

Hip Hop Stories and Pedagogy
Trudy Mercadal-Sabbagh
Department of Communication
Florida Atlantic University
Boca Raton, Florida

The state of American education legitimizes some ways of knowledge while marginalizing others. It is modeled on white middle-class logic as its referent, which “silences subordinate voices” and disavows those life experiences that do not fit the mold. Giroux calls for us to reconsider education, to engage in understanding it as a way of life in which learning is a collective activity (Giroux, 1992, p, 14). The purpose of this essay is to argue for more holistic and alternative community-based educational programs, as well as offer pedagogical models through which to reach minority students providing them with space for an emancipating learning experience.

Hip Hop, according Tricia Rose’s definition, is an Afrodiasporic music genre born in 1970’s New York, offers a bridge between non-traditional ways of knowing and traditional curricula. In Rose’s words,

Music and cultural critics praise rap’s role as an educational tool, point out that black women rappers are rare examples of aggressive pro-women lyricists, and defend rap’s ghetto stories as real life reflections that should draw attention to the burning problems of racism and economic oppression (1994, p. 1)

Following the model of Freire’s theories on pedagogy, then, I argue that Hip Hop provides a space for the instructor to engage in a collaborative learning experience with the students, in a constantly dynamic shared process. In Freire’s view (as interpreted by Giroux), “the educator must assume a standpoint from which to read the word and the world” (p. 121). I understand that the educator’s standpoint should be (and/or include), inasmuch as it is possible, the standpoint of the students.

The possibility for effective learning, social justice and transformation, however, outweigh the possible downsides, such as very real issues of violence, misogyny, sexism and commodification prevalent in popular commercial music. Moreover, Hip Hop pedagogy allows the engagement with, and discussion about, artistically transforming Hip Hop music as opposed to that which may seem commodified, or to engage in critical analyses exploring the tensions between the negative and positive aspects of the genre.

In what kind of context can Hip Hop pedagogy be truly effective and transformative? Though my experience in using music as a teaching tool predates my work with students labeled “at risk,” using Hip Hop in the alternative school setting has provided an especially enriching learning experience. What makes a student an “at-risk” student? The definition covers a wide-spectrum of possible problems such as diagnosed or undiagnosed learning disabilities; emotional distress; drug or alcohol misuse; traumatic family relationships; abuse; time served in jail or prison; or any variant or combination of these factors. Educational risk is seldom an isolated problem. Young people labeled “at risk”—or in some cases, youth offenders--often have a wide range of needs, including concerns about immediate safety and survival. These students have often had deleterious experiences in the traditional educational system, and are therefore often not inclined to learning in a conventional classroom environment. Furthermore, if they have served time in jail, it often makes them ineligible to return to mainstream schools.

This essay is based on my experience teaching at one such alternative school, designed for students labeled “at-risk” and open to youth offenders. The program functions as part of the Youth Offender Services program of a City agency situated in the historic inner-city neighborhood of Overtown, a traditionally African American working-

class community. It is a student-centered college preparatory program, designed to meet the individual needs and strengths of each student. Said needs and strengths determine the services provided, instead of operating by the traditional model in which the students receive only—and are expected to adapt to—whatever it is that the institution or system in place has to offer.

I will focus herein on Hip-Hop as a pedagogical tool in learning traditional curricula-based language arts, and as a medium for expression for students who may not find much comfort expressing themselves in standardized language-based formats. Hip-Hop, especially the genre known as rap, holds a special significance for many urban teenagers, particularly students in our program. I have also witnessed how Hip-Hop may function as an alternative for fighting, as conflict is resolved by students “sparring” with each other with their own personal rap lyrics. Students support each other by sharing lyrics, and are more amenable to engaging traditional curricula topics such as grammar, speech, writing and composition, if presented through Hip Hop-based materials and perspective. Thus, Hip Hop offers a venue for conflict resolution, collaboration, critical thinking and a pedagogical method to engage traditional curricula.

