

# 'Poetry does really educate': *An Interview with Spoken Word Poet Luka Lesson*

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**Abstract:** Spoken word poetry is a means of engaging young people with a genre that has often been much maligned in classrooms all over the world. This interview with the Australian spoken word poet Luka Lesson explores issues that are of pressing concern to poetry education. These include the idea that engagement with poetry in schools can be enhanced by putting spoken word poetry on the curriculum, the suggestion to provide teachers with professional development opportunities in order to equip them with the confidence to create poetry, and the need to surmount some of the societal, institutional and pedagogical challenges that hinder the promotion of poetry in education.

In June 2014 I visited Australia in order to conduct research on poetry education. One of the organisations that I visited on my trip was The Red Room Company, a nonprofit organisation based in Sydney devoted to promoting poetry as broadly as possible. One of its programs consists of poets taking up a residency at schools. Some of the figures for the poet-in-residence initiative are impressive. Employing 18 poets to run 63 workshops for 4,507 students and 185 teachers at 43 schools in all six Australian states, the program resulted in 16,247 contact hours in 2014 alone (The Red Room Company, 2015, p. 14). The Red Room Company employs these poets to engage young people with poetry, especially in socially disadvantaged contexts that sometimes consist of immigrant, non-English-speaking communities. Spoken word poetry is given a lot of importance. Hirsch (2014) explains that the term is a catchall that incorporates different kinds of recited poetry, including slam poetry, in which poets perform their work and are judged by an audience, and performance poetry, which refers 'to a type of contemporary poetry composed either for or during performance before an audience' (p. 453). Despite mentioning students' creation of performances and poetry among other texts, the absence of an explicit reference to spoken word poetry in the Australian Curriculum English (ACARA, n.d.) is conspicuous. This is especially so given the importance it is given in the current poetry education literature (Gordon, 2009; Williams, 2015).

One of the poets employed by The Red Room Company is spoken word and hip-hop artist Luka Lesson, this being the stage name for Luke Haralampou. His choice of stage name is especially appropriate given his work with students. In a way he teaches young people to perceive poetry in a different manner from how it is traditionally depicted in class. Lesson is of Greek heritage and a firm believer in the value of multiculturalism. A graduate in Indigenous Studies, he has taught the subject at Monash University. He is reported as having 'helped many marginalised young people find their own voice, to speak up about racism and all things unjust' (Xing, 2012). Moreover, he is described as being 'committed to standing with communities of all backgrounds to establish a connection between social issues, poetry and self-empowerment' (The Red Room Company, 2015b). It is probably for these

reasons that Lesson co-founded the Centre for Poetics and Justice, a Melbourne-based community organisation dedicated to the integration of poetics and social transformation. The organisation runs spoken word workshops within a variety of youth venues, including schools and juvenile detention centres. Its workshops use performance poetry as a vehicle for young people's expression and social engagement.

Lesson has been active in the spoken word poetry scene since 2009 and currently works as a full-time poet, frequently collaborating with musicians and visual artists. In 2011, he won the Australian Poetry Slam final and the fame that ensued as a result of this has allowed him to tour the world performing his poetry, particularly in the USA, Asia, South Africa and Oceania. *Please Resist Me* was Lesson's first spoken word poetry album and it challenges the exploitation conducted by colonial and social powers:

Please resist me  
Colonise me, compromise me and conflict me  
Please don't risk me  
Please call me stupid  
Because your resistance  
Brings my evolution

It is because of the expression of such sentiments that Lesson's 'poetry not only resonates with audiences, it dares them, teases and coaxes them into something infinitely brighter' (Sometimes, 2013). Despite the somewhat ephemeral nature of spoken word poetry, Lesson published *The Future Ancients* in 2013. The book acts a poetry collection and an interactive means by which the reader can engage with the text, either by jotting down their own lines or else by linking to audio and video recordings of Lesson's performances through QR codes.

Besides being a spoken word performer, Lesson (as cited in Saeed, 2015) sees it as his job to engage young people with poetry:

I get employed to make poetry be something more than dusty books and old irrelevant quotes by dead authors. Schools teach poetry but kids generally aren't that keen, so my job is to help facilitate writing and the performance of students' own work, some of which are as young as 13 years old. It is actually much easier than people think. Young people of all backgrounds are yearning to be heard, and stamp their authority and name on this era.

Lesson (as cited in Saeed, 2015) is aware that in order to engage young people it is necessary to change

their perception of poetry by means of such forms as spoken word:

People envision boredom more than anything when they hear that word ... Although taken as 'classic' and 'proper English' now, Shakespeare was doing then what spoken word and rap do now, fully owning his language and using it in whatever way he felt fit, capturing the slang of lay people from the streets, not the bourgeoisie who have since claimed him as their own. The stigma is falling though, thanks to the work of great and powerful poets practicing their art form and talking about current issues worldwide.

