

Developing a Hip Hop Studies Curriculum

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The supposition of using hip hop as a tool for teaching may come as a surprise to many, a shock to some, and as a long overdue concept to others. Much of what is seen in the media, talked about on campuses, and expressed in many communities is a negative vision of hip hop culture. Hip hop much like jazz for many years, has had a negative connotation associated with it. The scenes of scantily clad women, thug-life depictions and degenerate behavior are etched in many peoples minds when they think of hip hop. They are unable to see the commercial hand that creates these images for sensationalistic profit. Many of the people who work in the recording industry and who influence the decisions that govern the promotion and distribution of the music, the videos and the images, are following a script given to them by those who worked in the industry a century ago. The same negative images of African-Americans were portrayed by D.W. Griffith in his "Birth of a Nation" and reinforced the stereotypes of African-Americans as lazy, no-account, degenerates who are oversexed and violent. Any image that defies that stereotype is seen as not accurate and more importantly will not sell records or any other product.

There are however large segments of hip hop culture who are using hip hop as a form of education and empowerment. Hip hop is one of the many elements that came out of the African-American experience like blues, jazz, gospel, and many other expressions, that created an identity for a generation of African-Americans who sought to be free from racial, economic, and political oppression. The origins of hip hop most certainly stretch back to Africa, but the amalgamation of the many elements that make up this art form came together in New York City around the late 1970s. The music was used as a form of entertainment but also as a unifying element in communities giving identities to "crews" and local neighborhoods. Hip hop's evolution into an art form for social change had its roots at this time with Afrika Bambaata from the Zulu Nation. This evolved into the conscious rap of the 1990s with KRS-One and others that epitomized the use of hip hop as a tool for education as in the song by KRS entitled "You Must Learn".

It was then that the industry and corporations saw the financial potential for hip hop and realized that it was not just a passing fad but a burgeoning culture which they could capitalize on and mass market. It is not surprising that they chose the most negative and stereotypical of images to promote and perpetuate – the gangster. Of all the styles that were in hip hop, the focus in the early 1990s was on gangsta rap and much of the music is still permeated by this style of hip hop. The conscious or "positive" hip hop of artists such as Common, Mos Def, Talib Kweli and a host of underground artists are not seen on MTV, BET or any of the mass media outlets.

These issues are glaring and can be addressed through increased awareness and broader support for artists who are challenging the stereotypes. Aside from this discussion of the images and perceptions of hip hop, however, I would like to address the issue of hip hop as an art form that can be used as a tool for education. What many in the media, academia, politics, and in communities-at-large do not know is that hip hop is a multidimensional art form similar to what Richard Wagner called opera, *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a total work of art. Hip hop however is more than a performance art form. It not only involves the artistic expressions of dance and movement, art, theater and music, but it also involves the hard and soft sciences including (but not limited to) engineering, science, math, philosophy, religion,

language and business. By incorporating these disciplines into performance, hip hop fosters the creative use of knowledge synthesizing the left and right spheres of the brain thus integrating knowledge and creativity into kinesthetic activity such as speech and movement. In short, hip hop can integrate all university education into an comprehensive expression of performance.

A hip hop studies program would incorporate classes from the following departments: Linguistics, Anthropology, Art, Literature, Language and Foreign Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Philosophy and Religion, History, American Studies, Health & Fitness, Computer Science Audio Tech, Multimedia Design and Development, Psychology.

Table 1
The Five Corners of Hip Hop and the Incorporation of Collegiate Disciplines

MCing

Literature, music, theater, and dance, Language & Foreign Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Philosophy and Religion, History, American Studies, Computer Science Audio Tech, Psychology

DJing

Computer Science Audio Tech, DPA music technology, Multimedia Design and Development

B-Boy

Health & Fitness, DPA dance department

Graffiti

Art, History

Street Entrepreneurialism

School of Business

Physiology of Music

Music has been proven to regulate bodily functions, especially cognitive processes (see attached bibliography). The elements of music (rhythm, harmony, melody, timbre, texture, form) have a variety of effects on our personality, thought processes, mood, and character. They enable us to learn and receive information but more importantly, synthesize information into concepts, ideas, and plans of action.

Table 2
Six Elements of Music and Their Effects on Us

Rhythm gives us a speed and flow with which we can do our tasks

Harmony helps us work well with others and brings our ideas together

Melody gives our ideas an identity and meaning

Timbre brings color and expression to our thoughts

Texture provides our ideas with complexity and helps to support them

Form gives a shape to our overall existence (beginning, middle, end)

These six elements that are taught in many general education courses in colleges across the country, can be used to bring together the departments of music and the various departments across the campuses. Hip hop music and culture as a modern-day expression of these concepts gives our youth a way of learning through their own generational creative processes.

