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Hip Hop as Pedagogy: Something from Something

Daniel Banks

“Young world, your work has the power to provoke movement from silence to empowerment based in liberatory pedagogy and youth development. It democratizes a civic population of youth by giving them a platform to speak. Your elders in rhyme challenge you to find your own voice, to work hard to apply it, and to do so responsibly. If you’re not afraid of your own potential, we promise that we won’t be. Hey Young World, the word is yours.”

—Mark Bamuthi Joseph¹

“When you go into any culture, I don’t care what the culture is, you have to go with some humility. You have to understand the language, and by that I do not mean what we speak, you’ve got to understand the language, the interior language of the people. You’ve got to be able to enter their philosophy, their worldview. You’ve got to speak both the spoken language and the metalanguage of the people.”

—Wole Soyinka²

In his paradigm-shifting chapter “(Yet Another) Letter to a Young Poet,” Mark Bamuthi Joseph (aka Bamuthi) describes the learning process used by Youth Speaks, a San Francisco–based arts and education project that encourages young people to express themselves through spoken-word poetry. He describes a process of “flipping the script” pedagogically—in other words, inverting expectations and conventions in bringing poetry and literature to the classroom. Rather than beginning with a “classic” text, which “presents texts as separate and more relevant (worthy of study) than the realities of the students” (Joseph, qtd. in Chang 2006, 14), Youth Speaks first asks students to write something relevant to themselves and their lives. Then, after this experience of work and self-expression, the youth are asked to put their writing in “dialogue” with an iconic text.³

Youth Speaks is one of the best-known organizations practicing what is often named either Hip Hop education (HHED) or Hip Hop pedagogy (HHPED).⁴ HHED tends to focus on the content of the class or lesson by introducing some aspect of Hip Hop production into a lesson, for example a rap song. The potential of HHPED is that it is a total reimagining of the classroom experience and speaks to the cultural intelligences of the students, which include the language, history, rituals, and mores of the 40-year-old, global, youth-oriented, social justice movement known as Hip Hop. Accordingly, I use the term *generations* to reference the fact that, since the 1970s, several generations and millions of youth have been born under the sign of Hip Hop and influenced by a culture of art and activism. HHPED engages both the structure of the learning environment as well as the cultural ethos of Hip Hop, in addition to, and sometimes more significantly than, the content. Although the terms HHED and HHPED are often used interchangeably, I suggest that each practice is unique.

The foundation of the cultural ethos is what makes Hip Hop a model for pedagogy in and of itself. HHPED asks, “How do educators learn about and engage the cultural intelligences of their students?” In this essay I explain why Hip Hop as pedagogy presents an effective way of engaging today’s youth learners while simultaneously modeling participant-centered approaches to leadership and student/community engagement.

HHED and HHPED each owe a debt to critical pedagogy and Paulo Freire's work of "Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination" (69). Reconsidering the relationship between classroom content and structure has direct application to teaching in a theatre environment—both academic classes and studio classes—and may in fact lead to a reimagining of the frequent separation between the two and/or the privileging of one over the other. Innovations in the field already point toward Freire's notion of *praxis*, "reflection and action upon the world in order to change it" (36). I have also found that current students in theatre programs across the country have similar goals for their artistic practices.

In 2004, responding to my New York University (NYU) students' desires to make work that had cultural, social, and political meaning to them, together we founded the Hip Hop Theatre Initiative (HHTI). In developing a curriculum rooted in the values of Hip Hop culture I was struck by the ways that the pedagogy intersected with the intelligences described by developmental psychologist Howard Gardner in his theory of multiple intelligences (MI). The theory has gained popularity in education, the arts, grassroots organizing, and social justice fields over the last thirty years.⁵ That same time frame corresponds to the increased number of students in the United States exposed to Hip Hop culture.

And so, in HHTI, I began to put the two theories in a kind of genealogical dialogue by exploring parallels between the intelligences of MI theory and the explicit performative elements of Hip Hop culture (namely, DJing, MCing [rap, especially freestyle], B-boying/B-girling [dance], Writing/aerosol art/graf, and Human beatboxing).⁶ I believe that MI theory is a useful heuristic or window for understanding *why* it is important to consider the structure of the learning environment, in addition to the content of the lessons. Therefore, in this essay I also trace the parallels between Gardner's theory and what I call "Hip Hop intelligences" and include suggestions for "remixing" the learning environment to play to the cultural strengths of Hip Hop generations youth. Numerous critical pedagogy-based initiatives already accomplish excellent work of this nature with educators and community leaders; HHPED is a part of this movement. My hope is that this focus on a culturally based pedagogy will assist practitioners of all backgrounds in continuing to transform modes of classroom interactions, both in theatre and non-theatre settings.

