

Kris Nelson Community-Based Research Program

...a program of the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA)

Hip Hop Pedagogy

Prepared at the request of
TruArtSpeaks

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2015

KNCBR Report # 1386

*This report is available on the CURA website:
<http://www.cura.umn.edu/publications/search>*

Center for Urban and
Regional Affairs (CURA)

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The Kris Nelson Community-Based Research Program is coordinated by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) at the University of Minnesota, and is supported by funding from the McKnight Foundation.

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The Hip Hop Pedagogy Handbook

Written by Jason Noer aka B-Boy J-Sun

“Hip Hop is a body of knowledge and a worldview more vast and encompassing than even many of its practitioners – one that students often comprehend much better than their teachers.”

- Jeff Chang *Schooling Hip Hop* Foreword

Introduction

“Please pass the mic, please pass the mic, please pass the mic...” Enter the cypher of academia and do the knowledge. This handbook is for you, yes, you the graffiti artist, the DJ, the breaker, and/or the rapper/spoken word artist. This is a resource for developing pedagogy from the lived experience of a Hip Hop art form. Just as you have cultivated your own style, character, and flow on the microphone, the floor, the turntables, the wall – this handbook a tool that will provide a gentle guide for using your lived experience to develop your own way of educating the youth.

But why the Hip Hop arts? Why spoken word? The seeds of Hip Hop culture were planted in the fertile soil of civil rights groups, religious factions, and street gangs. In the mid-1960s, these New York street gangs ran rampant in the city acting as agents of chaos. Or so the public has been lead to believe. However, there are a few important truths about these gangs that are historically (and hysterically) passed over or, perhaps, shoved aside.

The gangs protected their blocks from other gangs, drug dealers, addicts, and *police brutality*. (Chang 49) Violence and disrespect was a forgone conclusion when the authorities

were involved. Often, the police were ejected from each neighborhood by rocks and bottles thrown from the tops of buildings.

A few of the street gangs in the South Bronx, like the Black Spades and the Ghetto Brothers, organized education and food programs similar to the ones used by the Black Panther Party. (Chang 68-65) Some men and women quit the gangs to form groups like the Universal Zulu Nation (UZN), which is the oldest and most widespread organization dedicated to the elevation and preservation of Hip Hop culture.¹

The UZN spread the Hip Hop message of social justice for oppressed and marginalized people of color. The leader of UZN, Afrika Bambaataa, advocated inclusion and that skill in a Hip Hop art took precedence over race, gender, sexuality, and ability. Bambaataa urged African American and Latino men and women to examine their history, the same as the Five Percenters that are part of the Hip Hop's lineage. (Chang 101-107) He also told members to practice peaceful habits and work together to empower the youth.²

Zulus are DJs, Hip Hop dancers of all forms, graffiti artists, rappers, beatboxers, and spoken word artists. They are activists, community organizers, documentarians, entrepreneurs, writers, teachers, and mentors. People from all walks of life are united under the banner of peace, love, unity and safely having fun. In chronological order of artistic elements of Hip Hop culture are graffiti art, DJing, breaking³, and rapping. Spoken word establishment, the four traditional

¹ 1973 is the official date that Bambaataa codified the four elements of Hip Hop culture and established the UZN.

² Currently, the author is the Vice-President of the Minnesota Omega Zulu chapter. Each chapter has a name that incorporates the UZN with a unique identity to a particular location.

³ Sometimes known as breakdancing.

influenced Hip Hop with artists such as The Last Poets and Gil-Scott Heron.

These urban oral warriors, rappers and spoken word artists, have been the main and most prolific messengers of the culture. Songs and poems inform the public about injustices, disparities, and the solutions to these problems. The connection to social justice movements and programs is enough to justify a pedagogy developed for use in the classroom but another aspect of Hip Hop culture must be highlighted.

But this handbook is not just for the use of rappers and spoken word artists. All practitioners have the ability to apply the concepts contained in the following loose methodology. This is possible because the aesthetics, values, practices, traditions, etc., of Hip Hop are the same in each of the four main elements of the culture – a culture developed by youth.

The relevance to today's youth cannot be overemphasized and the resonances grow stronger each day. Countless educators use Hip Hop songs and poems to connect with their students. These oral arts engage with issues of social justice, give young people a path for self-expression, and allow them to relate otherwise unattainable material. The intersection of familiar music, current socio-economic conditions, and politics lets the youth comment on the world around them, which attracts and sparks their interest. This situation allows educators to teach classes in composition, history, social studies, science, communication, etc. (Emdin 5) However, lyrics and poems are only one way to utilize Hip Hop – a practitioner can develop pedagogy from the aesthetics and practices of the culture in addition to teaching an appreciation for the art form. (Emdin 2)

Many of these young people are moving toward higher education and, as they rise, an instructor must be ready to keep them interested and encourage them to achieve more complex goals. Hip Hop culture is now its fourth decade and is growing up alongside the youth. The Hip Hop practitioner is in a perfect position to become a necessary part of the academic experience and, at the same time, create a sustainable career as a professor. Next, let us look at what is contained in this handbook.