Furthermore, for the teacher, scholar or activist working in community-building efforts, Hip Hop pedagogy can engage models of action oriented research (Small, 1995) and reciprocal empowerment (Darlington and Mulvaney, 2001), which are research and communication models developed with social action and empowerment goals. Small argues that action-oriented research models “are highly politicized, with liberation and empowerment as its primary goals,” and focus on strengths rather than the deficits, engaging in “collaboration with the citizens in the research process” (p. 253). Moreover,

reciprocal empowerment, in the authors' words, "is effective for spokespersons and groups seeking an egalitarian discursive interaction, a non-hierarchical process of arguing and decision making" (Darlington and Mulvaney, p. 169). These research methods can be effectively woven together with critical concepts based on Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, a pedagogical model concerned with teaching praxis as community-building and on people working with each other. My work aims to build, in modest fashion, on works of other scholars and activists exploring issues of music and resistance in alternative education. Hence, as teachers and students engage in reciprocal empowerment, the alternative classroom provides a space rich in potential for action-oriented research that leads to community involvement and student empowerment, mediated by political and cultural art forms such as Hip Hop music.

Alternative Schools

Increasingly, students who are not succeeding at regular public schools are sent to alternative placements. These students are labeled "at risk" and are, generally speaking, at risk of failure due to poor grades, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, or similar risks associated with early withdrawal from school. (Paglin and Fager 1997). In my personal experience, students at an alternative school often express frustration at their previous schools, due to overcrowding, lack of discipline, lack of personal interaction with educators, FCAT failure, branding of schools as a "D" or "F" school, the all of which they internalize to different degrees as reflecting on their own image as unworthy of being recipient of better quality educational services.

There is a growing interest in alternative venues for at-risk students. In 2001, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted the first study, at a national

level, of public alternative schools for student “at risk of education failure.” The topics surveyed in this study related to the availability of public alternative schools, enrollment, staffing and other issues pertaining to these centers (NCES, 2004).

Various factors have been identified by researchers, according to the NCES report, as beneficial to students in alternative education environments. These include dedicated and well-trained staff, effective curriculum, and a variety of social services support provided in collaboration with an array of agencies. Furthermore, the alternative school offers flexible and responsive environments, providing numerous advantages for students, including reduction in drop out rates and truancy, redirection into more productive and successful learning environments, and re-engagement with learning and the community (Quinn and Rutherford, 1998). Successful alternative schools engage in strategies that smaller enrollment than mainstream schools; higher standards of behavior; a more informal relationship between staff and students (a “family atmosphere”); a curriculum often described as “applied,” “experiential,” “hands-on” or “integrated” that makes connections between the disciplines and between the school and the community of the world or work; student voice in school operations; and allowing students to work at their own pace (Quinn and Rutherford, 1998). All of these being strategies I experienced in the alternative school in which I am conducting work.

The growing interest in alternative schools as a venue is reflected by government actions. The National Research and Development Centers of the U.S. Department of Education, for example, established in 1994 the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At-Risk, whose mission statement supports “a range of research and

development ... designed to improve the education of students at risk of educational failure.”

To summarize, then, as a response to societal problems associated with students’ failure in education, there is a growing trend in the research, development, implementation and funding of alternative programs and schools to help students labeled at-risk succeed in high school and higher education. Most of these programs engage community support, and are in their majority located in larger urban areas, i.e., the inner cities and often, in what popular discourse terms “the ghetto.”

Precisely because these schools are steeped in inner-city culture and provide the space for more flexible and integrative curriculum, I propose that alternative schools are a proper venue for satisfying, at least short term, problems related to student failure, and for exploring pedagogical models that better engage the students these schools seek to serve. I am specifically referring to, for the purposes of this paper, to the Hip Hop movement as a venue for such pedagogical strategy.

Why Hip Hop?

