

Just Like “Freedom Writers”

One Teacher’s Personal Narrative about Working with Hip Hop in the Classroom

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Abstract

Hip Hop pedagogues ask students to engage in critical thinking about their own identities and issues connected to their cultures and communities. Classrooms that are grounded in Hip Hop pedagogy often position students who are invested in the Hip-Hop culture as curricular experts, a proposition that can be scary for both new and veteran teachers. The fear of sharing academic leadership and losing classroom control can be a very real concern for teachers whose jobs may depend on being considered an expert in creating an academic environment that demonstrates the rigor necessary for their students to succeed in a high-stakes testing culture.

Within my own experiences as a high-school English teacher invested in Hip-Hop pedagogy, I have learned that I must be self-aware regarding what I bring to the educational table. Using autoethnography as a framework for discussion, I will explore my own experiences as a teacher who was outside of the hip-hop community and who incorporated a version of Hip-Hop pedagogy, Critical Hip-Hop Language Pedagogy, into my own classroom. My research questions included the following: What are some of the internal and external struggles that teachers navigate when they teach using Hip Hop? How is teacher authority - as perceived

by students, administrators, and oneself - impacted when Hip Hop enters the classroom?

Three years ago, I sat in my high-school administrator's office being severely reprimanded for the first time in my career as an educator. I felt the blood drain from my face as I sat in shocked silence, the vice-principal's words shattering any illusions that I had previously held that she thought I could teach in this neighborhood, in this school. Anywhere, for that matter.

She pointedly listed her objections with the material that I had been using in my English classroom. "The songs that you chose were completely inappropriate for school. The fact that you used the radio versions doesn't matter. You gave the students lyrics, and they *know* which words are being left out of the songs. They can fill in the blanks."

"But I blanked out the curse words and used the edited versions of the..."

"Ms. Applegate," she interrupted. "They can infer. And you and I both know that English class shouldn't be about songs. It should be about *literature* and *grammar*."

"I was partially using the songs as a way into other types of literature. When we work with difficult concepts, sometimes it helps to begin with texts that are more accessible to students. My students seem to be very comfortable with hip hop as a genre," I started to explain.

She leaned forward and cut me off, her angry eyes boring into mine. "Not *all* of your students are Black."

Wait, what? Really? *Ahh*, I thought, *there it is. The heart of her argument.*

HIP HOP AND IDENTITY IN THE URBAN ENGLISH CLASSROOM

After years of watching themselves being portrayed in the media as "irrational, angry predators" (hooks, 1995, p. 23), many urban youths may adopt a fairly nihilistic approach to their roles within the larger community. In *Democracy Matters*, Cornel West (2004) explains that these "sleepwalking citizens" (p. 27) must become engaged in community issues in order for us to move forward as a thriving, successful, and internationally connected society. Unfortunately, in many urban schools, the texts and pedagogical approaches used promote only (or mostly) the dominant gaze of the cultures that have traditionally fallen into the role of oppressor. Marginalized students, then, often view these traditional classrooms as a space that belongs to White students.

Traditionally, the high-school English classroom has often functioned as a space in which future literary scholars are trained (Slater, 2004); however, in recent years, the definition of what it means to be a literate citizen of the world has

expanded beyond discussion of the literary canon to the ways in which we read a variety of texts in the world. At the high-school level, this definition is often put into practice by engaging students’ outside literacies through a variety of learning principles that are integral parts of decoding the world, including engaging students in active, critical learning; playing with different identities; creating opportunities for students to learn about themselves and their capabilities; and helping students make connections between a variety of texts (Gee, 2003). In order to do this, some instructors, for instance, integrate Second Life technology into their classrooms, providing students with the opportunity to design an alternate virtual identity and to interact with people around the globe through its virtual landscape. Other teachers encourage students to read Shakespeare online and set up live, web-based interactions with other students down the street and across the country and even on other continents through message boards, programs like Skype, Google chat, and dozens of other web-based portals (Myers and Eberfors, 2010). Other English teachers, such as myself, incorporate Hip Hop into their classrooms – sometimes simply as a way to help students connect with literature via popular culture and sometimes as an exploration of race, power, gender, class, and identity, among other issues.

