Spoken Word and the community.

While Cable was working to create this new adult spot, he also began working with a youth organization that goes into schools, provides writing workshops both in and outside of school, while promoting a platform for performance. The work and love he gives to the youth in his city are amazing. Cable maintains a night job that does not “pay the best” because it gives him the ability to go to school during school hours and be present for them. For many of these students, he is their superhero. Simply looking at the responses from students on his Facebook or talking to any one of his students, the love, and respect that has been created is clear. In fact, in recent years, Cable and his co-organizer worked and fundraised in order to make the youth organization grow and provide the opportunity for a youth team to participate in the Under 21 National Poetry Slam. In doing so, they are providing opportunities for students often from socio-economically challenged areas, opportunities to learn and compete with other youth

across the country. Cable believes in the power Spoken Word has to change lives and works diligently to provide opportunities for others to have the same chance.

Considering Cable's story from a holistic perspective, storytelling is one of the most prominent themes in the retelling of his journey. Retelling stories preserved oral histories in his family, journeys of the generations before them. He recalls family members getting together and telling outlandish stories, creatively trying to outdo each other. Specifically, noting Shel Silverstein as one his most influential writers, indicated he had a proclivity and interest in stories as poetry at a very young age. While he notes he has a love for many genres of storytelling, poetry and Spoken Word hold a particularly special place for him.

So much so that whether he is working on his own craft or assisting others in developing their own, he is somehow involved with Spoken Word in some fashion every day. Cable's work in the community is one of the more time-consuming ways he is involved in Spoken Word. This is another major theme in Cable's narrative. In two of the three poems, Cable chose to share with me, he explored various aspects of his lived experiences in relation to the socioeconomic realities of the world around him. Cable seems to inherently think and speak from the perspective of community. During our interview, he confessed a major motivation for his involvement in community work is getting to be a part of helping others find the power in their own voices. Smiling he adds, *"There just nothing quite like seeing someone begin to realize their own worth and potential."* He knows the way it affected his own life when he found his own voice and learned how to use it to invoke change both externally and internally.

## **Chapter Discussion**

Looking back at the stories of four adult poets, uncovering the commonalities that emerged across many different stories was a thrilling discovery from this study. Knowing that despite unique circumstances, these poets often experienced Spoken Word in similar ways. This allows themes to emerge that can inform it's potential as an arts-based education practice. An example of this can be found when considering the possibilities of using Spoken Word storytelling in regards to healing. All four of the participants experienced healing with poetry and Spoken Words in their lives. However, only three of them indicate a conscious moment they turned to writing as a way to heal. The other participant found healing in a way he had not expected or sought out, but rather, simply experienced of being engaged in poetry and Spoken Word. Regardless of whether healing was sought out intentionally or experienced incidentally, all participants experienced it through the process of writing and sharing poetry.

One of the particularly significant and relevant connections between all four of these participants is the influence storytelling had on their lives. Each participant made a point to describe individuals in their lives whom they identified as influential storytellers in their lives. Each participant spoke of a love for reading and creative writing from very young ages. These foundations in storytelling in the traditional sense or as forms of communication seem to have been a very significant influence in their paths to Spoken Word. These insights around ways they utilized methods of storytelling, including Spoken Word, to make sense of their lived experiences and realities are important considerations. Not only do they illustrate part of their individual journeys, but it also

begins to provide us insight into ways they also used Spoken Word to engage in various forms of learning and self-reflection.

One way participants engaged in self-reflection and healing through Spoken Word and poetry is by employing it as a tool for personal healing and finding their own voices. While Onslaught and Professor X are explicit in calling writing “a form of therapy,” all four participants speak to turning to Spoken Word and poetry to get through extremely difficult and challenging moments in their lives.

Looking back at each participant’s story, there are many things that influenced these poets engagement with Spoken Word. Each poet experienced critical moments that propelled them into Spoken Word. For Galactus, it was a moment he realized he was on the verge of becoming unhealthily comfortable in his introversion and knew he had to break out of his comfort zone for that to change. For Professor X and Onslaught, the loss of a parent was a catalyst for them to turn to writing poetry and subsequently Spoken Word as a space to speak whatever truth they felt in a world in which they often felt silenced. Despite the pressure from his family to leave creative writing and poetry behind, Cable remained deeply passionate about it and desired to pursue a career in the creative writing field. He shared his grandmother was the only one in the family that encouraged him to follow that dream. When she fell ill, they made an agreement he would continue to follow his dreams. Shortly after, he lost his grandmother. Cable held true to his promise and emerged himself in the poetry scene shortly after.

It is important to note these critical moments because through the lens of Critical Pedagogy and Transformational Learning, both of these require an individual to experience a crucial stage in which a critical moment or “disorienting dilemma” where

the individual is confronted with a new reality that in many ways is in juxtaposition to the one they've known (Freire, 1970; Meziro, 1997). When considering the role critical reflection and meaning-making play in one's healing and self-awareness, it is important to keep this potential of Spoken Word in mind, particularly as a transformational tool for engaging learners.

Aspects of community was an additional commonality that emerged in each participant's story. Through sharing of Spoken Word, each participant recounts conversations and ways sharing poetry built bridges for relationships and friendships. Each has experiences with members of the audience approaching them to discuss a poem a participant performed because they felt a connection to their own stories.

Each also have numerous stories of friendships built among poets who would often come together to write and share their works. Attendance at poetic house parties in which poets and poetry lovers would come to listen and share and discuss poems performed, share life experiences and build bridges with one another. Again, there is support in the literature regarding arts as a tool for building and experiencing community. In a study by De Eca, Parndinas, and Trigo, (2012), they specifically examine a program called INTER-Action that is run by interdisciplinary professionals who use art to engage in dialogue and interaction within a community. The authors are heavily influenced by Paulo Freire's emphasis on dialogic approaches and envisioning educators as learners. Using the arts as a problem-posing method of education, Parndinas, Torres De Eca, and Trigo, believe "through collaborative arts, individuals and groups can reach non-linear perceptions, develop emotional intelligence and find metaphysical/spiritual models of being...(and) encourage transformation of life experiences into a collective situation

where everyone has a voice and place” (p. 188). By creating a space where art is created and shared within the community, individuals and the community develop a deeper empathy for each other and can then collectively engage in meaningful social change.

In addition to opening up a community, they could be part of, Spoken Word was a conduit for each participant to be involved in social change through art. Every single participant been part of or worked with arts-based community education programs or utilized their art for the promotion of social causes. Fundraisers, human trafficking awareness, youth organizations, these are just a variety of ways this study’s participants utilized Spoken Word as a catalyst for community development and upliftment.

The following chapter will discuss the themes yielded from the data analysis of the participant’s narratives. Chapter four explores how these poets used Spoken Word as a vehicle that promotes learning at individual and community levels. The following meaningful themes emerged and will be discussed further in the next chapter: Storytelling, healing, finding a voice, Spoken Word as a tool for learning, community building, and democratic praxis.



#### IV. INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY LEARNING EXPERIENCES THROUGH THE USE OF SPOKEN WORD

<b>Table 3. Emergent Themes.</b>	
<b>Emergent Themes</b>	<b>Participant Examples</b>
<b>Storytelling</b>	You work through those stories. Getting people to listen. Getting people to understand. Until your story departs And you're left with the satisfying hollowing of release! Galactus
<b>Finding Voice</b>	Definitely Spoken Word helped me learn to talk. That had a huge impact on my life, being able to get in front of an audience and not be afraid. Being able to speak confidently. That has an immediate impact and is life changing. Galactus
<b>Healing</b>	I started writing to vent. I keep telling people it wasn't freakin' Shakespeare. You know what I am sayin? It's literally like... I don't know what I am feeling right now and then I would ball that &#%! up, kick it against the wall! I remember doing that a few times very early in life. Then I would just write when I needed to. Onslaught
<b>In/Formal, Non Formal Learning</b>	I wouldn't be rapping if it wasn't for my cousin and if it wasn't for my mentor/big brother, I wouldn't be a poet. And if it wasn't for my high school theater teacher, I would not be on stage or do anything like that... Onslaught
<b>Democratic Praxis</b>	...Our open mic adult organization had the opportunity to have a fundraiser for a local non-profit... That was the first trigger for us as to become more community centric. We've done everything from toy, book and school supply drives to teaching writing workshops at the homeless shelter. We've done a lot of writing workshops with inner-city nonprofits. That's what initially got us into schools and universities... Cable
<b>Community</b>	When you start doing poetry, you encounter the same people and new faces too. Those you see all the time are the people you're really sharing your stories with, you become comfortable enough to share with them... The crowd is there too, so they get to hear your stories...being able to share with the community in that way together...provides a safe space. Not everyone is going to like what they hear, but the space allows you to be open enough to share what you need to say. Professor X

## Storytelling

According to Guajardo and Guajardo (2010), “The creative process of storytelling is critical to forming identity, analyzing data, creating strategies for change and opening up imagination and creativity. Storytelling cultivates personal, organizational and community change through questions and conversations” (pp.7-8). One of the most noticeable commonalities among the poets who participated in this study was the presence and relevance of storytelling in their lives from a very young age. In reviewing the interviews of each participant, every single one of them named at least one member of their family as someone who told stories. Additionally, each poet expressed a love for various methods of storytelling from a young age; everything from comic books to martial arts movies. Through artistic expressions, each poet found connections to themselves, possibilities and the reality of the worlds they navigated. Poetry would eventually become a conduit for expressing, processing and documenting their stories. When they moved from writing stories to sharing them, Spoken Word created a new space for storytelling as well. The following poem was written by Galactus during the writing lab held for study participants.

*So there were the stories that need to be told  
And the act of telling the stories.  
There is a transformative power in screaming vulgarities  
into microphones in front of drunk strangers.  
Time is story's need to tell in order to age.*

*Retelling the same story doesn't mature you,  
Practice isn't experience,  
Repetition isn't ascension.  
You work through those stories,  
Getting people to listen,  
Getting people to understand  
Until your story departs  
And you're left with the satisfying hollowing*

*Of release  
And the next story begins its growing pains.*

*For my first two years of performance poetry  
I had at least five poems that told the same story.  
I liked that story and I liked those poems  
But I wasn't getting any better, I was staying good.  
Every artist goes through periods and arcs of hubris.  
Poem was about how underdogs can only define success for themselves,  
Followed by poems owning my own failures,  
Followed by not writing.*

*The low bar in Spoken Word is the telling-which is also the most important part.  
Almost anyone can write;  
Not everyone can speak  
And speaking into a microphone in front of strangers,  
Telling your story to drunks with numbers can be almost an impossibility.  
I say almost everyone can write, I mean literally.  
I'm not saying almost everyone can write well.  
Im saying almost everyone can string some words together and put a period at the end of  
it, almost.*

*The first time I competed,  
it was with my eyes closed and my fists gripped around the microphone,  
Which is exactly what I tell people not to do as a coach.  
I couldn't see them and they couldn't see my mouth,  
But I did it and vaulting that low bar was formative.  
I could do it in my current town,  
I could go to a city down the highway and get called a fag on stage.  
I could do it in New York. I could do it in Boston.  
I could do it in front of several hundred people,  
And  
They would listen,  
They would laugh and  
Then I could just do it at lectures and conferences  
Speaking loudly and confidently about whatever the moment demanded.  
I wasn't the scared boy who couldn't speak;  
I could be a man who controlled a room at three minute and ten second intervals  
I can only image what people who knew me in high school would think  
If they saw me live...  
"He's not as shy as he used to be and his skin has cleared up..."*

Spoken Word as a method of sharing stories has always been at the heart of this art form  
(Sommers-Willett, 2009). In fact, it is the sharing of the poem which most inherently

differentiates Spoken Word from other types of poetry. As illustrated by Galactus in the above poem, “significant learning can occur through reflection on one’s lived experiences, as well as through witnessing another’s experiences enacted. Reflection can happen through description, oral or written storytelling, or embodied activities” (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2010, p. 37). Galactus illustrates his realization that stories exist within an individual and are continuously evolving and unfinished. As we author the truths of our lives, it requires an awareness and vulnerability that pushes us to more critically reflect on our understanding of the self. It calls into question if our experiences are congruent with the stories we wish to exemplify and leave as legacy.

As we share our stories with others, we open ourselves to the perspectives and perceptions of others providing new potential contexts for introspection. As expressed by Galactus: “*Retelling the same story doesn’t mature you...you work through those stories.*” He connects these thoughts in his poem he speaks to the relevance that writing, re-writing, telling and retelling your story can have in transforming your sense of self. Mezirow (1997) states:

A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience...in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understanding is the cardinal goal of adult education (p. 5).

Galactus’s poem presents a deeper metaphor for transforming oneself through the process of negotiating our stories with ourselves and with others. Furthermore, he speaks to the idea that retelling the same story in a sense is equivalent to being stuck in a particular

area of one's life. By working through our stories, one can reach a necessary level of personal understanding that frees up the space in our lives to begin a new part to the story, a new lesson in our continuous evolution.

Another important finding relates to all four participants reporting about storytellers within their own families. Qualities they shared about the storytellers in their lives were often embedded in the participant's own writing, such as social consciousness, fantasy, or the processing of experiences. For example, Professor X identifies her mother as the most prevalent storyteller in her life. She shared that:

*Growing up my mom was a poet and she was part of the Texas women writers. I would go to these little library events. I loved to read, so I would go off into the library and read while she was having these meetings. But then when I got bored, I would go into the meeting with her and I would hear these different women reading their poems which were most often about what was going on in their personal lives.*

Similar to Professor X all of the study participants were avid readers growing up. However, her mother exposed her to storytelling through her own Spoken Word and the stories of others at an early age. Galactus also described his family as “particularly narrative.” Closely knit, his family put emphasis and value in taking the time to talk with each other and share the events of the day, most often around the dinner table. While he admits that there was not necessarily an overt emphasis on reading from his parents, there were always books and newspapers in the house. His parents read regularly and so did Galactus. Likewise, Cable quickly identifies family members who influenced his love for storytelling, “My grandfather and uncle were great storytellers. To this day I don't know

*if some of the stuff he said was true or not, because some of it was just so fantastic.”* As Cable shared stories about his family, the excitement in his voice and smile spread across his face expressing how much these memories and moments meant to him. He continues to invite me to these experiences, and the significance of these influences on his own storytelling continues to crystallize.

*There was the academic or even just entertainment value of books, poetry and plays and stuff like that. I loved Shel Silverstein as a kid. He was just so awesome! I don't know if it's sacrilegious or not to say it, but I love Shel Silverstein way more than Dr. Seuss. He was my dude...As a child; I made up fantasy stories in my head all the time. I was always on adventures and things like that. In my family, we traveled a lot. I got to see places that were so different and sort of really added to the fantasy world in my head.*

Cable shares throughout our discussions a love for many kinds of storytelling: Books, movies, music, particularly Hip Hop. His love for stories as a way to both escape and create, seems to emanate from his descriptions which parallel how he describes the ways his grandfather and uncle engaged in storytelling as well. From many of the memories he shared, it was clear that storytelling was also a way family history was passed down and shared between generations.

Storytelling as a form of oral history within the family would be true for Onslaught as well. He identified his grandfather as the major initial storyteller in his life. Growing up Onslaught often heard his grandfather articulate experiences as a soldier in World War II and as a Black man living during the Civil Rights Movement: “*My grandfather watched the news and spoke openly about the realities of economic, racial*

*and social inequities from the time he was a young man. I gained incredible amounts of wisdom and insight listening to the stories that my Grandfather shared with me.”*

On the other hand, Cable explains that he wrote for storytelling, his own life experiences, and to create fictional worlds:

*My influences were Stephen King, Edgar Allan Poe, Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Tupac, and Aesop Fables. I loved Aesop Fables as a kid...My favorite spoken word poems are the ones that tell a story! Also, sometimes, the poem has an underlying message that doesn't have to be spoken; you just get it. Those are my favorite. If it's not really about the story....it just doesn't resonate as much with me, you know? Plus, growing up we listened to a lot of Tejano music and a lot of it is storytelling.*

Onslaught echoes this sentiment; from his writing, his good poetry is able to allude to an underlying message: *“I think a good poet is able to illustrate everything that is happening around them without the message being too heavy. We are building bridges with our stories, you know what I am saying? The audience needs to have the freedom to get the message. To make sense of it.”* Both poets speak to the necessity of crafting Spoken Word stories in a way that allow audience members to connect more organically to the messages.

As a researcher, I was able to collect many stories while having conversations with the study participants; they usually answered my questions by sharing a story to illustrate their answers. At moments, this kind of reflection and re-telling of their own journeys helped participants make connections about themselves or past influences that they may or may not have considered previously through the use of stories as shared

throughout this theme. “Story...is a portal through which a person enters the world, by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). Participants from the study made connections for themselves about the ways storytelling and storytellers impacted their own development both as an individual and as a poet. Critical pedagogy argues that through examination of lived experiences individuals are able to gain unique insight and knowledge which assists them in better navigating the world around them, as well as their place in it. As Spoken Word artists and storytellers in their own spaces, each participant utilizes creativity and language to both process their experiences and share them with others through poetry.

### **Finding Voice**

For poets, finding our voice and articulating our journeys requires vulnerability, self-reflection, a willingness to wrestle with the unknown and an audience to share. Whether we are talking about sharing our most private moments with our most trusted friend or exposing some of our innermost struggles through poetry on a microphone, there is mortality to a story once it is out in the open. Sharing of your truth can be a powerful experience. During the writing lab, I imagined what Spoken Word would write to me about our current relationship.

