

DON'T BE NICE



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DON'T BE NICE

Directed by Max Powers

2018 | USA | 96 min

TEACHER'S GUIDE

This guide has been designed to help teachers and students enrich their experience of *Don't Be Nice* by providing support in the form of questions and activities. There are a range of questions that will help teachers frame discussions with their class, activities for before, during and after viewing the film, and some weblinks that provide starting points for further research or discussion.

The Film

The upstart Bowery Slam Poetry Team, made up of five African-American, Afro-Hispanic and queer poets in their 20s, prepares for the national championships. Mentored by a demanding coach who encourages them to push past their personal boundaries and write from a place of vulnerability, pain and honesty, the poets break down, break through and compose their best work ever. Timely and difficult, their spoken word slays—but will these soul-searching pieces about police violence and the whitewashing of Black culture be able to compete against choreographed crowd-pleasers for the title? Will opting to make a statement instead of a show spell their defeat? An emotional and inspiring film that gives insightful commentary on race, gender, identity and sexual politics in America today, *Don't Be Nice* is both an absorbing competition doc and a vital writer's workshop that proves once and for all that winning hearts and minds is the ultimate prize. **Angie Driscoll**

Source: <http://www.hotdocs.ca>

The Filmmaker

Before diving into the world of Bowery Slam, director Max Powers co-edited Judd Ehrlich's *Keepers of the Game*, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, and was an associate editor on Ehrlich's Emmy Award-winning high-school football documentary *We Could Be King*. Max edited the short films *Big Cheat* and *Something Happened*, and Flatbush Pictures' *Tough Mudder: The Challenge Within* on The CW. This is his directorial debut. He has a film degree from Vassar College.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/dontbenicemovie>

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VIEWING THE FILM WITH STUDENTS

The following three subsections are intended to provide you with a range of Pre-Viewing, Viewing and Post-Viewing activities. They are followed by a set of questions based upon the film's larger thematic domains, some follow-up questions and quotations, sample curricular outcomes and a page of weblinks for further investigation.

Pre-Viewing Activities

As a class, have students brainstorm what they already know about slam poetry.

As a class, have students brainstorm what they know about The Movement for Black Lives (Black Lives Matter) and/or protests against police violence in the United States and Canada.

Introduce important concepts, people and events that are referenced in the film, such as: anti-Black racism, Afro-Latino, systemic injustice, oppression, the school-to-prison pipeline, police brutality, Emmett Till, Amadou Diallo, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray and Philando Castile.

Introduce the idea of social identity to students. Have them reflect on their own social identities and how their identities affect their lives in distinct ways.

Ask students to privately reflect on whether they have ever used art to express their emotions about difficult subjects. Ask them to think about the kinds of political, social and personal issues that they are moved to explore creatively.

Discuss trauma with students. Prepare them for the discussion of potentially triggering issues such as racialized violence, sexual abuse and intimate partner violence.

Show students the trailer of the film (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCIL00t3F-g#action=share>). Ask them to write down a list of the themes or main ideas of the film that stand out to them. Ask them to keep these themes in mind as they watch the film.

Viewing Activities

Have students complete the PBS viewing guide on documentaries (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/docs/Copies%20of%20Viewing%20Guide.pdf>). Students can revisit their completed documents as a Post-Viewing Activity.

Have students jot down three to five ideas for discussion, or questions that the film raises in their minds. As an Extension and/or Post-Viewing Activity, students can enter their questions into an online response or polling system and can vote on the questions or issues they would like to explore in further detail. Encourage students to use multiple levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Have students make a timeline of the political/social events that are addressed in the film.

Have students take notes about the storylines of each of the subjects in the film. What are their names? What are they thinking about, struggling with and writing about? What do students notice about each subject's poetic style?

Have students take notes on all of the pointers about poetry-writing discussed in the film.

Have students take notes about issues of social identity that are addressed in the film.

Post-Viewing Activities

Have students participate in a Socratic discussion on the film. Guidelines for Socratic discussions can be found here: <http://www.authenticeducation.org/documents/WhatSeminar04.pdf>

Have students look at their notes from the Pre-Viewing Activity and see how their ideas and opinions were changed or enhanced by the film.

