The University of Cincinnati’s African American Poetry course consists of the reading and analysis of African American poetry. The class also integrates a community outreach project that allows students in the class the opportunity to share poetry they find most meaningful with middle school and high school students. Students learn the backgrounds and the perspectives of the various black poets they study. These poets may range from Civil War times to modern day. For a final project students will be making poster boards displaying poets such as Maya Angelou, Naomi Madgett and Audre Lorde. While this may be their final classroom project, their work is far from over.

Michele Reutter, associate professor educator of English, has been teaching this course since 2009. The class unofficially began as a service learning course when two non-traditional students voiced their desire to take what they were experiencing in class to young people in the community.

“I kept hearing from them my life would have been different if I had known about these amazing African American poets before I got where I am today,” Reutter said.

The class evolved with the goal to insure that young African Americans understand college is possible and expressing their artistic or intellectual abilities is important.

The course has since become an official service learning class and partners with a variety of schools such as Hughes High School, Western Hills, North Avondale and Purcell Marian. It is known as the African American Poetry Connection. Most recently the Connection has worked with Hughes High School. Ideally they want to bring the high school students on campus so they can see what college is like. If logistics is a problem and they are not able to come to the college, the college goes to them.

Marsha Jenkins, alum of the University of Cincinnati and a former student of Reutter’s, was greatly impacted by this class and particularly the service learning portion.

“I enjoyed the service learning portion of the class tremendously because it gave me the opportunity to teach and share what we were learning. It also gave us the opportunity to expose the children to African American literature and poetry which they aren’t usually exposed to in their studies. This class, combined with the service learning, inspired me to figure out what I wanted to do with my life,” Jenkins said.

Jenkins followed Reutter’s lead. She went with her to help shop for materials and helped to figure out which pieces of poetry engaged students and inspired them to write.

“I understand that we were there to teach but also provide students with a fun and creative experience within African American poetry,” Jenkins said.

Reutter hopes to build a long-term relationship with the various high schools to encourage community engagement. Reutter says poetry is not only about reading and listening to the words, but feeling them as well. She hopes that as a result of this outreach, younger students will begin to understand this concept and express themselves.

“It’s important for African American students to find their own voices and the range of voices in artistic work and print and to find it early,” Reutter said.

Reutter says the beauty of Hughes High School is that it is across the street from our campus. “We should be serving Hughes. They are our little brothers and sisters,” she said.
Left to Right: Leighandria Young, Jeff Back and Ven’Shay Akins preparing their final poetry connections project for Hughes high school students.