*A Letter from Spoken Word to Me.*  
*I'd be lying if I said I wasn't surprised by your arrival.*  
*To be honest, I'm a bit surprised you even remember me.*  
*I've heard through the grapevine you've asked about me,*  
*Stated to others your allegiance;*  
*your need to have me.*  
*And, initially, I thought maybe you had seen too much at my side.*

*Our last time connecting was such an incredible ride, but you bailed.*  
*I figured by now you'd left me to love me in name only,*  
*begun to believe that our memories*  
*had just become sound bites to your conversation.*



*I have more than a few times questioned-  
if you ever really loved me in the first place.  
But now you're here  
and there are some things I've been wanting to say.*

*Do you remember the first time we met?  
I let your soul safely bleed into pages;  
gave voice to your silence.  
Your voice never trembled with me,  
never stumbled for the right words,  
never caved to peer pressure,  
for structure or sound.  
You showed up vulnerable and open.  
I was your therapist before you knew what that was.  
Guts exposed and wounded,  
I held you, comforted you,  
guided you back to the possibility of whole.  
And I never asked you for anything  
besides a connection.*

*Do you remember the first time I was your salvation song?  
When I cleared clouds and dark skies, created entryways for light and tomorrows?  
Do you remember when I was the only one who listened?  
The only one who gave you the right words.  
I emptied thesauruses for you.  
Dumped dictionaries at your disposal.  
there was not a language that I was not accessible to you in  
nor a  
format that I wouldn't contort myself into  
to be your bridge to something better.  
Do you remember the first time I let you share me?  
Exposed my prose across the backs of cocktail flyers  
for you to utter into the ears of strangers.  
Do you remember?*

*Each word felt like seeds planted in a community garden,  
I bore you family where you had none,  
reminding you we were not a dirty secret to be kept,  
that we mattered, that we were not alone.  
Others had a home in me too.  
I did that; with no agenda or pretense.  
I loved you unconditionally.*

As a teenager, I envisioned poetry as a tool I could use to say anything that was true for me without consequence. It allowed me to be raw and honest, to express my

perspective of the world. When I found Spoken Word as an adult, I found a connection with others, many who had fallen in love with poetry for the same reason I had. A community of writers who felt the desire to write and share their stories through this form of art. With less focus on the heart of the writing and more time spent on the mechanics and performance aspect of poetry for Nationals seemed to have contributed to my feeling stuck in a rut when it came to writing. My coach called it “writing for the editor, not by the poet” and it has been hard to get back to the heart of it. I believe that having a poem where I expressed the anguish of my son caught in the middle of custody battles as a parallel to war and that along with other poems taken out of context were used to try to negatively portray me in court. So then there became a fear of writing for a bit, and that it was not as free of a space as it had once been for me, at least not to share it. Combine these experiences with the mere demands of life, motherhood, a partner and a doctoral program, a perfect storm of circumstances contributed to my own lack of writing. And, I miss that space. It is an odd struggle. I believe that struggle and desire for a space to speak freely may have influenced the prevailing message of finding voice throughout the poem.

During the individual interviews and the writing lab, each poet spoke to finding their voice through poetry. For example, Spoken Word assisted Galactus and Onslaught finding their own voices at a personal level. For Cable and Professor X, it was about finding their voices as poets. Below Galactus’s poem, written during the lab, speaks directly to finding voice:

*There is the importance in finding your voice  
And  
Then there’s an importance in not caring if other people don’t find your voice.  
You should try to win and you should also not fear failing.*

*Young man, I would say go down the highway,  
 Go Alone.  
 Don't bring your friends, your reputation...  
 Only bring your poetry and your courage.  
 Stand on your own two feet,  
 Brace yourself against hecklers and fail.  
 They will tell you to show them your breasts,  
 But don't.  
 They will call you faggot and that is not a nice thing to say.  
 They will dispute claims in your poems  
 And NOW is not the time to argue.  
 And then do it again,  
 For several more weeks...*

Galactus is speaking of his own experiences while also providing advice and guidance to others developing as individuals and poets. A self-proclaimed introvert, he mentions at least three times during our conversations that his friends back home or in college would be incredibly surprised to find him on stage behind a microphone: *"I was really shy and needed a change; getting on the microphone was really scary. Also, I have to figure out how to do this to make my life better. People back home would be surprised I could do this."* Still somewhat new to the area, he hadn't made a lot of connections with people and Spoken Word was a way to change that. Galactus states, *"Spoken Word helped me learn to talk. That had a huge impact on my life, being able to get in front of an audience and not be afraid, to speak confidently. That has an immediate impact and is life changing."* Spoken Word's performative nature quite literally forced Galactus to find his voice beyond simply speaking in public and into understanding how to effectively communicate his stories. This complements what Somers-Willett (2009) state about two of the four components of poetry slam, the competitive construct in which Spoken Word can be performed: Spoken Word is performed and constructed to a large degree with an

intentional or purposeful attempt to influence or instruct the audience while also placing an emphasis on authorship and authenticity in the creating of the story.

As Galactus speaks about his success in slam, it illustrates his ability to utilize the art form to not only find his own voice but to construct it in a way that also engaged the audience and judges. Furthermore, it depicts an example of how Spoken Word can be used to engage the artist in critical reflection and personal transformation through the construction of the poem. Onslaught found his voice originally in the writing. As expressed in his narrative, he grew up in spaces that were both full of love but also where there was a great deal of conflict, particularly physical conflict:

*Fighting was something that was introduced to me at a very, very young age. I had an understanding of violence. Probably an unhealthy understanding of it. I'm glad that I had it...But that's when I started writing poetry because... I didn't know what to do with a lot of the emotions that were going on. I couldn't just beat everybody up!*

Poetry became a safe space for Onslaught to express himself, a space that wouldn't fight back when he did. He describes himself as someone introverted and a loner as a younger person. Later, when he met several influential mentors Onslaught was able to transition from behind the scenes to stage, and to sharing his work. Through Hip Hop and then Spoken Word, he found platforms to express himself beyond the pages of notebooks alone. Expressing and working out his emotions through poetry during difficult times assisted him in finding his voice. Onslaught further illustrates the way in which poetry has been therapy by reflecting on the times he has been unable to write by attempting to force thoughts not ready for poems due to a variety of barriers or reasons. Wisdom has

taught him that sometimes sitting in silence is just as necessary in order to process experiences as the need to write them down can be, even if they may not make it from pen to paper.

*If it's not coming like it is supposed to I am really ok with that because it's been like therapy for me. If I can't write a poem, I'll write a rhyme. If I can't write a rhyme, then I will write something. Sometimes none of those avenues are easily accessible. We exert a lot of energy, put a lot of energy into the universe as poets, as performers, as people. You got a job, a kid, a family, bills, you have all the bullsh\*t proving we don't live in a post-racial America bombarding you all the time and we expect ourselves to constantly give ink to all that static. You want to be able to do that, but sometimes sitting and silence and not saying anything is the better choice. Sometimes I just don't have anything poetic to say about it. Other times, I'll try to force myself to write and it doesn't make any damn sense. And, I don't know that it would make sense to anyone else hear or read it. With those pieces, maybe somebody else will get something out of it but those pieces are few and far between. Sometimes, it's just simply the static. Like, we are literally just putting our static on paper and maybe that is the point. To just get the static out.*

An essential consideration in Onslaught's reflection is to be aware of why one feels compelled to write, to be conscious of the message and purpose. An incredible quality of Spoken Word is that it is always available to the writer when it is needed and a pen, paper, and space to speak are the only resources needed in order to engage in it.

Cable and Professor X speak about finding a voice through their lens as poets.

Professor X shares that she began her time as a poet writing to please the audience:

*“Initially, I was writing stories that weren’t mine or ones that the crowd seemed to respond to positively. It wasn’t until later that I said to myself ‘I need to write what I want to write.’ I kept giving the crowd what they wanted. So then it just evolved.”* She continues to explain that because the stories are her own experiences or perspectives, the material comes to her more naturally both in creating and recollecting it. She also admits that her competitive nature pushed her to want to improve and be successful in slam: *“Even with the things that are going on in society, I still write them from my perspective or how I am experiencing them. So for me personally, I am so busy, when I write personal stories they are easier for me to memorize because I am competitive also.”* In finding voice in her own stories, she has continuously grown as a poet.

Cable and Professor X at some point used the phrase *“I was hooked”* when recollecting their first time performing Spoken Word. They expressed an immediate attachment to this art form, particularly the competitive and performative aspects of sharing their stories. Cable explains that he went for two years straight after his first time attending and participating in a poetry slam. He recalls a time about six months into slamming, where he went to compete in a different city and forgot his poem on stage. While he was able to eventually recover and the audience was supportive, the experience propelled him into wanting to continue to improve. Originally, Cable admits being caught up in the performance aspect and not feeling as personally connected to his writing. Later, he began to reflect more deeply on the messages in his writing.

*I asked myself, ‘Am I up here saying something or am I trying to beat this guy or this girl or the audience?’ Stepping out of that and focusing on my own writing*

*helped out a lot! ...you find your own voice and that's when you really begin to realize "this is for me".*

*I stopped to re-examine my own writing and question why I was writing.*

*Reflecting and questioning myself brought the best out of me. I really changed as a person. And it's made me focus on what's important in my life and what I'd like others to take away from my message.*

For Cable, finding voice centers around exploring the legacy he wishes his work to leave behind. An awareness of self, encouraged him to look beyond the competitive construct of slam and Spoken Word's performativity. For him reassessing his own work, as well as that of other poets, helped him to discover the poems and stories he wanted to share.

### **Healing**

Healing was another theme that emerged from the data provided by the four poets and it was often closely intertwined with finding voice. In the poem below Cable shares what it was like to watch his uncle deteriorate from cancer. This is an example of processing traumatic situations while providing others a window for a deeper understanding of his experience.

*I spilled my own blood until my voice became clear  
It's a tough grip  
Meditation to hold on the feelings while maintaining concentration.  
Before poetry,  
I recall mostly the weather  
And people.  
Basketball games etched into my memories  
And space I crawl into when I didn't feel right.  
The first poem my heart wrote was at our family lake house.  
My Uncle Eddie was stripped to bone and hide by cancer  
The family filled in like a funeral march  
And filled every corner of that tiny house like a sarcophagus.*

*The poem wrote about the way the sun loves shadows*

*Because it's the result of everything it touches,  
 From tall grass to cedar trees.  
 My Uncle was wheeled around every inch of the property.  
 He seems happy  
 And in acute pain at the same time.  
 I think we all share the same feelings  
 And still radiate love and shadows.  
 My first poem was never written or spoken.  
 My first poem was feeling and meditation  
 And staring at a solemn future in the face,  
 Like looking at concrete and knowing it's taste.*

*My first poem became my Uncle's memory.  
 Fond and fading but alive with his laughter.  
 My first poem was sun and cedar,  
 A love, a home, a captive space  
 I crawl into when the world felt scorched  
 And smiles tasted like cancer.  
 Where I can spill my blood  
 And not shed a single drop.*

Poetry has been used to help the healing or development of individuals; Speedy (2005) explores narratives, particularly through poetic expression as a method for participants to make meaning and critically reflect while giving counselors multiple ways to listening. Using both written and verbal narrative expressions, the counselor gets multiple lines of information from those their clients; this technique speaks to a foundational tenant of poetic inquiry. Similarly, MacDonnell and MacDonald (2011) discuss how nurses have used guided imagery, images, narratives and poetry within nursing educational settings to promote empathy, understanding and a space to process the difficult and often traumatic situations they encounter in their work.

In particular, in the previous poem, Cable is processing the painful experience of losing his uncle to cancer. This poem provides him the space to mourn and celebrate the life of his uncle. In his own words:



*I can't say I write for "therapy". I'm not necessarily motivated to write simply to get something off my chest. Sometimes when I try to do that it's not ready to come out so I can't just sit and write how I feel. That comes later. While I don't write for therapy, it has definitely been therapeutic. I think therapeutic action then creates change. Writing is not the therapy itself, but the catalyst for changing or moving through something.*

Spoken Word as a therapeutic space provides freedom to make sense and understand how the author has been impacted by that lived experience. Cable may not come to the art as therapy but that does not mean he comes to writing devoid of pain, but rather he seeks a deeper understanding of it. In bell hooks search for healing, she approaches theory in much the same way. Seeking to better understand and make sense of her pain, she came to theory for answers. To explore ideas and possibilities that would provide a deeper understanding of her reality and place in the world (hooks, 1994). Through the exploration of pain, struggle, and circumstance of women's stories and experiences, hooks is able to develop liberation theory. hooks (1994) shares:

I am grateful to the many women and men who dare create theory from the location of pain and struggle, who courageously expose wounds to give us their experience to teach and guide, as a means to chart new theoretical journeys. Their work is liberatory. It not only enables us to remember and recover ourselves, it charges and challenges us to renew our commitment to an active, inclusive feminist struggle (p. 74).

Often in regards to healing, Spoken Word depicts aspects of struggle. Spoken Word could potentially be a pedagogical approach to learning from the experiences and

struggles of others to better understand our individual or collective realities. Spoken Word by its nature can provide a space of healing for those listening as well as for the author, the poet. Professor X shares the following experience after performing a poem about the loss of her mother.

*After I did the poem about my mom, this guy and his girlfriend come up to me and give me a hug. The girlfriend shares 'My boyfriend really liked your poem, he just lost his mom two weeks ago.' Even though I am telling my story, that story is touching other people and you never know who you are going to touch. So, I think that part of the community and then just getting involved with the youth and other people to write and be comfortable with it. I think all of that ties together.*

Professor X continues to explain that: "My mom died when I was 14, right before my ninth grade year in High School. That was a rough moment. It was difficult and writing helped me get through that." Thus, writing served as a healing space for her during the loss of her mother. As hooks (1994) indicates, there is liberation in seeing the pain of your struggle inform or assist others who are in the midst of their own. It provides the opportunity for us to continue to learn about ourselves and others, as well as the ways in which we are connected by our experiences.

Sometimes, self-awareness comes to the author from the sharing or performativity experience of Spoken Word. For Galactus, a fellow poet pointed out after several months and several poems, that he was consistently writing poems with a theme of outcast claiming his own victory. This was a struggle he had faced many times throughout his life and it became reflected in the stories he chose to construct:

*There was the theme of the outcast claiming his own victory and it was a bunch of poems trying to make bad people feel bad about making bad decisions. Then I wrote poems about trying to feel good about your life. I was writing more about coming to terms with how I am the way I am. That was the last thing I was really proud of, a poem I called Man Up. There were a few other poems about figuring out who you are.*

For Galactus, there was healing in writing and telling the stories of his coming to be who he is. Figuring out the stories he was telling and how they were a reflection of his own life was part of his healing to develop a deeper understanding of the self. Lawrence and Butterwick (2007) have been examining individuals' engagement in theatre as a way of sharing stories to navigate healing from experiences with oppression. By acting through oppressive situations, stories can be re-imagined and re-written with varying outcomes. These new endings can help create or envision "alternative realities" with more self-affirming and positive results. In doing this, individuals can become "agents for personal and collective transformation" (Lawrence, 2008, p. 69). When Galactus re-writes his outcast in claiming victory from "his tormentors", he is in effect, re-imagining a newer self.

Cable went through a similar process during a period in his life. As a military kid, Cable moved around a great deal. For several years during high school, Cable's family lived in a small, dry county that was predominately White in Northern Texas. Often feeling outside the margins both within his culture as a Latino male and the predominately White culture, Cable struggled with isolation and alcoholism. Despite being a dry county, it seemed that hanging out and drinking was the primary approach to

having fun in that town. Cable describes having a lot of anger and feeling disconnected during this time and describes it as one of the darker times in his life. Cable explains that the town and its impact on his life is something that came out in many of his poems as pointed out by people close to him:

*My girlfriend asked once 'Are you really going to keep writing about that? But they worked, not that they worked but they felt good for me and many people here seem to relate to the experiences I had there. We have always said this city was the biggest small town. Back up North, there was a lot feeling alienated...there's angst you deal with living in a space where you don't really understand the motives of the people who live there. In a place where creativity is not welcome much-like why do you wake up every day? What do we do here? What do I have to live for? Why am I going to stay here? Those kinds of questions.*

Struggling with understanding his own identity in this context proved to be a very difficult time for Cable. During the time, he didn't always deal with this struggle in productive ways. Further compounded by the fact it was not an environment that supported his creative outlets and approaches to making meaning from his own experiences. According to research in the area of poetry therapy, one of the things researchers have discovered that creative expressive writing “makes events and emotions more manageable when put into words; it provides an element of control to the writer” (Mazza, 1979, 2003). Furthermore, Mazza explains that creative reflective writing can increase self-understanding, clarification resolution, and closure. Additionally, as detailed throughout this document, the current research on art-based learning and its potential for transformation in a multitude of ways, supports Mazza’s older work. Cable’s reflection is

just one example of these assertions within a lived experienced. Considering lived experiences as sources of wisdom, learning occurs, sometimes as through the process of healing. It makes sense then creative expression of oneself through the art of Spoken Word as a tool for learning

### **In/Formal and Non-Formal Learning**

Malchiodi (2002) observes, “Art stimulates both those who make it and those who witness it. Creating, imagining and witnessing all instill you with a new sensibility about how you experience yourself in the world” (p. 33). This new experience gives the artist new wisdom and perspective to best understand themselves and their lived realities in relation to their surrounding worlds. Spoken Word and art at large can be used as a critical pedagogy in a variety of spaces, at both individual and community levels. In speaking with each of the participants, learning and community were embedded in their perspectives, experiences, and stories. What emerged were many examples of ways Spoken Word had been utilized or experienced by participants within the contexts of formal, informal and non-formal learning. These categories complement the kinds of experiences the study participants shared while illustrating ways Spoken Word holds the potential of learning, individually and in connection with others. According to Merriam, Carrarella, and Baumgartner (2007):

Formal learning takes place in educational settings and often leads to degrees or some sort of credit. Non-formal learnings refers to organized activities outside of educational institutions, such as those found in community organizations, cultural institutions and such as museums and libraries and voluntary associations.

