

Activating Hip-Hop Pedagogy in the Social Studies Classroom

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While empirical studies on the use of hip-hop music in social studies spaces is limited, the work that has been done offers encouraging perspectives. Some research suggests that incorporating hip-hop lyrics into the classroom leads to increased student engagement and greater curricular relevance.¹ Other scholars have centered hip-hop as a way to reject traditional notions of financial literacy.² Author and academic Bettina Love developed a hip-hop informed civics curriculum.³ Hip-hop has a vast potential to inform social studies teaching and learning. With this article, I hope to encourage other educators to think more deeply about how they can draw on hip-hop in their own practice.

Hip-Hop as a Pedagogical Approach

In 1989, Thandi Hicks Harper contended that a key piece in urban schooling was the incorporation of rap music, and she encouraged educators to draw upon rap in their practices.⁴ Scholars and practitioners have since given different terminology to their work around hip-hop in educational spaces: critical hip-hop pedagogy;⁵ hip-hop based education;⁶ or hip-hop pedagogy,⁷ to name a few. For the purpose of this article, I draw on the understanding of hip-hop pedagogy.

Hip-hop pedagogy, as defined by Christopher Emdin and Edmund Adjapong, incorporates the creative elements of hip-hop into teaching to stimulate students' connection with the content: "meeting them on their cultural turf by teaching to, and through, their realities and experiences."⁸ As a culturally responsive approach to education, hip-hop pedagogy is rooted in the foundations of hip-hop, not only as a genre of music, but as a culture that has deep-seated norms and traditions.⁹

Because of its emphasis on social justice and education, hip-hop has long been associated with liberatory educational practice (i.e., centering the histories and identities of the oppressed to promote liberation).¹⁰ Consequently, hip-hop pedagogy places emphasis on social action, emancipatory understanding, and knowledge as an important part of hip-hop culture.

In my teaching practice, I follow a framework for hip-hop pedagogy first presented by Adjapong. Outlined in Figure 1, Adjapong's framework connects the five creative elements of hip-hop (MC, graffiti arts, b-boying/b-girling, DJ, knowledge of self) to pedagogical strategies that teachers can use in the classroom.¹¹

Figure 1. Framework for Hip-Hop Pedagogy

Hip-Hop Creative Element	Pedagogical Implementation
MC	Co-teaching, Call and Response
Graffiti Arts	Visual Arts Education
DJ	Classroom Playlist
B-Boying/B-Girling	Kinesthetic Learning
Knowledge of Self	Social Justice Education

Orientation and Applications to the Classroom

The hip-hop pedagogy framework provides an avenue for incorporating hip-hop into educational spaces. In the following section, I highlight how using Knowledge of Self, MC'ing, B-Boying/B-Girling, DJing, and Graffiti Arts have expanded my understanding of what hip-hop pedagogy looks like in social studies education. The following examples stem from my prior work as a high school social studies teacher, when I taught

government, U.S. history, and world history.

Knowledge of Self

Hip-hop pedagogy focuses on student experiences and knowledge through the creative element “knowledge of self.” Some hip-hop scholars argue that hip-hop pedagogy is grounded and contextualized in the understanding of oppressive systems in place in our society and can be a path towards liberation from these systems.¹² Therefore, hip-hop pedagogy reconceptualizes what it means to liberate students through education by engaging students in critical thinking within spaces that they co-create.

I carried out this approach in my government class by centering the teaching and learning of student-identified issues. I asked myself: what do I really want students to take away at the end of this class? In the end, what I really wanted was for my students to have a better understanding of the role that government plays in their communities. I felt that the best way to do this was to meet them at the intersection of government and lived experiences. So at the beginning of the semester, I asked each student to submit a list of critical issues they wanted to learn more about. Among the issues students listed was a desire to understand who makes decisions about funding the police and prisons; this topic related to a series of highly publicized police brutality incidents in our city, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (such as the killing of Dontre Hamilton), as well as the construction of a new juvenile detention center. Students were also interested in issues of environmental justice, like understanding the high rate of lead in our city’s water (which resulted in students not being able to drink out of their school’s water fountains for a period of time) and gaining better insight about what city and school officials were doing about the crisis.

My students also identified drug rehabilitation as an issue they wanted to learn more about—many had personal experiences related to harsh drug sentences in the criminal justice system. To address this, I showed them how to read and research legislative bills being proposed on the issue and identify which elected officials had power to influence these types of bills. Through this research, my students discovered that their state representative was in the process of proposing a bill on drug rehabilitation. My students not

only penned letters to him about the issue, but also asked me if it was possible to speak with him face to face. To facilitate this, I reached out to the state representative’s office and scheduled a time for him to visit our classroom and discuss the topic. After the representative’s visit, students were inspired to learn about local initiatives around drug rehabilitation. They found several community organizations doing this work. By centering this critical issue in the curriculum, my students gained new skills—learning how to read legislation, understanding who is writing and enacting legislation, and how to contact individuals in their community who have the power to enact change—that will allow them to identify and work against systems that do not serve them or their community.

