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[Episode 77: Poetry In Schools – Part One](#)

Producer: David Turner – **DT**

Host: [Jacob Sam-La Rose](#) – **JSL**

Guests: [Miriam Nash](#) – **MN** & [Keith Jarrett](#) – **KJ**

Transcript edited by David Turner – 20/1/17

Introduction:

DT: Hello, this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast. My name is David Turner. I'm in the south of Norway, I'm in a town called Kristiansand where I used. I'm sitting on a rock quite high up overlooking the harbour. And it's really beautiful. I'm not showing off, I'm just mentioning

I've been in Sweden and then on to Norway where I had the luck of talking to some really interesting poets. So hopefully within the next couple of months there'll be a couple of interviews going out from my trip here.

Today's episode is unusual in that it's the first time I've broken a conversation down into two-parts because we had so much to talk about that it just ran on so rather than editing stuff down I just decided that the whole conversation should go out. So part one is coming up now.

Before I explain what it is, I just want to say a big thank you to Arts Council England for granting us some funding which will help us over the next 12 months. That's going to start at the beginning of September 2016 and the funding will run and part-fund the whole project until September 2017. And this episode is the first one where I've been able to pay and involve a guest host so today's episode... I don't appear on it, I just recorded it.

Jacob Sam-La Rose who is a fantastic poet and is involved really heavy as you'll find out from the episode with the education of poets that want to work themselves in education so he was involved with a scheme at Goldsmiths University and is now... Well he explains himself, I'm going to do a very good job of explaining that. He's joined by fantastic poets, Keith Jarrett and Miriam Nash and they talk about a great number of things but how... Mainly in this half, how they got involved with education and there are lot of interesting tips for anyone that wants to get into facilitating poetry in schools with young people.

And before that begins, yeah, just a quick note. I've also use the funding from the Arts Council to sort of rebrand and remodel the whole series so there's some new art work, which I personally think looks really great and we now have... If you go to Tumblr dot com, [Lunar Poetry Podcasts](#), we have a little blog there so there will be updates and I can write a little bit more. And as usual we have the page on [Facebook](#) and Twitter is [@Silent Tongue](#).

I hope you enjoy part one of the Poetry In Schools discussion with Jacob, Keith and Miriam.

Conversation:

JSL: Welcome, this is the Lunar Poetry Podcasts. My name is not David Turner, this the voice of Jacob Sam-La Rose sitting in the conversational, directorial seat. I have two lovely, lovely human beings and poets with me in this lovely, lovely office building in Borough. Overlooking a rather lovely hidden Park which has the name Little Dorrit attached to it, I'm not sure what the history behind that is but, lovely.

So the two people, more importantly, in the room with me right now are Miriam Nash and if we had a sound board you'd be hearing applause right now. And the one, the only, Keith Jarrett. So, for anyone who doesn't know you guys, I mean shock horror. Someone who doesn't know your backgrounds and who you are and what it is that you do. I'm going to start with Miriam. Miriam, tell us something about yourself. Who are you? What is it that you do?

MN: I am a poet, I'm an educator, I'm a sister. Important! I've been doing... I've been working in education with poetry for about seven years. I was introduced to the work by your good self and yes it's pleasure today to sit around this table.

JSL: Absolutely lovely. I love that sense of the various different roles. Must not forget that Miriam is also a sister very, very important. Alongside all of the other work that is done. And Mr Keith Jarrett tell us something about yourself.

KJ: Hello, I'm Keith Jarrett. I'm also good sibling, I hope, I'd like to think so. I am a poet, I also write fiction and I'm also an educator and have been part of the spoken word education project for a few years and I'm trying not to count them because time is flying really fast! And that's just some of what I do but at the moment I am a full-time PhD student and I'm developing my creative work while also looking at research and religion.

JSL: As some of the 13 year-olds I was working with earlier today might say "deep!". Just, you know, not to forget myself here. For anyone who doesn't know what it is that I do. Hi I'm Jacob Sam-La Rose. I'm the current artistic director and lead lecturer for the spoken word education program. I run the [Barbican Young Poets](#) program, I also am the artistic director for the Barbican Junior Poets program and we now have a Barbican Alumni poets program.