Informal learning refers to the experiences of everyday living from which we learn something (2007, p.24).

It is important to note that these types of learning rarely happened in isolation from each other, but rather were often deeply intertwined. Let's examine the following poem as an example of how these methods of learning can be connected.

*I start with an idea,  
some sexy idea that looks like it's lonely.  
Let me have you  
It sits on clean sheets like a virgin.  
All the things I want to do to him and he extends,  
he becomes concept.  
I right all of the wrongs and he feels good.  
I wanted to seduce him, but he's gotten in my head.  
He releases the DNA of phrases and lines that grows in me,  
breathe,  
now push the pen further,  
now breathe,  
now push the pen further,  
now breathe,  
now push the pen further.  
I grip sheets, push; I hold it  
covered in ink and blood  
and it's beautiful.*

*This is just the beginning.  
I will watch it grow and teach it to speak  
It will pick up my mannerisms and people will say  
"It looks just like me, she must have spit it out."  
I will teach it to be itself, but it will have to learn for itself.  
There will be some that laugh at it.  
Take it for funny, but it doesn't have to change.  
One day someone will fall in love with it  
And  
repeat its words back...*

This poem was written by Professor X during the writing lab based on the prompt "birthing Spoken Word." Her poem uses the imagery around the ideas of conception, labor, and birth as a metaphor for the process of turning an idea into a poem.

Additionally, it's a good metaphor for learning processes the artist goes through as well. "I start with an idea, some sexy idea that looks like it's lonely" speaks to the moment an idea becomes something relevant to or resounds as something to explore within the writer. As the writer begins to process the idea in relation to their own lenses, they often wrestle to refine their thoughts and experiences into a coherent story that is creative, authentic and engaging to the audience. Creative language to describe that process can be found in the line, "*It sits on clean sheets like a virgin, All the things I want to do to him and he extends, he becomes a concept. I right all of the wrongs and he feels good.*" In Spoken Word, poets often develop individual styles or nuances to their work which can distinguish them from others, as represented in the line of the poem "*picking up her mannerisms.*" The line "*I will teach it to be itself, but it will have to learn for itself*" creatively represents that the writer's lessons and experiences may go into creating the poem. However, the ways others react, internalize and make meaning of the poem is learning that occurs at personal and individual levels is how the poem learns and teaches for itself.

Ultimately, the story presented never has to change to fit others; each person will experience the story presented in ways relevant to their own lived realities and situations. For example, someone who considers themselves a poet could have read this passage and completely related to feeling that creating and the poem can be a beautiful and laborious process. Someone who doesn't write Spoken Word may not relate at all, but through the breaking down of the metaphor understands better what writers may experience during the process of creating a poem. Professor X's poem as whole serves as symbolism for the labor and learning that can be present for both poets and audience members through

Spoken Word. Depending on whether this poem is shared in a community poetry venue or in a classroom provides insight to ways Spoken Word can encompass formal, informal and non-formal opportunities for learning through a variety approaches and spaces.

Spoken Word within formal learning spaces were probably the least prevalent of the three forms of learning based on experiences shared by participants. In considering formal learning, Professor X and I both teach at local universities and had used Spoken Word in our classroom settings. Professor X, who teaches primarily in the English department, shared the following:

*I introduce myself to my students and I tell them teaching is my side job, what pays the bills. But foremost I am a poet. I do poems for my students. I select a few that are school appropriate. I perform one. They are often floored and ask for another. I tell them I will do another if we stay on task and get through part of the lesson for the day so it helps keep them interested in the class.*

Professor X introduces herself and shares with her students how integral being a poet is to her identity. Furthermore, in performing her own poetry, she provides insight into who she is to her students. She takes risk and shares her passion while simultaneously piquing interest in both Spoken Word and the course itself. By opening up in this way, Professor X creates an environment to begin developing a more authentic relationship between educator and student. Even the classroom itself becomes a safe space to share stories and express identities as role modeled by the teacher. By doing this, she hopes to also encourage them to dig deep as they begin a course focused on developing their own writing and language mastery.



Connecting to students isn't the only way Professor X uses Spoken Word in the classroom. *“I also use Spoken Word poems to introduce topics of discussion in the class either with guest poets or through online videos.”* This is a practice I have also done in my own classrooms, addressing everything from how to write well as a student to issues of social justice. Since perspectives are as diverse as the people who share them, Spoken Word can be used to present a variety of lived realities around many different topics. Finally, since some of the assignments she presented in class are personal or creative writing assignments, Spoken Word begins to expose them to these elements of their English courses.

*In my classes we often start with a personal narrative assignment so I will do a personal poem; maybe one about my mom. I will tell them to write about a particular moment, from their perspective, how did you feel? When they see me do a poem, to show them what I mean, it helps them understand better what I am looking for. Another way I use Spoken Word is to provide a guide for the length of some assignments. I have this one exercise where they pair up and share their stories with each other. The person listening writes the story of their peer as they heard it. I give them 6 minutes then they switch. When I ask them why am I giving you 6 minutes and explain it's because a poem is about two pages or 3 minutes of work, so if I am asking you to write 4 pages, that's about two poems.*

Professor X has students develop a greater sense of self while also gaining knowledge and skills sets relegated to the English courses she is teaching. Combining skill-based learning and opportunities for students to relate learning relevant to their own lives is essential to adult education. As stated by Merriweather (2011) arts-based education, in

this case, Spoken Word, provides the opportunity for “enhancing critical thinking skills, synthesizing diverse ideas, increasing self-reflection, and analyzing experiences, among other things” (p 53). Ways in which Professor X shares that she uses it in her classroom exhibits these characteristics. In addition, there are tactical skills that are also learned through the writing process and performativity, such as improved literacy, grammar, creative expression, public speaking and how to organize thoughts in a fluid and engaging manner. Furthermore, her willingness to be vulnerable and share her own stories creates a sense of connection between her and her students.

She shares that students often come to her to get her opinion on papers for other classes, which allows her to continue to facilitate learning and growth in her students. Other professors know that she performs Spoken Word and send students who express or show interest in the art form. Spoken Word became a tool Professor X could utilize to formal learning settings to promote community building and informal learning opportunities. It is worth noting that while clear elements of formal learning are demonstrated in the ways that Professor X and I utilize Spoken Word in the classroom, we also both approach our classrooms with the intention of creating community and introducing the potential of informal learning opportunities within our formal settings.

Within the academic literature, I did encounter works which, explored other formal learning settings where adults utilized arts-based pedagogical approaches, along with other forms of critical inquiry or reflection in order to make meaning in their lives. As mentioned earlier in this work, some have utilized poetry and sharing of narratives in order to assist in their development as nurses and counselors (MacDonnell and MacDonald, 2011; Malchiodi, 2002; Speedy 2005.) Using both written and verbal

narrative expressions, including poetry, the counselor can get multiple lines of information from those they counsel. These examples explore the use of art-based approaches as a way to process significant personal and professional experiences, develop empathy, promote humanistic connections and make meaning of their lived realities, individually and collectively.

Speedy, in particular, is utilizing shared poetic narratives, which in essence is Spoken Word, for critical development. Additionally, Manning, Verenikina, and Brown (2010) explore how learning with the arts, including Spoken Word, could be used in work-place learning. The authors found that content areas such as team building, innovation and creativity, improved communication and writing skills improved from embedding the arts into workplace learning. Using these examples from the literature, the impact of the arts, and poetry, in particular, can benefit adult learning in formal and non-formal settings in a wide variety of ways: personally, professionally and academically. However, the exploration of the usefulness of arts-based pedagogies, including Spoken Word, to complement broad range subjects unrelated to art within formal learning settings is still quite young within the academy. However, arts-based pedagogies within informal and non-formal settings are explored with greater frequency. Spoken Word, particularly relative to adult learning settings is still largely unexplored.

Opportunities to observe the ways informal and non-formal learning in connection to Spoken Word emerged more frequently throughout the study. Onslaught, in particular, states quite clearly that often he has not benefited from engaging in traditional or formal modalities of learning. More specifically, he shares how Spoken Word has been a teacher for him and how he has seen it be a successful learning tool for others.

*Spoken Word has been a teacher because I'm not a traditional learner. So you can tell me something directly or you can package it and leave it in front of me. The package is always more attractive. I'm digging that package, you know. I'm really digging it to see where you're coming from. And I may get something out of it. Something relevant to me, even if that wasn't the intention in the delivery of the package.*

This metaphor of Spoken Word as a unique package based on the listener or learner's particular lens exemplifies the potential marriage of informal and transformational learning. Current academic literature supports the possibility of this phenomenon, particularly for individuals who have felt marginalized in restrictive formal settings, a sentiment several of the study participants identified having experienced. "Community arts programs can often...operate in cultural margins, can focus on multiple uses of the arts for mediating and intervening in critical human issues" (Hocking, 2011, p. 47). Understanding the possibilities of informal community educational settings is particularly relevant for this study since many adult learners within Central Texas may have participated in formal learning settings which did not provide these spaces where personal and cultural experiences overlap in their lives as established in chapter one. Providing safe spaces where adult learners can construct meaning regarding identities within or across a multitude of social contexts can be done within a variety of arts-based education approaches. I will explore the role and potential of arts-based community educational settings later in this chapter, however, I mention this here as it provides insight from Hocking is relevant when exploring the potential art-based practices can provide when introduced to formal, informal and non-formal modes of learning.

Opportunities for informal and non-formal learning in connection to Spoken Word emerged more frequently throughout the study than modes of formal learning. Quite often, experiences shared informal and non-formal learning was intertwined with one another. Onslaught notes the value Spoken Word has provided him as a social worker, working with young adults who are often living challenging adult lives before reaching what is considered adult age chronologically. By understanding their stories and struggles through Spoken Word, he is able to better know how to support and assist them in discovering themselves and connecting to each other as they reflect and share lived experiences.

*Using spoken word as a teaching tool is helpful in my work. I think the youth are by default poets, period. As you're growing, you're experiencing and learning. And actually, that's true no matter what phase of life you are in. You want to share that experience through the lens that you currently have with others. You want to understand and be understood. As we become older people, we've already been there and we forget sometimes how magical this sh\*t is. It's easy to get jaded because life will beat you down. But I learned a lot through young adults by listening to what they're writing or listening to; paying attention to what they're saying through their expression. And when you finally realize it's not magic, there's a light that comes on if you can catch it early enough, when you see the effectiveness of self-expression and Spoken Word.. I always have a hard time explaining a simple way of saying that how Spoken Word can affect change.*

Considering this insight from Onslaught, evidence of informal and transformational learning are present. As the youth utilize art and more specifically Spoken Word, not only

do they learn more about themselves, but Onslaught learns more about them as well. This provides me the opportunity for self-reflection as an educator and mentor present itself and he is able to improve the ways in which he engages them in learning. He is able to transform his own approaches and understanding as an educator as the students utilize the tool to make meaning around their lived experiences.

Mezirow (1997) states “A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience.... in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understanding is the cardinal goal of adult education.” Transformational learning seeks to do just that; to create space and praxis to examine one’s beliefs, knowledge, and experiences as they continue to make and remake meaning as lifelong learners (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). When a person encounters new knowledge, beliefs or information which is in conflict with what one already knows this causes what Mezirow (1997) calls a “disorienting dilemma.” This often elicits strong emotions and confusion as one begins to analyze the current understanding possessed. As one begins deconstructing their own knowledge, engaging in discourse for the purposes of reflection is a major part of transformational learning. Mezirow (1997) shares:

Discourse, as used here, is a dialogue devoted to assessing reasons presented in support of competing interpretations, by critically examining evidence, arguments, and alternative points of view. The more interpretations of a belief available, the greater the likelihood of finding a more dependable interpretation or synthesis. We learn together by analyzing the related experiences of others to

arrive at a common understanding that holds until new evidence or arguments present themselves (p. 7).

When Onslaught stated, “You want to share that experience through the lens that you currently have with others. To understand and be understood” he is speaking to that human need to make meaning of our experiences. Furthermore, Onslaught connects the idea that as we are learning through lived experiences we are changing. This results in a constant re-negotiation of our perspectives and understanding through new lenses.

As we share these moments of self-reflection and experience with others, in this case through Spoken Word, we promote the possibility to prompt others to re-negotiate their understanding as well. That re-negotiation within and between individuals is the change that Onslaught feels he has trouble explaining with clarity. “Significant learning can occur through reflection on one’s lived experiences, as well as through witnessing another’s experiences enacted. Reflection can happen through description, oral or written storytelling, or embodied activities” (Butterwick and Lawrence, 2010, p. 37). Since Spoken Word is in fact, a mode of storytelling, significant informal and transformational learning can be gained through this art form, individually and collectively. Both the poet and the listener have opportunities to gain and share wisdom to through the exploration and critical reflection of lived realities. It is, in fact, the component of sharing within Spoken Word that most distinctly advocates the possibilities of transformational and informal learning for more than just the individual writing the poem.

One area of criticism Professor X expressed related to what at times feels like a lack of authenticity in poets work in arena of competitive slam. After having been a competitor at a national level Spoken Word competition, she felt conflicted about the

ongoing over-representation of particular current social issues and the over-performativity of some of the poets around the topics expressed during the slams. While many of the issues or themes presented in the poems were of significant importance to her personally, the often similar writing and performative approaches so many poets exhibited at times made her feel it diminished the importance, struggle and reality being represented in the works. She began to question if some of the poets had personal commitments or relationships to such important issues like, racism, police brutality, sexual assault and other narratives rooted in the lived narratives of individuals who often straddled marginalized spaces.

For Professor X, and for many other Spoken Word artists and writers, poetry serves as a mode of healing, activism, truth-telling and change making. The tension that can result for many poets when some seem to exploit these topics in an effort to win slams is significant in the Spoken Word community. While some argue the goal of slam is to win, others disagree that goal should be accomplished on the back of exploitive inauthenticity. Professor X acknowledges she is extremely competitive and ultimately has a desire to win the Slams in which she competes. However, she is also in love with the art form of Spoken Word and recognizes its need to be a platform for relevant and meaningful topics without compromising the authenticity of representation and story by the desire to win a competition. As she processed through this dichotomy the following poem was written:

*Anticipate your name being called,  
put your head down and come forward,  
let your face tell the tone of what's to come,  
stand still,  
adjust,  
step back compose,*



*step forward  
readjust as if you didn't get it right the first time,  
put your hands at your side and rub invisible sweat off your palms,*

*it would be terrible to slip,  
this makes your look unsure of your words,  
vulnerability scores well,  
the wait allows you to know your worth,  
listen til the crowd calms then start slow for emphasis,  
wait rewind start big and loud to get attention,  
regardless your first line should hook bottom lip,  
tug jaw drop for laughter,  
disbelief  
or to let out  
the lung gripped breath of your pain.*

*Your topic depends on the trend.  
2009, empathy, let me tell you how I feel about what happened to someone else,  
2010, the abstract, the concept, the I am an insert verb and noun.  
2011, the slave narrative and reliving rape  
2012, how you survived whatever it was and resurfaced after drowning, insert or don't  
insert, feminist or gay pride  
2013, let me tell you how your poem should not be performed...  
how I am made uncomfortable but will say things to make you uncomfortable,  
sometimes repetition is uncomfortable...  
include various blurbs in other languages,  
layer with volume and passion,  
escuchar and tempo ecouter,  
a lasagna  
listen to this,  
they will eat it up.  
2014 gender equality, racism and privilege...  
my body, this body, a woman's body,  
insert hashtag,  
but before inserting always get permission,  
start a movement,  
move a body,  
bet your crowdfunding catches on.  
Change is good,  
Find you are a nobody or a governing body.  
Yes, change is good right?  
But how is it change when you keep hearing the same thing?  
Insert buzzwords,  
rape culture,  
skittles,  
gentrification,*

*hoodie,  
body parts,  
ferguson,  
fire in your belly,  
skittles,  
gut,  
stomach or on your tongue  
skittles,  
talk about your skin  
let them see the rainbow  
They keep tasting or the rainbow in your heart  
or the rainbows they keep putting there.  
Mouths have a pallet of colors  
and people clap for what they identify with  
so be snow white on yellow brick roads,  
take them black home.  
Tell them how you are proud of your fat  
or your hair  
or your culture  
or you're ashamed of your fat  
or your hair  
or your culture.  
How you don't want to be judged but you wait for scores  
how you were bullied and called names  
but no longer answer to your own name...  
coming to the stage  
Authentic!*

*Sometimes it's not even what you say it's how you say it.  
The hot feet,  
the atlas,  
the slide,  
the reach,  
the point,  
the ball your fist,  
the get off the mic and come back,  
the heart attack and deep breath and wait,  
the slow it back down and shake your head  
the amen  
and look up,  
the this be adjective noun,  
this be adjective noun, this be, wait....  
...this be gospel*

Her poem resulted from the critical reflection of her own beliefs and work, as well as, the work presented by other poets. This poem is an examination and re-negotiation of her current perceptions. Particularly, regarding her understanding of the necessity of authenticity combined with her recognition of the competitive nature Slam can bring out in writers. Through the construction of the poem, she critically analyzes the relationships, realities, and tension between storytelling and persevering in slam.