It is with the intention of exploring Lesson's commitment to engaging young people with poetry that I asked to interview him after observing one of his workshops at a high school in the southwest of Sydney. Some of the issues that Lesson touches upon in the interview are highly significant within poetry education. These include the importance of broadening the curriculum's conception of poetry by enabling young people to watch and perform spoken word poetry, the benefits of providing teachers with professional development opportunities that encourage them to position themselves as creators of poetry rather than merely consumers of the genre, the significance of selecting pedagogical approaches that engage young people with poetry, and the challenges to and means of promoting poetry even more powerfully in education. While giving credit to those teachers who invite spoken words poets such as himself to the classroom as a means of heightening students' engagement with poetry, Lesson also questions the effectiveness of pre- and in-service training in preparing teachers for the job of teaching poetry. This seems to be in line with Ewing's (2010) idea that a 'paucity in pre-service training is compounded by the widespread lack of sufficient or appropriate in-service teacher professional learning in the Arts' (p. 35)

Lesson's interview, presented verbatim, is one of a series of interviews on poetry education I have conducted with poets in the UK, Australia and the USA over the past few years. A number of interview-based articles such as this one have been published in refereed journals (e.g. Xerri, 2012, 2014a, 2014b) or are in the process of being published. One of the aims of these articles is to provide poets with a means of weighing in on the poetry education debate and thus enrich the existent literature, from which their voices are usually absent. Another aim is to provide teachers with access to poets' thoughts on poetry education and

thus broaden their understanding of ways of engaging young people with the genre and the rationale for such engagement.

### The Interview

XERRI: Some people have voiced concern about the status of poetry in contemporary culture. They maintain that poetry is experiencing a crisis and that its readership is in decline. From your experience of working with young people, do you consider such sentiments to be valid?

LESSON: I think that poetry hit rock bottom but is now on its way back up. I think the entry point for that journey back up is spoken word or performance poetry or slam poetry. I don't think it's the best form of poetry; I don't think that there's such a thing as best or better poetry. But I'm a fan of the oral tradition of poetry, that kind of way of writing and experiencing poetry.

XERRI: When you say poetry hit rock bottom, what do you think are the factors that led to its decline?

LESSON: Not being able to move forward from what people call 'the classics' and not being able to connect with current poetic forms as well as being too dusty, traditional, and Anglo-centric when it comes to poetic forms.

XERRI: Did you see that in your own education?

LESSON: Absolutely! My education on poetry was so boring and so disconnected from the poetry in my culture and from the poetry that every single person in my classroom already had in their cultures. If someone had told me this Greek poet was a really good poet I would have totally ate it up but instead I was being taught to sound like eighteenth or nineteenth century Englishmen. Poetry is only as good as its poets, only as interesting as its characters. My education was basically teaching me to imitate someone that was so ethnically and historically disconnected from who I was that I had no entry point into the reasoning for why I would find that interesting.

XERRI: When you chose to become a performance poet or else poetry discovered you, did you feel that you were trying to position yourself as a rebel against the education you had received?

LESSON: Not necessarily. I don't really think that was a primary function of why I was becoming a poet. It's just that I was doing workshops for as long as I was writing. So I was in schools a lot and a lot of my work ended up being providing teachers with a relief because they also wanted their students to get excited and have an entry point into poetry. At the start I was like, 'Oh yeah, this might be a bit rebellious' or 'They're not going to like me because I'm

a hip-hop guy.' But actually I found the opposite. Teachers were craving to have a hip-hop artist or a poet interested in their classrooms so that their students could fall in love with words. I think that's all that teachers should be doing initially. They should forget about the word 'poetry' or what form it takes and instead help students to fall in love with words in as many ways as that can be done.

XERRI: When you work with young people in schools – schools being a very formal and artificial setting – do you feel that you're trying to distance yourself from your own poetry education?

LESSON: Totally! My poetry education at school has nothing to do with me as a poet. It never really affected me. When I was young my mum gave me a copy of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching and although it might not be called a poetry text it was very poetic and it made me fall in love with words. It wasn't the main thing that made me want to be a poet but I realise now that that was something I loved. I was also into music when I was young. Hip-hop was really my poetry education, I think. Now I'm going full circle and discovering page poetry because I can appreciate it and understand it better.

XERRI: But at the same time you seem to want to inspire the young people you work with to become spoken word poets.