I support a range of different communities and collectives. The [Burn After Reading](#) community, for example. A large part of my work is given over to supporting the development of young and emerging poets, as well as being a poet and performer and educator myself. I've been working in and out of classrooms in various different educational facilities and institutions and spaces and community spaces for, oh I don't know. As Keith was saying, perhaps too long to count but something, if I had to put numbers to it something around 20 years now. So it's a joy to be sitting in this room about to embark on a conversation around the work that we do as poets in education.

I'm really curious just to get us kicked off, about... So I was having conversations with two people who were shadowing me earlier today and talking about my first experience of running a workshop and of being in a classroom and how it was that I got comfortable with that sense of leading something along those lines. And I'd be really curious in terms of you guys. What were your first experiences, how did you actually get into the work that we're talking about?

KJ: On an informal level, I think it's one of those things you're expected to do once you've got your name about a bit as a poet, just to turn up to a school. And I think I was just asked to... If I'm correct, because I can't really remember my first ever experience of doing a poetry workshop in a school. I've done other things, I also taught English as an additional language. And I should have known better but I walked into a classroom and went, "eek, what do I do now? Right! Why aren't you writing? Why aren't you interested.

So I think I really didn't know what I was doing in my first sessions as a... Just when I was expected... I think I was just called, and it was probably National Poetry Day, and I was asked

to go do something and get the kids entertained in writing. So it was a really loose brief and I just loosely thought, yeah I can do it.

And then I did a mentoring project which was really about looking at certain pupils at risk of exclusion and so they wanted me to do a workshop where I'd be getting them to write poetry and Rap and using that as a way of bringing them in. Again it was a really wide brief and I was very inexperienced and I cringe, I really cringe thinking about those early days and the time where I'd just sort of hide in the stationery cupboard and think, what am I doing?

JSL: And how is that... I have my own agenda for asking this question. That workshop that you were asked to do around poetry and rap and that kind of expectation. I mean, was it an expectation? How did that sit with you, how did that feel in terms of that sense of please deliver a workshop that relates to poetry and rap for us?

KJ: It actually... The story of that is a bit longer and it came from some mentoring work that I wasn't very well prepared for either. Where I was working with primary school age children at risk of exclusion and I wrote a report based on that. Which then went out to a number of schools and one of them picked up on what I did and said, "oh brilliant and you write poetry! How about you do something with poetry and rap?" Which sounds good but then I wasn't really supported. I was on my own, I was 22 or something and it was, I... Yeah I do cringe.

But, at the same time, I see the good intentions behind it. But then also when you're sort of... Poetry and rap are... You know rap is a part of poetry by it can be a separate discipline and there's this kind of expectation, "oh, there's something cool, why don't you go and do something cool with the kids?" Like, that'll stop them committing crime and it didn't quite work out by that. But I did form some really good relationships with young people through realising that I was slightly out of my depth [**JSL:** right] and then trying to correct it.

JSL: Yeah I have this kind of vexed relationship, meaning that essentially I kind of fall on both sides of the divide with regards to the relationship between poetry and rap and expectation around that. So I know, I remember in my early... The earlier part of my career I did have a period of time where I flirted with hip-hop as a kid. So that was at one point very much a part of my culture but I kind of moved beyond that for my own self.

While I still love hip-hop music. I would never consider myself to be an emcee as such and like you I respect that rap is an art form in itself that has ways of working and skills associated. So there is a part of me that remembers a time when there was this expectation because you were of a certain perceived background, "Yeah, okay you must be able to, because you do some stuff with words right? That's hip-hop as well right? So you say you're a poet but hey come in and speak to these kids and do some rap stuff with them!" It's like, not quite that simple. Yeah, I totally appreciate that. So Miriam what are your hip-hop workshop skills like?

MN: I'm occasionally asked if I will rap by a young person [**JSL:** fantastic!] but I say no because I wouldn't do it justice.

JSL: I want to be in the room if that ever actually happens.

MN: Although, I am quite good on the Hamilton lyrics. But I started out just... I kind of fell into running some workshops or running a writing group for peers when I was doing my undergraduate degree at Goldsmiths. And through that I met [Spread The Word](#), the wonderful organisation, through that I met the poet [Sundra Lawrence](#) and through that I met yourself on a on teaching project, poetry project in schools in Harrow.

