



Why I Teach My Students to be Brave

At my spoken word camp, I watched a 15-year-old girl bring us to tears with her raw openness. That is why I teach.

By Kristin Leong



Editor's Note, Part 1: This is part of a series called, "Why I Teach," in which educators share their stories about what keeps them in the profession. This story is adapted from a recent Seattle Times storytelling event, "Why I Teach." The Seattle Times' Education Lab organized the event in partnership with NPR affiliate 88.5 KPLU and the University of Washington College of Education.

I launched a spoken word summer camp last July. I was thrilled when an unexpected crew of 7th to 12th graders actually signed up to write poems with me in the middle of their summer break. This was an organic progression for me, a humanities teacher, because I tell the kids right from the first day of school that we're all going to become performers this year, and it totally freaks them out.

And I tell them it's okay. That we're all just going to practice being brave over and over until we actually become brave, and we do. Every single year. And this is why I teach.

Slam Camp was such a great opportunity for me because I got to do an accelerated version of my yearlong classroom—in a week. So we had to build our community really fast, which was an interesting challenge because I had kids in there from an 11-year-old boy who was obsessed with lacrosse and superheroes, all the way up to young adults who were learning how to drive and fall in love.

So we started off really safe. On Monday, we were doing things like reciting Blackalicious lyrics and acting out the Whole Foods Parking Lot Song. By Thursday, we were ready to have bigger conversations. We were having conversations about what other kind of performances we're doing in our lives. Like gender. Like being cool. By Friday we were ready to talk about anger and that was okay because we had created the safe space where we could do that, where we could take that risk.

It was on that Friday that one of my students, a pretty and popular 15-year-old girl got up and took the microphone and blew us all away. From the first line in her poem, she had the room totally stunned, totally silent. She cried right from the beginning, and then she cried all the way through.

She ranted against Seventeen magazine. She spat back against that horrible quote, "*Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels.*" She told us that her friends didn't seem to love themselves the way that they love each other. She said her poem was for every cookie they wouldn't eat.

By the end of that poem she was still crying, but her voice was loud and clear. She had her shoulders back. She had her hair pulled back away from her beautiful wet face. Her feet were planted on the floor. By the end of that poem she was... triumphant.

She was celebrating her 15-year-old body in all of its curves. For the thigh gap that she didn't need. And that poem echoed like a rally call through the microphone and filled up our classroom. And by the time she was done, her face still red and wet, the room was still totally silent. The room was still totally stunned.

And then all at once, we stood up and we started to clap. And then clap and clap and then cheer and then cry—she had all of us crying right along with her—and hugging and cheering.

And then that boy, the 11-year-old, gets up, turns to all of us in the audience, ecstatic, and says to all of us, "THAT WAS THE MOST AMAZING THING I HAVE EVER SEEN." (And we're like, dude, you're 11...) But it was. It was the most amazing thing any of us had ever seen.

And we were all crying and cheering with her because we were celebrating her bravery. We were celebrating the empathy that she had created in that classroom that day. But we were also celebrating her willingness to totally disregard whether or not we were ready as her audience for what she was ready to tell us. And in fact we had worked up to that Friday. We *were* ready for what she had to tell us.

I checked in with that student recently, and I thanked her for allowing me to share her story. She told me that her favorite thing about Slam Camp was also her favorite thing about our humanities class together. (I had her as a student as a 7th grader and also as an 8th grader.) She said, "You ask us to do things that scare us all the time."

And I realized—that’s why I teach. And that’s why I’m here tonight, at the University of Washington, pretending that I’m brave too. Practicing what I teach.

Editor’s Note, Part 2: A video of Kristin Leong’s talk is available here, and she reflected on this talk in this essay.

Illustration by Marina Muun



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