LESSON: Any poets! I don't think there's a page versus stage poetry thing. I'm in love with all forms of it but what I want is for a generation of young people to know that they can just sound like themselves and express themselves in a way that's contemporary for them. By definition, teachers won't necessarily know what that means; they won't necessarily be on the same level as young people. Young people make new words and play with language so much in the classroom and anywhere else all the time.

XERRI: How solid is poetry's status within the Australian educational system?

LESSON: How solid? I'd say it's not going anywhere. Poetry is definitely going to be part of the English curriculum and has been part of it for a long time. The way in which it's going to be taught is the most important issue though.

XERRI: Is there sufficient support for the promotion of poetry in education here in Australia?

LESSON: I'm going to say no because I know what poetry can do, how far it can be taken, how strong it can be, and how it can feed into other art forms. Poetry can form the basis of lyrics writing, the basis of script writing, the basis of a lot of experiences with words. I mean that's my opinion as a poet. I think that if young people are taught

to be poets or to express themselves freely and perform their work, even if they don't become poets later on in life, poetry does help human beings become more whole. It's good to be able to put words down on paper, to be able to be unafraid of all the things that are in your head, or the fears that you might have, or the memories you're trying to avoid. Poetry is really an art therapy of sorts.

XERRI: What are the challenges here in Australia when it comes to promoting poetry in education?

LESSON: There aren't enough poets; there aren't enough good quality performance poets that can run a good workshop and that can really get the most out of young people. I think there are actually holes in the market that allow more young people to be full-time professional poets. I think it's important that we're able to train or help poets become workshop artists that are high quality when doing their thing. Another hole is that even though there are schools that are definitely interested in poetry, there are also plenty of schools that don't know what it is at all. Once people discover what it is, they like it. For example, I'm lucky because once people come to one of my gigs they're like, 'I've never heard of performance poetry but I love you. I hated rap before but I love this. I don't know what it is, I don't know why, but I love it.' And that's why I say that poetry hit rock bottom but it's coming back. Once people go to a slam or a good event or they see a good poet, they're fans for life. A lot of the people who attend such events are teachers or are involved in education in some way; they can see the value in that. In the States there's a whole tour that you can do that's just made up of colleges. There's a market. There's actually an event that all the college heads of English departments go to. You perform either by yourself or in your group and they book you for the year. That's an event that happens once a year in the States. So there's a real gap in terms of the forward thinking of the organisation of the whole poetry thing here in Australia. However, having said that, we don't have that many poets of high quality.

XERRI: Why not?

LESSON: Australia is an interesting case because we have a small population with a huge landmass. So we're finding it hard to influence each other and to grow as artists if we don't live in the city centres where there's a lot of poetry going on. Even then I wouldn't say that the best poetry I've seen has been in Australia. It's hard to grow as an artist in Australia because of the distance, time and money that it takes to travel around and experience great poetry and to go to as many gigs as possible. A lot of us aren't discovering spoken word until later because we didn't do it at school.

But the next generation will be stronger and better for sure.

XERRI: What should be done to promote poetry in education even more broadly?

LESSON: I would suggest that YouTube be treated like a library, that there be videos on the curriculum that every student in Australia needs to see, that is, spoken word videos from Australian and overseas artists. I would then implement programs where poetry slams were part of the poetry curriculum. For instance, I sometimes spend a month at Xavier College [Melbourne's premier private secondary institution] and poetry slams are embedded in the English curriculum. Every student has to write a poem about justice, every class has a poetry slam, the top two from every class go into a final poetry slam and then Year 10 has a poetry slam champion every year. It means that every single person is writing and performing something and facing a lot of fears and learning a lot of things in the process.

XERRI: Do you have any suggestions with regards to teacher education?

LESSON: I think teachers are really busy. I think teachers have a really tough job. Those that are thinking outside the box really need support. Many of the things I do when I do teacher training consist of basic workshop outlines, showing resources available online, and giving them class sets of my book so that they can use it in their lessons. I also encourage them to write their own poetry and perform it and be strong in that so that students can see that it's a two way street.

XERRI: What are the benefits of teaching creative writing to young people?

LESSON: I think a lot of people when they get older and they haven't learnt creative writing feel very frustrated with their lives. I think the more words that we have in our heads the more successfully we can express exactly what we're feeling. Without that we get very frustrated and with that frustration comes acting out or self-loathing or anger or just frustration with situations. I think creative writing is essential, whether it's a diary or a poem or an anecdote or whatever. To be able to say what we feel and put it out into the world is to exist. So I think it's essential.

XERRI: What do you hope to achieve by means of a poetry workshop with young people?