Discuss with students their initial reactions to the film, the featured individuals and the themes. How did their feelings evolve over the course of the film?

Discuss as a class: What were students' initial perceptions of slam poetry? How did their original perceptions compare and contrast with their perceptions after viewing the film? Using this questions as a prompt, have students write a one-paragraph written response.

In the film, Lauren Whitehead, one of the team coaches, struggles with whether she is pushing members of the team too hard. Organize a small debate about whether her approach to coaching went too far.

Have students write a slam poem about a topic of personal and social significance. Have them perform their poems for the class.

Team coaches Lauren and Jon give the team many pieces of advice about what poetry is and how to write an effective poem. Based on this advice, have students create an instructional video about writing a winning slam poem.

Have students choose a poem from the film that stood out to them for its effectiveness. Have them imagine they are writing a response to the poet. Their response should address the ways the poem was effective, powerful and well-performed. Responses should be specific and personal.

Lauren gives the team a lot of advice about "making a courageous move," being vulnerable and finding yourself in your art. Have students use this advice to create a piece of visual art work.

Have students choose a line from the film that stood out to them. Have them create a poster using that line and their own visuals to express the meanings they took from the statement.

Have students explain between five and 10 references in the poem "Google Black." If they do not know or understand any reference completely, they should Google it.

Have students write three to five titles for poems they would like to write. Those titles should be the poems they would want to perform at a slam to say something meaningful about themselves and the world around them.

Have students complete an exit note. The exit note should contain one idea that demonstrates what they learned from the film, as well as one question that they still have about the topic.

WEBSITES AND ONLINE RESOURCES

About the Film

Twitter: [@dontbenicemovie](#)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/dontbenicemovie>

Instagram: [@dontbenicemovie](#)

Additional Resources

Bowery Slam: The web site of Bowery Poetry which gives a history of the venue and bios on the current team members. It also includes social media access to follow the slammers and interact with the team directly.

<http://www.bowerslam.com>

Bright Hub Education: Slam poetry/spoken word for beginners, published March 31, 2014, is a practical guide to writing and performing spoken word poems, as well as to what to expect at slam competitions.

<https://brighthubeducation.com/> Type the title of the article into the search function of the website.

Huffington Post: "American Teenagers Are Using Slam Poetry to Make Sense of Trump" is a June 20, 2017, article by Priscilla Frank about a group of young poets from Los Angeles who perform political poetry under the name "Get Lit."

<http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/> Type the title of the interview into the search function of the website.

Louder Than a Bomb: This inspiring 2010 documentary is about a slam competition for Chicago area schools and students. It deals with stereotyping, community-building and personal struggles faced by the children.

<http://www.youtube.com/> Type the title of the documentary into the search function of the website.

Medium.com: "Three Questions with Joel Francois" is a June 23, 2016, interview by LA Markuson with one of the subjects of *Don't Be Nice*, Joel Francois, about poetry and storytelling.

<https://medium.com/> Type the title of the article into the search function of the website.

PBS NewsHour: "Exploring Identity and Intersectionality in Poetry" is a lesson plan by Douglas Ray exploring and building on the work of Audre Lorde and Danez Smith. The description says: "This lesson seeks to create a space for students to explore and articulate nuanced aspects of their own identities and those of others."

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour.extra/> Type the title of the lesson plan into the search function of the website.

Poets.org: A Brief Guide to Slam Poetry explains some of the origins and influences of slam poetry and provides additional links and resources.

<http://www.poets.org/> Type the title of the article into the search function of the website.

Vibe Arts: According to the website, "the Arts for Social Justice (ASJ) program is a three-year initiative that aims to promote the arts as catalysts to tackle social issues in society. It does this through high-school workshops and emerging artist residencies as well as providing a range of resources for teachers."

<https://vibearts.ca/project/arts-for-social-justice>

Wax Poetic: Poetry from Canada: This podcast features interviews with Canadian poets, live readings and recordings with hosts RC Weslowski, Pam Bentley and Kevin Spent.

