



MAKE THE ANVIL THEIRS:

Assessing the Impact of Oral Poetry on Young Children's Imaginations



WolfBrown helps funders, nonprofit institutions and public agencies understand their potential, set priorities, and fulfill their promise. At the heart of our work is the belief that every human being has a unique creative voice of intrinsic worth and that every community has a responsibility to awaken, nurture, and sustain its cultural capital.



Founded in 1985, **City Lore** is New York City's center for urban folk culture. Our mission is to foster New York City – and America's – living cultural heritage through education and public programs in service of cultural equity and social justice.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank the U.S. Department of Education, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation for their generous support in realizing this research. We would also like to thank the staff, teaching artists, and students in City Lore's Homer 2 Hip Hop and Roots, Routes, and Rhythms programs for their contributions and dedication to the fields of oral poetry and folk traditions.



INTRODUCTION

Do folk arts have a place in arts education?

Everyone, not only “artists,” has an imagination.

Streets and woodlands, as much as museums, exhibit human inventions. Think about how people in flood plains have created sculpture out of the stranded trees, **like woodcarver Simon O’Rourke**, or how entire neighborhoods come together to show off **holiday decorations**. These are small, everyday acts of creativity.

Our everyday language is just as much a playing field for imagination. Conversations, as much as scripted plays and composed operas, exhibit human invention. Whenever people teach six-year-olds how to tell riddles, use metaphors in public meetings (in the *wake* of George Floyd’s murder), or tell the tale of their ill-fated commute to work, they exhibit how to invent and create with words to articulate human experience.

However, when we advocate for arts education – the space to cultivate creativity and invention – we are often speaking up for the “fine” arts, not for these daily forms of imagination or “folk” arts. But how much plainer would life be, without impromptu kitchen dances, hand-made wedding dresses, or the oral legends passed down in families?

Similarly, national, state, and local literacy standards largely shun creative writing in favor of fact- and argument-based forms. Most curricula for English as a New Language (ENL) learners hones reading and writing, rather than the speaking and listening capacities that so many young people have across their languages. These narrow conceptions of literacy waste one of the most vital and universal starting places for learning about language as an *artistic* medium, and about people as potential wordsmiths, storytellers, and poets.

More broadly, turning away from jokes, legends, and lyrics – the creative heartbeat of our days – may foreclose on one of the most immediate arenas in which young people learn to articulate how they see the world.



Photo Credit: Simon O’Rourke



OUR WORK IN PROGRESS

How do we reclaim the power of language?

Over the past eight years, **WolfBrown** has partnered with **City Lore**, an urban folk lore center in New York City, to bring folklore practices into classrooms throughout that city. Most recently the work has centered on using oral poetry traditions to celebrate the language and literacy skills of young people in Queens, NY – possibly the most linguistically and culturally diverse set of zip codes in the contemporary United States – through the **Homer to Hip Hop** program. (See the sidebar for additional information about the program.)

Through grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation, poets and teaching artists are sharing oral language forms from the U.S. (e.g., the Blues poem, hip hop lyrics, etc.) and those brought from other cultures (e.g., Japan's street theatre, *kamishibai*, the Persian lyric form, *ghazal*, etc.) to teach the power of all languages, and all speakers, to young children in the hopes that they garner the confidence to invent through words.

QUESTIONS DRIVING THE PARTNERSHIP

Folk arts and folklore are about celebrating the histories, traditions, invention, and creativity that make up the fabric of everyone's daily life.

In that spirit, City Lore wanted to know what would happen if folklorists partnered with culturally and linguistically diverse teaching artists to envelop students in oral language traditions over a five-year-period. More specifically, as their evaluation partner, we (the team at WolfBrown) wanted to know whether engaging and sustained oral poetry residencies could have a measurable impact on young people. We had these questions:

- Will this kind of residency program change young people's attitude toward poetry? Will they come to see it as a powerful way of making their voices heard?
- Will they grow more open and curious about the poetry of other traditions and cultures?
- Will they grow as poets?
- Does time spent with poetry transfer to other domains? For example,
 - If asked to transfer what they learn in City Lore to social studies or science class, do they write in more imaginative and individual ways?
 - How is the writing and thinking of young people with multiple years of City Lore residencies different from that of their peers?

What is City Lore's Homer to Hip Hop program?

Launched in 2018, Homer to Hip Hop is an in-school arts program that engages young people in exploring poetry and oral traditions from diverse cultures around the world, including from their own communities in NYC.

More specifically, it is a teaching-artist led, in-school, artist residency programs for children in grades 3-8. Students across 4 partner schools in Queens participate in extensive residencies that involve the same teaching artists over time. More specifically, the students attend 16 sessions per year to develop oral fluency, self-expression, and confidence through the fun and mastery of oral poetry.

Learn more about the program by visiting the program page on City Lore's [website](#).