MC’ing

The hip-hop pedagogy framework encourages educators to consider the nuances of what an MC does, and how that can open up new pathways for student learning and engagement. MCs—who often work in pairs—are responsible for keeping up the flow of an event, and the hip-hop pedagogy framework posits that student co-teachers can play the same role in the classroom.¹³ In my classroom, I implemented co-teaching through the use of “cogens”. Christopher Emdin terms cogens as “simple conversations between the teacher and their students with a goal of co-creating/generating plans of action for improving the classroom.”¹⁴ Cogens have been essential elements of the co-facilitation model I utilize. All the topics for my courses come from cogens. As an educator, this means that for cogens to be effective I have to enter the cogen space believing that my students have something valuable to contribute to the curricular development of our class. If I were to enter the cogen space and simply reroute students’ curricular interests back to what my curricular interests are, the cogen space would not be successful. To facilitate the cogen, I invite the class to discuss what it is we/they want to learn. Individuals may participate verbally, or they may write their thoughts down if they do not feel comfortable sharing out to the group. I then structure their interests into units, pairing similar topics together and coming up with a timeline for the class to engage in these topics. Then I present this timeline, or syllabus, to the class.

The students can then decide to participate as co-teachers on a lesson or unit of their choice. This is not a mandatory participation grade, though many students elect to do so. They may work as co-teachers alongside me, individually, or as a small group team. We then hold cogens with the co-teaching groups during work time in class. During the small group cogens, the team discusses the pedagogy behind the lesson. I structure these cogens by posing a few simple questions for the group of co-teachers to consider, such as: What do you want your classmates to know by the end of this project? What sources should we bring into the classroom for this learning experience? What should the end product of this project be? This way, students are giving input on their learning experience, while I guide the actual implementation of their ideas.

B-Boying/B-Girling

The incorporation of b-boying/b-girling is focused on the process of dance, not just the performance of it; this is to say that dance that is not just a performance, but a learning experience with a process to it embedded in the rigorous understanding, conceptualization, and presentation of course content.¹⁵ In my practice, the use of b-boying/b-girling was initiated by the students. Through a cogen in one of my world history classes, students identified that they wanted to learn about dance traditions from around the world. Earlier in the year, one of our co-teaching groups decided to seek

out pen pals from South Africa. The co-teachers who helped me lead the pen pal project thought the project would be an interesting avenue to explore the topic of dance. So, I scheduled a day for us to write letters to our pen pals about dance traditions in the United States, and we inquired about their dance traditions. We received our pen pals' responses nearly two months later, in which they listed a number of dance traditions. I brought the co-teachers back together to discuss how to respond to the letters. Together, the co-teachers and I decided that each student would select a dance tradition identified by the pen pals such as Ndlamudance, Gumboot, and Pantsula.

Working as individuals or in groups, the class engaged in a critical inquiry on the dance tradition they selected. This research included gaining an understanding of what the dance tradition looked like now, but also included the historical foundations of the dance tradition. Through this research, the students were able to make connections between a number of modern and historical dance traditions throughout the world. After they concluded the research, the students performed a compilation of the historical dance traditions that gave way to the modern dance tradition they researched. Along with the performance they gave a presentation in their preferred delivery mode (e.g., spoken word, rap, lecture with powerpoint, etc.) on their research process which included a historical analysis of the dance tradition. What I believe made the incorporation of b-boying/b-girling successful was the student-centered approach; I allowed student interests to guide the direction of the project and positioned myself as a facilitator.

DJing

In the hip-hop pedagogy framework, the hip-hop element of DJing is positioned as a way to bring student interest and voice into the class through the creation of a class playlist.¹⁶ I personally have playlists for everything: a playlist for when I want motivation; a playlist for when I'm sad; a playlist for when I'm happy, etc. So, I began to think: what if we applied this thinking to our analysis of historical events? In my U.S. History class, I applied the thinking of a playlist to the creation of a unit on race relations in the United States.

Four Essential Questions for Playlist Creation

1. What current knowledge do my students have on this topic?
2. What topics can I cover that extend my students' current knowledge?
2. What hip-hop artifacts (i.e., songs, images, videos, performances, graffiti, etc.) speak to this topic?
4. Are these hip-hop artifacts discussing hip-hop artists that my students are familiar with? If not, how can I add hip-hop artifacts that speak to the topic *and* my students' interests?



B-Boys performing in a street show.