<https://player.fm/> Type the title of the show into the search function of the website.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Questions for Pre-Viewing or Post-Viewing Activities

What are the themes and issues explored in this film?

Which theme or scene stood out to you the most? What did that theme or scene make you think about or realize?

Who was your favourite poet profiled in this film? What resonated most with you about this person and their poetry?

Why do you think the filmmakers chose to emphasize the Black Lives Matter protests that were taking place during the filming of this documentary?

Which issues in the film do you relate to the most? How do you use politics, social issues or your personal experiences to inspire your artwork and/or creative expression?

Explain whether or not you think the judging system in poetry slams is an effective way to measure the quality of a poem or a performance?

What does Lauren mean when she says good poems should be generated from a place of questioning rather than from a place of answering? Explain fully.

Lauren and Tim both question the problem with slam audiences responding more favourably to more "rowdy" slam performances. To what extent do you agree, based on the film, that more dramatic performances win over poems with more literary value? Do you think this is a problem in slam poetry?

What does Lauren mean when she says to find "the poem behind the poem behind the poem"?

Noel says that the point of the writing process is to bring about emotion and connection. What does he mean by this? To what extent did the team succeed at doing that?

Lauren wonders whether she should watch the video of the police killing Philando Castile. Have you ever wondered whether you should watch videos of police violence? Why is this a difficult decision for many people?

Lauren says that writing poetry can "save each other's lives a little bit." What does she mean by this?

In what ways did the team win despite losing the nationals?

QUOTATIONS FROM THE FILM TO EXPLORE

1. *"Black is always a combination of death and audacity, dangerous for all of the reasons it is beautiful. When you are killed for how you look, self-hatred starts to seem like a survival tactic.... But you can't burn your reflection without breathing in the smoke."* Joel Francois
2. *"I really care about the members of this team being able to tell the stories that are important and urgent and imperative to them. And as a straight white man it's important for me to grapple with and understand both what I represent in the world [and] what my identities bring in to a room. You don't want to be paralyzed by that awareness. If you walk into a room and think, 'I'm white, I'm white, I'm white, I'm white, I'm white,' the opposite of that is like 'You're black, you're black, you're black, you're black, you're black.' My job is to be myself. To accept the limitations of my view, to forgive those limitations in the moment and to ultimately deliver my presence and my honesty."* Jon Sands
3. *"In slam you need the emotional centre that anchors your piece, but then you also need the things that slam audiences are going to enjoy and are going to react to."* Noel Quinones
4. *"I need poems to be generated from a place of question rather than from a place of answer, which is the difference between writing a political poem, right? A political poem, we already know what our ideas are. We know what we need to say, we know what the message is. But a poem that teaches us something about ourselves, that's where we're trying to push you guys into."* Lauren Whitehead
5. *"Slam, to me, sort of outlived its usefulness. The goal was to get people excited about hearing poems and excited about literacy and to think about poetry in a new way. And now it has created a sound and people really are loyal to that sound, are loyal to what a slam poem looks like or feels like or does. And they all sound the same and they all have the cadence and they talk about the same subject matter and they're pitching the same message. I want our team to move people and I feel like you do that by being courageous and vulnerable and telling a truth that's scary. That's what I'm looking for."* Lauren Whitehead
6. *"The living experience is an archive and we can access it depending on how courageous we are."* Lauren Whitehead
7. *"Things are moving. I have been going out for some roles. Sometimes it can be discouraging, and you have to look at yourself in the eye and come to terms with the way that you look, the way that you move, and just be comfortable with that moment."* Ashley August
8. *"That sounds really great and inspirational and probably a great moment to have, but I feel like I'm supposed to be having some moment where I'm pushing through and I'm super f***ing strong but I'm not and it's been f***ing with me."* Tim DuWhite
9. *"What we just saw and what we were just a part of, that's what I think we should be wanting from this process. We all wrote these poems for a reason and they're bringing out emotion and connection, and that's the point."* Noel Quinones
10. *"There are things that we kept questioning, but now we are going just going to let go and just give in to the process."* Ashley August
11. *"What do they want us to do? They've been murdering and executing Black people and specifically young—or old, turns out—Black men, since the founding of this country. Like no shift in any direction has stopped that trend. None."* Lauren Whitehead
12. *"I don't know how to love this black that has left me in pieces. Maybe I'm not to celebrate it but to survive it. I cannot die in the streets tonight. Not while there is someone waiting patiently in the streets to love me. I can't promise you that I will survive this execution but I will not spill to the ground. I will fly, ripping into funeral confetti, burning like fireworks across the sky."* Joel Francois
13. *"Outside of these walls, there is a world that is trying to choke the life right out of us and I can die in circumstances that I've already played out in my head over and over and over."* Joel Francois
14. *"When you're Black you have to question whether or not the things that matter to you matter to everyone else. And that's in everything. The entire Black experience seems to be this cult thing."* Joel Francois
15. *"I think about: What if we just had full range to write everything we want and know it's going to be accepted and the different metaphors we're missing out on?"* Tim DuWhite
16. *"Each morning I wake up hoping that this guilt will scab into a new skin."* Mega DesVignes