Section one explores the necessity of culturally relevant pedagogy for today's students and presents the evidence for the effectiveness of Hip Hop as CRP. (Freire and Ladson-Billings) The next section consists of best practices by practitioners and contains examples of how to use lived experience to construct your own educational style. (Sandoval, Mcleod, and Schloss) Section three looks forward to the future of Hip Hop pedagogy and the new developments in Hip Hop Studies. A Hip Hop and spoken word resource list for practitioners is located in the appendix and should be regarded as a jumping off point for your own explorations and investigations.

I temper the academic theories presented with the practice of a veteran b-boy, sometimes known as a breakdancer, and give examples of my own experience working with the youth in my local breaking community (Minneapolis, MN). The youth that I work with are second and third generation Hmong Americans that make up ninety percent of the local community, which has the most members of almost any community in the United States.

I argue that my viewpoint is relevant because this dance form is considered to be the traditional dance of Hip Hop culture. In earning my title of "b-boy" over many years of involvement with the local community, I have learned that this specific identity carries

many responsibilities. One of the most important duties of a b-boy/b-girl is to know the history of the dance form, as well as the history of each Hip Hop element. Furthermore, the dancer must know the current state of each form. Such knowledge makes it possible to reposition each example that I provide for use in the classroom by practitioners of the other Hip Hop arts.⁴

This essay is not a step-by-step guide for becoming a practitioner professor. The intersections of theory and practice that I present allow use of this handbook to craft your own methodology and to carve out a teaching style from lived experience in a Hip Hop cultural practice.

“In about four seconds the teacher will begin to speak...” (KRS-ONE *My Philosophy*)

“Let us begin. What, where, why, or when
Will all be explained like instructions to a game.”

- KRS-ONE *My Philosophy*

Ch. 1 Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

⁴ To establish my own credibility to the reader, I submit this short history of my twenty-six years of experience as a breaker. The author is a member of Rocklords (established 2004, MN), Battlecats Breaking Crew (established 1993, MN), West Coast Rockers (established 1992, CA), the Bronx Boys (established 1974), and the UZN (established 1973, NY). My first b-boy name (a title earned through battling), J-Roc, was given to me by a peer and then, as I matured, so did my name. I am now known as B-Boy J-Sun.

In this chapter we will review the reasoning and evidence that supports the use of culturally relevant pedagogy. First, a definition of the term is necessary – Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings defines the practice as a teaching method of opposition that is obligated to communal and individual liberation. Further, she suggests that the critical pedagogy rests on a three-pillared structure of criterion in which “(a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order.” (Ladson-Billings 160)

For students, being comfortable in a classroom environment is an important move for aiding in comprehension of materials and a taking of responsibility for learning. There can be no question about the importance and impact of achieving academically and demonstrating cultural competence but a special focus on the third criterion must be made. Teaching students how to critically engage with social issues and, therefore, issues of power is a powerful concept.

Ladson-Billings has conducted significant studies investigating the teaching practices of educators with primarily African American students. She posits in the articles, *Toward a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* and *But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* that “culturally responsive” practices produce academically desired behaviors and aid in avoiding undesired behaviors in the classroom. (Ladson-Billings 467)

In 1988, the author studied a group of eight teachers that worked in a predominately African American, low-income school district in Northern Carolina. Ladson-Billings selected the teachers through “community nomination”, a process in which parents of students recommended

educators followed by a cross-checking of performance with the opinions of principals and fellow teachers. She spent two years interviewing, observing, and videotaping the eight chosen instructors and their classrooms. Finally, Ladson-Billings had the teachers evaluate and observe each other for analysis and interpretation of teaching practices. (Ladson-Billings 471)

She found that there was no all-encompassing strategy or group of tactics that the teachers used to effectively instruct students. Although there were some intersections of styles, each educator had a particular way of communicating and imparting knowledge that caught the attention of the young people. But her most important conclusion was that the students were learning and genuinely interested in the classroom materials based on the way that information was presented. (Ladson-Billings 471)

It is necessary to present information in an accessible way to encourage young people to begin to think on their own. Students should be taught to consider that any issue in their field of perception is a subject of discussion. In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire cautions against a “banking” notion of educating, in which the instructor is the absolute authority in the classroom and simply deposits specific knowledge in the minds of the students. Such a uni-directional approach forecloses independent thinking and questioning outside of the lesson. (Freire 71)

Instead, Freire recommends a “problem-solving” method, which is a reflexive and praxical mode of education. The teacher and the students in this mode are intermediaries in the process of learning and both consider the implication of each other’s views and thoughts. Subjects of discussion revolve around issues that effect and interest both parties, which engages young people to be active historical beings. (Freire 79)

Freire's concludes that the problem-solving education is a revolutionary approach that allows oppressed people to challenge dominant power structures. Part of this conclusion stems from the idea that the youth realize that history and the present moment are dynamic processes that can be directly influenced. (Freire 83) The Hip Hop and spoken word are relevant forms of art to the student that provide a successful and efficient means of encouraging students to participate in social justice projects.