When teachers intentionally use Hip Hop pedagogies to encourage students to not only engage in classroom activities but also to expand their understandings of what it means to be part of local communities functioning on a global scale, students can thrive. Take the students in H. Samy Alim’s high-school based hiphopography class, for example; with an assignment to conduct ethnographies of the uses of what he calls Hip-Hop Nation Language within their local community, the students ventured into their local neighborhoods to become active researchers of culture and communication (2007). Another Hip Hop pedagogue, Mark Lamott Hill, traces his involvement in the design and implementation of a Hip Hop literature class, which was co-taught in a public alternative school with a diverse group of students. He introduced multiple texts and voices, and he and his co-teacher asked students to consider these texts in conversation with other, more traditional texts. While they used excerpts from *Invisible Man* and other multicultural literature that has become part of the canon and playlists that included 50 Cent, Jay-Z, and some underground rappers, the focus of the class was on the development of students’ understanding of literary terms and themes/ideologies held in both types of texts. At one point in the class, several of his students pulled him aside and thanked him for making a class for “us.” When he questioned them about what they meant, they explained that the “regular” classes were for the white kids; even when they did well in those classes, they still felt like outsiders. But in this Hip Hop lit class, they were able to offer their insights in new ways, ways that were meaningful to them (2008). Like many classrooms that

incorporate Hip-Hop pedagogy, Hill's classes became an authentic learning space for urban students (Hill, 2009).

The purpose of Critical Hip-Hop Language Pedagogies (CHHLPs, Alim, 2007) is to move beyond simply using Hip Hop in the classroom as a way to engage students. It is to challenge both students and teachers to move beyond the status quo, to examine Freire's "word and the world" with a critical eye, to ask questions that matter, and to see themselves in positions of power and as agents of change. CHHLPs ask participants to not only understand the world by deciphering the code of power, but to *overstand* it – to recognize and have power over the ways in which they walk in the world. This is obviously an actively political stance on the part of the teacher. It is a way to move beyond looking at the everyday discourse into a greater examination of the Discourses that drive ideologies within society at a deeper level. It is a way of allowing students to shift from an outsider's position in (*etic*) to an insider's perspective of (*emig*) education; not only does this give students buy-in to the materials, ideally, it shifts the power dynamics in the classroom to that of shared responsibility for the construction of knowledge.

SNAPSHOT: CITY HIGH SCHOOL

As the junior English teacher at City High School, I was responsible for raising our students' scores on the standardized tests that are used to measure student growth and school success; only 11.4% of students from the previous year had "met" or "exceeded" the required standards, and 40% of the students tested during the previous year were on "academic warning," according to the state. After five years of being on an academic watch list, the school was entering its first year of restructuring under a new administration and with a mostly-new faculty. The current administration was determined that at least half of this new group of students would achieve succeed on their standardized tests, and I was under tremendous pressure to find innovative and engaging means of helping the students reach that goal.

From an outsider's perspective, it should be relatively easy for students to meet or exceed the State standards on these standardized tests; the tests themselves are multiple-choice and essay, and a vast majority of the reading and writing segments are based on students' traditional reading and decoding abilities. But part of the tests for this particular state are written at a fairly high reading level, as one of the two required tests is the ACT, a test which is designed with more of a "weed out" function than a "push forward" drive. Our school was already in danger of losing students; the school itself had a 39.9% mobility rate, which meant that students were often moving in and out of the school, and 30.8% of the students were chronically truant. In addition, almost 90% of its students were considered low-income, and many of the students had heavy responsibilities to attend to outside

of school. In schools like mine, where the majority of my eleventh graders were reading at a middle-school level (and where most of my enriched students were reading at about a tenth-grade level), just getting the students to school could be a challenge – much less helping them to gain six or seven years of reading ability in those six months of sporadic attendance.

At City High School, the beginning of the school year hadn't provided a particularly smooth transition for the students, the new administration, or the teachers. And – despite all of the accolades I had received from the administration prior to stepping foot in the building – I felt an increasing amount of pressure to change something major about the way that I was teaching. The students' discipline was lacking, and I could tell that they weren't learning, and my co-teachers and I weren't teaching effectively. Never mind that the curriculum was in flux at the district level, responses to discipline referrals were laughable at best, and our day-to-day lives were always unpredictable in terms of who would be in the classroom and which resources would be available. In the first six weeks of school, I couldn't even track how many students came and went on my roster, where my special-education co-teachers were (or who was assigned to my classroom when), and how many times we went through the classroom and school-wide expectations. It was chaos. And it wasn't just chaotic in my classroom – it was chaotic throughout the school. The ACT workbooks that the administration promoted as the panacea for our academic problems were dreadfully dull; even I had trouble focusing on the assignments, and my tolerance level for dreadfully-dull school-related materials was significantly higher than that of my students. Every time we pulled out the workbooks (which we were mandated by our administration to do three class periods per week), I watched the students mentally disengage.