CULMINATING ACTIVITY: SLAM POEM ABOUT A SOCIAL ISSUE

In this assignment, students will write, perform and video-record a slam poem about a social issue that affects them personally. Videos should be submitted as YouTube links or mp4 files.

Students can work alone, or in groups of up to three people.

The poem should have a central metaphor or image and should use at least five of the following poetic devices: rhyming, repetition, alliteration, assonance, metre and figurative language.

Because the poem should deal with a social issue, students must do research to ensure that their information is factually sound.

The video should be three to four minutes long.

ACTIVITY RUBRIC: SLAM POEM ABOUT A SOCIAL ISSUE

Knowledge and Understanding

	2.5 2.9	3.0 3.4	3.5 3.9	4.0 5	
Clear understanding of poetic devices	Limited success in use of poetic devices	Some success in use of poetic devices	Moderate success in use of poetic devices	High degree of success in use of poetic devices	/5

Thinking and Inquiry

	2.5 2.9	3.0 3.4	3.5 3.9	4.0 5	
Ability to research, synthesize and organize resources	Demonstrates a limited ability to research, synthesize and organize resources; evaluates credibility of sources with limited effectiveness	Demonstrates a moderate ability to research, synthesize and organize resources; evaluates credibility of sources with some effectiveness	Demonstrates a considerable ability to research, synthesize and organize resources; evaluates credibility of sources with considerable effectiveness	Demonstrates an outstanding ability to research, synthesize and organize resources; evaluates credibility of sources with a great deal of effectiveness	/5
Uses creative thinking to develop ideas	Uses limited creative thinking to develop ideas	Uses some creative thinking to develop ideas	Uses considerable creative thinking to develop ideas	Uses a great deal of creative thinking to develop ideas	/5

Application

	2.5 2.9	3.0 3.4	3.5 3.9	4.0 5	
Applies ideas and facts to poetic form	Applies ideas and facts to poetic form with limited effectiveness	Applies ideas and facts to poetic form with some effectiveness	Applies ideas and facts to poetic form with considerable effectiveness	Applies ideas and facts to poetic form with a high degree of effectiveness	/5

Communication

	2.5 2.9	3.0 3.4	3.5 3.9	4.0 5	
Communication of ideas and performance	Communicates ideas with limited effectiveness; Performs with limited emphasis and confidence	Communicates ideas with some effectiveness; Performs with some emphasis and confidence	Communicates ideas with considerable effectiveness; Performs with considerable emphasis and confidence	Communicates ideas with a great deal of effectiveness; Performs with a high degree of emphasis and confidence	/5

Comments:

