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**LEARNING**  
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**GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP**  
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# EMPOWERING YOUNG VOICES: COMMUNICATING GLOBAL ISSUES THROUGH POETRY

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## Using Spoken Word Poetry to Empower Students and Drive Change

As a teacher of Secondary English Language and Literature, as well as a spoken word poet, I have a genuine passion and appreciation for the reading, writing and teaching of poetry, and the art of performance - that is, transforming words from the page to the stage with conviction in the hopes of effecting change locally and globally. In the process of doing so, I aim to inspire and empower my students to confidently use their voices for positive change and become global citizens.

As such, it was only natural to innovate a project-based learning unit that would combine professional experience in spoken word and passion for inspiring students through poetry, with new opportunities for them to confidently express individuality whilst reinforcing our school value of Global Citizenship. Through this project, students would come to learn that poetry is deeply rooted in oral traditions and has the power to create a communal experience that can affect change in meaningful ways: we can inspire, motivate and challenge others whilst raising awareness of global issues.

## The Case for Project-Based and Interdisciplinary Learning

Participants in the 'Poetry for Activism' project comprised Year 7 Extended Learner students from a year-long ECA programme designed to provide additional English enrichment. These ECA sessions are guided by subject specialists who are experts in their field and who have the autonomy to plan engaging student-led projects. Participating students are encouraged to choose writing styles, forms, themes, genres and activities that interest them personally, with the intention to promote autonomy in student learning. This approach successfully encourages experimentation and supportive risk-taking, conducive to their own development as writers.

Typically, each ECA Block focuses on a different project,





culminating with work that students take much pride in, promoting student authorship. This particular two-Block project enabled students to become the authors of their own carefully edited and designed poetry anthologies focusing on global issues that they feel passionate to stand up for, leading to the Secondary Schools' first Spoken Word Poetry Showcase. The process encouraged students to express their views on current global and local issues and in doing so, they actively embodied the values of Global Citizenship.

### Project Strategy and Process

Global Citizenship Education (GCE) has gained attention in recent years as a means of developing students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as their sense of responsibility as global citizens. According to the UNESCO, GCE "aims to empower learners to assume active roles to face and resolve global challenges and to become proactive contributors to a more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, and secure world" (UNESCO, 2015). Research has shown that incorporating GCE and social justice themes into the English curriculum, such as through a unit on poetry for activism or protest poetry, can promote critical literacy skills and foster empathy, agency and civic engagement (Comber & Simpson, 2016; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Furthermore, using poetry as a medium for activism can, as this project demonstrates, help students develop learner attributes relevant to global citizenship, including being informed and critically literate, socially connected and respectful of diversity, ethically responsible and engaged whilst developing key skills in the process.

#### 1. Activating Prior Knowledge – Literature Linked to Sustainable Development Goals

What are contemporary issues? What books, poems, stories, graphic novels have you previously read that communicate contemporary issues? Why might authors write about such issues? Using the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a stimulus, students considered these initial questions to reflect on their pre-existing exposure to literature and media, with a focus on rights, responsibilities of individuals

and groups and global themes. From the co-creation of our own virtual bookshelf focusing on texts linked to specific SDGs, it was clear that our learners already demonstrate awareness of a range of social justice and ethical issues, such as climate change and sustainable development, having selected a range of relevant texts to populate our bookshelf - amongst few of the many examples were: Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird', Malala Yousafzai's 'I am Malala' and Alice Walker's 'The Colour Purple'. Contextualising the project offered rich discussions on the purpose and intended effects of writing for 'activism', to bring about or campaign for social or political change, with poetry being one of many writing genres writers can use to powerfully protest. Subsequently, to instil in students a personal connection with the genre of poetry, they were tasked with producing a poem about poetry, communicating their honest thoughts.

Poetry is...  
The roaring voice of the voiceless;  
a blossoming bloom  
with wonder and purpose to explore  
like a spirited child,  
Poetry is curious and free.

