
TEMASEK PRESS

STEPHANIE DOGFOOT: EMPOWERING POETRY THROUGH SPOKEN WORD

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Stephanie “Dogfoot” Chan is an accomplished poet who has participated in and won multiple poetry slams in the Americas, Europe and Asia. She has been writing poetry since the young age of 11 and performing them since 2008. She came to Temasek Junior College to expose the IP3 students to the powerful and empowering form of poetry known as *Spoken Word* as part of the programme for ACE Week.



Stephanie has participated in and been the champion of multiple Poetry Slams around the world in countries such as the United Kingdom as well as France. She has also been the host of various Story Slams around Singapore, during which she shared some personal stories about how she has grown and the obstacles she faced along the path to becoming a successful Slam Poet and a member of an all-female Spoken Word troupe in Singapore known as the “*Sekaliwags*”.

Starting off with a brief introduction to the *Spoken Word*, Stephanie admitted that she was once a very reserved person who spent much of her time in school writing parodies of pop songs with her friends, frequently incorporating their “teenage angst”. Initially, she was insecure about her poems and unwilling to share them with people outside her close friends.

However, Stephanie got her first big break when she was interning in Vancouver, Canada. Being in a totally new and foreign environment, she felt more confident to try out new things and participated in a poetry slam in a bar where she heard people share poems about deeply personal matters. This was the first time she tried her hand at *Spoken Word* and she was inspired by these



people to share a personal poem about her crush. The audience was surprisingly engaged and applauded for her. It was that moment which made her realise that people were interested in hearing about what she had to say. She realized that people would relate to her on a personal level and appreciate her honesty once she was willing to open herself up.

The first poem she shared with us was titled “Dear 12-year-old self”. It was written as she looked through a diary which she kept during her secondary school years. It contained some of her most personal thoughts and she jokingly reflected on the thoughts she had at that age. Being based on content written during her teenage years, the IP3s laughed along with her, indicating how they related to its contents in a deeply personal way.

Stephanie’s second poem was written about her mother and talked about her love-hate relationship with her. Titled “To Allow Room for Mine to Grow”, she opened up about the sacrifices her mother made for her and the issues she had with her as she grew up. Through the story, she prompted the cohort to realise how, as we grow older, society expects us to hide our feelings in order to be “more adult”. Many people in the cohort related to this story and some even teared up as a reaction. She also told us how *Spoken Word* enables one to open up and be vulnerable as a way to release one’s feelings and talk about them.

Stephanie felt that Singaporeans were too obsessed with food and were ignorant of the more important things in life and incorporated these feelings into her poem titled “When The World Ends, You Will Be Eating Hokkien Mee”. It contained many local references which meant that she had never presented this poem overseas as the audience, without knowledge of Singaporean culture, would not understand the context. Through this poem, she related to the students the difficulties she faced when she was aspiring to be a writer as she grew up. She was discouraged by her parents when she grew up in the 1990s as they felt that there was no chance for her to become a successful writer as no one would be interested in art from Singapore. She was constantly told that Singaporeans were only interested in Western stories and arts, something which she realised was untrue. She realised how critical and important the *Spoken Word* could be in allowing us to talk about who we are and where we come from and how entertaining it can be.

Stephanie also reflected on her relationship with her domestic helper who had been with her family for more than 20 years. Entitled “You Are Six Years Old and She Is Teaching You How to Ride a Bicycle”, the poem that came a result of her relationship with her domestic helper prompts people to think and talk about domestic helper abuse and allow them to empathise with domestic helpers in Singapore who are often mistreated yet too afraid to report their suffering and

too poor to sustain their families without their jobs. Stephanie also talked the cohort through how she felt very confused growing up as she was unhappy with how her domestic helper was being abused yet she still utilises her help.

Entitled “The Revenge of the Cat-Feeding-Vigil-Aunties”, her next poem was written initially as a way for her to vent her anger through *Spoken Word* but it soon became a way for her to let her imagination run wild and escape from the nuances of everyday life. Poetry allows us to explore novel ways of thinking as well as enables us to imagine of a “better future”, without being told that things are impossible and to have the freedom to imagine all the possibilities.



Stephanie’s last poem addresses superstitions Singaporeans still believe in. Named “Umbrella” as a reference to the age-old superstition that claims one should not open umbrella indoors as ghosts will allegedly come out from the umbrella. It discusses how, although Singaporeans live in a modern society, Singaporeans still hold on to superstitions passed down from their predecessors. It talks about how Singaporeans discard things that are no longer needed and emphasises the importance of preserving our shared heritage and collective memories through the sharing of stories as much of it is being lost owing to our rapid development.

To end off, Stephanie prompted the IP3s to realise that we can empower one another through the sharing of our personal stories or stories passed down through generations. Through the *Spoken Word*, we are able to be more open with one another and more connected as long as we take the time to listen to and empathise with one another.