But it is not enough that the teacher is familiar with songs and poems, even if they are life-long listeners. An English teacher with a background in literature and poetry is not the same as a teacher with embodied experience. An educator with the experience of writing, performing, and battling has the potential to engage the students with powerful personal stories, as well as the material. Additionally, a practitioner that is willing to demonstrate skill in their chosen form gains credibility that cultivates trust with students.

Trust is an important factor that will allow students to begin to question problematic aspects of society that have attracted their attention. The learners will follow the example of a teacher that participates in rap or spoken word and challenges important social issues. This is the reason that a handbook for practitioners is vital - culturally relevant pedagogy is useful but when combined with lived experience in Hip Hop culture, it becomes *credible*.

There is some question about how well a CRP works with students that are not interested in Hip Hop and the educator must be flexible in their teaching style. We will have to assume that a practitioner understands adaptation and inclusion from experience because that subject is not the focus of this handbook. Instead, we should look at CRP as a mode of thinking rather than a concrete methodology in order to judge its effectiveness and application.

This way of thinking about CRP comes from my experience of teaching breaking to all ages of youth, but especially teens. CRP is inherently entangled in my work with these young people at a high school in North Minneapolis, Minnesota. My reputation as a credible practitioner in the local breaking community provides a relevance and common ground with the youth. The pedagogy I employ is based in many years of practice, both in teaching and the physical art form. Teaching is not a natural thing; rather it is a strategy consisting of tactics developed through long experience and cannot be rushed. The respect and trust gained within a Hip Hop community comes from the demonstration of longevity and of giving back to that same community. These specific aspects resonate with the teaching profession in the relationship between educator and student. Both are needed to be effective in constructing a problem-solving mode of education.

For example, I teach the fundamentals of breaking while inform the students about the origin of each movement and its significance to the dance form. However, I tell them that history is multi-textured, nonlinear, and can always be reinterpreted. Perhaps more importantly, I point out that I am not the ultimate authority and ask the young people many questions about their thoughts. An approach that can accomplish this goal is to encourage teens to think deeper about why they have chosen dance, spoken word, rap, graffiti art, and/or DJing, as a mode of expression.

A constant self-reflexivity is necessary to understand one's own historicity and positionality. This encounter with the Other (as in the entire perceptual field, not just the bodies within it) should force the educator to recognize her relations with and be accountable for the objects of discourse that she has chose for the students.

The combination of practice, reflexivity, and accountability creates a favorable learning environment. As a result of students becoming comfortable with expressing their opinions about dance, my class is able to have discussions about issues that are associated with Hip Hop culture such as misogyny, homophobia, and materialism. A spoken word artist or rapper can use the same tactic of Hip Hop pedagogy: e.g., informing students about Kool Moe Dee as an innovator of the double-time style of rhyming while teaching that particular style. At the end of the lesson, the practitioner educator can ask her students how spoken word/rap resonates with them.

This tactic creates access to the teen's lives, brings relevance to material that may have seemed previously unreachable, and gives them the sense that their opinion counts. More connections can be formed when comparing past artists and current popular rappers. By helping to construct a timeline of sorts, this tactic facilitates a larger temporal understanding of the culture itself.

A DJ and graffiti artist can use similar examples to employ this strategy. A DJ may choose to use the original source of a sample to educate students about the continuum of African American music that contributed to a popular song. In essence, the DJ would work backward from the present moment to expose a relationship between time and creativity. A graffiti writer can reference the origin of styles such as Phaze II and the "wild style" technique. Phaze II, now known as True Mathematics and a UZN World Council member, is such an important figure in the culture that many different historical and style lessons can be taught in connection with him.

The work of Ladson-Billings and theories of Freire provide a stable, but shifting, surface to support culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy. Practitioner experience supplies the methods of utilizing cultural aesthetics and values – i.e., a way to adapt to the shifting surface of CRP.

Now that the foundation has been established, the next chapter presents some examples of effective practices of CRP.

Ch. 2 Practitioner-Focused Best Practices

Now we have come to an intersection of culturally relevant pedagogy and artistic expression. The crossroads of theory and practice is where the graffiti artist, DJ, breaker, and/or spoken word artist/rapper have the ability to carve a unique path toward problem-solving education. The combination of CRP and Hip Hop practice has proven effective in the classroom using different strategies. A straightforward and proven use of the aforementioned cultural arts can be seen in writing and reading courses but there are several unexplored potentialities.