Scholars in disciplines ranging from ethnomusicology and anthropology to communications and education are increasingly looking to explore forms of contemporary popular music such as Hip Hop, as they intersect issues of race, power, identity, history, politics and connections between culture, education and music. In the context of teaching at an alternative school whose students are mostly from African American or Caribbean backgrounds, Hip Hop makes particular sense, as explained by Dimitriadis (1996), “Hip Hop emerged from the experiences and practices of economically disadvantaged Afro-American, Latin and Caribbean youths” (p. 181).

These earlier Hip Hop youths formed a culture that, quite distinct from the dominant order, has become deeply entrenched in the urban culture that nurtures young people to this day.

As a universal art form, music is a cultural artifact that most people can relate to. Besides being a forum that opens the possibility to struggle and resistance, Hip Hop music promotes basic educational and community-oriented values such as group cooperation, personal expression, creativity, and self-discipline, among others (Marshall). As a uniquely African-American music form, Hip-Hop follows the tradition of jazz and blues as being born from struggle and suffering, and captures forms of resistance and political overtones. As explained by Michael Eric Dyson (2002) in his address to a Senate Committee, Hip Hop “joins features of black oral culture ... to a variety of black musical styles” (p. 5). In Gilroy’s words, in referring to Hip Hop it can be said that

What are wrongly believed to be simple cultural commodities have been used to communicate a powerful ethical and political commentary on rights, justice, and democracy (p. 130).

Hip Hop creates a counterpublic—in the model of Warner (2002)—and in the process, a counter-knowledge, a socio-political consciousness, in which politically-minded rappers like Common, dead prez, Moz Def and Tupac Shakur, have provided social criticism and education for its fan base (though interestingly, 70% of rap music customers are white youth), in which the issues dealt with include police brutality, repressive institutionalized racism and not least of all, frustration with the educational system. In “They Schools” for example, dead prez passionately critiques the failures of the educational system in reaching out to young African Americans.

How does this relate to education? How does it engage the student in a learning experience of topic areas such as language arts? As stated before, urban youth often feel disenfranchised by mainstream education institutions. Rap artists such as dead prez, then, address the gap between the knowledge that many inner-city youths may have gained from their lived experience, and the uninteresting—and uninterested--institutionalized knowledge indifferently provided by the school system: *'Get your lessons, /that's what my moms kept stressing./I tried to pay attention,/but their classes weren't interesting./They seemed to only glorify Europeans.* Thus, their “failure” is too often not due to lack of ability or interest from students, but the school system’s failure to make it valuable to them: *They schools ain't teaching us what we need to know to survive.*

In considering Hip Hop as a pedagogical tool, it is necessary to address the issue of violence in rap lyrics. In response to complaints of violence in rap, Dyson argues that black youth are viewed as innately inclined to violence, and that the lyrics and images of Hip Hop are used as proof (p. 12). However, American culture has long held popular “frontier myths” of extraordinary violence, such as heroic gunslingers and shoot-outs of the “Wild West” and an overwhelming body of gratuitously bloody action films in the last decades. Harking back to Dyson, then, on reviewing crime statistics in the last ten years, “it is simply dishonest to paint black youth as the primary source of violence in America” as young blacks are more often the victims, rather than the perpetrators, of violence. (p. 13) As a genre of Hip Hop, rap deals with undervalued moral problems. Lyrics often grapple with the problem of evil, and strive to understand human suffering in the light of a compassionate God. The suffering masses that concern rap artists are almost exclusively the ghetto poor, and rappers such as Master P and Tupac Shakur give voice to

black rage as they express the belief that self destructive behaviors caused by social ills are compounded by illicit drug trade that flourishes in the ghetto because of government complicity, police immorality, and white indifference. (Dyson, p. 15). It is undeniable that along with other types of popular music, many rap lyrics also represent a darker, sexist, misogynist side. Rap artists in general, however, are often denied the credibility, the moral ambiguity of the human struggle with notions of evil and social injustice and are treated far differently than, for example, the producer of gangster films and TV shows, who equate the Mafia with notions of honor, loyalty and moral complexity (Dyson, p. 17.) In truth, many hard-core rappers condemn street violence and give voice to a call for peace. In “Stop the Gunfight” Tupac calls for a cease to gun-fighting by asking in anguish *How many homies gotta die tonight* and calling, as well, for taking self-responsibility for an ending to violence:

*And if u ask me/It's a damn shame/We be takin' lives that we can't
replaced/Over B.S. that don't make sense/We gotta get better than this/It
was something we could resist/We study fightin' at our own risk*

To summarize, standardized education is often mismatched with minority students' experience; it disavows and often denigrates their forms of knowledge. Standardized education seeks to reproduce ways of knowing that silence, subordinate or whitewash other ways of knowing. In Giroux's view, “knowledge has to be meaningful to students before it can be critical” (p. 14). Hip Hop gives voice to the subordinate and questions the assumptions of the status quo. Furthermore, it provides space for value dimensions that invite critical thinking; celebrate other ways of knowing; and finally, provide the student with a more democratic and emancipating learning experience.

The role of Stories.

How, then, do we incorporate Hip Hop and storytelling in pedagogy? Iconic Hip Hop artists such as Ice Cube and Tupac engage in first-person narrative storytelling within the structure of the song. In “Dear Mama” Tupac begins by positioning himself as the narrator of a very personal story, *When I was young me and my mama had beef...and relying his experiences, he communicates information about life in the ghetto, Over the years we was poorer than the other little kids... A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it ...* As well as normal teenage experiences of conflict with parents, which addresses issues that other youths may identify with: *the same drama ...When things went wrong we'd blame mama.* In *Dead Homiez*, Ice Cube narrates in first person, his experiences attending the funerals of friends who died violent deaths: *Up early in the morning dressed in black, Don't ask why? 'Cause I'm down in a suit and tie. They killed a homie that I went to school with.* Contrary to usual concerns discussed in media about violence in rap lyrics, Cube addresses issues of rage and anger management: *It makes me so mad I want to get my sawed-in, And have some bodies hauled in, But no, I pay my respects and I'm through.* Most students that attended the program where I taught had suffered the violent death of relatives and friends. As Cube honors fallen friends in song: *I dedicate this to my dead homiez... take a little time to think about your dead homiez* and despairs of the senseless deaths, as *something ain't right, when it seems like I'm viewing a body after every month*, he mirrors the experience of countless young people in underclass urban neighborhoods. These young students honor their dead friends in myriad ways, such as in song and by tattooing memorabilia on their bodies. They also feel that rap lyrics address social realities affecting their lives that are neglected

by mainstream media and would agree with the characterization of rap as “the CNN of the ghetto.” Daily life as experienced for my students was that residents of inner cities, homeless shelters and prisons, those populating the unemployment statistics, are overwhelmingly black and brown.

Thus, in the process of examining rap lyrics, fruitful discussion ensued as students found commonalities with their own lived experiences. One student wrote *I been stabbed at, shot at, and today da police stopped me for the colors on my hat...* Another student wrote of being burdened by memories of the past, as *Memories of my history get to me constantly jerkin' me hauntin' me ...* while others wrote of their frustrations caused by lack of money, the inability to find work or a constant worry with keeping room and board.

Encouraged to write their own experiences in song form, students wrote more freely and willingly than if required to write an essay with more mainstream and standard topics, as suggested in the textbooks. Set in groups to discuss their experiences and “peer review” their lyrics and essays, it was easier to introduce standard essay writing structure to the exercise. On reading lyrics of rap songs, students would discuss and find the main topic and supporting arguments, for example, discuss voice and tone, and re-write songs in standard essay format. The results were a hybrid of vernacular and Standard English, within more structured grammatical and essay forms, resulting in academic structures that incorporates their ways of knowing and their experiences. True to the modus operandi of rap artists “stealing” or sampling from each other (as a way of doing homage to other artists), inner city kids have no qualms in sharing ideas and helping each other with ideas

and lyrics during peer review exercises. In this manner, then, hip hop provides a space for communal learning and a more interactive development of skills.

