

## **“Voices from Haiti” Using Poetry to Speak up for a Cause**

**By Kate Seche**

“[Poetry] entertains and informs. It raises awareness on specific topics and engages audiences through the expressive art of poetry” –Poetic People Power ([www.poeticpeoplepower.com](http://www.poeticpeoplepower.com))

### **Overview**

In the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the Pulitzer Center commissioned a “Special Report” to take an in-depth look into the lives of the Haitian people one year after the massive natural disaster. This lesson helps students explore the Haitian experience through poetry, photography, and music.

### **English Language Arts Common Core State Standards**

#### ***Reading – Key Ideas and Details and Craft & Structure***

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

#### ***Language – Knowledge of Language and Vocabulary Acquisition***

- Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
- Demonstrate understanding of word relationships and nuances in word meanings.

### **Time**

- Two 45-minute class periods

### **Materials**

- Computer with Internet access
- Journals/Student logs to record reactions and poetry ideas

## **Student Preparation**

Before beginning this lesson, students will need a basic understanding of the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti including the domestic and international response directly following the quake, and the plight of many Haitians a year later. For background materials refer to the lesson plan, “Haiti – One Year Later” also on the Pulitzer Education site.

Assess your students’ familiarity with the concept of advocacy and their comfort level reading/writing poetry. Students do not need to be experts in either area; they will only need a basic level of understanding.

- Reading and writing poetry
  - What type of poetry do you enjoy reading? Why
  - Do you think journalism can take the form of poetry? Why or why not?
  - What are advantages to sharing an individual’s story, or advocating for a cause through poetry? What are the disadvantages?
- The concept of advocacy and/or how to raise awareness of a cause
  - What is advocacy?
  - What are social or political issues that you feel receive sufficient attention with in your community? What social or political issues do you feel need to receive more attention?
  - Why do you believe certain causes receive more attention than others? Who should take responsibility for raising awareness of under-represented issues? What do you think is the best way to raise awareness of under-represented issues?

## **Anticipatory Set**

Open the “Voices from Haiti” special report project page and enter the project.

Before the students begin exploring the poetry, have them look at the eight title images on both the first and second pages. As they look at the images of the different Haitians profiled in these poems have them consider the following questions:

1. Who do you think the person in the photo is? Why do you think the producers and poet chose to highlight this individual for his project?
2. Describe the emotion conveyed in the photo.
3. What do you think each individual is thinking in the photos?

Once the students have considered the personal story and situation of the different individuals in the photos, share the title and first few lines of each poem with the group, and allow them to make any changes to their predictions.

## Procedures

The project is comprised of eight poems by poet and journalist Kwame Dawes. You may choose to have your students explore all of poems, or divide the students into groups and assign (or allow them to choose) one of the poems. Provide the students with the following directions:

1. Open the poem and, before starting the video, read the poem aloud to yourself or your group members. Paraphrase or summarize the main points. What is the theme of the poem? How do you know? How does word choice and imagery contribute to this theme?
2. Follow along with the words of the poem as poet, Kwame Dawes reads the poem aloud. How was the poet's reading different from your own? Did the poet's reading emphasize any elements that your own did not? How did that change your interpretation of the poem? After hearing the poet's reading of the poem, answer these questions: How does the form (rhyme, rhythm, repetition, line structure) convey the theme and/or mood of the poem? How does the poet evoke emotion in the reader? What other techniques (onomatopoeia, alliteration, etc.) have been used in the composition of the poem? How do they influence the theme of the poem? How does the exclusion of certain techniques influence the theme of the poem?
3. Now, watch the photo slideshow as you listen to Kwame Dawes read his poem. How did seeing the images change your interpretation of the poem? Did new ideas or details appear as you watched the photos and heard the poem?
4. Who is the speaker in the poem? Can you hear different speakers in the poem? If so, who? How does the poet incorporate different voices into the poem? How do we know we can trust the speaker(s) in the poem to report events accurately?
5. What is the significance of the title of the poem?

If groups of students explore different poems, have them break into new groups with one representative from each original poetry study group in the newly formed group. Allow the students to watch and listen to each poem, and have the individual representatives report out on elements of their conversations and solicit feedback from their peers.

Return to the "Voices from Haiti" homepage and click on the "Related Reporting" tab at the top of the page. Click on and open the project, "After the Quake: HIV/AIDS in Haiti." Under the "Blog" tab students can find a range of short pieces reported from the field as Kwame Dawes, Lisa Armstrong, and Andre Lambertson worked in Haiti. Many of the blogs provide background on the individuals profiled in the poems, or the interviews that inspired Dawes' poetry. Have students select and read two or three of the blogs and ask them if they see similar themes, concerns, or individuals reflected in the poem they studied.

To learn more about the poet, Kwame Dawes, return to the main Global Gateway Education page and launch the HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean Gateway. Scroll through the projects, and launch "Hope: Living and Loving with HIV in Jamaica." Under "Recent" you will find an article from Neiman Reports, "Bearing Witness: The Poet as Journalist." The article describes Dawes' experience working as both a journalist and poet as he's reported from Jamaica and Haiti.

After reading the article to your students, or having your students read the article independently or in groups, have them consider the following questions:

- How does writing poetry free Dawes from the anxiety he feels conducting journalist-style interviews?
- In the article, Dawes comments that, “a poem is not the “story,” it is something deeper; it has to do with an image, an image that can be both something seen or something that happens, a snippet of a narrative. It can be a detail, a scent, a question, a fear, a desire.” Discuss the process you think this poet used to create poetry in Haiti and Jamaica; where, when, how, could he find his inspiration? What moment, or moments do you think inspired the eight different poems featured in this project?
- Dawes also explains, “I stand as a witness to the silences—to what goes unspoken and ignored—to the things that float away as if insubstantial but that are filled with the simple breaths of people trying to make sense of their existence. This act of witnessing allows us to reach to other levels of meaning that can only be reached through the poem.” If you witnessed similar “grace moments” in your life, where do you think they would occur most frequently? Who would they involve? Do you think these moments could be captured in a poem?

### **Assessment/Extension Activities**

Ask students to think about an issue, individual, or event in their own community that would be well-represented through poetry. Challenge students to conduct interviews or research on a topic and raise awareness of this issue through poetry.

[Note: The Pulitzer Center is seeking student advocacy poetry in response to international issues highlighted in our reporting and local issues which students feel should receive more media attention. Please contact [globalgateway@pulitzercenter.org](mailto:globalgateway@pulitzercenter.org) for additional information.]



*Photo By Andre Lambertson, Haiti, 2010*