I wasn't teaching on that program myself, I was supporting it in a kind of administrative way, which has been another part of the work that I do producing and administering projects for young people. And that was a very formative experience for me, seeing that work and seeing the power of that work and being involved in it but also being able to look at it before I had a go myself.

And then I obviously had the incredible luck and the incredible privilege to work with you as one of your 'shadows'. And I think we worked together for almost the whole year actually. And I remember I worked with you in a number of different schools in a pupil referral units and museums. And so I really got to see it... Yeah, I was a very, very lucky member of your 'shadow' community.

Yeah so I got to see that work happening in some different settings and then some way into that we were both working on a project at Erith School in Kent with the wonderful Doug Bloom. And so, as part of that I ran my first workshop in a classroom on my own but you were there to support that, as well as the teacher of course. So I did have a very supported entry in to poetry and education as a workshop leader which I, you know, think about and talk about actually all the time in my work. Because you know I guess, part of what I'm able to communicate is that I do this work.

Not only the teaching and not only the workshops but you know I feel I am a poet because of the support of yourself and other poets who made it possible for me to even see that this was a job that you can do. However strange and tenuous it may sometimes feel it was... I could see it there and I just thought this is incredible work that I didn't know was happening. And I was not only shown that but able to be brought into it.

JSL: Listeners I am blushing right now you can't see this through the airwaves or over the digital streams but yes. Thank you for reminding me of some of the work that we actually did back in the day. I want to celebrate the administrative side of what it is that you've done and maybe we'll come back to that. Because I mean for all of us in the room, we have these varied perspectives so you know, experience of doing this work as teacher as well as poet and facilitator. Experience of not just being the poet in the classroom but also supporting the poets in the classroom and liaising with teachers and venues to ensure that that work happens and to make sure that everyone's supported.

I'd love to come back to some of that a little bit later in the conversation but I also want to pick up on that sense of the support that you said that you had. Because again, I know for me, when I was upcoming and learning my craft and learning what it meant to be a poet at the front of a room that wasn't a performance space but that was actually a learning space.

You know a lot of that I learned 'on the hoof' so to speak. There were very few if any actual pedagogical workshops or workshops around the notion or the craft of how you pass your skills on to students or how is that you work with other people in that way.

So a lot of what it is that I've taken on, I mean obviously I've studied since then, but a lot of what I picked up in the early days was just through doing it and figuring out what it was that worked and going into a workshop and saying; "Okay that didn't quite work as I planned, I'm going to have to rethink that and come back with something different. Why didn't it work? Okay, let me try this the next time." But now we have, and I mean this isn't necessarily accessible for all but there's more support for these kinds of things.

So again, Keith you have an experience of going through the spoken word education program. Miriam you had an opportunity to be supported by not just me but other teachers that you had access to. Tell me something about that experience of the kind of support or the kind of investment in development as an actual craft that you may have had. And what that meant to you in terms of your development.

KJ: I first met [Peter Kahn](#) a few years ago and he contacted me via recommendation from someone else, we had a Skype conversation. He told me about this radical project which was starting, which is a collaboration between him, different poetry organisations and Goldsmiths. I thought, wow okay this is very interesting. I'd never heard of anything like that before, an opportunity to do what I'd been doing. By that time my I'd worked in schools doing poetry projects, mentoring projects as well, where I was slightly more comfortable in the classroom than my first experiences of hiding in the cupboard.

Going through the process of being in a traineeship almost and then also having that academic backup to it being at Goldsmiths and doing the MA and having colleagues, other people who are undergoing the same process. For me, that's just been infinitely valuable and I just don't understand why it hadn't existed in the way it had before and why there weren't more opportunities for people to do that.

I mean I know... Just even basic things about how you present work and present examples and obviously there's the teaching stuff of... You know, thinking about people who might have dyslexia or problems with vision or whatever and thinking about how you present your material but then how you demonstrate, how you prompt poems, how really simple basic things which I'd never thought of like; Okay if I'm going to set an exercise for students to do I should have done it myself first and I should have a template poem of my own as well as another example.