Cypherspace

The structure of the teaching environment plays a significant role the involvement of students. The classic model of standing in front of the class and depositing information to be memorized is not desirable here. The cypher is a circular and traditional Hip Hop construct much more suited to problem-solving modes. In fact, the cypher has the potentiality to access differential modes of consciousness as put forth by Chela Sandoval in *Methodology of the Oppressed*.

First, it is necessary to define *space*, *hyperspace*, and *cyberspace*. Space is a place generated by conflictual, contractual, and relational modes of consciousness and practices. Hyperspace is a mutated space that disorients and distances an individual from attaining any sort of stable positionality outside of dominant modes of power. Sandoval's concept of a differential

mode of consciousness can be accessed from cyberspace, which is “a zone where meanings are only cursorily attached and thus capable of reattaching to others depending on the situation to be confronted.” (Sandoval 176) Cyberspace possesses decolonizing powers that can make it a place of “limitless possibility.” (Sandoval 176)

The cypher has long been a dynamic site for Hip Hop practitioners, especially breakers and rappers, for expression, improvisation, and innovation. Joseph Schloss, Professor of Music and breaking practitioner, writes extensively about the cypher in his book, *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip Hop Culture in New York*.

Schloss states that “a cypher does not require a stage, an audience, a roof, a dance floor, or even a designated block of time. The cypher’s very informality and transience are part of its power; it appears when and where it is needed, then melts away.” (Schloss 99) The cypher travels with the practitioner. Breakers and rappers utilize the cypher to compete or collaborate with each other and in the tension between the two is where *cypherspace* lies.

This circular and mobile spatial structure that can be constructed anywhere at any time is connected to all other cyphers, often referred to as *the* cypher, not *a* cypher. (Schloss 99) The interactions and cultural productions inside the circular construct have the potential to transform the space from dynamic to dead. For example, breaking was pioneered in a specific space, the cypher, and time, 1970s, and was not necessarily developed for the stage. A circle is small and enclosed and a stage is square and wide open. If taken out of this space of origin, breaking loses some impact, and an adaptive aesthetic is needed to revitalize or reorganize it for a public performance.

Another important and liberatory aspect of the cypher is that it is widely regarded as a space where race, sexuality, or any other aspect of identity is honored and respected as equal to all others. The negotiation of identity is based in the philosophy of the oral art form, that skill takes precedence over how a practitioner is socially classified. The effect can allow for moments of access to a differential mode of consciousness because the performers and spectators are only “seeing” proficiency. However, not every practitioner and/or observer will choose to engage with this way of seeing and, therefore, cannot access this particular liberatory mode of consciousness.

Hip Hop practitioners are enucleated in hyperspace because of the traditions that preserve an art form are intrinsically connected to a heterosexual patriarchy that uses tactics of oppression. Tradition itself is sometimes equated with essentialism and can lead down a path to stereotypes of groups and individuals. An example is the use of femininity to denote weakness in an opponent. Utilizing such a tactic reinforces gender role stereotypes and preserves a destructive mode of thought instead of challenging it.

To an observer, a battle taking place in a cypher may appear to be an individual effort to disrespect an opponent, but only to those unfamiliar with the mores of Hip Hop culture. In reality, this mode of competition is a major factor in building and maintaining an empathic, reflexive, and responsible community. The cypher is a space that generates a group of like-minded individuals connected by that space and a desire to recreate it for identity performance and cultural production.

Sandoval’s cyberspace presents the possibility of working against the preservation of prejudices by utilizing a differential mode of consciousness. Again, spoken word artists do not seem to use or form the cypher as much as rappers but this does not exclude them from this

discussion. Instead, spoken word is immediately accessible to differential modes of consciousness because it is a vital part of the art form's essence. Spoken word is not bound by meter or rhythm, and gives the artist the ability to set the pace of the poem. Spoken word performers compete but do not battle face to face. Rappers take another path to emancipatory thought and utilize the framework of a song or sometimes just a beat to facilitate different modes of thought.

Marginalized communities of color in the five boroughs of New York accessed the differential mode of consciousness by transforming violence into art. The violence was a result of several factors including limitations of employment, resources, and police brutality. The people were not violent but the power relations that systematically oppressed them created poverty-stricken environments, which presented very few opportunities to the youth, and many joined gangs. It is in these places of subjugation where the citizen-subject lives "that oppositional consciousness under neocolonial postmodernism has been generated." (Sandoval 27)

To combat the scarcity of constructive outcomes, such as joining a gang, some African American and Latino/a youth chose to develop dances that would become breaking. Other teenagers selected the other three artistic elements of Hip Hop culture - DJing, graffiti art, or rapping. Sometimes young people that were former gang members were allowed to leave the gang because of their level of proficiency or ambition to become community leaders.

One such ex-gang member, Afrika Bambaataa, organized the first and largest organization dedicated to the elevation and preservation of Hip Hop culture and youth empowerment through the arts. The Universal Zulu Nation (UZN) represents an example of a liberatory mode of consciousness that was accessed by the cypher. Of course, the cypher was not the only site of

access and not every breaker became a revolutionary, but it was a very important and prominent type of space. My point is that the modes of thinking are drastically different between one individual that is conceptualizing movement and another contemplating survival.