Total ____ /25 = ____ /100

EXAMPLES OF CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS

COURSE	OVERALL EXPECTATIONS
Integrated Arts 9–12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apply current technologies to present integrated art works/productions. • select and apply a combination of key elements and principles from more than one arts discipline when creating and presenting integrated art works/productions. • demonstrate an understanding of common symbols and themes in past and present artworks from a variety of cultures
Grade 10 & 11 Media Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • design and produce original media art works on a specific theme. • use appropriate technologies, tools and techniques to create and present media art works for a variety of audiences. • communicate personal messages by creating and presenting media art works using a variety of approaches and techniques. • present media artworks, individually and/or collaboratively, using a variety of methods that are appropriate for their work. • identify and describe some elements from contributing arts that are used in media arts. • demonstrate an understanding of and apply conventions associated with the presenting and experiencing of media art works, and challenge these conventions in creative ways to extend the audience’s experiencing of art works.
Grade 9–12 English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • generate, gather and organize ideas and information to speak for an intended purpose and audience. • use appropriate words, phrases and terminology, and several different stylistic devices, to communicate their meaning and engage their intended audience. • identify a variety of vocal strategies, including tone, pace, pitch and volume, and use them appropriately and with sensitivity to audience needs and cultural differences. • identify a variety of non-verbal cues, including facial expressions, gestures and eye contact, and use them appropriately to help convey their meaning and with sensitivity to audience needs and cultural differences. • demonstrate an understanding of a variety of media texts.
Grade 9–12 Drama	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use the elements of drama to suit an identified purpose and form in drama presentations. • identify and use a variety of techniques or methods for establishing a rapport between performer and audience. • use a variety of expressive voice and movement techniques to support the depiction of character. • use role play and characterization to explore personal and social issues. • use a variety of conventions to create a distinct voice that reflects a particular global, social or personal perspective. • use a range of techniques and acting approaches to refine performance during rehearsal. • select and use appropriate dramatic forms to present themes or ideas about diverse cultures, contexts and perspectives.
Grade 10 Civics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use the concepts of political thinking when analyzing and evaluating evidence, data and information and formulating conclusions and/or judgments about issues, events and/or developments of civic importance. • describe some civic issues of local, national and/or global significance. • communicate their own position on some issues of civic importance at the local, national and/or global level.

Grade 11 Introduction to Anthropology, Psychology and Sociology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explore topics related to anthropology, psychology and sociology, and formulate questions appropriate to each discipline to guide their research. • explain, from a sociological perspective, how diverse factors influence and shape individual and group behaviour. • explain, from a sociological perspective, the relationship between prejudice and individual and systemic discrimination and describe their impacts on individuals and society. • explain the ways in which social structures affect individual and group behaviour. • explain how structural changes take place in social institutions in response to diverse influences.
Grade 11 & 12 Equity Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explore topics related to equity and social justice, and formulate questions to guide their research. • explain how power and privilege operate in various Canadian social, economic and political contexts. • demonstrate an understanding of a range of perspectives on and approaches to equity and social justice issues, and of factors that affect inequity and social injustice. • analyze, in historical and contemporary contexts, the dynamics of power relations and privilege as well as various factors that contribute to power or marginalization. • analyze historical and contemporary equity and social justice issues and the impact of economic and environmental factors on these issues.
Grade 12 Challenge and Change in Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explain the relationships between poverty, affluence and social change. • explain the relationship between social panic about crime and deviance, and the attention given to these issues by media, politicians and other social groups. • demonstrate an understanding of various types of discrimination and their impact on individuals and groups.
Grade 11 Politics in Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use the political inquiry process and the concepts of political thinking when investigating issues of political importance in various communities and ways to address them. • analyze how various factors can contribute to, and present a barrier to, their own and others' political engagement. • explain the political importance of some current issues and analyze various perspectives associated with these issues. • analyze some issues of political importance in terms of their causes, their impact and ways in which they have been addressed. • analyze the objectives and strategies, and assess the influence, of individuals and groups in addressing issues of political importance. • demonstrate an understanding of factors that facilitate and present challenges to democratic political change. • identify and analyze a political issue, with the goal of developing a personal plan of action to address this issue.
Grade 12 Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use the political inquiry process and the concepts of political thinking when investigating issues, events and developments of national and international political importance. • demonstrate an understanding of various political ideologies, theories and concepts, and analyze their relevance to Canadian and international politics. • analyze the role of civic awareness and responsibility among citizens and non-governmental stakeholders in the national and international community.

The Overall Expectations listed above are from the *Ontario Curriculum*. Complete course descriptions, including all Overall and Specific Expectations, can be found at: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/curriculum.html>