Sometimes the information needed to solve problems or work toward transforming self and the world in which we live lies just beyond our reach.

Opportunities for transformative learning are available to us, but often veiled or hidden. We can access this hidden knowledge by paying attention to imagery that presents itself through dreams and other creative and intuitive processes such as metaphor, story, art, dance, poetry, photography, meditation, and quiet contemplation (Lawrence, 2005b, p. 309).

This specifically illustrates an example where hearing Spoken Word poetry resulted in Professor X deconstructing and reconstructing internal and external messages, perceptions and expectations concerning the role of poets creating narratives of marginalized identities within the body of the art form. By doing so, she is in many ways asking the Slam and Spoken Word community, to do better as storytellers, especially those consider themselves activists within the art form. When Professor X shared this poem with the other study participants during the lab, they all responded strongly in agreement with her sentiment. This poem represents a level of awareness and expresses an important belief around creative authenticity many poets believe in. However, it can also be argued that stories, which may not be authentic to the writer, still have the

potential to connect with a lived reality or experience of someone listening to the works. While there may be a tension among poets about the necessity of authenticity in one's story, what is shared may be of significance or provide a moment of learning to a listener.

Each of the poets in this study have competed in national level Spoken Word competitions. Three of the four have served in the official capacity of coaching adult and/or youth teams for national Spoken Word competitions. Poetry Slam Incorporated or PSI is the national non-profit organization which the international oversees the coalition of poetry slams internationally. While it is a space of informal learning itself, so are the individual venues that are sometimes slam only sites and others are slam and open mic settings. The importance of this context is that it is through the guidance and rules of the PSI that individuals select teams and prepare for national competitions. Each one of the study's participants have competed in one or more of the regional and national slams that are organized through those events, particularly as members of a slam team. Within these spaces both informal and non-formal learning has occurred.

Galactus shares an experience on his first adult national team that helped inform his approach as a coach. During practice his first year, there was a lot of stress and tension between members of the team. One team member in particular seemed overly focused on getting ahead or making others on the team, particularly Galactus look or feel bad. It left a very negative mark on his summer as they practiced together. As Galactus explores why she may have acted that way, he shares how it influenced his approach as a coach.

*I wondered "What is the best that could come out of that behavior, treating someone terrible and being hurtful?" Successful Spoken Word artists are not*

*living the high life. The best that can come out of it is that some people like you but she's guaranteed that I don't. So when I went on to coach the adults and the youth team, I always open up with my expectations. I expect each of my team members to treat each other with respect and I don't know why this seems to be so difficult. So my goal as a coach was not to just focus on the art or the love of it, but also to teach people how to navigate working with other human beings. That is an important skill for anyone to have.*

Beyond what Spoken Word teaches from a technical perspective, Galactus speaks to the development of team and community that must not only develop between team members but a skill that is necessary when working with others in any capacity. He talks about the difference when trying to teach this skill to others.

For Galactus, it was baffling that adults would choose to act that way. However, when he later coached both adult slam and a youth slam teams, he used those negative experiences to make him a more aware and better coach when developing his own team and poets. He recalls a time he had to take a youth team member outside, who was upset and frustrated with others on the team and things were getting heated. "I was like-I want to talk to you and I don't want you to hit me. And he said, I am not going to hit you." He explains that with the adults, he didn't have to worry about negotiating emotions turning physical. With the adults, he admits this weird balancing act of feeling like who is he to tell adults how to act and being sure that the team he is coaching is treating each other with respect and compassion. For each of the study participants, looking at their coaching experiences, it became evident that for them Spoken Word was a space for learning and educating others as a reciprocal learning practice. As they learn more about themselves as

artists, they are also learning how to be better coaches, and mentors through these experiences within the team, and slams contexts.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Professor X had been one of the first group of poets to be a consistent member of Kindred's foundation and participated in that venue long before it was a slam venue. Due to life circumstances, she had to take a hiatus from participating in the community and venue for a few years. When she returned the venue provided spaces for poets to spit poems on the open mic or to compete in Slam. As she returned and began to earn her way on teams, many of the new poets had never heard of her.

Blown away by her talent, they were surprised to learn that she was part of the foundational history of the Spoken Word community in that area. Having this historical and social context to share with newer poets, she was able to utilize those experiences and knowledge to help inform poets, teammates and later those she would coach. By doing this, new and old practices and insight allowed for new dynamics to flourish within various community and team settings. Onslaught shared he has had similar experiences during times he has ebbed and flowed regarding his consistency within the art.

Experiences with Slam and at the national competitions they have competed in have been places of non-formal and informal learning. For example, Onslaught shared that the first time he went to nationals he was not actually on a team, however, he did perform in one of the event's open mic nights. Recollecting that moment, he shares the following story:

*There was an open mic I did and I did this poem called Arms Are Serious. That was like my most Saul Williams-esque poem that I had. It was nothing but nebulas*

*and I was like “I’ve already held court with the wounded minds, Saturday nights we smoked like hematite on the blows, beyond sight, the darkened alleyways, starlight ho, the glasses of an old soul died older than the coldest night.” The crowd responded like “WHAT!?!?! That sh\*t sounded good!” And I remember asking folks in the audience, “Do you understand what I was saying? I was talking about a crackhead.” They had understood the message I was trying to create with my imagery and I was like, “wow, okay there’s a community that actually gets what I’m trying to say.”*

This National Poetry Slam open mic event became a non-formal learning space where Onslaught was provided an opportunity to grow more confident as a poet, rapper, and writer. His talent and ability to craft and perform his own creative writing through the use of illustrative language and metaphors to tell a complex story had been understood and respected by an audience of poets with advanced experiences within competitive Spoken Word. This assurance provided an opportunity for him to engage in self-reflection about the potential of not only this artistic genre but his place to be within it. In his own words, he says, *“That was it, I was hooked and this art form is where I would spend the next 10 years of my life.”*

Cable and I shared a discussion about our own revelations during our first time at Nationals. Poets come to Nationals from such a vast variety of diverse backgrounds artistically, geographically, socio-economically, in addition to multiplicities of individual identities, and this presents the possibility for an array of opportunities to learn by listening to different performances, stories, and styles of writing. Furthermore, because so many poets are in the same spaces at the same times, the potential for deep conversations

and connections made with other poets provide not only growth as a writer, but also as individuals and as a larger community as well. Cable and I shared several experiences where we had been deeply impacted by another poet's story both on and off the stage. We shared how these experiences had inspired and pushed to grow in our art form giving us new perspectives to consider. Even more importantly, we discussed how sharing our own stories had connected us to others. At times, we had connected to others who shared similar experiences, as well as, those who had core similarities with different outcomes. Other times, we sought out poets to engage in conversation to understand a story they had shared more deeply. These moments not only impacted us as writers but as individuals. In this way, Spoken Word aids in teaching us how to build community through the connection of lived experiences.

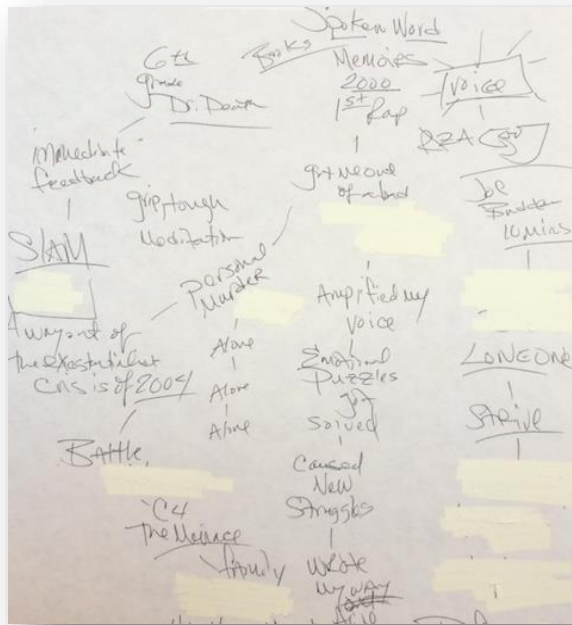
During our conversation, we both spoke explicitly about our eye-opening experiences at Nationals that had impacted us in ways we had not anticipated. Some of these experiences were positive and inspiring and others were difficult and troubling. In an effort to help maintain the anonymity of others, I am not utilizing specific quotes from that portion of the conversation between Cable and me as some of the examples could inadvertently identify or imply a particular person or issue. However, it was necessary to speak to the discussion as it illustrates similarities in ways our learning within the setting of Nationals had allowed us to grow and develop individually and collectively. While we had these opportunities in our home venues and spaces as well, the potential multiplied as hundreds of poets with a similar love for Spoken Word sharing a kaleidoscope of stories and experiences.



In fact, when the participants in the study came together for the writing lab, each one of the participants shared ways they had learned and been impacted by the poems, experiences, and conversations with poets they might not have otherwise met or heard without experiencing Nationals. Scher (2007) states “Community arts can give you vision and elicit the power of your emotions and intellect at the same time” (p. 4) Evidence of emotional, personal and intellectual development individually and collectively for participants reflects Scher’s stance while demonstrating the marriage of informal and non-formal learning within a variety of Spoken Word communities and venues.

During the study’s writing lab, I again observed a marriage of informal and non-formal learning. The lab was held in a conference room within a non-profit community media organization that opportunities for community members to learn how to develop various forms of film and visual media skills. The owner kindly allowed us to use the conference room, as well as, some of the other outdoor and indoor spaces in case the participants felt more comfortable writing outside the conference room setting. I appreciated the opportunity to utilize a space that offered participants the liberty to choose an environment potentially conducive to their writing style.

As an educator and a researcher, it was beneficial for me to experience the different ways in which participants pull their ideas and thoughts together into a poem. For example, Cable maps out his ideas and concepts before writing a poem. Mapping out his ideas allows him to find what is relevant and important to him as he begins to write about a topic. *“Sometimes I don't know how to say it, sometimes stuff comes out that doesn't make it in the poem, but it helps me structure my ideas.”*



**Figure 11. Photo of Cable's Poem Concept Map.**

Cable's poem that derived from this concept map appears in the section on healing and was written from the prompt "my Spoken Word memoirs" and many of the ideas within the map found their way to his poem. I had never seen a writer utilize a concept map to write a poem before this experience. Ironically, most of my experience with concept maps were utilized for academic work within formal learning settings. As the researcher and as an educator, I learned another way in which tools I utilized in formal learning settings might be useful in non and informal learning settings as well.

Cable and Professor X both shared that there are times when they are writing poems, they engage in research around particular topics to utilize more creative expression and provide more depth to the work. Both state that the topic at hand must be of individual importance to them to feel compelled to write about it. An example of such a topic is racism. Racism has affected both of their lives individually yet is also a larger

societal issue. Professor X is bi-racial, with Latina and Black heritage. Growing up, she was less engaged with her Latina identity, which has become increasingly important to her as an adult. The following poem is not only informed by her own desire to learn and research more about that identity, but also from her experiences.

*I've never had Black girl magic  
Never had Brown girl brujería  
No, this is voodoo  
Systematic sorcery, I caste system spells  
Spit them out like the grito stuck in my throat...haaaaahhaahhaa ha ha  
Sounds funny right?  
Didn't think she could do that, thought she was black,  
there is no middle passage for mixed girls  
And without a passage she ain't no essay, pretty sure I read her wrong  
Never had a rite of passage, 15 passed right on by  
A quinceañera is just a fiesta, a fee esta, a fee, a price, esta, to be  
I have not yet appropriated myself, made me my own  
When my mother died, I clenched at a culture never given  
We weren't taught Spanish  
It was only spoken around Christmas so we wouldn't know what we were getting  
but it was a deliberate choice to not give something that would be taken away  
Taken down the hall for special ed  
Taken to the principal's office to stay after school  
I never had to think too hard about how to copy sentences in only one language  
We weren't given names with accents to be punished for having accents  
An accent is a mark indicating stress  
And I have tried to pull my hair out but it is strong  
The black girl in me is too proud to call it good  
But it grows with just enough curl to be black sheep  
This is the shit I'm not black enough or brown enough to talk about in public  
How my Cesar Chavez heart beats in the MLK tomb in my chest  
How I love chicken enchiladas and Tajin on my watermelon  
How I'm not black enough for rhythm in my feet but my hips (have been coated salsa)  
Ooh she's spicy, she's exotic,  
Pick her African violet marigold skin  
Pick her  
This is how you flower tortillas and corn rows  
Stitching hood and barrio together,  
I am altered  
Hemming and hawing I guess because I'm tabled in cultural discussions  
so I am altered  
Skeletons in my closet-sugar coated calaveras  
So I press King James against Virgin Mary palms with confusion*

*Not knowing when to jump up, hallelujah  
 and when to kneel  
 I pray, that when I am down I am heard the most  
 That my tongue is not so foreign that I'm met by a gatekeeper  
 Apparently I don't need a green card but I haven't earned a black one yet either  
 When my daughter was young  
 she was excited to share Spanish,  
 she recited  
 Uno, dos, tres, taco, (hahaha) I laughed at taco  
 How can I Million Man March when I can't get past four  
 Some of you, right now have mental tally sheets  
 Just so you can tell which side I identify with more  
 There are people that say I only live half a struggle  
 They should recognize that there is more than just one*

This poem provides insight into the struggles she has felt within herself and within society while also speaking to larger issues of systemic racism. For example, when she speaks to not being taught Spanish as a child she sheds light on ways schools often treat students who do speak Spanish negatively. Her research enhances her personal story while also allowing it to speak to larger socio-political realities as well. We will further explore the ways in which the poets utilize knowledge and Spoken Word to affect social change later in this chapter. However, in exploring the learning tools participants utilize in constructing their poetry, this work provides unique insight. Research, a process often associated with more formal learning, is a tool both Cable and Professor X explicitly noted assists them in processing the informal learning then expressed in poetic form.

One of the insights Professor X shared when it was her turn to share the work written during the writing portion of the lab was that she doesn't do well in writing labs where writing is forced. *"I am horrible at writing workshops. I am more of a write to myself kind of person."* Professor X admitted that while she was able to write to one of the provided themes, about 15 minutes into the writing portion, she left that poem to work on another piece she had been working prior to the lab. She shared both poems with

the group. For her, writing prompts were beneficial when she could easily find ways to connect with them, but that was not always the case. Other times, she added, there were other poems wanting more of her attention or read to be completed. Professor X explained that what she truly appreciated about writing labs or times that poets came together to write was having the designated space and time to write, as well as, the ability to share and reflect on her work with others. Galactus expressed that his job often took up so much time and mental energy, he would rarely find time to write or visit venues. For him as well, the designated time and space to write was something he would expressed appreciation for and something he missed at times.

During the writing lab, Onslaught shared that it had been a while since he had really been writing or performing Spoken Word and that he had been putting his focus and creative expression into film and Hip Hop recently. Initially, he articulated that over the 10 years he had been heavily involved in Spoken Word, he had written so much the sheer density would make it nearly impossible to perform or share it all. He had learned the difference between writing because he needed to instead feeling like he was supposed to be. That revelation had opened up the potential for other art forms to become modes of helpful expression.

*I don't want to be, I guess I already am but I don't want to continue to be a word hoarder. I got so many notepads. I used to try to force myself to write. But I'm like, why? Because you actually have to be in a place where you can honestly listen to yourself and get out what you need to get out. If there's nothing but static, then you're writing static essentially. If you're writing static to get rid of static that's fine. But we all know that in the days of cable boxes, if you didn't*

*have cable, it didn't matter how many times you switched that damn box. If you didn't put the check in the mail it's still going to be static.*

*So on to the next thing. For me it is all seamless, there's just different mediums that we present it in but at the end of the day, it's all expression. And it's all about trying to build those bridges and connect to people.*

When Onslaught provided this perspective, it triggered something in me that I shared with the group. It had been deeply bothering me that I had felt so blocked in writing my own poetry over the last couple of years. For a majority of the time I had been alive, poetry had been an extremely necessary and therapeutic outlet I loved and needed. While I still deeply loved Spoken Word and poetry, trying to find my own voice again had been difficult. I shared that I had been trying to analyze and reflect on why I was blocked for a long time. Was it because coursework had become so time-consuming and I was spending much of my time writing in a more academic fashion than creatively therapeutic one? Was it because I had competed in Nationals and since felt overly critical about how what I was writing from a performance perspective instead of writing to get it out? Was it because my poetry had come up in a negative way during a custody battle? I explained to the group I was not sure; I had been trying to figure it out for some time and hearing Onslaught's perspective about static made me wonder if that was not something I needed to explore. Maybe I just needed to be intentional about taking the time to try writing again. Onslaught looked at me and said:

*Maybe you shouldn't be writing poetry. Maybe you should be comfortable in your silence. Or maybe this work that you are doing now is what you are supposed to be or need to be writing instead. Maybe it's that we're supposed to be doing*

*something else because we aren't one trick ponies. And this work that you're doing is still ABOUT poetry, even if it's not a poem or being performed on a stage. You are still telling our stories.*

His feedback hit me like a ton of bricks. I was speechless for a minute. I thanked Onslaught for sharing that perspective with me because it was one I had never considered. In my researcher's journal after the lab, this was one of the areas I reflected on for a while. In my notes, I kept processing my emotions and the weight of his input on my own learning. At first, I worried that I would not be able to be unbiased about this moment within this work. I had felt guilty for not being able to perform or write Spoken Word while writing about Spoken Word, it had been an extremely emotional and eye-opening moment for me which had spurred so much personal reflection. However, when the emotion of the moment passed, and I began working on the analysis themes, I realized the importance of this moment to the study itself which had very little to do with me as an individual. Throughout my conversations with each participant individually and collectively, learning and community were so often and so closely intertwined, they could not be separated.