Schloss states in *Foundation* that one of the main cultural products is the understanding that being “responsive to a changing situation is more important than maintaining allegiance to a prearranged plan that is no longer relevant.” (Schloss 101) Thinking creatively about adapting to the environment is a lesson that is learned early in a rapper’s development. For example, the music that is played by a DJ in formal or informal cyphers is usually not chosen by the rappers. They must immediately adapt their lyrical style and vocabulary to reflect the rhythm and melody of the music.

One outcome of a physical practice is the application of philosophy to actions outside the cypher. In other words, the practice produces the potentiality to be adaptable to changes in the every day environment. This type of resistant approach to different obstacles in every day life can lead to oppositional thinking. Highlighting a student’s flexibility in improvisational thinking and creative writing in the cypher opens the door for use in other areas of the student’s life. It is the educator’s responsibility to encourage and demonstrate how and where these developing skills can be applied.

Considering the resistant nature that can be accessed through the cypher, situating the structure as a potential puncture in the dominant narrative is appropriate. At its inception, the Universal Zulu Nation constructed a vertical power configuration that combined a hierarchy with tribal titles (malika (sister), ahki (brother), king, queen, spokesperson, head of security, president, etc. are the some of the titles in the UZN). The power structure was meant to be

liberatory but still put much of the influence and final decisions in the hands of the few – the same as the very institutions that oppress communities of color. Yet, the reproduction of power did not reproduce the same type of institution; rather, when combined with the cypher, it was the site of mobile nodes of resistance with experience navigating complex social matrices.

The puncture formed by cypher in the dominant narrative allowed practitioners to consider possibilities that were oppositional in relation to the few provided by an oppressive system. This unmooring of meanings in a puncture can “access and guide our theoretical and political “movidas”—revolutionary maneuvers toward decolonized being. “ (Sandoval 140) Cypherspace is extremely useful in explorations of challenging material in the classroom.

I use two examples of deploying the cypher in the classroom: (1) the collaborative or building cypher and (2) the competitive or battle cypher. The collaborative cypher is noncompetitive and there is no predetermined order as each dancer takes a turn. There can be themes, like threading (creating shapes with the body and putting other parts of the body through the constructed shapes) or taking one move from the previous dancer’s turn and expanding on it. I transfer the new possibilities of movement to discussions about issues associated with Hip Hop by suggesting new possibilities of thinking. The comparison between movement and thought generates new questions, and moves toward problem-solving modes of thinking.

The competitive cypher is the battling mode of performance in Hip Hop culture. I use this mode to train students to practice like they battle in order to prepare for real competitions. Being prepared is a lesson that can be applied in many areas; I most often use it in relation to my student’s scholastic success and future endeavors.

The collaborative and competitive cypher can be utilized in the oral arts in similar ways. A spoken word artist or rapper can use themes in rhythms, literary devices, and subject matter to produce a comfortable learning environment. This collaborative space cultivates trust and a certain openness with the participants within the cypher, including the educator. The building cypher is an instrument that the practitioner teacher can use to enable discussions about larger social issues, simply by stopping the cypher and focusing on a particular idea expressed in the space. The collaborative cypher lends itself to both spoken word and rap but the latter can be utilized easier here than in the battle cypher.

The battle cypher is a little more challenging as an educational tactic, but no less useful to a classroom environment. A way that this tactic can be used is to pick an issue that the students can pick two different opinions on (or more to destabilize problematic binaries, which is in turn another way to deploy subtle Hip Hop based pedagogy). The two crews composed a battle rap supporting their opinion on the issue and attempting to disprove the other the group's viewpoint. Each crew designates two representatives to battle and additional lessons in forming arguments can be taught by the practitioner.

The teacher should consider the option of investigating other subjects with Hip Hop and spoken word, which in turn can sustain the students' attention and engagement. One of the best practices, as cited by David Stovall, is to be prepared to answer why an educator is teaching a specific lesson. (Stovall 590) Let us take Stovall's idea a step further in order to deploy our experience as a practitioner. For example, to demonstrate a willingness to have a dialogue, the teacher can challenge the learners to pose any questions in a freestyle rap or poem and s/he must

answer in the same mode. Music is optional but has a profound effect on the students' willingness to battle or build.

Of course, not every student will want to compose a poem when asking a question. Instead, it is the decision of the practitioner when and where it is appropriate and with whom. However, even shy students can write a rap verse or poem for a homework assignment.

Humor is an important tactical tool produced by inviting students that do not usually feel included with the learning process to become part of it. The interplay of student and teacher participating in a culturally relevant mode of investigation often yields, at the very least, a mildly humorous result. Such a tactic can release tension several times during a school day and facilitate more learning by more of the class. (Ladsong).