After weeks of struggling and watching my students do the same, I decided that it was time to change our approach to talking about texts and language. Drawing on my previous experiences using Hip Hop in the classroom, several years of researching how other teachers used Hip Hop to explore issues of power and class, and an well-developed understanding of the State's curricular goals for high-school English classes, I drafted a month-long curriculum, which I affectionately dubbed “Hip Hop 101.” The Hip Hop curriculum would serve, I believed, as a nice counterpoint for the test-prep that I was required to do in class. I decided to introduce pieces of the project into all of my classes but do a more intensive study in two specific classes: my enriched American literature class and my credit-recovery class.

HIP HOP 101: THE PARTICIPANTS

The first class was an “enriched” American literature class with 23 students, 11 who were female, 11 of whom would self-identify as Caucasian, 2 as Latina, and

the remaining 10 as African American. While the students were classified as honor students, we had struggled throughout the semester in our differing expectations of the work that they should complete for the course. The attendance for this class was fairly good, but I quickly learned that, in order to have discussions that involved the entire class and went beyond the surface level, the majority of our work had to be completed in the classroom. When assigned outside reading, many of the students refused to read for homework; it wasn't necessarily that they preferred to come to class unprepared, but a variety of things often interfered: low reading levels, working to support the family or themselves, football practice – and, yes, sometimes a sheer lack of motivation to complete work on their own time. These enculturated interferences, I hoped, would be overcome by their interest in relevant materials that they would encounter in the Hip Hop project.

The second class was a generic credit-recovery English class; one classroom and one class period housed three actual classes: English 1, English 2, and English 5 – all semester classes for which the enrolled students had to “recover” the credit they had previously lost by failing the class when they originally took it. Since all 20 students enrolled were part of the school's special-education program, the seventh-hour course was co-taught by a special-education teacher and myself. Unlike the first group of students described above, this class was all African American and consisted of 18 males and only two females. The ability levels in this class covered a wide span, from barely literate to almost on grade level. Attendance was sporadic; of the 20 students enrolled, a core group of five or six students routinely showed up, while another six rotated in and out and the others skipped the class in favor of leaving school with the seniors during seventh hour. The experience was an ongoing struggle for myself and my co-teacher, our teacher's aide, and the students themselves.

Part of the issue with this class was that it was developed six weeks into the school year. When the students were thrown into this class together, with no notice to either my co-teacher or myself (they literally all showed up at my door one day without warning), we were somewhat at a loss for what to do with them. There was no consistent curriculum; or, rather, there were three curricula that hadn't worked for these students in the past. And the majority of the students were so far behind in terms of reading and writing levels that the standard curriculum wouldn't work for them anyway. After weeks of frustration, pushing my students to think critically about texts that many of them refused to read – or were unable to read – outside of class, I was looking forward to our next project. The students, who often took the position that I should be the expert and that they were reluctantly passive recipients of information, would finally have the chance to be experts in their own right.

Our semester had been chaotic in both of the classes that would participate in the Hip Hop project. For all intents and purposes, these two classes were at

the opposite ends of the spectrum, so I was curious as to how each class would respond to the challenge of developing their own research questions and creating projects that were relevant to their own lives. Using Hip Hop as the framework, I had designed a project that asked students to look at the ways that language and texts were used in their own communities. And while my intention was to bring up issues of identity and power, I underestimated the ways that these conversations would expand beyond the classroom walls and would involve not only the students but also other teachers, parents, and administrators.

A CLASSROOM IN FLUX

Before we even talked about the project itself, the credit-recovery class explored what it meant to be “urban.” We brainstormed a list of sights and sounds that they associated with the term, and they developed multimedia presentations to try to clarify their own definitions of the urban life. This began some interesting conversations about whether or not their communities were urban; many of them saw themselves outside of their definitions. Urban life was what people in Chicago and New York lived, what they saw in videos and movies, even though many of the sights and sounds applied also to my students’ own lives. Together, they also brainstormed a long list of Hip-Hop artists that interested them – modern authors that they knew and enjoyed.

On the first official day of the project, each class listened to Lupe Fiasco’s “Hip Hop Saved My Life” and discussed the meaning behind his words and the ways that he conveyed his message through the text. It was interesting to see how different groups within the classroom responded. Students who had more familiarity with rap immediately started tapping their hands to the beat, mouthing the words with the song as they read the lyrics. Others traced the words on the lyric sheet and bopping their heads in rhythm with the song, joining in with Lupe Fiasco as he rapped, “Stack That Cheese” in the song’s hook. In both classes, when we’d finished listening to it once, the students begged to hear it again.