LESSON: At the very least I want them to have fun with words and to have a laugh and enjoy the value of making a joke or creating a line that makes sense. At the most I've had students who have gone from cutting themselves

and being 100% on the edge of suicide to becoming great poets and writing a poem everyday. I keep in contact with them and then they grow and change and become beautiful artists. I've been doing this for a number of years and I've seen that the students who have been close to a negative edge or suffering a lot in their lives might not have made poetry their career but it became a catalyst for change. I also try to work with the people whose role is to educate, those that listen to what's going on in the hearts and minds of young people so that we can all raise our consciousness as a society. That's really what I'm all about.

XERRI: How do young people usually respond to your workshops?

LESSON: They love it. I've never really had a negative situation with a student disliking something to that end. There might be a grumpy kid or two but usually even the kids that are super angry and upset about something they're also sometimes the best poets because they've got a poem in them. That frustration is exactly what I had at school. I was always talking a lot or hating class or being bored. Sometimes they're the best poets. I'm lucky that I'm happy to be in a classroom, that I love being in a classroom, that I'm still young enough for students to see that it's a young person's thing that they can jump into. I've had incredible things happen in a classroom that I can't begin to explain.

XERRI: Do you feel they respond better to performance poetry rather than page poetry, or the opposite?

LESSON: In my experience it's performance poetry that they respond to better. You wouldn't call me a page poet even though I have a book, but it's always the embodiment of the poem, it's always the passion that I bring in presenting the poem that initially grabs their attention and makes them understand what it is I'm getting at. So it's always performance poetry.

XERRI: You've already mentioned that you have experience of working with teachers. What are your views on their approach to poetry teaching?

LESSON: I live in a bubble because my experience of teachers is of those who have asked me to come into a school or they're at an event and they see me perform. I see a lot of teachers that are using YouTube, grasping at anything they can to be able to give students something interesting for them to enter the world of poetry, anything to make poetry come alive for them. So I see a lot of teachers being really creative and being inclusive and culturally aware. Poetry does really educate. If you use YouTube for half an hour you can see poets of twenty different nationalities speaking about something important. That's

what a rapper I'm influenced by calls 'edutainment', which is educating through entertaining means. That is why I got into what I do. It can be entertaining but still educational. Entertainment draws people in to be educated. That's how spoken word poetry can go much further than a book.

XERRI: How dependent is the success of performance poetry in schools on the passion of these specific teachers that you've mentioned?

LESSON: Very dependent! If it weren't for the passion of those teachers spoken word wouldn't be in schools because it's not on the curriculum.

XERRI: Should it be part of the curriculum?

LESSON: Yes, because as soon as young people have this experience they are motivated to do spoken word poetry or engage in it. I think that the curriculum needs to be half what adults feel young people need to learn and half what young people are really hungry for. If they're already listening to spoken word poetry or they're already into a Luka Lesson or an Omar Musa or a Taylor Mali or whoever it is, then that should definitely be part of the curriculum so that they can grow and be influenced by and become poets. Spoken word poetry is now a career so there's no reason why it shouldn't be part of the curriculum.

XERRI: Students who find themselves at a school where there is a teacher who is passionate about spoken word poetry are lucky in a way. How can we reach the other teachers? What kind of support can they be provided with at pre- and in-service levels?

LESSON: A lot of the English teachers that I meet, even if they've never heard of me before, they do get to love what it is that I do and what other poets do. They can appreciate what it involves. To be able to give them access to spoken word in teacher training or through the curriculum, whether it's through a book or a video clip or an event or anything at all, that will make spoken word explode; it would make it quite powerful in this country. I think this is shown by how many teachers are getting into it on their own. Once they hear of it then they really understand that young people will engage with it.

XERRI: Is there the willpower to really allow teachers to come into contact with performance poetry, to provide them with training on how they could actually cultivate this particular set of skills in their students?

LESSON: In my experience there isn't really any willpower on the part of the authorities to put spoken word poetry on the curriculum. I don't think so. At the moment I'm in talks with a guy who sits on a board that decides on which texts feature in the English curriculum in Victoria. I gave

him my book and I'm trying to make that happen. But it's difficult, especially if it's a book of a spoken word artist or a CD of a spoken word artist who refuses to put things in books because they're all about the oral tradition. There are plenty of ways in which it can be done but I don't think any poet has had the balls or the guts to talk to these people. I think often the problem is that these two worlds aren't talking to each other. We just sit back and say, 'Oh they hate us. They hate our poetry.' But it's possible that these people just live in circles where they have no idea who I am and what kind of work I do. I really hope there are a hundred full-time poets by the time my day is done. It looks promising. There are at least two poetry slams in Australia that get at least 200 people plus every month and all those people are falling in love with it again and again. I think it's on the rise.