[Things like that, no one told me that until I actually went through that process of training and I thought, wow you know all of those wasted opportunities... I feel like they were wasted opportunities where I was in schools where actually pupils who weren't engaged, they may well have been if they got it and if I'd had that, you know, extra background. I'm not saying I'm a perfect teacher or workshop leader and I'm not saying that everyone is going to pick up something from a poetry workshop. But I feel that having that background, having that training has hugely helped me teaching but also generally how present myself to

other people. I think that more or less answers that. I'm not sure what your experience on that level is.

MN: Well I think I mean, for me that support... I think the support that I had was what even got me into the classroom and you know made me feel like I could enter that space and it was... I remember, it used to be so terrifying, I mean the night before I would go into a school... Particularly when I started to go in all on my own, you know first you have to find the school and it's really early, it's on the other side of town you know, it's got several entrances. You know, you have to get in first of all.

JSL: I'm thinking of a particular school in East London that has two different sites, I think that we all are familiar with. And you could be at the lower site and actually realise that your workshop is supposed to be at the upper site or something crazy. Yeah, yeah.

KJ: Ten minutes walk.

JSL: Yeah yeah.

MN: Then you have to find the teacher and you have to be presentable but you're sweating and you weren't quite sure what to wear. And finally you get into the classroom. But, so you know that support was really, really important in giving me the confidence to be able to know how to... You know even enter into that space and talk to teachers and you know, make sure that I knew what I needed to know and feel that I could ask questions.

And I guess even with that support still when I was starting I thought that I was supposed to know things. You know I thought I was supposed to just be able to get on with it and you know that that was a requirement. And you know, if something went wrong I would feel really bad. Whereas now you know I think, one of the wonderful things about having some more experiences you know I think, well things don't go as planned all the time. And part of your role as an educator is to be able to adapt and see what's happening and kind of be aware of yourself in the space and not get lost I guess.

You know, not get lost among all the ideas of what you think you're supposed to do because if you're so caught up in, you know, presenting in the right way. If you're so worried about getting it right you're actually not in a position to give support and energy to the students.

JSL: Hallelujah.

KJ: Yeah.

MN: So you know, you need to be able to have that support to be able to do that. To arrive in such a way that, yeah that you're there for them. I guess every teacher has to go through some kind of wrangling with themselves in order to get there. But it's so much easier to do with other people.

JSL: Yes. It's fascinating, the first year of teaching for just about every teacher that I've ever, kind of, spoken to or had any kind of interaction with, that first year of teaching is like

a hellish experience. While you figure out who you are and how you relate to the work that you're being asked to do. But then you learn from that incredible kind of, you know, intense period of pressure. And just trying to do right by your students and by everything that you know you're supposed to be offering them and you come out on the other side of that a better teacher, ideally.

There's so much in what you've just said, both of you that I really want to celebrate that... Particularly, three things that come up from what you just said Miriam in terms of our relationships with failure. The notion of being present in any space where we're teaching and that relationship with improvisation and being able to think on our feet.

That thing about failure is such a big thing because we have to be, in my opinion. We have to be able to hold the possibility that things aren't necessarily going to work as planned but also we have to balance that against the fact we've got these various different stakeholders in the room, right.

So we've got the students themselves but we've also got the teachers or whoever the representatives are of the institution that we're working in. And they have they all have their various different expectations. So we have to kind of balance that sense of, "well hey, look it might not go according to plan but we'll do something". With this sense of, "well these guys are expecting something and these guys are expecting something", and I'm kind of you know beholden to what it is that they expect!

Balancing that can be a really challenging thing, right. So there's that, there's that sense of being present in the room. I love that sense of presence and being completely kind of just there, right. Being in the room and alive to what's being offered and not just following a script. Being responsive, this notion of responsive teaching I love that idea and that's something that I try and put over to all of the spoken word education students I'm working with now. That sense of responsive teaching being able to shift and respond to what it is that your students are giving you back and how...

I mean, the number of times I've turned up in a workshop space and what it was that I was told would be, you know, the situation... Or, here's the brief and you get there and it's like, this is nothing like what you told me was going to happen. This space is completely different these students are completely different. The teacher who I'm speaking to in the room is saying that actually this is a workshop about, I don't know, naval history and I thought it was going to be about whatever and we had these conversations, we set it all up.