I was shocked into goosebumps – the kids were actually listening and fully engaged! We played it again, and the students continued to follow the beat and rap along. After the song ended a second time, I refocused the class.

“What’s happening in this song?” I asked.

I put the lyrics on the overhead, stepped away from the front of the room to join the students, and then asked for a student volunteer to lead the discussion.

In my enriched class, one of the more chatty students – an African American boy who had been placed in the class as a form of behavior modification after routinely getting into trouble with students in the basic classes – volunteered to be our scribe. I moved to the back of the classroom and simply listened the conversation evolve. Immediately, one of the Caucasian girls raised her hand and

asked, “What’s ‘stack that cheese’ mean?” In hearing that it meant that a person was making significant money, she sat back in her seat in thought. “Oh.” And so the conversation went. They talked about characterization, taking the position that the speaker was a good son because he was “talking about taking his mom out of the ghetto” and “putting her in the Rich-Kids district,” referring to the affluent local high school across town and up the literal and socioeconomic hill. Halfway through, the discussion leader position switched to another student, this time an African American female who was usually pretty self-contained. While the main conversation continued, lots of on-topic side conversations also sprouted up as students helped each other decipher the lyrics.

In the credit-recovery class, we had essentially the same introductory lesson planned and had to drastically adapt it to engage our students. When I passed out the lyrics, one of the students sneered, “I don’t know this.” His assumption seemed to be that since he didn’t know the song and it was being introduced by two thirty-something Caucasian teachers, it didn’t have much to offer him. One of the other students who knew the song and the artist reassured him that the song was good. Sure enough, once we started listening, the first student started listening and rapping along; by the end of the song, he was comfortable calling Lupe Fiasco a “beast” (somebody who dominates the scene). They enjoyed listening to the song and talking about it casually together afterwards, but they resisted the formal discussion. No volunteers stepped forward, and our pained attempts to elicit responses to our open-ended questions (“What worked? What didn’t work? What did you like?”) went unrewarded.

By the time they came back to class the next day, most of the students had ideas for their topics. One, a student who had barely made it through the previous quarter with a D, decided that he wanted to analyze Tupac’s “Dear Mama.” Another student, a potential school valedictorian, confessed shyly that she wasn’t overly comfortable with the project but wanted me to know that she was trying her best. Most of the students, however, met somewhere in the middle with a vague idea or with several research projects that they needed to narrow down.

Throughout the project, the classroom dynamics changed quite a bit, especially with regard to several African American students who had previously been disengaged. In the credit-recovery class, a senior who had been reluctant to even read in class led the discussion about urban life; when some of the other students were hesitant to respond with ideas, he pushed for more details and explanations. This was a huge stretch for him, as his normal class persona was tough and quiet; as he talked with the other students about what it meant to be “urban” and questioned whether or not they would consider themselves to fall into this category, he encouraged the students who responded and met my eyes when he encountered silence. “I see what you go through up here,” he quipped before going back to facilitating the discussion.

During an off-project moment, one of the enriched students who had previously been more interested in socializing with his classmates than participating in class rose from his desk to stand behind me as I led the class in an introduction of new vocabulary. I looked at him curiously, and he began to drop a beat behind the rise and fall of my voice; he kept up the beat, and I fell into it, awkwardly rapping definitions and laughing with the students when I stumbled to fit certain words into the rhythm that he had established. When the entire rap dissolved in laughter, another student picked up the vocabulary “lyrics.” No longer was I the sole authority in the classroom; no longer were the students’ outside lives and their academic lives divorced from one another.

One student, who had been deeply engaged in carving gang symbols into his desk instead of discussing literature, became so invested in the Hip Hop discussions that he led the analysis of three different songs and later brought in samples of his own music to share. On a day that included narrative mini-lessons based in Hip Hop, another student in his class spoke up: “This is just like *Freedom Writers*.” To my curious question, “Is that good or bad?” he responded, “Neither, really. It just is.”

A RELUCTANT COMMUNITY

While the students’ responses to the Hip Hop project were generally positive, other people in the City High School community - parents, other teachers, and administrators - had reservations about using Hip Hop in the classroom. As somebody who had been out of the K-12 classroom for several years and who had been involved in a fairly supportive community prior to that, I hadn’t anticipated some of the negative parental responses to this project. Similarly, I was used to having a significant amount of academic independence and had not anticipated the number of colleagues and administrators who would develop their own opinions about our project and its merits – or lack thereof.