Essential in the creation of the playlist were some critical questions that guided the playlist creation. While pondering these critical questions, I realized that an album that many of my students were discussing recently covered a lot of topics regarding race: Kendrick Lamar’s album *To Pimp A Butterfly*. Therefore, I positioned Lamar’s album as an example of a soundtrack to a critical issue in our country—in essence, a playlist. Different songs on the album spoke to different topics that shaped the overall race relations unit. See Figure

2 for an overview of the songs and the topic that each song addressed in the unit. We used different mediums to analyze each song: lyrical analysis, music video analysis, primary source document analysis, and picture analysis.

For example, the song “King Kunta” discusses the legacy of Kunta Kinte and the overall perseverance of Black people in the United States. I provided students with highlighters and copies of the song text for a lyrical analysis of the chorus and the last verse of “King Kunta” guided by the following

Figure 2

Songs from <i>To Pimp A Butterfly</i> and Their Topic Application in the Race Relations Unit	
“Wesley’s Theory”	Racism in American institutions
“For Free”	Reparations
“King Kunta”	Black perseverance and ingenuity
“Institutionalized”	Public policies that have influenced the Black community
“Hood Politics”	American politics, distrust, and the Black community
“Complexion”	Colorism
“The Blacker the Berry”	Anti-Blackness
“Mortal Man”	Black activism and heroification
“Alright”	Demonstrations of Black joy

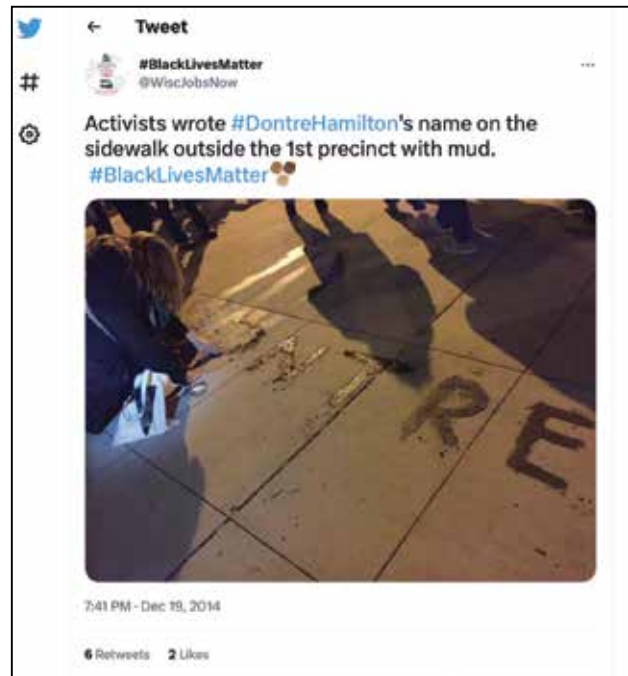
questions: (1) In looking at the song, how does Kendrick Lamar describe the attitude of Black men in America? Highlight specific parts of the song that make you think this; (2) Based on the song, who do you think King Kunta is? Highlight specific parts of the song that make you think this.

After students listen to the song, they discuss their findings in small groups. Then, students participate in a series of small group learning stations that explore Alex Haley's account of Kunta Kinte in the movie *Roots* and primary source examples of other people who were enslaved that embodied characteristics of perseverance and ingenuity.

As a final assessment for the race relations unit, using Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly* as a guide, students crafted their own playlist around a specific topic concerning race relations in the United States. Students crafted playlists around colorism, the legacy of Jim Crow, and police brutality, among other topics. Along with links to their songs, students provided an explanation for why or how each song spoke to their selected topic. The creativity, depth, and emotionality in which students thought about the topics has pushed me to think more deeply about how we can leverage the creation of playlists as an avenue for inquiry in the social studies classroom.

Graffiti Arts

Adjapong explains that "when utilizing hip-hop pedagogy, students are charged with tasks where they engage in the visual arts, similar to graffiti artists, to work through and demonstrate their understanding of content."¹⁷ To this end, I have drawn on graffiti arts in my practice by positioning graffiti as a source to be analyzed. This is best reflected in how I drew upon graffiti arts to process the aftermath of police violence in our community. After the police killing of Dontre Hamilton, an unarmed Black man, our city erupted in protests that spanned days. In response to the mass protests, many businesses boarded up their windows and doors across the city. When it was time to return to school, I felt a deep responsibility to address the protests in my social studies classes. The question for me was: how can I process this event with my students while directing attention to the message of the protests? As I drove through the



This image was taken outside the Milwaukee Police 1st Precinct during protests over the murder of Dontre Hamilton, who had been sleeping on a park bench on April 30, 2014 when an officer shot and killed him. The officer did not face criminal charges.

city, I noticed that many of the boarded up businesses had protest graffiti, and this graffiti quite literally spelled out the demands of the protestors. On our first day back, we had a class discussion about the protests and I asked students to bring in pictures of graffiti that they saw around the community in response to the protests. I did the same. The next day, we discussed the themes we saw in the graffiti: Where was the graffiti located? What emotions does this piece of graffiti evoke? What strategies did the artist take to convey the message (e.g., size or color)? What message is this piece of graffiti sending? Through these guiding questions, we discussed potential action steps we could take as a community to heal from the trauma of state-sanctioned violence.