So being able to think on feet is so important and it comes back to that sense Keith in terms of what you were saying around expectation and I'm fascinated by that and I don't know if you guys have any thoughts on these lines specifically. The notion of facilitating or teaching, there is this expectation of us as kind of creative professionals or freelance literature workers, whatever. That some part of our income will come or be derived from facilitating or working in a classroom environment. And it really comes back to, for me, this question of beyond that expectation, why are we doing this work? Right?

Surely it's not just about the money, it's not just about I need to be able to earn X amount from this teaching activity in order to be able to survive as a quote unquote poet. Surely there's something more in terms of why. I mean, why do you guys do this work? Why is this work important? Is it important to you? Why do you guys do this work, what's it all about?

MN: To me it feels really integral to my work as a poet. Because I feel like writing on its own is wonderful and it's so amazing to spend time learning that craft and reading and working with other poets. But I think being able to work in education, whatever that means you know, and that really doesn't have to mean any one particular thing. You know, I don't just mean working in schools but taking the poetry into different settings. For me that feels really essential to what poetry is, what poetry is for.

So to me that's why, and actually I have, yes I have those moments on my own at my desk where I think, yes this is it! But I also have probably even more moments where I'm working with somebody, you know, whether it's an adult or a young person. Whether it's someone who has experience or is writing their first poem where there's this recognition that we're working with creativity here. And that's an incredible thing as well, I mean that's such a privilege to be able to work with people on something that is so personal.

Because you know having an audience is about communicating the work that you've done but using poetry in education is communicating the process and communicating that wrangling, that learning that you're doing yourself. So that's so exciting, you know, when you get to do that with somebody else. And I think that's really important about this work is that whenever I go into a space I'm just reminding myself that the people I'm working with are creators in their own right. And they may not identify as creators at that particular time but they are because we all are, and yeah, so that's why I do it.

JSL: There's something beautiful in what you just said that I might come back to after I invite Keith to say a few words about why it is he does its work. But that notion of the relationship between process and product in the settings that we work in and again how a lot of the expectation... Unless you have someone that you might identify as a champion teacher who kind of understands and really does appreciate and really values the work that you're doing, there's a sense of, "yeah we want them to write poems".

"All this kind of airy-fairy processed stuff? Nah, nah, nah!" "What we want at the end of this period of time is, we want 30 poems, or we want 10 group poems, or we want this... You know we want the finished anthology or you know..." The focus on the actual product is... You can appreciate the importance but to create space and to actually create an ability, or to allow for that space to focus on the process that can be communicated beyond the session that you're leading, yeah yeah I celebrate that. Keith why?

KJ: I mean you answered that beautifully and there's so many bits in there so I'm just thinking of different ways I could answer that. And one of them is simply that I'm going through a process where I feel really weird at the moment because I spend all of my days... This is just for a couple of months but most of my days probably about between six and eight hours a day I spend at a computer just transcribing interviews that I'm doing as part of

my research. And it's driving me crazy, in a good way because I know it's temporary and it's part of a bigger project which I'm really excited about.

But I know that if I just sat on my own writing poems all day and not communicating in other ways, interacting with people, passing on... I was going to say passing on my knowledge but it isn't that. We'll probably come back again in a bit to how we see relationships with pupils or students or whatever. But sharing, sharing process and sharing how I do things and how different possibilities is just as important as me having my creative time or my time alone to work. You know, with me and my computer or laptop or notebook or whatever it is.

I think as much as I crave that a lot of the time and especially at the end of a long day where I'm in a school teaching and I'm like, "I just want to be on my own and work!" I crave that but if that was all that I had to do in my life I wouldn't be satisfied either. So it's a weird thing because sometimes I do almost hate it.

And especially working in schools and that was another thing with the spoken word educator project, I'm no longer embedded in a school. And you know, after my last day and after really missing some of the kids that I was working with, suddenly, I was like yeah I'm free! I don't have to put up with all of the pressure that goes into being in a school.