Parental responses were mixed. Some parents saw how engaged their children were and helped them to find lyrics and resources at night, while others helped their students complete their projects in a last-ditch effort to turn them in only a few days late. One couple, however, came to parent-teacher conferences, and I ran their sophomore’s proposed project by them, and the mother requested that we simplify the project to simply a summary of a newspaper article for her son; despite my assertion that the critical-thinking element of the project would be undermined by this approach, they were insistent.

Staff responses were also mixed. My co-teacher for the credit-recovery class, a Caucasian male in his mid-thirties, seemed to appreciate the chance to help the students learn more about something they were interested in and did a great job of tapping into those interests to develop their research and writing skills.

However, the teacher's aide, an older African American woman, working with the credit-recovery class reportedly told an administrator in front of other teachers and one of our students that we weren't really "teaching English" and were not following the curriculum. Although she reluctantly helped our students research and summarize their findings, her role was that of a censor, rather than a facilitator.

Our technology coordinator, an African American woman in her mid-forties who occasionally monitored the computer lab and enforced the district's Internet policies, did not approve of our presence or our project. This disapproval manifested itself in dirty looks directed my way and in the occasional, spontaneous barring of our class from the computer lab. Without question, this not only slowed our progress, it also undermined my position with my students and their roles as budding scholars. When I stopped by the library to discuss the project with our media-center director, a middle-aged Caucasian woman, she warned me that I should scrap the whole project. She indicated that didn't have any library resources that would be of use to our students since the district had stripped down the school library over the summer. In addition, she warned me that the district's technology department would run a sweep of the "inappropriate sites" that students had visited and that it would reflect poorly on me if they had accessed lyrics and the like while they were in my class. When I explained that one of the goals of the project was to connect my students' outside literacies with their school-based literacies through Hip Hop, she shrugged and told me that I was on my own.

Halfway through the Hip Hop project, I was pulled from class into a meeting with my supervising administrator, a middle-aged African American woman with a reputation for bullying teachers and students. Each concern that she laid before me about why Hip Hop was not an appropriate tool for the classroom was one that I had heard before and was prepared to address. Until this one: "Not all of your students are black," my administrator insisted – a fact that I had known but had not seen as particularly relevant, as I had successfully used Hip Hop as a pedagogical tool in both a rural "black" school and a rural "white" school before. This statement left me speechless. I didn't even know where to go from there, so I took my metaphoric licks and walked out the door.

REFLECTIONS ON IDENTITY AND THE HIP HOP PROJECT

As I reflect on the Hip Hop Project at City High School, I find myself returning to my student's comment that our class was "just like *Freedom Writers*," a popular movie based on the true story of an innovative teacher who changed the lives of her urban students for the better through her teaching. *Freedom Writers* (2007) was largely marketed as representing the students' stories, rather than simply one more film that focused on an urban teacher. The film, based on the collection of journals from Los Angeles-based teacher Erin Gruwell and her 250 students, is

the story of a first-year teacher and her urban students as they learn and grow together over the course of four years of high school. While the book itself is structured as mostly student journal entries that tell the stories of students in Gruwell’s classroom, the film – contrary to its marketing claims – focuses primarily on the ways that, as Gruwell’s teaching changed her students’ lives, she fell easily into the teacher-savior *mythos*.

Was I subconsciously trying to recreate an education narrative in which I *saved* my urban students by coopting their music? What was the reason that the project met so much resistance from people who weren’t part of our classroom community? Why was it so threatening to explore issues of race, class, gender, and power in language and narrative via Hip Hop, a musical lens that has been called the “voice of the streets” (Ibrahim, 2007), in a school where the students lived much of their outside lives in conversation with the streets?

I believe that part the struggle to incorporate Hip Hop into my classroom at City High School stemmed from the disconnect between the ways that I approached teaching my students and the way that the administration, parents, and some other faculty members preferred that students be taught. Under pressure to help students pass standardized tests, some of these individuals wanted students to transcend their outside lives, to focus solely on academics so that they could absorb as much knowledge as possible during school a la Paulo Freire’s banking model of education (1970/2000). On the other hand, I approached standardized tests from the perspective that there was a dialectical disconnect for many of our students who spoke African American Vernacular English (the English dialect AAVE, also known as African American Language); after all, several of the “errors” (such as subject-verb agreement connected to the verb “to be”) on the tests would actually be correct in AAVE (Smitherman, 1985, 2000, 2006; Alim & Baugh, 2007). Linguistically, from my perspective, standardized tests were inherently flawed because of their inability or unwillingness to acknowledge the linguistic complexity within American schools. In connection with this belief, I wanted to work with the students where they were and help them to shape their education in ways that were relevant to not only their futures but also their current situations. We had a fundamental clash of values surrounding the goals of education and the approaches that should be taken to reach those goals.