Transformational learning and critical pedagogy both require critical self-reflection, dialogue with others and action from a new perspective. In seeking to understand potential connections between Spoken Word and the principles of critical pedagogy through the experiences of my participants, the opportunity for dialogue and self-reflection had, in fact, allowed me to develop and move forward in action as a researcher and as a poet differently. Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated a variety of ways that Spoken Word has provided the space for critical self-reflection,

growth, and learning for each participant. I had gotten to experience with this group one of the very things I had sought to explore in this work.

After I had thanked Onslaught for the feedback, the other participants nodded in agreement. Cable's response validated the importance of the insight shared by Onslaught at a collective level:

*One of the reasons I am so excited to be part of this research you are doing is that it not only validates our stories and experiences as poets, but as educators.*

*Almost all of us have learned through Spoken Word and used it to teach others.*

*Your research has the potential validate our work and what we have always known in the community within the academic realm. When we share our authentic stories on those stages, through our poems, we connect, learn and grow from each other. We become teachers and students. This research is helping document our history and the importance of what this art form can do for individuals and communities. And that seems a lot like poetry to me.*

Spoken Word differs from poetry in that it is shared with others. It is through that sharing that the possibilities for learning and transformation at individual and community levels become endless. In this study, democratic praxis emerged as a theme. While learning is inherently intertwined within the ways democratic praxis emerged in this study, it is still worth exploring the ways the participants used Spoken Word as a powerful vehicle for engaging in social change. As artistic activists, educators and lifelong learners, each participant promoted community development and upliftment through various facets of Spoken Word.



## Democratic Praxis

This specific theme speaks to the ways the practice of Spoken Word has been utilized for community change. Ranging from fundraising to providing writing workshops to creating non-profits for arts-based community education opportunities, the participants in this study have engaged in social change through the practice of Spoken Word. Spehler and Slattery (1999) challenge the dominant assumption that the arts exist primarily for aesthetic purposes. They consider artists to be prophets in the process of social change: “Prophetic poets, visual artists, dancers, actors, lyricists, and novelists challenge us to investigate—not ignore—such despair, injustice and paralysis” (p. 2). They go on to explain; “The development of the prophetic voice is a process involving psychological, spiritual, cognitive and emotional aspects of our being” (p. 7). In each of our participants, the utilization of Spoken Word as a tool for social changes was evident. For many, it is, in fact, a crucial component of the work. This is in support of Merriweather’s (2011) work as stated previously, “Slam poetry has 4 defining characteristics-active engagement, pedagogical in attempt to influence/instruct the audience, authorship/authenticity, democratic practice in form and content” (p 56). Onslaught felt passionate about this responsibility for artists. Let’s begin exploring his perspective with the poem he wrote at the writing lab:

*Love letter to breath and bridges.  
There is a brick wall in my throat.  
It’s old and crumbling but it still holds my heart  
The heat of my crux in.  
I murmur, mumble and trip over attempts to speak to you  
About you.  
Poets bore me, words spoken at open mics and slams  
Sound like whimsical whimpers.  
I don’t want to build.  
I don’t want a bridge built with materials from unearthed places*

*I no longer set foot.  
So I haven't written to you in a while.  
Didn't want to extend an invitation for you and I to have a staring match.  
I still love you, never stopped.  
I wanted you to evolve; evolve from my pen,  
Vertically. That is all.*

Onslaught learned from an early age that “your words should have meaning, advocacy, when using your voice. This value would become embedded in the variety of art forms. Onslaught uses for storytelling throughout his life. Directly after Onslaught shared the above poem, he passionately and quickly followed up the end of the poem by sharing the following:

*Just shut up and do something. I can count how many times I have been to the Electric in the last two years because I can't go the night they have it anymore. About 3 visits back—it took everything in me—I walk in, it's packed wall to wall, younger college kids, none of the old guard, it's like nobody that I really know is in there, a whole bunch of new people, you know, too old for under 21 slam, so now-it's a whole bunch of white privilege poems and I am like 'ok, so now it's not about white guilt anymore. We've evolved and we are talking about white privilege and summers on their dad's boats in Nantucket. And you want me to feel sorry for you? You're crying about too much? If you really want to have that experience, I can take you to a crack house. You have to pay rent there for about two or three years and actually immerse yourself in it. But even then, they know they can go back to where they came from. That's the reality for people period. I get sick of hearing poets well the CNN poets, like when the Hezbollah stuff was happening? I was like here come the CNN poets with this:*

*Letter's to Senegal and poetry about the struggle they knew nothing about days ago.*

*I purposely did not go to any poetry event after the incident in Ferguson happened. I didn't want to hear this story from anybody—if they have never had a cop shove a gun in their face,—I don't want to hear your poem about it. I have on several occasions and if I don't have a poem about it--you don't get to have one. What are you doing? That is what I want to see. If you are doing more than writing about it or going to rallies and marches, let me know and I will acknowledge and appreciate that. How are you actually using this to also make change in the long term?*

While I recognize this is a particularly long quote, I was important to express it in its entirety. He represents what many see as a greater responsibility to the art and the community. Additionally, he is critical where there is a lack of action. In Onslaught's poem, he explains in his love letter to Spoken Word that his love for the work has never ended, but he is pained and pushed away by the way he sees it changing in the community. He alludes to the fact that he feels it is often written less from the heart and more about whatever is politically or socially relevant to be outraged about for the moment before our attention is diverted to the next thing. That rather utilizing the art form for change, many write poetry around significant social injustices because they feel it will score well, not because they are committed to further action to address the concern. Furthermore, he states that his modes of artistic expression tend to morph or grow into something new as he evolves. When the poem indicates almost a physical discomfort at what he perceives is the proportion of poets constantly performing stories not personally

experienced-but sure to be the next hot topic everyone has a poem about at the next slam it speaks to his commitment not just to art, but art as a form of social change.

For Onslaught, those who have lived experiences should be given the space and right to create the narratives around those realities. Then everyone has a responsibility to go to the next step. How is what you are saying/doing improving the community? How is your art making a difference or creating opportunities for you to make a difference with it? I have seen each study participant engage youth artists and adults alike these critically reflective questions. Furthermore, if we are to consider the possibility of Spoken Word as a tool for democratic praxis, as well as a tool to develop critical consciousness then this kind of questioning is necessary. That is in fact often a goal of arts-based community education.

Building on the work from Freire (1970), Ulbricht (2005) and Campana (2011), arts-based community education will be defined as a socially just pedagogical approach that marries knowledge and wisdom to promote critical reflection, conscientization, and liberation. In recent years, more literature has emerged concerning the potential for Spoken Word as a tool for social change (Campana, 2011, Chepp, 2012, Chepp 2016; Hocking, 2010; Olsen 2007; Sommers-Willet, 2009). Participant data from this study provides examples of this potential in their own work relating to Spoken Word.

Cable shared a poem regarding the devastating level of poverty experienced when he moved around with his family in the military. He noted in his explanation of the poem that he knew what it was like to live in poverty in the United States but witnessing poverty in a third world country was deeply eye opening and life changing for him. It

also educated many within audiences who have never experienced this level of poverty to consider beyond their own understanding of it.

*In Panama*

*The day had the heat of war lingering in the swelter,  
The day felt 90 degrees and wearing a sweater,  
A cool a/c breeze in our car  
Acting as a balancing act  
From the outside World.  
There, outside in bare feet,  
Approaching the window and my nine year old eyes,  
Another  
Maybe nine year old selling sweets.  
Knock knock  
“Platanos senor?”  
“Gracias, pero no.” Pop says  
The kid walks on working,  
My father takes the opportunity  
To illustrate to me in that moment,  
The way Echer drew stairs, leading nowhere,  
He says, “See son,  
Now do you see how lucky you got it?”  
Tell me why I feel bad after what I’ve seen,  
Is it because I see how I feel, outside barefoot,  
Making me feel at odds with myself?  
Or because in the ever back-flipping,  
Carnival of life,  
In this house of mirrors and through the glass,  
I see myself in another possible reality,  
Stunned and  
Thinking on any short ends of the stick I’ve drawn,  
How I’ve held them,  
As a loaded gun  
With only ONE bullet,  
Running against the thought  
Of ending it all,  
Or taking to one of the few opportunities we got,  
Pray for the truest aim,  
Pull back the hammer,  
LOCK,  
Before using that shot,  
To fire of like cannons,  
Intended on answering the riddles  
Unanswered since we invented God,*

*"I wanna be somebody, Dad"  
 I think on that,  
 Scratching my head until it scabs  
 Memories bleeding through,  
 As I child,  
 I had a hard time sitting still,  
 Because still waters run deep,  
 But running waters run towards Oceans,  
 Each drop, trying to find God in all that blue.  
 And Panama,  
 Is buried  
 Between the two ocean eyes of God like the tip of his nose,  
 Maybe that is why,  
 He hasn't seen this kid too often,  
 Maybe in this moment,  
 I am learning the value of life  
 From someone else's collapse?  
 I could have been born in the grave,  
 Still unable to understand where this kid's struggles begin.  
 But here,  
 In the small sliver of land between two oceans,  
 At the age of nine,  
 Looking out the car window,  
 Scratching my head on the lessons,  
 I feel God seeping through new cuts.  
 I pray this kid grows up,  
 Sells enough bananas to buy a tree,  
 Sells enough to buy acres,  
 Sells enough to buy a villa overlooking his accomplishments,  
 And on the nose of God,  
 Could burn acres of banana trees,  
 A sacrifice to the sun,  
 As the sun lashes him now,  
 Sacrificing for himself.  
 At Nine,  
 I see another child at nine,  
 Who couldn't spell to save his life,  
 I want to scream,  
 "Dad just buy some fucking bananas from this kid!"  
 While the A/C blows cold  
 Truth  
 There are haves and have-nots,  
 Where you are born is not up to you,  
 Failing to make moves spells disaster,  
 I like to think,  
 I was born with a beautiful riot*

*Behind my first steps,  
And though at times I may stumble or struggle,  
I hope  
To keep as much pride in my feet,  
As this kid  
Selling platanos in the street.  
In America, if  
You cut down a kid's treehouse,  
it's a tragedy.*

Freire (1970) explains praxis as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 101-102). Through praxis, oppressed individuals can acquire a critical awareness of their own condition and with their allies in their struggle for liberation. In fact, much of the arts-based community educational approaches discussed in the research connect community action with a particular art form while also promoting individual growth and reflection. Cable's poem is an example of this potential. Hocking (2011) argues that traditional educational settings marginalize a variety of populations; however, informal education settings have more flexibility to break through those barriers.

Clover and Stalker (2007) conceptualize arts-based adult education as approaches that utilize the imagination and engage in critical approaches to personal, political, economic, social and cultural transformations. Through artistic practices, individuals and communities can develop a greater understanding and appreciation for various cultures. Deeper appreciation can promote deeper community connections, which result in collective leadership practices that are authentic and challenge the status quo. This conceptualization of arts-based adult education embodies transformation, critical reflection and transformation, as well as, holding to true to many of Freire's (1970) components of critical praxis.

As is Cable, Onslaught is deeply attached to the integration of art and social change by those who will educate and engage in change as well. He role models this in his own work, be it in Hip Hop, Spoken Word, Martial Arts and most recently cinematography. Onslaught often contributes his various artistic talents and time to raise money and awareness around a current social justice issue affecting his community. More often than not when engaging in conversations on the topics, he is intensely focused on how he can influence his immediate community, focuses on a more micro-level impact. However, there are also many moments he speaks about the need for more socially conscious musicians, movie producers, directors, screenwriters, actors and various other performance artists to improve the representation of various narratives often missing in mainstream entertainment at macro levels as well.

Onslaught suggests that poetry and Spoken Word are political and can be found in spaces others may not consider to be poetry. He shares:

*Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. were Spoken Word artists in my opinion. The "I Have a Dream" speech was tested three times before it was shared in front of all those people in DC. King had another poem about being Black and beautiful that he was testing but he was killed before he had a chance to speak it in a larger setting. And I think there was a reason for it. That poem and those words put value and emphasis on the people that would be directly affected by the lack of civil rights in this country at the time. It put value on the Black community and on being Black. As both Malcolm and Martin experienced different moments in the movement, different places and different experiences, their stories would begin to change. And in fact many argue that the changes in the narratives they*



*shared were motivating factors in what got them killed. Many of their speeches, the realities of their lives, were poetry; Spoken Word they shared with the world.*

While it is arguable whether to consider the speeches as Spoken Word, it does in fact, make sense to consider there is performative power in the ways these oratories were delivered. In this way, it is a shared oral art form speaking to the lived realities many African Americans faced at the time. Because this form of expression is comparable to Spoken Word, I truly believe it provides a connection to art-based educational practices. In fact, much of the arts-based community educational approaches discussed in the research connect community action through the use of a particular art form while also promoting individual growth and reflection. Hocking (2011) argues that traditional educational settings marginalize a variety of populations; however, informal education settings have more flexibility to break through those barriers.

Clover and Stalker (2007) conceptualize arts-based adult education as approaches that utilize the imagination and engage in critical approaches to personal, political, economic, social and cultural transformations. Through artistic practices, individuals and communities can develop a greater understanding and appreciation for various cultures. Deeper appreciation can promote deeper community connections that result in collective leadership practices that are authentic and challenge the status quo. This conceptualization of arts-based adult education embodies transformation, critical reflection and transformation, as well as, holding to true to many of Freire's (1970) components of critical praxis. Professor X's poems on racial identity and perception, Onslaught's own poem in addition to framing the speeches of world leaders as poems, Cable's poem around poverty and privilege and Galactus's poem which pushes back

against the stereotypes of what it means to be a “real man” in our society, are all examples of how each participant has used their own works or the works of others to provide critical reflection of personal and larger social issues.

Within the current body of literature, regarding Spoken Word specifically as an art-based educational tool is often discussed within youth or intergenerational learning settings rather than strictly adult learner settings (Clay, 2006; Clements, 2011; Fisher, 2003, 2005, 2007; Townsell & Aprill 2007; Wissman, 2010). One example of such a program can be found in the work by Reyes (2006) that states the primary goal of his work is to use spoken word to create caring and critical intellectuals, who will utilize this growth to make changes in their environments. The author examines and illustrates the methods and approaches used when structuring his Spoken Word workshops and programs that included concepts such as community space, reflection, dialogue and connectivity among participants. Reyes illustrates how the participants experienced increased literacy development, engaged in discourse relevant to life experiences encouraging them to move from words to relative action within these programs and communities. While this was a youth based program, each of the skills which flourished compliments the goals of adult learning and could potentially be used in adult settings as well.

Fisher (2005) discusses the possibilities of utilizing Spoken Word practices found in coffee houses within secondary educational settings to promote dialogue, self-reflection and literacy development. In this case, the author discusses how Spoken Word used in adult venues can be molded to fit youth curriculum. Considering the transferability, adult arts-based community approaches can be altered to inform youth-

based approaches, the argument that Spoken Word has significant potential regarding its usefulness as a means for self-reflection, growth, and action regardless of the age of the learners, remains strong. However, because this topic in general, is still new to the literature, particularly regarding adults, this study intends to help fill the gap regarding Spoken Word's potential for critical transformation and praxis.

As we continue to consider the action and impact perspectives of Spoken Word as a tool for praxis, I think it is important to document ways the participants engage in community work beyond just the impact of sharing their own works to spark dialogue and inform various perspectives of lived experiences. I have often seen poets ban together to write and perform at events for and about social change or issues facing various levels of society. It is a way to utilize the art to seek change and express a variety of opinions in hope to move forward.

Algarin and Holman (1994) 'is to dissolve the social, cultural, and political boundaries that generalize (sic) the human experience and make it meaningless' (p. 51). This takes reflection and understanding the contexts in which they are writing about in order to critically construct poems that help promote their message. Using the art to speak out or fundraiser is one way in which Spoken Word embodies democratic praxis and authentic expression of events in their lives and social issues. An example of this has been previously mentioned is that three of the poets in this study as well as myself, all researched and learned about the realities many who had been survivors of Human Trafficking. We read first-hand accounts of survivor's experiences and learned about the larger social, political and economic impacts that Human Trafficking has in our society. We created poems that reflected these lived truths and performed them at a fundraiser.