XERRI: You might agree with the idea that teachers are the agents of change in a way. How important is it for them to position themselves as readers and writers of poetry when they're teaching young people?

LESSON: I would say it's very important. However, not if it's insincere or if it's just for the sake of it; that would cause more damage than good. But whenever I've been in a class where I've helped students to write something and the teacher has written as well and has shared what they've written and it might be something vulnerable or personal, the respect between teacher and students becomes so equal and solid. Vulnerability is a tool that is sometimes undervalued by teachers. It's not just about teaching but it's about sharing and learning and being able to express everything. So yes, I think it's important. I think teachers should definitely be connoisseurs of poetry, they should definitely have read some of the greats or at least know how to YouTube for a couple of hours so that they can show students some cool stuff. But if they do it only because it's on the curriculum then it becomes just like any other subject. A good teacher is what makes a good subject. My best subjects at school were the ones my best teachers were into.

XERRI: Can teachers step into your shoes and do what you do?

LESSON: Yes and no. I'd say no because I've spent as many hours learning what I do as they've spent learning what they do. So obviously it's my profession. But vulnerability, personal strength, and self-expression can be found in anyone. Sometimes the best poets are the poets that are performing their very first poem on stage; sometimes that experience is the greatest thing you can witness. I'm not going to say that it's some kind of academic or prophetic

skill that I've gained, but I do think that teachers should try it. If they're that way inclined they should really get into it. I've done workshops with CEOs of businesses who cry afterwards because they remember something about their children that they might have forgotten because they work so hard. There are so many beautiful poems that can be written by anybody at all. I did a workshop with about 400 teachers over four weeks and every time I did it I got them to write a poem. All did the exact same thing as students. When they were writing the poem and I was walking around the room they all started leaning over it so that no one could see it. I asked them to perform and they were really quiet. And then one or two confident ones got up and they always have super long poems because they're great writers. And then I'd pick a couple of people who thought that they were terrible, but their poems were excellent, the best poems of the day. Usually they're the artists who are perfectionists. It's exactly the same thing in the classroom. I think the problem is that teachers are teaching something that they can't actually do themselves, that they're too scared to do themselves. That ice needs to be broken so that they can really understand the benefits of poetry.

XERRI: The curriculum emphasises the importance of teaching creative writing but some teachers do not write poetry despite the fact that they might like to be given the opportunity of being trained in how to do so. Do you find it an anomaly for the curriculum to stress the importance of creative writing but at the same time the people who are reaching students might not be practising creative writing?

LESSON: Let me be a bit cheeky and say that it's a tad too easy to become a teacher. I think that teachers are probably not paid as much as they should be and that the profession is not respected as much as it should be. However, teachers are probably the most influential persons in young people's lives, in our lives. I think it's quite dangerous, shallow and ignorant for teachers to teach creative writing and yet are too scared to express themselves, or talk about a secret that once happened, or a fear that they once had, or write something beautiful about a place they've been to, or they haven't travelled outside Australia, or they haven't been able to experience different cultures while teaching a class full of different cultures. It's not to say that it's the teachers' fault, because this is the way the system is set up today. But it's still dangerous, especially for Indigenous and country communities where teachers are meant to go out for their first few years of teaching to do country service. They're the worst teachers

that they will ever be in their first two years. They can only get better from there and yet we're sending them to really impoverished areas where young people need to be most influenced. So I think it is difficult to be able to teach poetry if you're not writing and reading it, if you're not trying it. I think teachers should have access to being able to learn to read and write poetry within the process of becoming teachers or developing as teachers. This would help them to drop the fear. At what point do you call yourself a poet? You write one poem and you can call yourself a poet. You can just be a loudmouth and call yourself a poet if you're good at talking shit. Where's the point when you can call yourself a poet? It's not like you get a degree and you say, 'I'm now a poet.' It's more of a philosophy for me. To live and write poetically is something that is healthy as a human being. So I hope that that becomes more a part of Australian society. I think we've got such a great opportunity. Every classroom that I've been in in all the countries that I've toured – Indonesia, China, the States, New Zealand, Greece, South Africa, England – wherever I've been there's this huge history of poetry, massive histories of poetry. From Mao Tse-tung's poetry to my friend in Indonesia who is a well-known poet. Because there are 220 million people in Indonesia whenever he releases a book he sells 200,000 copies. He's a normal dude but there's such an ancient tradition of poetry there and he's tapped into that. And yet here in class we're still looking at just Shakespeare or just Keats or whatever it is. I just think Australia needs to become more open-minded in many ways.

XERRI: Thanks so much for this interview.

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