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## Slam Poet's Muse is Teaching

By Stacey Hollenbeck



It's 2 a.m. and student teacher Courtney Barajas needs a not-so-gentle reminder why she's still awake, working on lesson plans. So the 17-year old, who is earning a measly \$400 teaching summer school through an internship program in Houston, Tex., takes out her iPod, scrolls to one of her favorite poems, and cranks up the volume.

A loud, confident voice echoes in her brain. "You want to know what I make?" it asks. "I make kids wonder, I make them question. I make them criticize."

The voice, once used to scold unruly students, belongs to Taylor Mali, a former teacher turned slam poet who, for over 15 years, has been reciting impassioned poems about teaching and everything that goes along with the job.

His poems—about sleepless nights, financial troubles, student fights, classroom distractions, and changing the world one 8th grader at a time—have not only earned applause from experienced teachers and other slam poets. They're also inspiring young people, like Barajas, to teach.

"After [Mali] read 'What Teachers Make,' I thought, 'That has got to be the greatest job in the world,'" said Barajas, 17, who met Mali and saw him perform in 2004 at the American School in London. Now in the classroom working for the Breakthrough Collaborative, a nonprofit that encourages high school students to pursue teaching careers, Barajas says her colleagues keep a copy of "What Teachers Make" posted in their faculty lounge.



Taylor Mali  
—Courtesy of [www.taylormali.com](http://www.taylormali.com)

### For the Love of the Job

A New York native, Mali began teaching in 1990 while studying poetry at Kansas State University. One of the program's requirements was teaching a freshman composition course at the university. Mali fell in love with teaching immediately.

That passion, along with those coveted moments when figurative light bulbs glow above students' heads, prompted Mali to get a job teaching middle school upon graduation. Although never certified, he taught various subjects in different states for nine years and experienced firsthand the impact a teacher can make.

"I had students come up to me at the end of more than a couple of lessons and say, 'You really love doing this, don't you?' I think when kids know they're being taught by somebody who really loves doing what they're doing, it makes it more meaningful for them," said Mali.

Soon enough, his interests merged and Mali began presenting slam poetry, or spoken-word

performances, about teaching. In 1996, along with a team, he won the first of what would be a record of four national slam poetry championships.

The former president of Poetry Slam Incorporated, Mali has been featured on HBO's "Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry" series and even created and starred in a one-man show called "Teacher! Teacher!," which was named best solo performance at the 2001 U. S. Comedy Arts Festival.

### **Inspiring Teachers**

Mali says his poetry about teaching has received a dramatic and rewarding response.

"I started to get people e-mailing me or telling me that they had decided to become a teacher partly because of the passion with which I spoke about the profession," he said.

Mali began keeping track of the effect he was having on others. In 2000, he established a goal of inspiring 1,000 people to become teachers by 2006.

"I thought by the time 2006 comes, I will certainly have either reached this goal or totally forgotten that I ever had it. When 2006 came, and I didn't have my 1,000 teachers yet, but I was just hovering around 100, I thought, 'Scrap the deadline; I'm going to just keep doing it. And if it takes me until I'm 75, so be it.'"

Mali now has nearly 170 new and aspiring teachers, whom he calls his latest heroes, listed on his Web site. Many, like Barajas (number 169), never considered teaching before hearing Mali's poetry.

Number 48, Kyle Herman, had always entertained the idea of teaching, but said Mali gave him extra encouragement. Now a middle school teacher at Community Montessori School in Indianapolis, Ind., Herman first saw Mali perform at Indiana University Southeast in 2001.

"A lot of people don't think very highly of teachers anymore. But, he made me realize teachers can do great things; they can be an inspiration for other people," said Herman, 26. "He made it seem noble again."

### **An Ode to Teaching**

The popular "What Teachers Make," also Mali's most plagiarized poem, is his would-be response to a lawyer who stereotypically says teaching is for those who "can't do." In the poem, the cynical lawyer rubs his thumb against his fingers (making the international "show me the money" sign) and says to Mali, "I mean, you're a teacher, Taylor. Be honest. What do you make?"

Mali doesn't reply with a dollar amount. "I make a [expletive] difference! What about you?" Mali says instead. For some beginning teachers, and struggling veterans, this statement, and the entire poem, is a reaffirmation of the honor in teaching.

Recently, the video-sharing site YouTube selected Mali's performance of "What Teachers Make" as a featured video. In the clip, Mali moves around a stage, contorting his face, sweating, and shouting. The video has been viewed more than 600,000 times and generated more than 3,500 comments, both positive and negative. While some viewers dislike Mali's attitude, his hostility, and his foul language, others write, "I wish I had a teacher like this," "This is inspiring," and "It made me a little teary-eyed."

"I just wanted to impart some of the passion that I felt for the role of teacher," Mali, 42, said of his signature poem. "It's a plain-spoken poem that mixes humor and truth, and it's delivered with passion and people respond to passion," said Mali.

### **An Unlikely Classroom**

Mali has poems about subjects other than teaching, including love and politics, but most of his work incorporates education. In one poem, "Miracle Workers," Mali says, "Education is the miracle, I'm just the worker."

"[Education] seems to be the silver bullet that is the ticket out of a lifetime of misery," he explained. "Education is the mystery rope ladder that gets thrown down that we can climb up."

Although he calls teachers miracle workers and asserts that they make a difference, Mali believes there's a lack of young go-getters pursuing careers in teaching.

"I just want teaching to be an alternative for smart, motivated people," said Mali. "It just doesn't pay enough."

Low salaries and unmotivated teachers aren't the only problems in education today, said Mali, who is decidedly anti-No Child Left Behind. "I don't know what the answers are myself," he said, "but I also know that America hasn't really committed itself to gathering together the people who could work out the answers."

Although he no longer teaches, Mali, who also worked as a voiceover artist, visits schools weekly as a guest, teaching instructional workshops on creative writing. Despite these experiences, he still misses teaching a class and witnessing those treasured ah-ha moments.

"To some extent," Mali said, "whenever I lament not teaching, somebody reminds me that I'm still teaching, I just have a different type of classroom."

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