I find schools incredibly depressing places. The institutes themselves and the management and the way they kind of work. But, it does something working in there having those challenges having the conflict between the head teacher who wants no problems, no fuss, nothing controversial. The teachers who want results, the kids who want either to be entertained or to do something that engages them. And you who wants to make it different. Like, all of that, and as a creator as well you want to have your own artistic integrity rather than go into some curriculum or you know what is it 'naval history.

So there's all of these conflicts and that challenges, it creates a lot of heartache and stress and I'd probably have more hair on my head if I didn't ever work in schools. At the same time there is something so valuable and so rewarding and I've also had some of my... Undoubtedly some of my best experiences just being in a school, getting to know pupils who I learned from as well.

I have learned as a poet to write, through teaching poetry and being challenged in all of that. And as much as... Yeah, it's something that does scare me, I have to be prepared for it. I have to be prepared to teach and it isn't easy. It feels like some, you know, it's that expectation, "oh you write, you should teach it as well." It's not easy to do it properly and it's... Especially in schools... I think working with younger people is a particular challenge. But I couldn't see myself not working in some form or another with young people helping them to create poetry.

JSL: I think it's worth pointing out the model of the, or at least part of the model of the spoken word education program. Which was as you said that sense of; Okay, for the first year you'd spend that time working alongside whoever the lead on the program was, having

seminars around both the craft of writing and the craft of teaching. But then also you'd be in a school one day a week I think it was for you all year, right?

KJ: Yes.

JSL: So you're in one day a week working alongside Peter who was leading in that year and with the facility... It was kind of on the job training, that facility to try things out, see how they would work. With, again the kind of support that Miriam was talking about with someone like Peter in the room who would be able to feedback to you after you'd run that workshop. But then the second year, once you've gone through a year of that kind of instruction that kind of training, the second year you take on a school for yourself. And you'd be in school. Your generation of spoken word educators, you had, was it four-day weeks.

KJ: Yes, four days a weeks.

JSL: So I know when... So I stepped into the program and took it on in the second year of the program which is when you guys were just starting your placement. And one of the thoughts I had that I put in place the following year was that, I felt the four-day week... There needed to be a bit more flexibility for people around that, because there's this relationship...

And again one of the things you were touching on was this notion of balance, right. Being able to balance your needs as working artists between the work that you do in concert with other people. The work that you do in spaces that are filled by other people. The work that you do that it's feeding into other people's development but also the work that you necessarily need to do as a writer in that space between you and the page.

And I mean the whole thing about the spoken word education program at the moment is a sense of that balance between you as teaching artist and you as poet in your own right doing that work. I think it's powerful stuff to hear you talking about that kind of, that sense of what it actually takes to be in an education institution. I mean hats off to all of the teachers any teachers that might be listening into this conversation.

MN: Yes, they're amazing.

JSL: All of us who've worked in any of these kinds of roles can appreciate and have some appreciation for the work that it is that teachers have to do. You know, crazy hours Monday to Friday plus whatever time is that they put in from their own time, preparing lesson plans and making sure that they're ready for the next week ahead. You know there is so much that is asked of them and as a teaching artist in a role, if you have that kind of full-time or almost full-time placement. I mean four days a week essentially becomes five days a week.

KJ: Yes.

JSL: Because you're there and you are delivering work for those four days but your fifth day which is supposed to be kind of time out for you to be writing and doing you. Really

becomes, "do I have everything I need for the next week?" And that's something I think we forget, regardless of whether you're a spoken word educator, a resident artist or any other program you might be working on. I think one of the things we sometimes forget to account for is that preparation time, it's not enough for us to just turn up. "Hey I'm here now. Let's write some poems!"

You know there is that preparation time that when we fail to account for [it] we kind of end up bankrupt in terms of time and we kind of lose that... The time has to come from somewhere and we lose that time for ourselves, which is really important. I know self-care is a big thing that I want to talk about in a moment.

But Keith I just wanted to come back to something, you were talking about this notion of relationship with students and how that is formed in terms of, I think it was and you can correct me here. But I think it was that sense of what your needs might be in relation to what it is the needs of the students might be. Was it something along those lines?