Many researchers have studied music's effects on the brain and the body and the science supports the idea that hip hop can assist tremendously in learning.

In exploring the power of the voice, we should not neglect a vital new form of chant that has entered popular culture: rap. Although this music has gotten a lot of bad press for being violent, aggressive, and invasive, its way of speaking in rhythm and rhyme links it to poetry...as a form of self-therapy, it is highly effective. Rap enables the left brain to talk to the body, especially in deeper systems that govern instinctual response and survival (Campbell 2001:112).

Hip hop can not only assist in bringing together information and helping the mind but it can also heal those who are physically impaired.

Rap doesn't only speak to the young and alienated but also to those who are language-impaired, to stroke sufferers and accident victims. Even when the disabled are not able to understand the plainly spoken word, they may be able to grasp words that are expressed in rhyme and rhythm. One reason for this is that the brain processes speech that is expressed in rhythm and rhyme differently from regular speech. Thus the very same rap that a beleaguered parent views as a curse could be a godsend to someone with aphasia (Campbell 2001:113).

Hip Hop Lyrical Development

The unique focus of hip hop on lyrical expression and rhythmic development makes hip hop a perfect method for teaching literary devices and language. This also makes it a perfect conduit for any subject because of the focus on memorization. The real exciting aspect of this is that memorization is not the end of hip hop expression, it is the ability to translate the memorized information into coherent metaphors that can be used in a performance setting that is key in hip hop. As is noted in the fields of sociology and anthropology, humor and wit are signs of an intelligent use of culture and are a measure of one's grasp with a cultural lexicon.

Through hip hop metaphor, simile, analogy, and humor students can grasp a myriad of subjects and ideas and become competently expressive in them. Some of the main disciplines that could be a part of a hip hop curriculum that focuses on lyrical development are:

- History
- Religion
- Literature
- Arts

Science
Technology

Hip Hop Production and Music Creation

Through the use of studio equipment and technology students can learn scientific principles and apply them through the creation of music. The production of a hip hop “track” involves the awareness of many concepts used in math, science and technology. Students will have the opportunity to learn the history of these disciplines and dig deeper into the world of science by using samplers, keyboards, turntables, MP3 turntables, computers, and drum machines.

Hip Hop Movement

Because of the emphasis on movement in the form of dance and even bodily expression, hip hop helps those students who would otherwise not grasp key concepts through verbal means by having them kinesthetically embody the information and perform it. This method also helps reinforce the information in people who are able to comprehend ideas verbally.

Hip Hop dance can also be a fun and exciting way to teach physical fitness and give students something practical they can use when they perform in cheerleading, or other outside extracurricular activities.

Hip Hop Visual Art

As many have already expressed, a visual representation helps to encapsulate ideas in a student's mind. Graffiti (the art of tags and burners) gives some students who are more visually stimulated the advantage of learning through images. Having students create “burners” visually representing their ideas and the information presented in class, helps them and other students who view them, to see the information in a representative way and possibly create new ideas through having a comprehensive perspective.

By integrating concepts of many of the great artists such as Picasso, Da Vinci, Romare Beardon, James Phillips, students who are majoring in art can see their work as a continuum of artistic expression that is relevant to their time.

Hip Hop Business

Because hip hop is currently one of the most lucrative industries, having an educational program that uses the elements of hip hop in its curriculum provides students with the skills, knowledge, and marketability for future employment.

Hip Hop culture focuses on creating a product whether it is a CD, a dance routine, a piece of visual art, or a “track,” this gives the hip hop devotee something to present to employers or potential collaborators to enable them to do business. Many business concepts are learned through the creation of a product and the need to package, advertise and market that product. Students gain valuable experience in organizing their time, resources, and working with a budget through the creation of their own product that can be used for their portfolio.

Conclusion

As mentioned before, the image of hip hop in the eyes of many segments of today's society is not a positive one. I feel it is because of a lack of understanding of history and a lack of exposure and awareness that has created this erroneous conception of what hip hop is and can be used for. What I have outlined is an approach to using hip hop as an educational tool

that defies this stereotypical image of members of the hip hop community as uneducated thugs who do not have an informed awareness of their environment and situation.

Hip Hop has permeated our society and has gained worldwide acceptance as the voice of the youth. By incorporating the elements of hip hop into pedagogy for today's classroom we can effectively reach our students but more importantly provide them with the critical thinking, analytical, and evaluation skills that they need to succeed. They can also enjoy the learning process and become active rather than passive learners.

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