I have written extensively about Hip Hop practices that take place in the cypher and do not want to neglect spoken word as an instrument for CRP. Realistically, spoken word does not have the baggage that comes along with rap music and, traditionally, does not take place in a cypher, but it can. Poetry from students can easily transfer to lessons about uses of literary devices while engaging with current issues that involve or interest the learners; it is one of the most powerful strengths of the form.

Additionally, I do not want to exclude the other two Hip Hop practices of graffiti art and DJing. Though not traditionally performed in a cypher, these two art forms utilize their own ways of claiming space to reach similar objectives. For example, DJing is rarely done with other DJs but cypher DJing is used in classes or schools such as Scratch DJ Academy. The iconic Jam Master Jay of RUN-DMC established this school in 2002. One application of cypherspace to such a classroom environment would be to talk about the socio-economic conditions of the New

York five boroughs when listening to Nas. Then the educator can create connections to current issues that involve students by asking questions that encourage independent thinking.

Graffiti artists usually paint while trying to avoid detection by authorities. As the culture has grown, these practitioners have been able to use public walls with permission and commission, and receive the acclaim and respect that high-caliber artists deserve. With this development, graffiti writers are beginning to be prominently featured in education. A practitioner can utilize a cypherspace state of mind while not actually being in a cypher.

The graffiti artist can access a liberatory mode by getting students to all paint together quietly. Then, the teacher scares the students with a loud siren, just like one that would surprise and alert traditional graffiti writers to the presence of police. The discussion that follows can touch on such issues as security, constitutional rights, and/or oppressive power structures.

Things to be Aware of When Utilizing Hip Hop as CRP

Although social interactions with classmates can effectively encourage independent thought (Dimitriadis 179, 183) and the forms developed from early Hip Hop practice constructed a whole scene based on the ability to express one's self under pressure, there are two potentially troubling factors to consider in a culturally relevant pedagogy: (1) ignoring problematic issues associated with Hip Hop culture and (2) reproducing the same power structures and/or force relations as the dominant narrative. These may seem like obvious obstacles to avoid to an educator but the direction of class discussions may be unpredictable when engaging students with a problem-solving approach. A teacher employing a liberatory mode of instruction must be prepared to successfully contend with both factors.

1. *Problematic Issues Associated with Hip Hop Culture*

Many teachers use the lyrics of Biggie Smalls, Tupac Shakur, and other mainstream rappers in class to ensnare their student's attention. They may juxtapose these artists with passages from Shakespeare. Instructors must have a working knowledge that goes beyond listening and analyzing verses; a knowledge of the lives of each cited artist is vital and still, that is not enough. A teacher must be able to speak in specificities *and* generalities about Hip Hop culture and the conditions that each artist lives, or lived in, that created such art.

For example, Tupac made revolutionary-minded music (*Holler If You Hear Me*) and compositions that may seem to counter to that same stance (*Hit Em Up*). He filed and won a police brutality suit against the Oakland Police Department in 1991. A wrongful death suit was brought against him in 1992 for the killing of six year-old Qa'id Walker Teal, which he settled out of court with the parents. When using Tupac as a resource for poetry, history, social studies, etc., the teacher should be able to answer why she chose this particular artist.

A resourceful student may investigate any assigned materials and challenge a teacher's breadth of knowledge; it is as easy as typing a name into a search engine. How does an effective educator answer difficult questions without foreclosing certain subjects? One way that a practitioner can stay away from this trap is to plan for meandering discussions in the classroom.

An educator that only utilizes the lyrics of songs and poems for memorization is teaching an appreciation for the art forms. This is the most common use of Hip Hop and spoken word texts and does not teach or encourage freethinking. It is the *performance* of cultural practices, Hip Hop aesthetics, and embodied experience that can access the problem-solving mode in students.

Spoken word has its share of vibrant identities but does not seem to have the same obstacles as rap. A practitioner should use lesser-known artists that have some sort of relevancy with artists known to the students. This is just one way or tactic to puncture the dominant narrative with practitioner knowledge.

Another example of complexity is the misogyny, homophobia, and violence in some Hip Hop compositions that it is an, often misinterpreted, “problem.” One of Hip Hop’s most valued aesthetics is to be honest and authentic to one’s own experience. This is an aspect that has been transferred to mainstream representations of the music. I am not defending the content of songs that are entangled with these social issues but three aspects of such compositions should be considered and relayed to students: (1) Hip Hop is not responsible for misogyny, homophobia, or violence in American culture, (2) Hip Hop music is believed to tell real stories that are always true, a standard that other genres of music are not held to, and (3) actual Hip Hop communities do not operate using problematic American social narratives, they *report* on them and many other issues too.

First, misogyny, homophobia, and violence have been around much longer than Hip Hop music. Rap is concentrated view of American life with artists reproducing American values replicated in many other art forms, such as rock, country, and blues. In other words, these are *American* social issues reflected in a type of music (Hip Hop) that, by its very nature, is held up as honest or “keeping it real.”