*Excerpt by Janice Liao (7N)*

#### 2. Critical Thinking Skills – Analysing Poetry Written for Activism

An integral part of preparing to write protest poetry involves analysing other famous poets' works, identifying how they successfully convey their subject, purpose and message using literary techniques. Students collaborated to present to the class a verbal analysis of a range of poetry forms used by classic to contemporary poets and youth activists from around the world to convey important messages focused on global issues. Through investigation, they realise that poetry has always been a powerful tool for social and political commentary, allowing us to explore important issues and ideas in a way that is both personal and universal. By engaging with poetry that addresses issues such as inequality, discrimination, and environmental degradation, students developed a deeper understanding of the world around them and their role in creating positive change.

#### 3. Research and Decision-Making Skills – Planning Our Poetry Collections

Learners also developed the skills of critical inquiry to research facts pertaining to the topical issues they were interested in learning about. This supported their careful planning of content for their poetry anthologies. Using planning templates, they planned three poems using their exploration of the SDGs and research to generate: a title for their collection and, for each poem, the global issue, purpose, techniques and form they would use to communicate a clear message and a call to action.





## 4. Creative Writing and Independent Thinking skills – Writing, Editing and Designing

Independent thinking was fostered as students made careful language and structural choices, including the application of various poetry techniques for deliberate effect in their writing. They also exercised creative thinking skills to edit and design their own printed publications. Each students' anthology features an 'introduction to the collection' by the poet, explaining the rationale behind their choices, demonstrating reflective thinking.

## 5. Collaboration and Communication Skills – Peer Review and Rehearsing

The students honed their collaboration skills by offering constructive feedback to help improve each other's writing and performance techniques while referring to clear criteria in each stage of the project. They co-constructed their own 'top tips' for the art of performance by observing and analysing spoken word performers, focusing on elements such as rhythm, pace, voice, facial expression, gestures, eye contact, intonation and articulation. This then encouraged small-group practises on targeted exercises relevant to these techniques. With a goal to build their confidence in clear and impactful communication, students were given the opportunity to practise with a microphone in the Theatre, providing them an authentic experience on stage.

## 6. Public Speaking Skills – Spoken Word Poetry Showcase

The project culminated in an inaugural celebratory Spoken Word Poetry Showcase where students performed their poems to a supportive audience of teachers, friends, parents and tutors. The showcase featured an inspiring range of poems on pressing issues ranging from the environment and animal rights to sexism, body image and gender inequality. By respectfully listening to and sharing their poetry with others, learners developed empathy for others and our environment, creating a space for dialogue, reflection, and understanding that can lead to positive change in our communities and beyond. Our students' experience in the project echoes a study conducted by Zeiger and colleagues (2016), evidencing that students who participate in spoken word poetry programmes reported increased confidence in their writing, speaking and critical thinking skills, as well as a greater sense of community, social responsibility, social entrepreneurship and motivation for active participation.

**"I really enjoyed this project not only because it allows us to be more knowledgeable about global issues and how we can make an impact on the world, but how we can turn research and facts into a piece full of emotion and passion: whether it's joy, regret, gratitude or even guilt."** – **Nia Ekaraphanich, 7N**



**"I am really proud of the planning, progress and improvement that led up to this performance. I feel that this entire project was well thought out and special. I really enjoyed rehearsing to our peers, giving our feedback and appreciation. I am glad to say that not only have I developed my poetry techniques, but I have improved my planning, communication and collaboration skills."** – **Varissa Asavathiratham, 7N**

## Becoming Agents of Change in the World

As we celebrate the success of this project, we must ask ourselves: what kind of world do we want to live in? Do we want to actively engage in shaping a better future for ourselves and for generations to come? The power of spoken word poetry lies not only in its ability to inspire and motivate individuals, but also in its capacity to foster empathy and understanding across diverse communities.

Students discovered that poetry is a dynamic and engaging medium for activism that enables effective communication of issues to a broader audience, sparking meaningful conversations about the world. It is interdisciplinary projects like these that provide a platform for students to explore their creative potential, while also empowering them to become informed, active and compassionate global citizens. In today's complex and interconnected world, it is essential for students to develop critical thinking, collaboration and effective communication, with clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities, that will facilitate them in becoming agents of positive change.

**"Poetry can inspire a lot of people: it creates a vivid picture to deeply help understand the important global messages we are trying to convey and this can appear in different forms."** – **Tatsha Kuansongtham, 7N**