Our art, along with many other poets, was the “event” individuals came to see. As they paid to get into this event, that money directly went to programs to assist Human Trafficking survivors. In this instance, poets not only informed audience members of the realities of Human Trafficking, by doing so, they created financial resources to help those impacted.

Another example of Spoken Word as democratic praxis can be illustrated in a fundraiser for a family who had been displaced by and lost everything in Hurricane Katrina. A poet found a venue that donated the time and space, found other poets to perform and advertised the show. More than 12 poets performed at this event and all proceeds went to assist the family. These are just two examples of Spoken Word can be used for liberation and activism arts-based community education as these events are also examples of non-formal learning.

Beyond these works, each of the participants have given back to the community through arts-based community education methods and mentorship. Cable shares that when they created their open mic venue, the organizers did so with the intent of giving back to the community.

*We had the opportunity to have a fundraiser for a local nonprofit. We used our venue and we invited local community members. That was kind of the trigger to where, as an organization, we really wanted to be more community-centric. We all talked about it, the poets and I and the cofounder and we were kind of like, we felt that was something that was missing in our scene, was that you have a lot of people, like our city is such a vast city with so many different pockets and it's pretty segregated, too. So we felt like it was our way to kind of give back to the*

*city. We get so much from the audience so it was our way to actually give back. So we've done everything from like toy drives, book drives, school supply drives. We used to go to a homeless shelter and teach workshops there. That's what initially got us into a lot of the schools early on and meeting with teachers and universities and workshopping there. A lot of inner city nonprofits, we've done workshops with them. And then segued into the offshoot our Youth Slam, which is what we're putting a great deal of focus into now.*

This illustrates community art and activism is at the heart of this particular work. In fact, each of the participants have also directly engaged in arts-based community education spaces for both adults and youth. This non-formal approach would often happen in writing workshops after school, within their formal learning spaces. Cable and his peers were challenged to not only teach their students the art of Spoken Word, but they themselves had to listen and learn with students to best reach them where they are, in both the schools and community program settings.

Current research supports this space for intergenerational through Spoken Word. Fisher (2007) examines intergenerational relationships in lives of experienced and young poets in participatory literacy communities utilizing Spoken Word and the impact on relationships and community building, as well as, increased engagement in literacy. "Elder or veteran poets were referred to as 'soldiers' or mentors who shared a strong commitment to organizing opportunities for young people to engage in writing and performing in and beyond their local communities" (p 140). While this work focuses mostly on the development of literacy, it still opens new perspectives and knowledge to the participants. Furthermore, it encourages community dialogue and development as

multiple generations can bring important but different social and political contextual histories.

Galactus shares how working with students, youth and adults alike, in this way can help develop skills beneficial to them in the long run.

*There's a difference between the longevity of a career versus the longevity of a talent. Slam is not a career, but as a talent there are long term benefits. For example, when I focus on editing, it's important to know what a semicolon or a comma does. These are skills you need in life to compose an email or your thoughts. You like writing? Great then be serious about that. How can you love poetry but you can't write correctly? Get your thoughts down, but know how to organize them to say what you are trying to express. Editing, grammar-these are all part of writing so know these skills too.*

Azevedo and Goncalves (2012) build on Freire's belief that art can be used to help facilitate meaning-making as a tool to teach literacy using writing and reading through arts-based approaches, including Spoken Word. The authors indicate the approaches discussed impacted both individual and group dynamic development through both constructing and sharing their works of art. As in all the arts-based approaches discussed, "critical reflection allows for a better understanding of our inner and surrounding realities" (p. 72). This can be transformational when complimented with such opportunities for dialogue and exploration. This provides another example of arts-based educational approaches within community educational settings promoting critical reflection at both individual and community levels.

Campana (2011) explains that working in communities and dedicated to social change the role the artist/educator/activist plays significantly different from artists or teachers as we have experienced or sometimes assumed them to be. Furthermore, this author states that activist art-based community programs have “much in common with critical pedagogy theory and social justice education” and build on the idea that “activism focuses on building a democracy on critical inquiry and thinking, taking risks, challenging power” (p. 280-281). If we are to agree with Freire’s (1970) premise that it is the job of all educators to be liberatory in working with adult learners, then it is necessary to pay attention to those pedagogies or practices that encourage and improve critical reflection and social action. Duncam (2011) states that “activist art is based on relationships with its audience and political intervention; it is deliberately designed as a forum for public dialogue” (p. 353). This cross-generational approach speaks to the ability for arts-based approaches to potentially reaching across age groups to inform both learning and action. Activist art is “based on the relationships with its audience and political intervention; it is deliberately designed as a forum for public dialogue” (p. 353).

Dewhurst (2011) focused through a critical lens on what components make a work of art transformational within society and a social justice context. This article “draws on findings from a recent qualitative study exploring the educational significance of making activist-oriented art” (Dewhurst, 2012, p. 364). The author examines a community activist art class for youth; however, the broader topic is art as a tool for social transformation. The key attributes of social justice education and how it can potentially manifest as into action are clearly transferrable topics that look at what kind of art education opportunities can potentially encourage action. When referring to the

intersection of art education and social justice, “this work often shares a commitment to creating art that draws attention to, mobilizes action towards, or attempts to intervene in systems of inequality or injustice” (Dewhurst, 2010, p. 7). Dewhurst argues that “as long as the process of making art offers participants a way to construct knowledge, critically analyze an idea and take action in the world, then they are engaged in a process of social justice art-making” (Dewhurst, 2010, p. 9). Furthermore, she found that the pedagogical approach included connecting, questioning and translating as important components of activist art. Exploring Spoken Word as a potential form of activist art only adds to the possibilities it has for critical transformation and meaning-making in legitimate ways that encourage learning and social change. While not all Spoken Word may be a form of activist art, its ability to be a tool in both personal and social transformation has incredible potential.

### **Community**

It was a challenge when determining how to address community into the emerging themes because it is so deeply interwoven into each one. Therefore, in this section on community, I will note some considerations relevant to community. However, a great deal of this section will summarize where community showed up in each area. The importance of community was a resounding and extremely relevant sentiment expressed by each one of the participants in very meaningful ways throughout the study. Finding a sense of belonging and family within the Spoken Word community was something each participant shared at some point throughout the study. Professor X stated it most succinctly:



*When you start doing poetry, you encounter the same people and new faces too. Those you see all the time are the people you are sharing your stories with, you become comfortable enough with to share with them. These are the people who become family. The crowd is there too so they get to hear your stories. And I am comfortable to share because there is the safe space with my family. Being able to share with the community in that way together, where everyone is sharing, provides a safe space. Not everyone is going to like what they hear, but the space allows you to be open enough to share what you need to say.*

Current academic literature supports Professor X's notion that communicating personal narratives through artistic storytelling encourages the potential for community members to connect through shared experiences and exploring differences. Nieves (2012) states that "storytelling is a communal act...counter-storytelling can be used as a tool for empowerment, particularly regarding interrupting the grand narrative to make room for the voices of others" (p. 36).

Nieves work explores the creation of a theatrical performance from the text of narratives submitted by local women from the community to express ideas and stories around their identities. Each of these performances was followed up with dialogue including performers and audience members to address issues and solutions to social or community challenges brought up in the performance. Using theatre to share narratives of others in this way provides a good example of utilizing storytelling for both personal and community meaning, particularly for adults. When opportunities to consistently connect and bond through vulnerable and reflective dialogue safe spaces can emerge resulting in a deeper understanding of the individual and collective needs of the community. Despite

differences in ideas, experiences, and identities, the sharing of stories through Spoken Word allowed relationships to grow that shaped and influenced each other's lives. They were not simply sharing poems; they were a part of each other's lives.

When Professor X described this sense of familial community building through her experience with Spoken Word, each participant echoed her sentiments. It sparked a lengthy conversation as each recounted memories and significant moments Spoken Word had connected them to each other and the community at large. Onslaught, Cable and Professor X all spoke specifically of times when they engaged in community writing labs, often held at people's houses. During these labs, poets could work on existing poems, write from new prompts, in addition to sharing the work.

Each described how community members got together and engaged in fellowship but also critically supported the work of other poets. Opportunities to be vulnerable through their poetry and get feedback from a safe space were an integral part of the community for many of the participants. While each of the participants recollected participating in these spaces, all alluded to the fact that there is a great deal less of this occurring in recent years. Most identify that this happens between team members when they are selected in early to mid-Spring through the time they compete in August. More recently, the slam venue Eclectic has tried to offer more performance and writing workshop opportunities as an organized community event. It has had varying success week to week. Additionally, it has started posting writing prompts in online communities and poets will often share writings that came from those prompts. This can also often engage people in online dialogue around the subject matter, the writing or performance

itself, or sharing of experiences. In these spaces, opportunities for transformational learning become possible.

The ways in which Spoken Word has intertwined individuals into communities are numerous. The work may contribute to the community leaves legacies behind that shape and impact newer poets. Professor X, Onslaught and Galactus have each been in the Spoken Word community for over 12 and most of their experience has been in Central Texas. Cable has been part of the Spoken Word community for six years, also in Central Texas. However, most of his involvement has been in a different city within Central Texas, a little over an hour from the other participants.

During the conversation, particularly around the concept of community, ways in which the participants had interacted with each other or with venues in different cities emerged as part of the discussion. While recounting past experiences, Galactus identified that he has not been nearly as present or involved in Spoken Word or the community within the last several years due to several other demands in his life. Cable indicated to Galactus that even in his absence, he was still remembered within the Spoken Word community south of his home venues.

*You still have a reputation there from people who know you. I remember you from years ago when the team from Kindred you were coaching came down to perform. You performed that night as well. Even before you arrived I had heard incredible things about the team, but also about you as a poet. When you were all scheduled to come down and perform, other poets from my city were talking about their experiences with you and how much they enjoyed your work. I mean, I feel like I am just barely meeting you but I also feel like I know a lot about you already too.*

Cable went on to share that he had heard of Onslaught's work and prevalence in the community as well but had not ever seen him perform live. Onslaught also shared in recent years he had been less deeply or consistently involved in Spoken Word and the community as his artistic interests were being focused in other areas. He also shared that he felt the community had changed quite a bit in recent years and that contributed some to his focus in other areas.

That is not to say that the blending of communities does not come without its challenges. Our Spoken Word communities can at times, embody the same conflicts that exist within our larger society as a whole. There is no doubt safe spaces within our communities for connecting, dialogue and social change that develop because of sharing narratives, experiences, and ideas through Spoken Word. There also spaces within our communities that replicate bias and division along lines of race, gender, class, and culture (Johnson, 2010; Sommers-Willett, 2009). Participants within this study did share some experiences around these divisions. As in many cities, which have a Spoken Word presence, Cable's city has multiple venues for performance. He recalls a time a poet who had recently relocated from a more liberal Spoken Word environment experienced a bit of culture shock at one of the venues.

*We are really a working-class town here. Therefore, when Betty came down, she was taken aback a bit. While it is not the norm, we sometimes have people get up and read poems that have something sexist, racist, or homophobic. She kept waiting for the crowd to react negatively but she didn't see that. I mean, some of our poets are in their 50's and hold these beliefs. Not everyone in the audience agrees with what is being said, but, they recognize that part of poetry and Spoken*

*Word is that you can say what you want to say. And since this is a working class town, people know each other. Some people will connect because they share the belief being expressed. Some people don't confront the poet because they simply know them to be that way because they are neighbors, friends or family you know. I think sometimes when people go to a new venue in a new place; they go with the expectations that it will resemble the community or environment they come from. In addition, honestly, I do not think that is a reasonable expectation for poets to have. You have to be willing to learn and navigate a new environment for what it is.*

This insight brings a multitude of things into perspective. What isn't considered a safe space of expression for one poet might be considered safe for another. While one can argue the importance of interrupting a narrative that promotes ideas of inequality or prejudice, it does not change the reality that there are communities with individuals who hold such beliefs. In this venue, Cable acknowledges that in that particular venue there is likely to be less confrontation around different beliefs, even when another poet may disagree with the ideas. He equally acknowledges that in other venues, expressing those kinds of beliefs would not be tolerated. That it is important to have the conversations to encourage people to consider a variety of points of view, it is also important not to dictate what stories can be shared in a space created for free speech.

One of the interesting considerations that emerged within the concept of community had to do with the ways learning opportunities and challenges presented themselves based on performing the poetry within a competitive slam context or within an open mic context. In an open mic venue, there is no competitive structure but rather an

open space for poets to share and perform their work with an audience. Much of this observation came forth during the writing lab in which the participants get into a deep discussion about the prominent venues they have historically been a part of within the larger Spoken Word community. Several of the participants described Eclectic as historically slam focused while Kindred had been open mic until 2006 when it became a combination of both. Additionally, almost all the participants indicated that while there had been a shift in the overall community in recent years, there had been a greater sense of community and support for newcomers to the Spoken Word scene. Professor X recalls the first time she experienced both venues.

*My first time at Eclectic, I didn't realize it was a competition. They were more cutthroat. My first time at Kindred, I was eating catfish and chicken wings while chatting with others. And you know Big Frank is always ready to welcome everyone at the door. I felt more welcomed there, more comfortable.*

For Professor X, her initial venture into Spoken Word felt supportive and accepting when she initially began sharing her poetry. However, she later shares that she is very competitive with herself and others. As she continued to grow as a poet and performer, she began to compete regularly at venues throughout Central Texas, beyond Eclectic and Kindred. For the last several years, she has competed on slam teams at the national level, representing three different venues over that time. She explains that competition requires her to get honest with herself, indulge in research in order to enhance her knowledge of language and concepts around topics that speak to her. Through the competition, she has to learn how to create a story that is both authentic to herself and her expression while reaching members of the audience in a way that they are somehow touched by the work.

Finally, she shared that if it is a difficult poem or extremely personal, she often shares it first in the open mic setting before competing with it. Doing so allows her to see how it resonates with the audience, in addition to self, when the work is performed.

In this way, informal and non-formal learning occurs. As she describes the audience members as a type of family who regularly come and share their experiences with each other. Informal learning comes from the processing, writing and sharing of the story and all the self-reflection and awareness that comes with doing so. “people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 1970, p.83). Spoken Word as critical pedagogy is illustrated through Professor X’s reflections. Being aware of self and others to connect requires a critical self-awareness that reflects authenticity, vulnerability, and relatability. As a topic becomes relevant for them to write about, their own relationship to the subject matter is reflected a large degree in how they illustrate their poems lyrically. Their lens is reflected in how they connect and share their own lived realities being impacted by the stories and experiences they are writing and sharing with others. How others experience the same topic can come into harmony or conflict with the poet’s perspective and this begins the audience member’s learning process of self-reflection and relationship to the subject.

Galactus also noted the element of community as a cornerstone of Kindred’s identity. He was the coach the first year that they had a slam team. Since community was such an integral part of Kindred’s identity and history, Galactus and the team chose to only do group pieces at Nationals. Group pieces are when two or more poets combine

original poems and perform them together rather than individually. While community and developmental support seem to be more prevalently noted in discussions of open mics, the slam venues provide the opportunity to hone in on the performativity aspect of the art at a more critical level.

All four of the participants spoke to slam venues providing particular spaces of development. Some venues were known by all four as very difficult places to perform poetry. Audience members could be critical and tough. One venue in southern Central Texas was known by all four as the place to risk it all. Galactus references it in his poem. During the writing lab, all four participants have competed themselves or taken teams to compete at this venue as coaches. The common belief is that this venue is a testing ground. Both by taking the risk in front of a tough set of judges and audience members and to be able to win them over with the work. Galactus and Onslaught reminisce about an open mic venue that was a challenge at times because there was no structure at all. He states, *“People often came up to do their own poems but didn't pay attention to anyone else's.”* Again, he felt if he could pull the attention of an often-distracted audience, then he had done solid work with his poetry.

It is important to note that all four participants indicated that there is a great deal of audience and poet crossover between attending open mic and slam venues. Each setting brings about the opportunity for transformational learning, critical reflection and community building. Open mics were expressed as more open and supportive for those looking to simply share and engage in storytelling through Spoken Words with other poets. Slam venues brought about creativity, teamwork, collaborative storytelling and improved public speaking and performance. Slam could be intimidating for that first



starting and participants shared that they will often send new writers to open mics before encouraging them to compete in slam. Doing so allows new Spoken Word artists to explore and get comfortable with writing and performing their art before competing with it. Because the Spoken Word communities can be quite small and tight, there is often a great deal of support and shared audience among venues.

The concept of community is found in each emerging theme. Storytelling, its influence and impact on the poets individually and collectively is clearly noted and supported by literature as a communal act. If we move forward with this premise, community remains a core element of the power of Spoken Word. Whether it is working through individual struggles and connecting with audience members or the safe space to find your voice, community is part of those processes. Learning in and with community members is something each participant experienced in a multitude of way, including utilizing the art form to build and support the development of community through democratic praxis. Many of the shared experiences from the participants support what the current literature states in regard to arts-based learning and community educational approaches.

### **Summary of Themes Chapter**

Spoken Word emerges as an effective arts-based educational tool that promotes critical reflection and transformation in individuals and communities as represented in the findings. While each came to Spoken Word through their own unique paths, participants illuminate opportunities of learning throughout their experiences. Some of the aspects of learning occurred at a very personal and individual level, while others occurred in dialogue or action with others. The creation process and path a poem takes through and

beyond the performativity aspects all provide spaces of learning that correspond to or compliments various aspects of adult learning, critical pedagogy and transformational learning as found in the data.