KJ: Yeah. I mean there are so many different conflicting needs and it's a bit like you know if you pick up a children's book in a bookshop. The bookshop isn't trying to sell to the child necessarily, it's the librarians and the parents who have the money. But at the same time the child needs to be interested enough to you know... If it's a series, they're going to say, "Mummy, Mummy I want the second one" or "Dad I want the second one."

So you're or my challenge always is thinking you know, who's this for? It's for me, you know there's my own ego at work which is... I love poetry, I love playing with words, for different reasons. One of them, I mean I'm a big fan of like really cheesy puns. You know, I'm just constantly playing around with words. They are my toys which means I need to be careful when I write poetry sometimes to take away like a lot of...

But, so when I do a workshop often I'm thinking about, "okay how can we make this a fun play on words?" That's my own personal thing but then actually, what does the pupil need, what do I want to get out of them? You mentioned also, like about you know, not necessarily having the same... Having an idea of what a class is going to be like but then having different expectations. When I'm told that they're a certain ability or you know... I'm told different things about the pupils, or not, again I have an expectation. Oh, okay so this is what the teacher expects of them and so this is what I want to get out [of them].

And I'm constantly challenging myself to, okay I want to get them to be... You know, if this is someone who has never written I want them to write a poem for the first time. So there's my own ego in this.

JSL: So you set yourself those kinds of challenges?

KJ: Yeah. But a lot of that is my own ego. Whereas, really you know, what is in that child's interest? Maybe, actually they just need to chill and have some time where this is the first time that they've even had the idea that they could express themselves. But then at the same time if this, you know, child wants to express themselves but I know that this school

has a particular rigid policy and says you cannot talk about gangs, guns, crime. You know they've got a whole prescriptive list then I've got that challenge on top of it.

Okay, what takes priority? Is my own politics going to take precedence over the schools, or what I think might be in the child's interests? So I'm constantly thinking about that, I think it's... I was going to say it's easier but it's not. When you're embedded in a school when you're there more than just once then you can really take on board those challenges a bit more.

And then along with the preparation there's emotional work, so you've got to factor that into your preparation time. But then you know, if it's just a one off, you're flying into a school like... In that preparation I've, sort of, got tiny little key points. Okay. let's try and make sure that they all write ten lines, but at the same time. You know, let's really get to what I want from that. Is it to be fun? And for them to not be put off by poetry by the end of the hour.

JSL: Do you have these kind of base line... I mean regardless of whatever the workshop might be. Do you, each of you, do you have your own kind of personal manifesto in terms of... You know, for this kind of workshop experience, for every workshop that I might go into I want to get out a sense of... I want to be able to leave these students with an appreciation of poetry, for example. Or I want to make sure that they have this understanding of how metaphors might work.

Do you have your own set of, whatever the workshop is, here are three key points that are just a part of my practice when I go into a space that I want to try and ensure that these students are left with generally in terms of an experience of poetry? Do you have those?

MN: I think yes and no. Yes, in the sense of things that I kind of want to be in the room or, kind of, core experiences. But no in terms of, you know, a line requirement or everyone has to write a poem even. But I think, you know, the first one is definitely what you said, it's fun and that's something that you taught me very early on. It's like, you need to have fun delivering your workshop, you need to have fun. And that helped me a lot in getting through, kind of, the first fear of going into a classroom in the early days just thinking that, "oh fun!"

JSL: So easy to forget yeah?

MN: And thinking, okay you know... So that's why, you know, it's relevant, me being a sister because my thought about, you know, being with my sisters is that we have a lot of fun. Like, with my sisters I'm probably sillier than with any other people, you know. And so I guess I try and just get a little bit of that. I don't know. It's not often, you know, if I'm going in for the first time I won't know the students. But to try and have a sense of fun.

And then I think there's something else which is very easy to achieve but I'm glad to kind of think of it as a core thing or experience, is that you know, they get to meet a poet and they get to ask them questions. And, you know, obviously I'm going in so that's very easy, that's

already kind of ticked. But it's like there gets to be some exchange where they get to interrogate, "what is a poet, what do you do?"

So I have to remember never to take for granted that you know, that they will understand what a poet is or what my role is and why I'm there. So yeah I think that's a really important one. I'd like to have three you know for roundness.

