

Poetry Sessions with Masai Dabula

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Activists and community members from all over Johannesburg came to attend a cultural poetry workshop at Newton, workers museum. The 14th annual Jozi Book Fair Festival by Khanya College took place on 29 – 30 October 2022. The poetry workshop was facilitated by creative director, Masai Dabula from HABITAT61. The workshop included participation in conceptualising poetry and performing. It was aimed at introducing the world of literature and guiding the attendees, many of whom had never scripted poetry, also on how to construct poetic text, transforming their stream of consciousness into creativity. The main objective was to ensure that they standardise their writing. It was meant to offer them a chance to liberate and redefine their identities, through inner resources and skills provided at the workshop. The event offered opportunities to network, it paved a path for artists to collaborate, build intellectual connections, formulate insightful perspectives and innovative ideas.

The session kicked off with an introduction on how to device poetry through unity. The facilitator asked members to divide themselves into groups. Of the four groups, three consisted of youth members only. The concept was based on individuals tapping within their thoughts and writing a sentence on a paper then folding it. The requirement was that other group members not see what was written but continue write what they thought or felt. At the end of the process participants were excited how the sentences seamlessly connected. When the groups presented first drafts, the idea behind the process was to show how different people can think up and create a poem, spontaneously. Dabula gave the groups an extra 15 minutes to edit their scripts, proofread, create proper sentence construction as well as breaking them down into different stanzas.

During the next session Dabula focused on two participants under Tsohang Batjha, a project run by Khanya College. They had to facilitate what the meaning and pointers of poetry are. Both 15-year-olds, Michellene Lunga and Astride Sibindi asked what inspired the workshop participants to write. Many were sceptical about sharing their experiences. Sibindi shared about how her father's passing and how it motivated her to begin the path of writing and be able to express herself. The facilitator was amongst few of those who had the courage to express how they began their journey of writing poetry. This session included definitions such as metaphors the use of similes and how to structure poetry.

Participants who already had experience writing a poem were given a platform to perform at the end of the sessions. The participants produced an inspirational moment as youngsters like Ntombikayise Zwane shared took to the stage and recited their work. Dabula encouraged the youngsters to write and read more. The sessions were essential in contributing towards developing different aspects of how the youth understand what is happening in their communities and the world.

The Chairperson of the South African Health Care Workers Forum, Noluthando Mhlongo shared her sentiments about the sessions. "I was just checking up and I felt I should join." said Mhlongo, "This workshop was an eye-opener for me," she added.

Nomzamo Zikalala from Sinani (an NGO), found the sessions educational and was touched by what motivated young girls like Sibindi to start writing poetry. The members of Sinani said they will now attend more poetry and literature workshops, and to exercise the process of stream of consciousness to write poetry. The women expressed gratitude towards Masai Dabula and Khanya College applauding them on the great work done investing skills in these children. "I think they are doing a great job encouraging these kids," Zikalala said; "to express themselves in their own language."

Participants reflected on the workshop and what it meant to them. Sibindi, explained that she loved the part of sharing her experience, she finally got to express her journey as a poet. After her father, her only confidant, departed, the Tsohang Batsha member felt out of place as grief began to consume her. "Poetry is a part of us, we get to express ourselves through it." Sibindi said, "I joined this workshop to improve my poetry."

Lunga highlighted that it was her first time being part of the poetry sessions and that she is now interested in participating more. She believes that through working as a team people can achieve a lot.

Sanele Twala 26, is one of the artists under programs provided by Habitat61 Creative Hub in Thokoza, Ekurhuleni, added that he was fascinated the concept of devising poetry, as group has shown how people have mutual understanding and thought process to a certain extent. He believes that as a cultural worker making a living depends a lot on recognition and self-promotion.

Dabula spoke on his preparation for workshops. According to him, one should understand what their motive of doing the workshop is. Such channel of education is based on perceptions that should be achieved instead of capital profits. The objective is to teach children to use the internal part of themselves and being able to formulate ideas on what they feel. And, to delve deep into an understanding of what influences what they see in the society. He furthers his explanation on the method he used in the first part of the session, "The concept was inspired by me and my friends, while we were running slam poetry competition," he said. Having this tool in their skillset can enable them to write speeches, poetry and monologues. He distinguished the need to teach young individuals to learn and understand that there are people who died for the words that are spoken today, "We have a rich history when it comes to literature and story to tell[ing]," said Dabula.

The workshops are short and focus on the basic exercises, processes such as the stream of consciousness. The Creative director advised that, "It's very important for every writer to have a word bank." Dabula explained why he gave Sibindi and Lunga to facilitate the second session. For their confidence, he felt he should give them the

opportunity to facilitate the learning process, they are growing their profile, Dabula said, “Even if the transformation is not that grand, though small it’s felt.”

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