Elizabeth Wheeler (1991) finds close commonalities between Bakhtin's concept of the dialogism and popular speech, and rap; between his theories and the structures of black expression. The speaker in rap lyrics address the "you" listener, but they also address a third imaginary listener, a hidden polemic often colored by autobiographical expression (p. 196). In their rap lyrics and subsequent essays, students often wrote about staring death in the face in a humorous way, in an analogy of Bakhtin's aesthetic of the grotesque, in which the (carnavalesque) laughter signals the triumph of laughter over fear. However, for listeners more familiar with realities in the ghetto, the stories behind the laughter and lyrics are painful. All students had friends who have died or are in jail, a routine devastation that is reflected in the rap music that they love. It is also, however, "a crucial source of strength, and inspiration for their own music" (Wheeler, p. 214). Rap lyrics express, as well, love for the neighborhood, as in Aesop Rock's "Panorama," which renders the inner city as much more precious than a decaying urban area:

I was sitting on my fire escape and I saw...
sturdy bridges, decorated with dirty pigeons
a vagabond begging for three pennies and a princess
a junkie tourniquet surgeon urging the needle in
a batty senior citizen flashing that awful toothless grin
I saw a corner store merchant rest on a milk crate with a stog'
a pierced nose, a model with a stalker, cheap hooker, jay walkers

*a table on a sidewalk with four old men slappin' dominos down
a city, a village, a neighborhood, a ghost town...*

the artist ends his song with a wistful *Maybe I should sit up on my fire escape a little more...* One of my students wrote, "I know where he coming from, cuz I do that too all the time." Sitting on door steps, porches, or fire escapes is something students often did and wrote about, their narrations covering the antics of children at play, interactions between neighbors who know and care of each other, as well as random shootings and police activity. Inevitably, the program would lose students to the streets, to jail, to the necessity of finding a full-time job and other instances from the rough and tumble of daily life. One student wrote: *I hope my scores on my test is high, so I can get my GED come July, Everyday I come here I seen the same faces, I seen a class of 29 drop to 5 ...these are the GED Blues....* Many other students, however, have achieved their diploma and moved on to a better life. One of them is the author of "The GED Blues."

Young people from the inner-cities draw upon their own cultural resources to resist oppression and build a sense of empowerment. The stories in rap speak to this. Undeniably, rap lyrics reflect the anguish and oppression suffered by inner-city youth. However, rap is also "fresh and engaging, a signifier of much needed change in our globe" (Martinez, 1997, p. 280). In my work teaching and tutoring inner-city youth, I have found that rap provides a vehicle not only for celebrating, but also for mediating the vernacular--the students' "street knowledge"--and the outside, hegemonic academic sphere. The students' stories parallel the stories in rap lyrics; they express—and create a safe space for the expression of--the sadness, joy, beliefs, and life ways that shape their daily lives. Such stories enrich and energize the learning environment and create a space

for student-centered collective action. In the words of Giroux, when it comes to inner city students, “one of the most important measures of school resistance is to be found ... in the nature of their attitudes toward school as an hegemonic institution” (2001, p. 247). When teaching in the inner city alternative school, allowing students to work with stories within the myriad facets of Hip Hop became a catalyst for attitudinal change from students towards academic learning. I hold hope that in time, higher learning will become increasingly inviting towards more art-based, narration-based, inclusive learning strategies that provide truly meaningful options and opportunities to disenfranchised youth.

Note

1 Reciprocal empowerment, a model of gender-based empowerment developed by Patricia Darlington and Becky Mulvaney, is based on research on traditional and contemporary rhetorical styles, as well as on interviews of 136 women categorized by ethnicity. It finds that while traditional power is based on domination, reciprocal empowerment practiced by (though not limited to) many women, builds on inner strength and collaboration.

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