JSL: For completion. The rule of threes.

MN: I mean, it's not so much a requirement but I do find myself working with the notion of specificity and using a detail. Almost more than anything else in terms of technique because even beyond you know, thinking about what a poem is I want them to understand how language sticks with us in our minds. And I want them to have an experience of that.

So usually that's going to be an initial session by me sharing probably a poem by myself, maybe a poem by someone else and asking them like what they can actually remember after hearing that in the air without being able to read. So that they can you know, hopefully they can start to think like, oh okay... Because that's helpful in every situation in which they're asked to write in school. You know, even in speech actually, being able to convey something in a way that people will remember.

JSL: Keith, can you add anything to that list?

KJ: Anything else to that list?

JSL: In terms of the things that you... When you know you're going into any kind of workshop, whatever that workshop might be. Are there any kind of base principles, base considerations? Regardless of what the specific content of that session actually is. Are there any base principles that you generally adhere to in terms of what that experience should offer the students that you're working with?

KJ: Well my first one is a negative which is just, I don't want them to come away... I don't want to ruin poetry for them.

JSL: Right.

KJ: And that's so easy to do. The other one is, connection and something I learned from being in the school where I was for a year was not to write people of. Which is a tough one because I did it in different ways, because I would target... My aim was, initially I really want to go for the... Because of my background in mentoring and exclusion and all of that I was concentrating on the kids who were kind of deemed bad or deemed at risk of, you know, being... Or having behavioural issues or whatever and then also the kids who are super interested and wanted to come to 'spoken word club.'

So I thought okay I'm going to go for those and people in between I wasn't that concerned about. But at the same time, I mean, looking back that was really naive. There were a few kids that I think I really could have paid more attention to and one in particular by the end

of that year she was so fantastic and helped mentor other kids in poetry and was such a great experience.

So, my greatest thing even if it's a one off is to try and take each person on their own merit as much as I can. But then that, you know, say it's a class of thirty and it's an hour, that's not very feasible. But even just to like get everyone to say their names and just to make sure that I get eye contact with everyone. And just to say... And keep positivity going as the bare minimum, never to dismiss anyone.

Even when I'm trying to get them to work, even if they are like, ah I can't be bothered and I know I've only got this one workshop for one hour with this person who I'll never see again. I'm going to keep an atmosphere of positivity that, one won't put them off but two will make them think wow actually maybe we've connected and there's something... So yeah, in short, to open doors if I can. To keep them open if they're already open. [JSL: Yeah.] And that's it in a short... You know if I don't really know them beforehand.

JSL: Just in terms of my own thinking around the kind of base principles that I like to bear in mind, I try to give over or try and leave my students with some, some kind of technical awareness. Even if it's one point, some kind of technical awareness or technique that they can use in terms of the craft of writing or in terms of their poetry, right. And that kind of goes towards this sense of, I want to make sure that they're left with something that exists beyond me.

So it's not just about me being in the room being the poet who's arrived, who's giving them this, "hey great experience!" And then disappears for a little bit. But that sense of, here are some skills and it's not just about me, it's about your relationship with this thing that we call poetry.

I want to try and ensure... And again I had that experience similar to you Keith of being brought in to work with students who are identified as failing or who have difficulties in the education system or whatever along those lines. And for so many of those students and for so many of the other students I work with regardless of whatever their background is or their sense of attainment or achievement, I want to give them the sense that poetry is something relevant. [MN: Yeah.

Yeah, something that is accessible and something that they can claim as their own. It's not just this kind of old dead thing over there... Which also leads into this, kind of, conversation between poetry and it, kind of, comes back to the poetry/rap thing that we were talking about before... Miriam, I'm still keen to hear you rapping... But that whole sense of the relationship between poetry not being cool and the things that are cool. So that sense of... The relationship between poetry and spoken word, for example. And how we brand things as spoken word to make them accessible to students or how some people brand things as spoken words to make them...

Poetry is a broad, broad field, right and I want to challenge you, I want to push you a little bit. You might say you like this part of that field, which might be defined as spoken word but

I want to show you that that's just one point on a large map. You can travel across that map as much as you want, there are so many different places that you go.

End of transcript.