MEASURING POETIC THINKING

In this work, we are using familiar forms of evaluation (e.g., interview, observation, and student work samples) as well as experimenting with using of poetic writings as forms of inquiry.

For example, to understand students' growing understanding of poetry, we will be asking them to invent a special pen for writing poems and to explain the unique features of that pen. On the following page is an example from one nine-year-old's response to this prompt: "Imagine a pen that has special features that make it very good for writing poems. You can draw it or describe it – or do both."

"The pen has settings. *When you set it on poetry it writes in that specific way.*

Like it counts the syllables, and decides how long the line should be, and follows the rhyme scheme, like **ABAB**. For that you fill it with the poetry ink.

But it also has **another** chamber you can fill. That's for the erasing fluid. You need that for changing mistakes but also for cutting out all the extra words that *get in the way of the meaning jumping out at you.*

It can help you show the poem's bones, no fancy disguise."

IMPACT OF THE WORK TO DATE

As with many of WolfBrown's long-standing partnerships, this work and collaboration with City Lore has been mutually enriching.

For City Lore:

This project is an opportunity for a successful, community-based nonprofit to build its capacity as a reflective and inquiring organization. To date, City Lore has:

- Attracted grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation to support this work;
- Deepened partnerships with Queens public schools, many of whom are multi-year partners, building a kind of poetry "pathway" that stretches across several years, ensuring that students can mature and grow as creative writers, and



- Increased visibility for the organization's education programs through publications, conferences, and blogs. For instance, **Volume 8 of the Journal of Folklore Education** features two articles about the oral poetry projects (Wolf and Sadeque). The journal is free to access online, making it a powerful resource for educators and cultural institutions, especially those working on culturally responsive and sustaining education.

For WolfBrown:

This work is an ongoing opportunity for us to imagine and stretch as evaluators. To date, we have:

- Been able to live up to our new motto, "Culture is plural", by working with a program that honors multiple oral traditions and everyone's right to imagine through folklore and folk art; and,
- Developed a set of qualitative and artistic tools (like the poetry pens prompt) that can capture the impact of creative oral communication on young peoples' command and use of language. This is a continuing part of our effort to use artistic processes as research tools.

"I KNOW, I WISH, I WONDER"

Segment of a City Lore Community Poem

I wish I was a scary box.

I wish I was a golden fox.

I wish I can spill like iced tea.

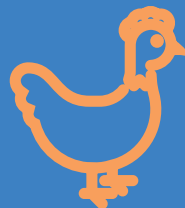
I wish I was a purple bat,
I would have a nose that was flat.

I wish I was the fire you seek and fear.

I wish Wendy's would bring back chicken nuggets.

I wish I could be a medicine that makes people feel better.

I wish I was a green box of chocolate foxes.





IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

What comes next?

In recent years, educators have expanded the traditional four disciplines of arts education – music, theatre, dance, and visual arts – to include media arts. Folklore and Literary Arts should be the sixth and seventh – or at least a major strand in each of the existing disciplines.

The sector – from educators, administrators, policymakers, to researchers and evaluators – can create space for the sixth and seventh disciplines by:

- Acknowledging folklore as a long-standing example of culturally responsive and sustaining education.
- Documenting and researching how folklore can become an integral part of classroom instruction, particularly as a source for developing young peoples' sense that they belong and can contribute to school communities.

We are eager to continue this work and share our findings with the broader community.



Photo Credit: City Lore



FURTHER LEARNING

Publications:

To learn more about this specific partnership and research, consider reading:

Dargan, Amanda and Steve Zeitlin. 2021. In the Moment: Poetry Duels and Improvisations. <https://vimeo.com/408676251>

Dargan, Amanda, Steve Zeitlin, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. 1990. City Play. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 121.

Hebert LaBry, S. (Ed.). (2021). Creative Texts | Creative Traditions. Journal of Folklore in Education, 8, 189. <https://jfepublications.org/journal/vol-8/>

Wolf, Dennie P. 2021. Make the Anvil Theirs: When Poetry Meets Folklore. Journal of Folklore and Education. 8:4-11. <https://jfepublications.org/article/make-the-anvil-theirs/>

Palmer Wolf, Dennie, Steven J. Holochwost, Tal Bar-Zemer, Amanda Dargan, and Anika Selhorst. 2014. "Some Things in My House Have a Pulse and a Downbeat": The Role of Folk and Traditional Arts Instruction in Supporting Student Learning. *Journal for Learning through the Arts*. 10.1.

Zeitlin, Steve. 2016. *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Additional Sources:

To learn more about WolfBrown, go to www.wolfbrown.com.

To learn more about the City Lore, go to: www.citylore.org.

If a poem could be a tool for doing things, what would it be?

"An anvil. You can forge words and ideas on it. All the time, you have these thoughts floating around in your head, sort of soft and messy and not real.

When you try to put them into a poem, you have to forge them out. The hammer and the heat of it gets the shape you really want—you get more world-like ideas."

- 11-year-old City Lore participant