Second, that “keeping it real” attitude is a tactic to generate income of many mainstream representations of Hip Hop music. In fact, music played on major media outlets may sound similar to Hip Hop but is merely simulacra. Hip Hop-influenced popular music is manufactured

for capital gain – the same three-minute verse and chorus formula was developed in the 1920s in Tin Pan Alley.

This means that popular opinion, trends, and viewpoints in music and American culture are utilized instead of the Hip Hop and spoken word aesthetic of authenticity. By authenticity, I am referencing the original meaning of keeping it real before mainstream media appropriated the concept. In her article, *Authenticity within Hip Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation*, the 1999 mind of Kembreu McLeod defines authenticity in Hip Hop as “...staying true to yourself, the street, the underground, not being soft, the old school...” (McLeod 135)

Profit and expression are not separate categories but the former often disrupts the rules of the latter. When that happens, it is a direct violation of the unwritten condition that a Hip Hop practitioner must be original in her chosen form of art, which is a condition that cannot be met when copying another style that is already a reproduction. Hip Hop music is performed to express an authentic identity or viewpoint of the artist.

Third, remind the students that your own Hip Hop community does not operate using misogyny, homophobia, or violence. Additionally, inform the class that Hip Hop culture consists of other forms – breaking, graffiti art, and DJing – and to explore these forms. The representations of the other forms are just as problematic but have different viewpoints on their own issues. These viewpoints may be helpful to both educators and students in understanding the complex concepts that can be potentially engaged in class discussions.

Another important and difficult discussion that is inevitable in any classroom is the question of graffiti art. There is no way to absolutely defend an art form that impinges on ownership rights. However, by its very nature, graffiti art is rebellious and the most illegal of all

the elements of Hip Hop but there are some helpful ideas to offer to students. First, the people that practiced this element were disenfranchised youth whose voice was completely ignored by the power structures of the time (1960s-1970s). *All* the elements of Hip Hop were illegal at one time. The first parties were in abandoned buildings or public parks and used electricity from streetlights. To this day, gatherings of dancers are approached by police and told to leave the location (personal experience). Because of this complicated past, all the elements have the ability to access cypherspace with effective outcomes.

2. Reproduction of Dominant Power Structures and Narratives

As I have mentioned before, the young people that pioneered Hip Hop culture sometimes used similar hierarchies and opinions of popular American culture when creating groups dedicated to the art forms and empowerment. The majority of listeners, including high school students, tend to focus on the music instead of the lyrics and can be unaware of the content of their favorite songs.

It is important to reiterate to students that their choices are not wrong but have destructive potential because of the stereotyping certain groups in some songs. Additionally, the educator should inform the class that there are Hip Hop compositions that support those same groups. (Stovall 592) In my experience, the best way to talk about this subject is to let young people know that they should like whatever songs they like but that they are smart enough to look deeper into the meaning of problematic lyrics.

For example, mainstream rappers are overwhelmingly male and use language that devalues women – bitch, ho, chickenhead, etc. – and perpetuate patriarchal relations that place

men on the top of a pyramidal power structure. The message within the music is played in constant rotation on media outlets whose sole concern is to make money, which they receive from record labels. The practice of *payola* is legal as long as the media outlet reports it when requested. (FCC.gov)

Listeners are told repetitively that these are the “hot” songs of the current moment without being told that the music is being chosen *for* them, not *by* them. Teachers that choose these popular songs should make students aware of the force relations behind the scenes of the music industry. This should be done to educate students that the music that they choose is not really a choice.

If the teacher decides not to talk about the power structures that perpetuate the dominant narrative, the educator is setting the students up to continue the same narrative. It would seem to be “common sense” to alert learners to this situation, but educators unfamiliar with Hip Hop culture as a whole may not be able to verbalize it in a constructive way without practice doing so.

One tactic that I utilize to challenge dominant power structures to ask my students who is allowed to practice a Hip Hop art form. Most of the time the teens already know the “right” answer and say everyone is included in the culture. The next question is more specific: I ask about specific identities – GLBTQ, differently abled, women – and the answer is the same.

This question can initiate conversations regarding the positioning of non-heterosexual identities as Other. Then I simply ask why is everyone allowed to practice the Hip Hop arts. The third question is one that sparks conversation and discussion about proficiency in an art form and history. My final question is why *they* (the students) are allowed to break, which delves into their

personal history and can begin to acknowledge one's own historicity. This is an example that can transfer directly to spoken word artists and practitioners of the other Hip Hop elements. Next, let us move on to the current moment and future of Hip Hop Studies.

Ch. 3 Recent Developments and the Future of Hip Hop Studies

“Hip Hop-based education scholarship must locate and engage a wider range of Hip Hop cultural production.”

