Using Poetry to Understand Others

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Part of identity is formed through our connections with others; family, friends, and cultural influences can all impact our self-perception in reciprocal relationships where we often influence others as much as they influence us. This lesson engages students with slam poetry that reveals speakers' values through their attitudes toward subjects, with special attention to tradition-themed poetry that delves into practices and customs passed down through generations. Using the AWARE framework (Assert, Wonder, Accept, Respect, Establish), students will analyze performances that explore how heritage shapes identities and societies, examining the ways that word choice and rhetoric reveal poets' perspectives.

Learning Objectives

- Utilize steps in the AWARE framework to guide small and whole-class discussions
- Analyze word choice, rhetoric, and other patterns in slam poetry that reveal the speaker's point of view and purpose
- Reflect on the role of others and how it relates to their own identity through journal writing

Essential Questions

- How can we use the AWARE framework to help us determine what an author believes and values?
- How do other people in our lives shape our identity?
- How might we influence and shape the identity of others?
- What role do traditions and culture have in shaping one's identity?

Suggested Materials and Media

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- "Vincent" by Don McLean
- "Brave Seventh Grade Viking Warrior" by Taylor Mali or "Poem for the First Day of the Poetry Unit in Language Arts Class" by Kyle "Guante" Tran Myhre
- "Mayda del Valle at the White House Poetry Jam"
- Writing prompts about others (included in the Unit Overview)

Part One: Mutual Influence

Step 1

- Introduce the essential questions and play "Vincent" by Don McLean on YouTube for the class. The video in the link includes lyrics to the song and pictures by Van Gogh. Use the AWARE framework for art analysis to guide an informal whole-class discussion.
- Use the following questions and prompts to guide your discussion.

- Assert your opinion about what you see and hear. Describe the elements (colors, subject, focal point) that stand out to you in the artwork. Describe the tone of the song.
- Wonder: What ideas or feelings is the artist trying to express (both the singer and Van Gogh)?
- Accept the viewpoints of others. What opinions about Van Gogh are expressed in the lyrics of "Vincent"?
- Respect: What do you think Don McLean wanted us to understand about Van Gogh?
- Establish: How can we be influenced by others even if we have never met them?

Step 2

Have students watch "Brave Seventh Grade Viking Warrior" by Taylor Mali or "Poem for the First Day of the Poetry Unit in Language Arts Class" by Kyle "Guante" Tran Myhre on YouTube. Consider playing the video once for the whole class and then uploading a link for students to watch in small groups. If students do not have the ability to watch the video a second time, the teacher should play the video twice. The YouTube video includes a transcript; the teacher may want to print the transcript for students so they can annotate it.

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Step 3

Review the essential questions with the class and invite verbal responses. Students may need guidance in defining cultural values. Examples of cultural values could include bravery, courage, attitudes toward school, attitudes toward life/death, openness, strength, camaraderie, and empathy. Brainstorm a list of values with the class that relate to the poem you watched.

Step 4

Ask students to work with a partner to answer the AWARE questions outlined in the table below. Students should respond in complete sentences.

	AWARE questions	My thoughts
Assert	How do our bravery and fear affect our interactions with others?	
Wonder	Why did the speaker choose to use the _____ (Vikings/hot air balloon) as a symbol in the poem?	
Accept	Explain the cultural values reinforced in this poem.	
Respect	How can others influence our behavior and self-perception?	
Establish	How can this poem influence your own writing or perspective?	

Note: If you have a 45- or 50-minute class, this is a good stopping point. You can pick up the second part the next day.

Part Two: Tradition

Step 1

Play "Mayda del Valle at the White House Poetry Jam" for students. Consider playing the video once for the whole class and then uploading a link for students to watch in small groups. If students do not have the ability to watch the video a second time, the teacher should play the video twice.

Step 2

Have students independently write their responses to the AWARE questions outlined in the table below.

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	AWARE questions	My thoughts
Assert	Why might someone look to their family's past for wisdom and guidance in their life today?	
Wonder	How does this speaker seem to be influenced by her ancestors?	
Accept	What new perspectives about faith does this poem address?	
Respect	How do you think learning about our ancestors and their experiences can help us understand ourselves better?	
Establish	How can this poem influence your own writing or perspective?	

Step 3

Students will use the writing from their AWARE organizers to guide a class discussion about both poems. Before you begin, decide on a discussion structure that works best for your students and allows you to assess their speaking skills. Small-group discussions can allow more students to participate at once but can be more difficult for teachers to facilitate. Whole-class discussions often become more like a series of questions and answers between the teacher and students instead of a natural conversation. Some other discussion options include organizing students into a fishbowl or star seminar that allows a limited group of students to discuss at one time while other students observe. The discussion formats allow the teacher to continually mix up the smaller discussion groups until every student has had a chance to participate. After you have chosen a discussion format, consider prefacing the discussion with the following:

- Share expectations for discussion and review sentence stems for responding to peers on the AWARE Framework for Poetry Analysis graphic organizer. Provide a printed copy of sentence stems for English language learners or students with processing challenges.

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- Explain that the purpose of the discussion is not to come to an agreement on what the poems mean but to share different perspectives and opinions related to the poems.
- Remind students that they should use evidence from the poems to answer the essential questions during the discussion. Students may need guidance to see how the questions on AWARE relate to the essential questions.

Step 4 (Optional)

As an extension activity, ask students to revise the information they wrote from one of the organizers into a multiparagraph analysis about the poem.

Closing

- Have students select a writing prompt about others (included in the Unit Overview) and record their thoughts in their journals.
- Note: Teachers can choose to add a grammar and usage standard to journal writing prompts.

Common Core State Standards

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1.d: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning

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and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.9-10.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.2.c: Use varied transitions and sentence structures to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

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