

Sparking Authentic Research with Poetry: A CommunityShare Story

By Taylor Johnson, based on an interview with Krista Gypton

When City High School's Senior English teacher Krista Gypton and her co-teacher, Eve Rifkin, reached out to poet and community activist Logan Phillips through CommunityShare, they already had a clear goal in mind for how Logan's involvement might enhance their Youth Participatory Action Research project (YPAR).

YPAR activates young people to identify a relevant issue in their own community and conduct on-the-ground interviewing, surveying, and other field work in order to do their own research on solutions to a community problem.

As Krista points out, "Too often the first thing we ask kids to do when we assign research is to find out what 'the experts' say, but those 'experts' haven't been in their community. Kids can also be experts. And real youth voice can contribute to bigger bodies of research."

This approach has roots in critical pedagogy. Krista and Eve's class had read works by Paulo Freire and bell hooks. They also explored the concept of funds of knowledge, but even with that critical framework in place, the teachers knew that their students might benefit from a transformative experience to jumpstart their engagement with the issues that most impact them and their communities.

"We wanted [our students] to have a strong sense of their own identity before going in to the YPAR process," Krista explains. "We started by thinking about how spoken word is really empowering to youth because of how it taps into that idea: how do we use our voices and our experiences to help out with something we know about?"

Logan Phillips, co-founder of the local nonprofit Spoken Futures, developed organizational goals to empower student voice through slam poetry. He co-founded the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam, which for several years has cultivated and nourished a vibrant youth poetry and spoken word scene in Tucson. Eve and Krista were familiar with his work and reached out with an email to invite him to spark their students' interest in their own lives and experiences through the medium of poetry.

They were able to secure a CommunityShare seed grant that would pay for a guest artist to visit their class, and Logan agreed to come to three class periods over the course of three weeks.

"He had this whole idea of 'getting your messy out'," Krista explains. "He told the kids, 'Don't get stuck in your head and overthink everything you're going to write. Later you can go back and fine tune.'"

On the first visit, Logan shared performances of his own poetry, explained lines and themes from some of his pieces, and then had students write. They worked with a prompt "Where I Am From" that inspired them to use metaphor, imagery, and description to explore and reveal the intimate details of their own origins.

By the second visit, students had created a solid rough draft of a poem, and they received specific suggestions for how to enhance their writing. Logan again performed original work.

By the third visit, the primary goal was to have everyone share their work by reading it aloud. Krista smiles as she reflects on this transformative final visit. "Most of them were into it.

Sharing your writing out loud is scary for anybody. Personal windows into your life can make you uncomfortable, and when we have to perform, to say these things out loud, it's like, No!"

But she emphasizes that having Logan there to guide the students along throughout the process was crucial. "He definitely leaned in, which was good because they may not have shared otherwise. Peers started cheering each other on, rallying around their writing. I wanted that to last longer."

Krista points out that she and co-teacher Eve are "two 40+ white women who just don't have the swag that Logan brings!" But having a guest in their room also allowed the students to "see [their teachers] be vulnerable alongside the students" as Krista and Eve joined in the process of writing poetry and sharing their poems aloud. Krista cautions teachers not to "miss an amazing opportunity for real culture building that can happen" when guests like Logan visit. "Don't waste your time in the back of the class grading papers."

Next year, Krista and Eve will invite Logan to be part of the YPAR project again but envision creating more opportunities for even deeper engagement and integration of poetry within the YPAR project itself, not solely as inspiration for choosing relevant topics for research. Krista wants the students to have opportunities to "write poetry about the interviews they had, instead of just incorporating sterile quotes."

In the end, the project was successful because Krista, Eve, and Logan communicated throughout the planning process and kept the big picture of the unit in mind. In particular, Krista emphasizes the importance of trusting the process and letting things flow. "I loved watching how so many students were willing to dive in and explore things about their homes and communities."

Whether through poetry or participatory action research, authentic youth voice matters. Thanks to the opportunities that CommunityShare provides for collaboration, teachers like Krista and Eve can connect with poets like Logan. Through the process of writing and performing their own original poetry with a community partner, students explored their own vulnerability. That may not have been what they were expecting when a cool poet breezed into the room on that first day. But as Krista reminds all of us, "If you give yourself permission, it gives other people around you permission to be vulnerable. We miss that opportunity too often."