- Mark Lamont Hill *Schooling Hip Hop 2)*

This handbook contains two recent developments in Hip Hop-based education. The first development is that it is written *for* practitioners *by* a practitioner. Practitioner-written literature is still relatively new because the Hip Hop generations are just now pursuing higher education with a focus on their form as an area of study. I could find very little research done by credible members of Hip Hop cultural practices for this essay, but that situation is rapidly changing.

Innovations in education are being made to transform the field of Hip Hop Studies. An online resource that is making a considerable impact is Flocabulary.com – a collection of music made specifically to teach lessons in grades K-12 and the roster of artists are experienced participants. Another important organization founded in 2002 is the Hip Hop Archives at Harvard University, which is perhaps the most influential and largest database of its kind. In 2009, McNally Smith College of Music in Minneapolis created the first Hip Hop Studies degree program in the country. Recognized Hip Hop practitioners Big Quarters, Toki Wright, Freddy Fresh, and Sean McPherson crafted the degree program.

The work done by Patrick Douthit aka 9th Wonder, Hip Hop producer and Harvard Fellow, has resulted in a Hip Hop Institute being established at North Carolina Central University. Douthit is a practitioner professor with an impressive and substantial discography that ranges from work with Buckshot, Boot Camp Clik, Little Brother and Murs. Douthit teaches a course called “Hip Hop in Context” that is based in the history department at the university. All of these organizations and databases are forming the basis of a respected and relevant area of study.

The future of Hip Hop studies is evolving into a more comprehensive area of study. As research done by practitioners is increasing, the use of Hip Hop as an educational tool will become more textured and easier to be applied by non-practitioners. Anyone can use these ideas as a way of teaching about different subjects because of the intertwining relationship of Hip Hop to youth and American culture.

Reflexivity, humbleness, and empathy are components necessary for the evolution of Hip Hop studies into an area of concentration in institutions of higher learning. This is one of many reasons that professor practitioners must lead the charge of critiques, research, and analysis of Hip Hop practices: these are qualities that one develops with a long history of involvement with the culture.

The second development in this handbook is the expansion of Hip Hop studies into the other artistic elements of the culture. The history of Hip Hop is almost always taught from the past to present in a rap discography that highlights the emcees and places them above all the other pioneering practitioners. These histories briefly mention the significant impact of the DJ, mumble a paragraph about breaking, and completely ignore graffiti art. Cultural participants

from these previously passed over elements are now utilizing their experiences in academic learning and teaching.

A disservice is being done to the students of teachers that solely focus on the lyrics of poems and songs because Hip Hop is a *culture*, which consists of many more useful and effective relationships/lessons for different scholastic areas. Hip Hop culture is to be *experienced*, and a responsible educator must find ways to involve their students in the experience. This statement is as true for high school as it is academia, where professors lecture on subjects with which they have no direct lived experience.

Open mics, all-ages concerts, breaking competitions, art galleries (or street galleries) are all important cultural productions in Hip Hop. A teacher can take students to these events, assign happenings as homework, or facilitate gatherings themselves. A social justice project can be inserted into the event, which can be content or a specific action that takes place during the event.

One of the main reasons that I deploy my own experience in this essay is that traditional practitioners are expected to know more than just the history of Hip Hop culture. They are required to know the history of each artistic element *and* the present state of each form, as well as, how this knowledge relates to the culture as a whole. Only a long-time practitioner can obtain this type of knowledge. No amount of compiled resources can replace the priceless experience *of* experience. Practice is necessary for personal understanding and a vital component of Hip Hop based pedagogy.

The future of Hip Hop studies? The future is you; the future is the practitioner academic. It is the *real* taking place of the “real”, and it is the effect that you have on your students. It is the

effect that Hip Hop has had on you. Hip Hop's membership is maturing, and the culture is too. It is not simply a youth culture any longer. What can you contribute?

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Appendix

Hip Hop Resource List

I have compiled some of the most significant books, articles and films for use when utilizing Hip Hop pedagogy or in the area of Hip Hop Studies. Not all of these resources are directly related to Hip Hop but may be helpful in examinations of certain materials. The reader should consider the bibliography of this handbook as part of the resource list. Many of these materials come from my own library and journey as a practitioner and academic. This list does not include music because it would be too long but I will give some advice to those using this handbook.

From 1980 to 1993, the culture produced some of the easiest Hip Hop compositions to employ in the classroom. Most of these songs contain straightforward concepts, clean lyrics, and simple concepts. I would suggest going back further and examining the music of James Brown, known to b-boys/b-girls as the godfather of breaking. Educators must be knowledgeable about the music through many hours spent listening to different practitioners. It is important to have knowledge of the local Hip Hop scene and to pass this respect and information onto students. So, now – do the knowledge.

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* I would highly recommend watching established breaking competitions like *Freestyle Session*, *B-Boy Summit*, *RedBull BC One*, *Scribble Jam*, *Outbreak*, etc. Battles are one of the few places that showcase all four Hip Hop elements.