Give Us a Poem (2007) was initially created as a site-specific installation for The Studio Museum in Harlem’s lobby. It demonstrates Ligon’s ability to infuse language with alternate meaning by translating it in bright neon. Ligon sourced the text from a speech Muhammad Ali made at Harvard University in 1975. When asked by a student to give the audience a poem, Ali replied, “me, we,” in a simple but profound pairing that connects individual and collective experience.

In this lesson, students will learn about community by working together to create a collaborative piece of temporary artwork using only light, their bodies, and paper.
Objective
Through creating a temporary collaborative artwork, students will learn about unusual art materials and consider connections between individuals and community.

Essential Question
Why is working together as a community important?

Vocabulary
Light
Natural agent that stimulates sight and makes things visible.

Darkness
Partial or total absence of light.

Unusual
Not very common.

Text
Written or printed work using letters or characters.

Me
Myself, I.

We
A group of people.

Collaboration
When a group of people work together to create something; oftentimes, each person has a specific role to play in the group.

Temporary
Something that only lasts for a specific period of time.

Materials
Glow sticks
Roll of black paper
Tape

Preparation
1. Use visual inquiry to explore *Give Us a Poem* and introduce vocabulary words. Ask: Let’s look together. What do you see? What material is the artist using? Have you ever seen art made with light before? What does it say? The artist is playing with the letters and the way they look; if we flip the artwork, would we still read ME and WE? What does ME mean? What does WE mean?

2. Introduce a movement activity: Ask students to use their bodies to express an emotion or idea. For example, how might they express happiness? Sadness?

3. Next, ask students how they might pose with their bodies to express ME. How might they pose with their bodies to express WE?

4. Explain that instead of creating ME artworks, the group is going to create a WE artwork. Introduce the vocabulary word “collaboration” and explain that students will use light to collaborate on a work of art.

Methods
1. Cut black art paper into 8–9 large tabletop pieces, or prepare a large open space by covering it with black roll paper securely taped to the floor.

2. Divide the students into groups of 4–5 and ask each group to create a collaborative piece, or, have the class create one work together. Tell students this artwork will only be visible while the glow sticks have light. Sometimes art doesn’t last forever!

3. Prompt students with the question: How might your group create a collaborative piece using light?

4. Offer glow sticks to students and give them some time to just play and explore the material.

5. Turn off the lights! Work collaboratively to arrange and rearrange glow sticks on the black paper. Encourage students to experiment with making letters, words, and patterns.

6. Take photographs of the work.

Reflection
1. Look together at your collaborative artwork.

2. Ask students: What was your favorite part of creating a collaborative artwork? What was challenging? What are some ways you work together in your school every day? In your community? Why is collaboration important?

3. Ask: “Why do you think an artist would make a temporary artwork? Why do you think the Studio Museum would choose to hang this work in their lobby?”
Glenn Ligon
Give Us a Poem, 2007
Black PVC and white neon
75 5/8 × 74 1/4 in.
The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of Glenn Ligon
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