In addition to this very basic conflict, there was also resistance to the Hip Hop project because of the shift in power and classroom dynamics. Effective classrooms, in the eyes of the administration and some parents, were ones in which the students were quietly engaged and the teacher was clearly in charge of the direction that the lesson was taking. And, as much as the administrators called for relevance and rigor, they were uncomfortable with the idea that the values put forth in Hip Hop music could be anything but encouraging to thuggish attitudes. They unconsciously expressed a belief in the stereotype that Hip Hop only spoke

for, first, the Black community, and, second, the “wrong type” of Black individuals - the loud-talkers, the thugs, the hustlers - instead of seeing the complexities within the voices and narrative ideologies of Hip Hop as a movement by immediately dismissing even censored Hip Hop as being inappropriate for the classroom. In their desire to give the students at City High School a chance for a successful future, they disregarded the value of what the students brought with them into the classroom.

In terms of my own internal struggles with the Hip Hop project, I had to become much more comfortable with students' leadership in my classes. Being able to see some of my formerly reluctant students taking on new, active roles in classroom discussions was encouraging but a little disconcerting. And it was one thing to appreciate the perspectives that my students brought to our discussion of Hip Hop texts; I was still providing guidance in terms of content knowledge about narrative structure and literary analysis. It was a completely different experience to be asked to create a text that followed rules that I hadn't yet mastered when my student dropped a beat behind the my vocabulary instruction; I was suddenly an unskilled novice, and, while this caused significant laughter in my classroom (from both me and the students), it was an uncomfortable experience - one that made me empathize with those students who were asked to create academic texts when they were uncertain of the rules that governed the genre.

The way that the class content changed during the Hip Hop Project was something that I was prepared for, but it was clearly disconcerting for some students and for some faculty members who saw the role of the English classroom as providing a base knowledge of the literary canon, instead of helping students to read a variety of texts, both academic and non-academic. I found myself defending the fundamental purpose of teaching English to a variety of individuals across the board, and I wondered if my subject position had been different, if I hadn't been expected to reinforce a hierarchical view of literature and culture, would my approach have been more widely accepted? For example, if I had been a member of the Hip Hop community, and Hip Hop was the way that I related to other texts, would that have added credence to my approach? Or, if I had made the argument that these texts were a way of understanding “better” texts - the classics - would that have assuaged any doubts that I wasn't questioning the power structure inherent in the status quo?

BEYOND HIP HOP 101

As Hip Hop pedagogues ask students to engage in critical thinking about their own identities and issues connected to their cultures and communities, one of the most important things for teachers to do is to recognize that, in this instance, there will be a significant power shift in most classrooms. Classrooms that are

grounded in Hip Hop pedagogy inherently position students who are invested in the Hip Hop culture as curricular experts, a proposition that can be scary for both new and veteran teachers.

Within my own experiences as a high-school English teacher invested in Hip Hop pedagogy, I have learned that I must be self-aware regarding what I bring to the educational table. For me, this means that I must admit that my students’ knowledge of literary theory as it applies to Hip Hop far surpasses my own and that their linguistic abilities connected to code-switching are fluid in ways that mine, perhaps, will never be. I have to recognize that I am not the expert in part of my curriculum. And, as I am in that position of shared leadership in the classroom, I also must be willing to advocate for this “dangerous pedagogy” in an already tense academic environment.

In retrospect, my student’s assertion that our class was “like *Freedom Writers*” may have been an unconscious attempt to justify the use of unconventional texts in an urban academic environment. After all, everything worked out well for the students and the teacher in that film. In contrast, by the end of the first semester at City High School, I had decided that I would not be returning for the next school year. By the end of the year, two of the students who responded positively to the Hip Hop project – my table-carving-Tupac-lover and my drop-a-beat-vocabulary-assistant – had been expelled from school. I often wonder what could have happened if the administration had taken a different approach with any of us, if I had understood on a deeper level that I wasn’t alone in my struggle to help students find relevance in academic learning, and if my students had known how to articulate the anxieties of being outsiders in an environment that demanded conformity.

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