



CHAPTER 27\*

# Fresh Techniques

## Getting Ready to Use Hip Hop in the Classroom

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THERE ARE MANY GREAT reasons for using hip hop in the classroom: it can validate and engage non-dominant cultures, worldviews, and identities, promoting social justice in the classroom; it engages students' established cultural knowledge, honoring their lived experience; and it's a great way to introduce critical perspectives into your teaching.<sup>†</sup>

In my first attempt at using hip hop in the classroom, I recognized that my positionality as a middle-aged white lady who's not deeply engaged with hip hop culture presented some hurdles. Considering the demographic profile of academic librarians—87 percent white, with a majority over age 45<sup>1</sup>—you might identify with at least some aspects of my positionality. If you find yourself with a similar set of hurdles, you may, as I did, want to engage in some of these exercises to prepare for an attempt to use hip hop in the classroom.

These activities will help you

- Increase your awareness of hip hop culture
- Articulate your positionality and relationship with hip hop culture to students from various age, gender, race, class, and other backgrounds

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<sup>†</sup> For more detail on reasons for using hip hop in your teaching, I recommend Dave Ellenwood's chapter "Hip-Hop and Information Literacy: Critically Incorporating Hip-Hop in Information Literacy Instruction," in *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis* (see Activity 5 for a full, annotated citation).

- Prepare to use hip hop in the classroom by meeting students on their own cultural turf and helping them connect their lived experience to learning in the classroom

**Note:** The following exercises can't actually be performed in one sitting and may benefit from consideration over weeks. **Take it slow!**

1. **Take some time to consider the benefits and the challenges of using hip hop in your local instruction context.** Complete this exercise as “writing as thinking” work, or discuss these ideas and concerns with someone you trust.
  - How do you think using hip hop might benefit your students or your own experience in teaching? In which courses (or other educational contexts) can you best imagine it working?
  - What are your concerns about using hip hop? How will you address these concerns?
2. **List five friends or acquaintances who you would consider hip hop listeners.** (Consider your broader, nonprofessional social networks, colleagues near and far, faculty, staff, students...cast your net wide!)
  1. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_
  4. \_\_\_\_\_
  5. \_\_\_\_\_
3. **Contact a person who listens to hip hop regularly, and ask them for their top five favorite hip hop artists.** (Ask them why they like who they like, to learn more about hip hop subgenres. Try this with a student!)
  - Record their answers. Try your own investigations of the artists they mention. (This is an activity that can be repeated for years. Teaching with hip hop has really widened my musical horizons and made teaching with hip hop easier over time.)
4. **Consider your own positionality with regard to the following intersecting components of identity.** Complete this exercise as “writing as thinking” work, or discuss these aspects of your identity with someone you trust.
 

• age	• socioeconomic status/class
• race	• academic/social achievement
• gender	• family of origin, family composition
• ethnicity	• geographic/regional background
• sexual orientation	• language(s)
• beliefs (political, social, religious)	
• ability—mental and/or physical	

- **Questions to consider:** Are there items on this list you consider less frequently or take for granted? Where do you see privilege at work in your life involving these characteristics? Have you experienced social oppression with regard to any of these? Try to think of (and record or discuss) specific instances where you experienced the significance of each characteristic in a social situation.

## 5. Read up on hip hop, race, and critical pedagogy.

Here's a miniature annotated bibliography to get you started:

Ellenwood, Dave. "Hip-Hop and Information Literacy: Critically Incorporating Hip-Hop in Information Literacy Instruction." In *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*, edited by Shana Higgins and Lua Gregory, 163–84. Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2013.

This chapter establishes strong pedagogical reasons to use hip hop in the classroom. It engages critical pedagogy and social justice-oriented discourse to recommend strategies, tools, and activities for introducing hip hop into library workshops. It contains important caveats about white instructor positionality, avoiding cultural appropriation, and recognizing sexist and violent content in hip hop, while still honoring the meaningful social impact hip hop has in many contexts.

Greenfield, Derek. "What's the Deal with the White Middle-Aged Guy Teaching Hip-Hop? Lessons in Popular Culture, Positionality and Pedagogy." *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 15, no. 2 (July 2007): 229–43.

This article is written by a white instructor at a historically black college about teaching an entire course on hip hop. It differs in several ways from the contexts librarians are likely to encounter when using hip hop in education, but as an autoethnography investigating white positionality in using a historically black art form in education, it has much to offer.

Honma, Todd. "Trippin' over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies." *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2005): <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4nj0w1mp>.

This article "critically interrogate[s] the omission of color and the perpetuation of whiteness in the LIS field" (1), providing a well-documented study of "how LIS has been constructed as a white field of study" (15), with implications and recommendations.

**6. Consider who you might collaborate with at your institution. Make a list of folks you might chat with about ideas related to using hip hop in the classroom.**

Everyone needs support. Consider other librarians, faculty, staff, and students. If you have an instructor you work with who might be amenable, that’s obviously a great place to start. But if you can enlist other librarians to do the readings in activity 5 with you, that can really help build community and support.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**7. Reflection and steps for the future**

Have these exercises helped you address any concerns that you articulated in activity 1? Which exercises do you think contributed most to your preparation for using hip hop?

There are many other exercises and readings that might help you further. See, for example, the hip hop lesson plan by Dave Ellenwood and Alyssa Berger (Chapter 25 in Volume 2 of this publication). Read up on race, hip hop, and critical pedagogy. Another thing you can do to prepare is consider your potential student participants with regard to their positionalities and experience with hip hop culture. Finally, if you feel stuck, or like you don’t have a likely community for your list in activity 6, try the #critlib community on Twitter as a potential sounding board.

## Note

1. “ALA Demographic Studies: September 2014,” American Library Association, <http://www.ala.org/research/sites/ala.org.research/files/content/initiatives/membershipsurveys/September2014ALADemographics.pdf>.

## Bibliography

- “ALA Demographic Studies: September 2014.” American Library Association. <http://www.ala.org/research/sites/ala.org.research/files/content/initiatives/membershipsurveys/September2014ALADemographics.pdf>.
- Ellenwood, Dave. “Hip-Hop and Information Literacy: Critically Incorporating Hip-Hop in Information Literacy Instruction.” In *Information Literacy and Social Justice*:

*Radical Professional Praxis*, edited by Shana Higgins and Lua Gregory, 163–84.  
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