Storytelling was a prominent theme for each of the participants in the study. Storytellers were prominent in the lives of each participant at critically developmental moments in their lives. These individuals had significant influences on the participants own connection to storytelling. Furthermore, it built foundations for each to see and experience the potential of stories as a way of understanding, creating, communicating or escaping lived realities and wisdom. In this way, Spoken Word provided spaces to safely explore identity and understanding of self and others by storying their lives. Onslaught, Cable, Professor X, and Galactus all utilized narratives to make sense of their own experiences as well as imagine new possibilities.

Transformational learning and critical pedagogy both state that individual consideration and reflection is part of these processes. In consciously choosing which stories to explore and share, individual's process their own ideas, prepare this wisdom to be shared in relatable, authentic and engagingly creative ways. Opportunities for critical reflection go beyond the individuals to include the community of listeners. Often, poets feel most comfortable when there is an audible audience reaction to their work that indicates support or ability to relate to the story being shared through the poem. Verbal transactions between the poet and the audience become its own unique form of communication. These exchanges become experiences that promote new ideas and perspectives while also providing opportunities for connection.

Spoken Word, as a method of finding voice and a tool for healing are two other prevalent themes that materialized from the data. Spoken Word as an approach to self-reflection and self-care is a significant finding from this study. Every participant recalled times Spoken Word and poetry were vehicles for processing through and making sense of experiences while providing them the safe space to do so. Finding voice for Galactus and to some extent Onslaught, was literally that, forcing themselves outside their own comfort zones in order to grow. Cable and Professor X discussed finding voice more from the perspective as a poet. Who did they want to be and what stories did they want to share as writers and storytellers? For all four participants, finding voice and healing are often closely intertwined. Each discussed the loss of someone significant in their lives at one time being a catalyst to their involvement with poetry and Spoken Word. Additionally, each noted that poetry has been a safe space they can work through difficult experiences and ideas. At times, there is a healing or letting go when the poem is shared. Spoken Word provides a great deal of opportunity for self-exploration, as well as, connecting with others.

Through the participant's stories and dialogues, examples of formal, informal and non-formal learning opportunities appear. Two of the participants, as well as myself, have utilized Spoken Word within formal educational settings. Showing Spoken Word poems in classrooms has opened opportunities for learning in a myriad of ways. Whether the focus was literacy development or a deeper understanding of a social issue, Spoken Word performances and poetry sparked learning through dialogue and the sharing of perspectives and experiences in classrooms. Within formal learning contexts, Spoken Word could be utilized for critical reflection, discussion, and praxis. Non-formal learning

contexts also employed Spoken Word in similar veins. Whether through youth or adult poetry community programs or within the context of democratic praxis, non-formal learning occurred most often in community. Performances on college campuses outside of the traditional learning space, community writing labs, or creating awareness of social issues through Spoken Word, non-formal learning was present quite significantly throughout the participant's experiences. Informal learning occurs at almost every level of Spoken Word process. From the identification of a particular topic, the critical consideration regarding what story needs to be told, constructing the message and executing it, invite the writer and subsequently the listener, are invited to reflect on their own experiences as well as to learn from the experiences of others. Diversity of learning approaches and settings was an important finding of this study.

Finally, democratic praxis and community were the two final themes discussed in this chapter. Democratic praxis was usually intertwined with community. Ways, in which individuals utilized Spoken Word to enact change, promote awareness or address social issues and realities were executed in community settings. Whether coming together to perform to support an important cause or creating opportunities for others to learn to craft and share their own stories, poets working in collaboration with others was necessary regarding democratic praxis. In the section exploring this theme, each example regarding democratic praxis is shared in the context of community.

It is the nature of Spoken Word to "invite others in" to the poet's world. In doing so, Spoken Word has the potential to build bridges between individuals. As noted by the participants, becoming part of the Spoken Word community created a sense of connection and family for many people. Many poets have relationships and friendships

that extend beyond poetry venues and into their everyday lives. Everyone, including myself, experienced the Spoken Word community as a place of support, growth, and connection on stage and beyond. It is profound, the ways Spoken Word not only assisted in building community but also supported it. At times, that support came from the connectivity of the community and others, it came from the community coming together to engage in growth and change.

Critical pedagogy and transformational learning theories indicate the necessity for critical reflection, dialogue, and action. By finding ways to promote a deeper engagement around learning that, goes beyond what has been known or taken for granted and utilize contemplative practices to break through surface level understanding to realizations that are more complex. Spoken Word itself is a critically reflective, dialogic art form that connects communities and individuals through stories, voices and action. Participants speak to how they have been able to utilize Spoken Word to engage as both learners and educators. Additionally, they have been able to create and impact social and community change with Spoken Word. In considering themes that emerged in this study, there a significantly rich insight into the ways Spoken Word can inform arts-based community education practices. In the final chapter, I will explore these implications for adult learning in more detail, along with highlights and tensions from the study.

## V. PENNING POSSIBILITIES: POTENTIAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF SPOKEN WORD

As the themes emerged through the data, ways in which each study participant engaged in Spoken Word as a vehicle for learning materialized. For the purposes of this discussion, it is important to keep in mind the emerging themes from the study findings. These are: storytelling, finding voice, healing, informal/nonformal/formal learning, democratic praxis and community. This chapter presents the highlights of the study, implications, tensions, and potential areas for future research.

### Highlights from the Study

*You are a part of me,  
Rattling from inside  
Caged thoughts seek to spill out into freedom  
No longer caught in  
Corners of minds or lumps in throats  
Truth exhales from my being  
And I spit,  
Contort words to illuminate realities  
I do not yet completely understand  
I spray microphones with possibilities and purpose  
Silence has no place here  
There's healing in my vulnerability  
Power tucked into each of my syllables  
My stories  
Forever documented  
Evidence of lifelong living  
and  
learning  
But only if  
We are in this together.*

*There is no story to tell without you  
Alone  
Speaking into the void does nothing  
So let my metaphors move mountains  
Watch me weave my words into bridges  
Connecting worlds  
And wisdom  
Poetry is personal*

*And so is the political  
There can be no false narratives here  
Alphabets beg to be part of something authentic  
You do not get to write my story  
But Ill listen to yours,  
Manifest the lessons embedded in lines  
And lean in.*

*Poets know the power of words,  
The ways they push and pull  
against  
and  
with each other  
seeking the exact position necessary  
to leave literary legacies worth listening to  
Spit from poets just trying to get through life  
One story at a time  
tales  
of who I once was  
of who I seek to be  
and how those truths change  
like the earth's rotations  
looking for new light  
within new days  
written in possibilities.*

In the poem above, I have sought to capture themes that collectively emerged from the participants and convey the way poetry can be used to promote deeper learning through rich, illustrative language that promotes reflection, understanding and application. When an individual has a personal connection to the content, a deeper level of understanding and learning is a potential. One of the most significant findings in this study are the ways in which Spoken Word complements the aspects of critical pedagogy and transformational learning, as found in the participants' stories.

Gaining understanding of how study findings support the concepts of critical pedagogy and transformational learning was an important aspect of this study (Freire,

1970; Mezirow, 1997). The discussion below provides insight regarding the process of Spoken Word embodies aspects of transformational learning and critical pedagogy.

### **Critical Moments**

Each poet reported that storytelling was a form of communication in their lives from very early ages. It can be argued that this informed how each participant came to Spoken Word or to storytelling and writing to process critical moments or experiences. Examples of critical moments which prompted movement into poetry and Spoken Word occurred throughout the findings reported in this dissertation, but most significantly in regarding areas of healing or finding voice. For example, Galactus came to Spoken Word most intentionally to find his voice. After finding himself alone in a new city, he realized he was often too comfortable in being what he described as unhealthily introverted. Professor X and Onslaught started writing poetry to deal with the loss of a parent and difficulties in life. It became a safe space to process these painful experiences. Cable saw storying his life as a way of communicating. He identified his love for reading and writing, ways to connect with worlds he was or was not part of and learned from those moments. He wanted to find ways to create works that provided that same opportunity for others.

Throughout this document, participants' poems have been shared. Critical moments or triggers to write, encompassed a breadth of topics, such as, racism, loss, poverty, fighting social norms, life-changing experiences, and experiences with students and so many other topics. Spoken Word can be employed to process and address a myriad of topics for healing and finding voice.



## Critical Reflection

As noted in the section above, participant's life experiences or social realities are often significant triggers to create a poem. During the writing lab, Cable wrote about the loss of his Uncle to cancer. In the discussion, he shared a profound sentiment "*My Uncle was a poem.*" Through his reflection of the life his uncle lived and was losing, Cable came to terms with how he saw him, in life and death. Through this negotiation of ideas, he was able to create incredible language that allowed us to feel the difficulty of not only Cable's loss, but of the uncle's experience as well.

Onslaught shared a poem in which he describes the importance of his role as a social worker for youths and how little society values the work in terms of monetary support. In this work, he reflects on the social stratification of poverty and its impact on high-risk youth as well as those who want to serve them. Negotiating the importance of his work while also addressing the financial realities of life exposes the tension between attempting to survive while also working to build up youth and communities.

Professor X shared a poem about her bi-racial identity and the struggle of having to constantly negotiate dual identities both inside and outside her family. As she began to understand the ways her identity was influenced by larger social constructs, as well as family dynamics, she was able to construct a poem that speaks to these influences while also demanding space for her own identity. Critical reflection allows the space for her to define herself in both private and public spaces.

Galactus's poem "Man Up" addressed issues of hyper-masculinity. Through critical reflection he decried the social expectations of what is considered masculine and the ways in which society imposes these beliefs. In his own life, being a self-defined

nerd, he shared that others were not always kind and made to feel “less than” because he did not fit stereotypical norms. Through this critical reflection, stories of a victorious underdog and critical analysis of hyper-masculinization ideals emerge through his writing.

### **Story-sharing and Reflective Dialogue**

One of the most prominent ways Spoken Word differs from traditional notions of poetry is that it is ultimately shared with an audience. Ideally, these performances take place in smaller venues that provide opportunities for interaction and discussion. It is often through these opportunities for dialogue that a sense of community begins to build, in addition to, opportunities to engage in reflective and passionate conversations around subjects or ideas shared in poems. It is a characteristic of audience members at Spoken Word events to show connectivity or appreciation for the poem’s content, delivery, and/or creative writing. Often, this is shown through various modes of expression such as snapping, calling out words of support, or clapping. In this way, there is a back and forth dialogue between the audience and the poet. The audience provides immediate feedback and the poet acknowledges who in the audience responds to what areas of their work. This provides critically reflective questions to explore such as why might those individuals be responding now? Do they share a similar story? Does this response help validate my own story? Or feel less alone in this situation? How does this inform my work as a poet? These are examples of learning and renegotiation of ideas as experienced through the performance aspect of Spoken Word.

What follows the performance is opportunity for dialogue with those in the audience. As shared in the dialogue during our writing lab, each of us experienced many

‘a-ha moments’ in sharing our work. For example, Professor X shared a time when she performed a poem about the loss of her mother. Afterwards, a couple approached her. The young woman thanked her for that poem, explaining her partner had just lost his own mother and he found comfort in her words. In this moment, strangers connected through shared emotions and experiences.

Cable recalled feeling validated as a poet and writer when he first performed Spoken Word. Cable had a life-long interest in telling and writing stories. It was something he sought to do for a living. In his family, this was not considered a viable way to support himself and for that reason was often discouraged to pursue his writing. However, his grandmother had supported him in his dreams. When she passed, he promised her he would continue to pursue them. He described the joy he felt as a poet when he performed after her passing. Signs of encouragement he was indeed on the right path.

Onslaught shared a similar story. He recalled performing at an open mic event at the National Poetry Slam the first time he went. In sharing the story, he remembered having worked very hard to use creative literary expressions and metaphors, inspired by writers such as Saul Williams. A smile spread across his face when he recalled that, *“I used these sky metaphors to represent the story of a crackhead. Everyone was telling me how amazing it was and I was like ‘You know it’s about a crackhead right?’”* This experience validated him as a poet and led to his journey as a successfully, well-known poet in the larger community. Onslaught had to work through his own doubts and was supported to do so in this process by the positive feedback from poets he admired.

Galactus told about night when after performing a poem about a victorious underdog, a friend asked him how many times Galactus was going to tell the same story. Before his friend had noted this pattern in his work, he had not seen it himself. Prompted with this awareness, Galactus had to critically explore why his own story was stuck in the same narrative. By doing this personal work, Galactus was able to grapple with those experiences that had contributed to that narrative and begin to consciously create a new one.

### **Critical Praxis**

Learning is inherently infused into the practice of Spoken Word. When considering the accessibility and ability to use Spoken Word as a tool for learning and change at individual and collective levels, the possibilities seem endless. Creating change may occur at a personal level, such as the experience of Galactus and the reshaping of his own personal narrative or it may occur at a community level. Every participant in this study has played a significant role in helping youth in their communities utilize Spoken Word as a tool for healing, self-expression, literacy development and democratic praxis. Every participant, in community with other poets, had provided their art to promote larger scale change. Whether that was putting an event together to raise money for water filters for Flint, Michigan or raising money and awareness about Human Trafficking. Spoken Word provides an emotive and expressive mode to address social issues and awareness.

Other times, Spoken Word practice can provide a community education that occurs informally. An example of this is the story Professor X shared about an experience she had one evening at one of her home venues. A White poet had gone before her and to

discuss the negative impact of a particular racial slur incorporated the racial slur into the poem. Historical context and current social tensions shaped reactions to his decision to use the word in the poem. Professor X happened to have a poem that spoke to the derogatory history of the word and the ways language has been racially oppressive and performed that piece directly afterwards. When the evening was over, the buzz of conversation in the venue was around issues of race, racism and the impact of what had happened. Without having planned it, this exchange of poems provided Professor X with the opportunity to stand against racism and discrimination, both harmful to many in our society. She was able to engage the audience into conversations with others that would both inform and support various points of view. Additionally, it sent a message about the values that the community of that venue held as a collective.

Spoken Word has the power to create changes in one's perspectives, ideas, lives and actions. Spoken Word, from poem creation to the ripples it leaves behind after being shared, provides a critical platform for one to process ideas and experiences through critical reflection and praxis. It does so while also sharing and valuing the individual's personal wisdom and knowledge. Spoken Word has also been shown throughout this document to be a tool that not only promotes individual change, but community change as well.

In this way, Spoken Word practice takes us beyond storytelling and becomes story-making. As the participants in this study engaged in Spoken Word and shared their stories in ways that promoted change, they constructed new ways of knowing and being within their communities. As communities emerge through the sharing of stories, storytelling transforms to story-making. Furthermore, when community members engage

in social change, share stories to invoke new ways of thinking or to inform social issues, these stories reach beyond simply being shared to creating new ripples of knowledge and being in the world (Guajardo &Guajardo, 2010). For the participants in this study, there are many instances of this. For example, when poets came together to raise money for families who lost their homes to Hurricane Katrina, they did not just come together and tell stories. They reached beyond the community of poets and into the general community to garner support in attendance, to promote awareness to best serve the families in need. The storytelling through Spoken Word was the vehicle which allowed and encouraged others in the larger community to attend and in doing so, provided funds that the families could begin to rebuild their lives, and ultimately created a new story for the families and those privileged enough to be part of their journey.

### **Implications for Practice**

When constructing this study, consideration was given to the potential of Spoken Word as a critically transformational pedagogy for educators of adult learners in formal, non-formal, and community education settings. Implications for practices emerged for both adult education and community education, particularly arts-based learning practices. Specifically, study findings promote the understanding of Spoken Word as a critical pedagogical tool that promotes transformational learning and critical consciousness at individual and community levels. As noted in Merriweather (2011, p. 53):

The arts are understood as important ways to facilitate greater learning and understanding. They provide a vehicle for enhancing critical thinking skills, improving ability to synthesize across diverse ideas, increasing self-reflection, developing a new language for expressing concepts, and analyzing experiences,

among other things. The arts are a unique way of engaging the learner in the process of learning. They are an antithesis to the notion of passive learning, the hallmark of the banking form of education described by Freire (1970)...

Spoken Word disrupts the notion that learning transfer only occurs from the educator to the learner, the banking form of education. Instead, it provides a space for learners to explore their own ideas and experiences while also engaging others in learning as well. Merriweather is one of the few scholars to examine how Spoken Word can be used as an arts-based learning tool. The study findings support the above notions about arts, particularly Spoken Word in this study, as a pedagogical strategy.

Considering critical thinking as necessary to reflect on one's experiences and construct them into a story that allows others to connect, consider or examine wisdom through the sharing of poetry. It is necessary for poets to consider obstacles in communicating their stories while also remaining authentic to their own experiences. Opportunities for negotiating meaning occur for both the poet and the listener. In this way, there are significant implications for the use of Spoken Word as an arts-based critical pedagogy.

### **Adult Educators**

Spoken Word presents a plethora of opportunities for learning in a multitude of adult educational settings. Through the utilization of metaphors and creative language, poetry and Spoken Word can go beyond simple cognitive approaches. In doing so, this allows the learner/reader to more deeply and personally connect to the information. If we understand that through storying our lives, we can make sense of our experiences and explore meanings in the various ways we communicate through stories. Through the

creative development of an idea or story, as done through Spoken Word, critical self-reflection can occur. The potential of arts as tool and space for transformational learning, critical reflection and problem solving skills are well documented (Armstrong-Gradle, 2011; Clark 1997; Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, & Kasl, 2006; Dencev & Collister, 2010; Kellman, 2007; Kerka, 2002, Lawton & La Porte, 2013; Lee & Taylor, 2011; Shreeve & Smith, 2012; Vettraino, Linds, & Goulet, 2013).