Conclusion

My interpretation and implementation of hip-hop pedagogy is deeply informed by my experiences as a Black woman with a deep relationship to hip-hop music and culture, teaching Black students who are also deeply engaged in hip-hop music

and culture. A critical component of engaging with hip-hop in your practice includes a thorough examination of your positionality with and to hip-hop culture. A part of this examination must include an understanding of the historical underpinnings of hip-hop and its importance to Black and marginalized communities, as well as your students' relationship to and with hip-hop. To develop these understandings, I encourage educators to read books on hip-hop history like *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* by Jeff Chang and *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* by Tricia Rose and to explore additional literature that examines how educators draw on hip-hop in educational spaces.¹⁸ As social studies educators continue to seek out pedagogical strategies that center students' knowledge and lived experiences, I posit that the most effective pedagogy we can engage in is one that not only acknowledges students' knowledge and lived experiences, but prepares students to evoke change in the systems and institutions that govern them—this is the power of hip-hop pedagogy in social studies education. ■

Notes

1. Christopher Emdin, Edmund Adjapong, and Ian Levy, "Hip-Hop Based Interventions as Pedagogy/Therapy in STEM: A Model from Urban Science Education," *Journal of Multicultural Education* 10, no. 3 (2016): 307–321; Jason Irizarry, "Representin': Drawing from Hip-Hop and Urban Youth Culture to Inform Teacher Education," *Education and Urban Society* 41, no. 4 (2009): 489–515; David Stovall, "We Can Relate: Hip-Hop Culture, Critical Pedagogy, and the Secondary Classroom," *Urban Education* 41, no. 6 (2006): 585–602.
2. Neil Shanks and Delandrea Hall, "And I Know the Money Don't Really Make Me Whole": Feminist Financial Literacy Through Hip-Hop pedagogy," in *Financialization, Financial Literacy, and Social Education*, ed. Thomas Lucey (Routledge, 2021).
3. Bettina Love, Get Free: Hop Hop Civics Ed, <http://get-freehiphopcivics.com>.
4. P. Thandi Hicks Harper, "Rap Music + Education: The Missing Connection in the Urban School System," *Research Rap Review* 1, no. 1 (1989): 1-10. In LD Productions, *Rap Attack '89: Rapping for a Cause Rap Conference Journal*. Available from the Youth Popular Culture Institute: www.academia.edu/37046984/Rap_Music_Education_The_Missing_Connection_in_the_Urban_School_System
5. Antwi Akom, "Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy as Liberatory Praxis," *Equity and Excellence in Education* 42, no. 1 (2009): 52–66.
6. Marc Lamont Hill, *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity* (Teachers College Press, 2009).
7. Edmund Adjapong and Christopher Emdin, "Rethinking Pedagogy in Urban Spaces: Implementing Hip-Hop Pedagogy in the Urban Science Classroom," *Journal of Urban Learning and Teaching Research* 11, (2015): 66–77.
8. Ibid.
9. Christopher Emdin, "Pursuing the Pedagogical Potential of the Pillars of Hip-hop Through Sciencemindedness," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 4, no. 3 (2013): 83–99.
10. Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop. A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (St Martin's Press, 2005); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. (Wesleyan University Press, 1994).
11. Edmund Adjapong, "Bridging Theory and Practice in the Urban Science Classroom: A Theory for Hip Hop Pedagogy," *Critical Education* 8, no. 15 (2017).
12. Christopher Emdin and Edmund Adjapong, *#HipHopEd: The Compilation on Hip Hop Education: Volume 1: Hip-hop as Education, Philosophy, and Practice* (Brill Sense, 2018).
13. Adjapong, "Bridging Theory and Practice in the Urban Science Classroom."
14. Christopher Emdin, *For White folks Who Teach in the Hood...and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education* (Beacon Press, 2016), 65.
15. Adjapong, "Bridging Theory and Practice in the Urban Science Classroom."
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid, 14.
18. I encourage educators to start by reading Lauren Kelly and Don Sawyer III, "When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong?: Enacting Critical Pedagogies of Hip-Hop in Mainstream Schools," *Journal of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music* 9, no. 2, (2019): 6–21 and David Stovall, "We Can Relate: Hip-Hop Culture, Critical Pedagogy, and the Secondary Classroom," *Urban Education* 41, no. 6 (2006): 585–602.



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