Spoken Word is considered one of these tools. As poets negotiate their lived truths through illustrative language, consideration beyond self is necessary to convey a message that others can connect to in personal or emotive ways. When these connections are made, space to recognize and explore “otherness” opens. By doing so, the potential to expand worldviews and promote understanding of different experiences and perspectives. When groups of individuals tend to repeatedly frequent the same spaces, community often develops because of connections made. However, it does not mean that community connections only occur in regularly frequented venues. People connect through each other’s stories and dialogue can promote the development of relationships as well. The potential for dialogue and critical reflection manifest in these spaces of community that can occur in a writing lab or in a Spoken Word venue or in a traditional classroom.

In this way, Spoken Word as an arts-based approach disrupts the notion of traditional educational practices. Using Spoken Word, individual’s stories and experiences become wisdom and knowledge that inform a topic and spaces in which people can learn about themselves as well as others. This is also true of instructors. Galactus, Professor X, Cable and Onslaught all shared numerous ways Spoken Word has presented the space to learn about self, others and build community.



Spoken Word poetry can be used to engage learners in considering topics with a deeper, more holistic approach. Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors for adults? Using poems from poets who share their stories about their own journeys learning a new language within a new culture can be used to complement the academic literature and create a more emotive way of learning. Compassion and understanding are necessary to work with ESL learners. Being able to feel the story being shared by someone who experienced similar obstacles gives a learner a deeper understanding that simply reading about ESL teaching approaches textbooks cannot provide. Furthermore, an educator could ask the students to write a poem about the fears they have becoming an ESL instructor or working students who do not speak the language in which the instructor is most familiar. In doing this, students can learn from each other, and share the concerns they have in common or ideas they hadn't considered. If the educator listens to the stories shared, it has the potential to inform direction regarding delivery of course content.

If a reoccurring concern or challenge emerges from student's poems, then maybe those are areas of instruction that can use more attention. I use this example of psychology with the knowledge that Spoken Word spans so many topics and experiences it can be used in a myriad of subjects in similar ways. This has been supported in the earlier literature when nurses were asked to write and share narratives from patient perspectives which resulted in deeper levels of empathy and compassion among nursing students (Kinsella, 2007). In this way, communities of learning are created. When students experience a safe place to be vulnerable in a classroom, they are more likely to take risks in learning. Furthermore, it can create a sense of community within a classroom

that can promote dialogue and deeper thinking as students feel supported to share academic and personal aspects of their learning with each other. Every single participant, whether in a formal or non-formal learning setting, indicated they have seen this occur for both educators and learners.

In relation to the area of adult learning, it is evident that by valuing the experiences of the learner, there is more personal investment in their own learning as it is self-directed and increases motivation as they begin to understand why how it relates to that (Knowles, 2005; Vella, 2002). Therefore, if Spoken Word embodies adult learning principles and critically reflective pedagogy, it becomes a tool that reaches a deeper level of learning that can be more personal and impactful for adult learners. Additionally, Spoken Word is a tool that is easily accessible and flexible to the content being explored. Its potential to connect learners to themselves and each other is incredibly powerful.

### **Community Educators**

Building on the work of Freire (1970), Ulbricht (2005), and Campana (2011), arts-based community education is defined in this study as a socially just, pedagogical approach that marries knowledge and wisdom to promote critical reflection, conscientization, and transformation. To help contextualize transformational learning within arts-based community educational settings, it is important to consider other studies that have provided insight to this approach. For example, Campana (2011) describes arts-based community education as an “experiential space where new kinds of identities and practices emerge” (p. 281).

The stage of renegotiating and enacting on new knowledge in the transformational learning process needs such the very kind of spaces this approach can provide. In this

dissertation, Galactus, Cable, Onslaught and Professor X provided insight regarding how others were impacted or challenged through the process or sharing of Spoken Word. Scher (2007) also states that the arts promote transformational learning in both individuals and the communities they live and participate within (p. 6-7). Presenting transformational and participatory approaches as methodologies, Scher uses the personal narratives of various artists who helped create transformation within their communities to illustrate her arguments that community arts can open communication and begin to fix broken parts of community with a shared creative voice. As discussed in Chapter 4, the themes community and democratic praxis provided insight into how the participating poets have been able to build community and address community concerns using Spoken Word. Poets coming together to speak against human trafficking is a primary example since human trafficking is a significant problem in Texas (Foxhall, 2017). Simply building a Spoken Word community has resulted in poets using this skill and their knowledge to educate others.

Every single participant in this study has worked with youth or community organizations utilizing Spoken Word to increase literacy development, critical thinking, performance/public speaking skills and learning to construct personal and community narratives. This provides insight to what kinds of successes are possible through people's direct experience as change agents in an arts-based community educational setting. When considering the emerging themes from the study participants, Spoken Word as an art form provides similar opportunities.

As arts-based community education is becoming a growing field in the literature and in practice among artists, art educators and community educators (Hocking, 2011),

acknowledges emerging “community arts” as a major within many formal educational art programs across the country. This increasing interest in the power of community arts shifts the focus from simply producing or teaching about the art form itself to rather, educating others how to use an art form to promote opportunities to create change and social action. As with many fields still in its infancy, the methods educators use to implement and how they define the purpose of arts-based community education can vary based on the purpose, context or institution associated with these programs.

The work of Campana (2011) significantly influences implications drawn from this dissertation regarding the potential for connecting personal and community praxis possibilities with art-based community education. The author defines community art education as “art education occurring in non-school settings, with any number and age of people” (p. 280). Using a qualitative approach focusing on art educators who were working in communities with an in-depth narrative analysis, examined how each defined themselves as artists, activists and educators and what experiences they believe influenced the work they do in the community. The writing workshop held with dissertation participants as part of the data collection process is an example of this in action. Galactus, Cable, Onslaught and Professor X discussed writing in community settings and delving deep into their stories. In doing so, they were able to critically discuss how they have been impacted as individuals, as artists and as community members.

The study findings that emerged from the dissertation regarding the theme of democratic praxis aligns with the current literature regarding implications for Spoken Word as an arts-based approach to community education and activism. Additionally, I

found that community-based artist/educators/activist shares many traits with assets-based community development such as; art and work which is community inspired, utilizes social relationships and networks from within the community instead of externally, grows from dialogue and inquiry as well as is participatory in nature. Campana's (2011) work supports the notion that dialogue and participation encourages "communication of a group's worldview, opposition, vision, facilitation of dialogue towards political and social consciousness for participants and broader public. In this study, participants shared experiences that illustrate this possibility through the use of Spoken Word, for example, Professor X's poem on her racial identity is a good example of how someone's shared poem can challenge and expand others worldviews. There were people who had known Professor X for some time did not know of her Latino heritage or the struggles she faced regarding negotiating a bi-racial identity. In presenting her narrative this way, she not only provides the space for others to learn about who she is, but to also consider what beauty and challenges lie within a bi-racial identity.

Spoken Word has the potential to inform and educate around a variety of personal and larger social issues. In addition, it complements the purpose of arts-based community education approaches. Poems originate from the writer's own experiences or stories, that are often shared with other writers or an audience that gathers to engage in Spoken Word as spectators. As the poems connect stories between the artist and audience members, spaces for relationship building, dialogue, critical reflection and new perspectives open for all engaged with the performance. The process of writing and constructing a poem takes conscious reflection and an understanding of the context in which they are writing to construct poems that help promote their message.

Using the art to speak out, fundraise, or bring awareness to important issues are just a few ways in which participants used Spoken Word to exercise democratic praxis. Liberation and activism within arts-based community education is increasing within the body of literature. These concepts are reflected in the dissertation findings considering the themes regarding community and democratic praxis. Each participant through the writing, performing and sharing of Spoken Word had used Spoken Word as a tool to enact, promote or inform social change. Exploring Spoken Word as a potential form of activist art only adds to the possibilities it has for critical transformation and meaning-making in legitimate ways that encourage learning and social change.

### **Tensions and Challenges**

As in most research endeavors, I faced some challenges in conducting this study. One of the initial difficulties I faced in this study was the loss of a participant early the study. When the participant decided to step out of the study, I had already begun the data collection process. Losing the participant slowed down the initial data collection process as I needed to recruit a new participant. Ultimately, I believe that the new participant did bring a different dynamic to the study, but initially it was a challenge.

Another challenge arose regarding the volume of data that was acquired between the interviews and the writing lab. There was approximately 15 hours of interview data to transcribe and analyze. While it provided a rich, dense body of information, as an emerging researcher, it proved a daunting task at first. Without question, there was an initial learning curve regarding determining what information and data were necessary to include and what was not relevant to the study. My chair provided me with guidance by both pointing out and teaching me to discover on my own when I had steered into data

outside my research questions. Keeping the dissertation questions in front of me really helped when I felt stuck regarding the direction of my writing. Additionally, in true nature with narrative and poetic approaches, I used more excerpts from the participants', interviews and poems to support connections from the research questions to their stories and emerging themes. I found this approach to also assist me in the last challenge in this study.

As member of the poetry community for many years, I knew the participants at varying degrees of familiarity. Because I had done poetry with them and learned with them, I worked diligently to be mindful of ways my knowledge of them outside of the data findings might influence telling their stories. By utilizing their own words and poetry, I was able to more clearly identify what participants had shared as a part of the study. Each participant was asked to submit three poems that were significant to them. By doing this, it created clearer boundaries for collecting data in an objective way. It promoted sharing the participant's story in their own image. I had the support of my chair to help process and ensure data was being analyzed through the research methods accurately. Ultimately, I believe that due to the level of familiarity I had with the participants, they were more willing to trust me with parts of their histories and backgrounds. Since there was a safe space to share their experiences with someone they trusted, I believe that led to richer data and a more complete picture of their journeys.

I believe these challenges and tensions helped me to grow as a researcher. The dissertation process provided opportunities to develop my own tools and strengths as and emerging researcher.

## **Future Research**

One area of future research regarding this topic would be to examine the possibilities of arts in formal learning settings. Much of the current research around Spoken Word and arts-based education is contextualized in non and informal learning spaces. At least two of the participants, as well as myself, have utilized Spoken Word in formal, traditional educational settings. Research around arts-based educational practices supports the potential for using arts as critical pedagogy. For example, Azevedo and Goncalves (2010) indicates in their article the significance of using art as tools for meaning making “particularly in the contextual meaning of written words” (p. 70). Their work goes on to give examples of methods employed to use art in written form to construct meaning which “can be used in different contexts in different target groups making it a flexible way to teach” (p. 69-70).

The more accessible and relevant learning and teaching methods are, the more likely they are to gain a better understanding and deeper engagement of the topics at hand (Vella, 2002). The arts provide a creative, dynamic space for adult learners to engage in self-reflection, critical consciousness, meaning- making and transformation in ways that embody adult learning principles. Despite all this emerging research around the role arts can play in transformational learning, there is still much to be explored around Spoken Word specifically within these contexts. This is particularly true regarding its potential in formal classrooms, more specifically in institutions of Higher Education. For example, poetic inquiry is still somewhat new in the academy. Cahnmann (2003) argues, “Developing a poetic voice prepares scholars to discover and communicate findings in multidimensional, penetrating and more accessible ways (p. 29).” Cahnmann believes at



that those who engage in qualitative research have much to gain from the use of poetry to enhance their work. Although this area of research is beginning to develop, there remains much to be done about Spoken Word as artistic pedagogy regarding the benefits of arts-based educational techniques, particularly in the formal classroom or as a scholarly approach.

Another area in need of future research is to more deeply examine how community building occurs within Spoken Word groups. Without question, participants in this study shed light on the ways they experienced community building through their engagement with Spoken Word. The plethora of academic work around Spoken Word, much of which is evaluated from youth programs, speaks to the potential of Spoken Word as a form of activist art that is a community focus as explained in the art-based community educational practices. However, the more intimate act of building and bridging communities through this approach could be useful. I find this to be particularly true since some of the participants reported on how the poetry community has changed since the art form became more popular and mainstream. While connections and learning still occur, some of the poets noted that there is not always the same familial feeling they experienced in the earlier years. By exploring this concept more deeply, more could potentially be uncovered as to how Spoken Word might be a useful tool for building communities and how mainstream interest can potentially impact its practice.

### **Final Thoughts**

By using narratives for personal exploration, critical reflection and learning, we can become empowered as well as make meaning within the contexts of our lives. Spoken Word in particular, is an art form that often seeks to represent the narratives and

stories of those who pen them. As sharing and learning through narrative approaches can be transformational by nature, Spoken Word as a narrative approach is a tangible method of arts-based education which can result in modes of empowerment and transformation.

I have written poetry for most of my life. I have been engaged with Spoken Word and the Spoken Word community since 2004. In my experiences, I have benefited from Spoken Word in many of the ways identified by the participants in their own journeys. It has helped me navigate through difficult and painful moments in my life and allowed me to connect with others facing similar realities. From this, friendships, connections, and community blossomed in ways that supported and challenged my own ways of being. Each participant in the dissertation expressed having experienced similar moments and feelings. Spoken Word has been extremely transformational for me and for them. To discover that others have also engaged in Spoken Word this way encourages me as a professional to continue to explore its potential in various education settings. Furthermore, there are many crossovers between findings regarding the use of Spoken Word in youth settings to those experienced by adult learners; a tool for critical reflection, an opportunity to develop one's voice, a space for dialogue, a means to engage in social change/activism and to connect as a community. Arguably, Spoken Word has potential as a universal education tool is exciting to consider and explore.

One of the most significant moments for me in my journey as a poet and an educator came from an individual who I had met as a youth. She became involved in the youth program I helped run for several years. After she had graduated college, she held a professional position in a potentially national platform. A cover story was done on her and during the interview, she made a simple but profound sentiment. She shared that

poetry had saved her life. It had created a safe space for her to process her difficult experiences and provided me a support system of others who listened and who often processed their own words in similar ways. I remember tearing up as she spoke. I understood her. As a younger person, there is no question that poetry had saved my life as well.

In moments, I felt helpless, silenced, or unsure, I could turn to the pages of my notebook and work through these challenges. It was my outlet and it was the only space at times where I felt safe enough to be my authentic self. As an educator, I hold close to radical and humanistic philosophies that focus on the holistic development of learners, value them as contributors of knowledge and promote the possibilities of social change. Spoken Word has done this for me. Clearly, it has done this for others. For this reason, I am deeply grateful and humbled by the opportunities to do this research and to have contributed to its potential within academia, particularly regarding the practices of adult and community education. I truly believe with my whole heart, penning possibilities through poetry has the potential to change the world.

## APPENDIX SECTION

### APPENDIX A: DEFINITION OF IMPORTANT TERMS

**Arts Based Community Education:** Arts-based community education will be defined as a pedagogical approach utilizing the arts in an informal setting for outreach, critical reflection and ethnography, conscientization, community development and change to create a more socially just and aware society, both individually and collectively (Campana, 2011; Sommers-Willet, 2009; Ulbricht, 2005;).

**Critical consciousness:** “The ability to recognize social, political, and economic oppression and to take action against oppressive structures” (Freire, 1970, p. 17).

**Knowledge:** The techno-rational knowledge one possesses, a more “outer-knowing” (Dirkx, 1997; Rendon, 2009).

**Open Mic:** A space where Spoken Word is shared with an audience without a competitive structure, but rather, more to simply share the work itself (Sommers-Willet, 2009).

**Praxis:** Reflection and action linked to certain values and ideas with the intent of creating social change (Freire, 1970)

**Poetry Slam:** A competitive structure with particular rules and guidelines in which Spoken Word is performed and judged by members of the audience (Sommers-Willet, 2009).

**Spoken Word:** An art form in which the writer composes original written works within an informal poetic structure which is then shared or performed publically (Merriweather, 2011).

**Transformational Learning:** The practice of examining one’s beliefs, knowledge and experiences as they continue to make and remake meaning as lifelong learners (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5).

**Wisdom:** The knowing which comes from our intuition and experiences, a more “inner-knowing” (Dirkx, 1997; Rendon, 2009).

## APPENDIX B: SAMPLE CONVERSATION QUESTIONS

1. Please tell me about yourself
2. Tell me about the time when you began writing and performing
3. Describe your involvement with Spoken Word
4. What motivated you to begin engaging in Spoken Word? Please explain
5. What are the most relevant moments in your life related to Spoken Word?
6. What does it mean to you to perform/share a poem with others?
7. What topics do you write about most? Please explain
8. What motivation do you have for participating in open mics or in slams?
9. How can you compare your experiences between slam and open mic? How are they similar or different?
10. What does it mean to have participated in national and regional competitions?
11. Tell me about the work you do in relation to Spoken Word, particularly in the community and/or your profession?
12. What have you learned from implementing Spoken Word as a teaching tool for others?
13. What do you think people learn when engaging in Spoken Word?
14. Tell me more about the meaning behind the two poems you have chosen to share with me today.
15. Tell me more about the poem performance (video clip) you have chosen to share with me.
16. What advice would you give to someone starting to become involved in Spoken Word?
17. Is there anything you wish to share that I have not asked you about?

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