The Hip Hop Theatre Initiative: Youth Voices First

For the purposes of this essay, I am discussing the global activist culture that self-identifies as Hip Hop and has its origins in a peace-building practice that dates back to the early 1970s in New York City.⁷ Iconic of this ethos are Afrika Bambaataa's Universal Zulu Nation, founded in 1973, and the Hip Hop Declaration of Peace organized by the Temple of Hip Hop and signed at the United Nations in 2001, as well as many initiatives around the globe (in which Zulu Nation also figures prominently). The social and economic circumstances of first-generation Hip Hop youth in the South and West Bronx and other parts of the United States are reflected in the resistant aesthetics forged by these environments.⁸

Hip Hop culture is, paradoxically, not synonymous with the genre of music and commercial products marketed under its name, although there are at times areas of overlap as the two interact in a global marketplace. It is critical that the reader over-write the influence of certain commercial industries that have more marketing dollars than Hip Hop culture, which, for many artists and activists, is the "real" Hip Hop. While these industries, themselves, put out very real images and messages that are often not at all progressive or positive, I ask readers to remember that misogyny and greed, for example, are not unique to Hip Hop; they are omnipresent in consumer culture and have appropriated Hip Hop's voice, beats, and rhymes to sell products.

Similar to Youth Speaks, HHTI strives in workshops to begin and end with youth participant voices rather than the facilitator's or facilitators'.⁹ At the start of a workshop this can take the form of a name game in which participants introduce themselves with a word and gesture and declare what they bring to a room when they are at their best; or it might be a round of the call-and-response rhyming song "Shabooya/Roll Call." Often, we also begin with a wall-write, which is the first thing that people are asked to do when they enter a room. Participants respond to a prompt written on a sheet of butcher-block paper hanging on the wall—such as "What is Hip Hop to You?"—through writing, drawing, doodling, and/or co-signing and extending what others have written. After taking time to observe the community-generated documentation, we discuss what they observe about the collective offering, such as common themes, differences of opinion, and styles of self-expression. We also structure the workshops so that participants have the last word, introducing such activities as

- going around the circle sharing something that they "liked or learned" during the gathering;
- offering something they are putting into the center of the community cipher and something they are taking away (the cipher is a circle formation in which members of Hip Hop culture gather, share, improvise, battle, and negotiate their relationships to both one another and the culture); and
- verbalizing a declaration to the ensemble that is spiritually sealed and actualized with the collective utterance of the Yoruba word "*ashé!*"¹⁰

As the HHTI work developed it became clear to me that our pedagogy was impacted by cultural ethos. By working with the various performative elements of Hip Hop (discussed in greater detail below), we were inherently appealing to multiple ways of knowing the world—among them visual, musical, aural, physical, and philosophical. Students came to the work with different access points—firsthand, lived experiences of systemic cultural and/or economic marginalization, or empathic ally/observer status. The majority of these students sought an alternative to a traditional top-down, "banking" style of education as described by Freire in his landmark *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this system educators make "deposits" (58) into students qua banks, only to be "withdrawn" at exam or evaluation time. As Freire writes, having influenced Bamuthi, myself, and many others in the field, in this system "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (*ibid.*).¹¹ He advocates a model of partnership rather than "bank-clerk" teaching (62). What became immediately clear is that, in order to excel, the students drawn to HHTI needed interactivity, a project-based/problem-solving learning approach, and to move frequently from one modality (seated/aural/literary) to another (physical/embodied/participatory). It was necessary to change rhythms as often and as seamlessly as a Hip Hop soundtrack changes beats.

Multiple Intelligences, Hip Hop, and the "Elements"

At about this time, Gardner's work in MI theory seemed to be omnipresent at conferences, in journals, and in live and online discussions about pedagogy. Gardner defines an *intelligence* as "a biopsychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture" (1999, 33–34). Given Hip Hop's status as a culture, I noticed with some curiosity that Gardner describes the intelligences in cultural terms, and that MI theory's listed intelligences mirrored my Hip Hop-generation students' pedagogical needs and ways of engaging with the world (also reflected in my own educational predispositions). Thus, I began an inquiry into the parallel historical geneses of Hip Hop culture and Gardner's research that led to MI theory.¹²

Gardner began his research in the 1970s and published his first MI book in 1983. He proposed seven intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.¹³ Gardner stresses that these intelligences do not necessarily “operate in isolation” (2006b, 8), but rather are the intersecting strands of the ways in which people perceive and know the world. Each individual has a unique blend of intelligences, what he calls a “repertoire of skills for solving different kinds of problems” (21).

Taking both Hip Hop culture and MI theory as late-twentieth-century zeitgeists, Gardner’s description of a problem-solving “repertoire” also aptly captures the spirit and origins of Hip Hop culture. Hip Hop is often referred to, both in writing and common parlance, as “something from nothing.”¹⁴ Hip Hop was produced in a crucible that collided cultural richness with severe economic marginalization. In the Bronx it was the inevitable consequence of the systematic practices of red-lining and planned shrinkage by the New York City government and other institutions, as well as mass insurance fraud by landlords that left many of the buildings in the area burned out shells (fig. 1).¹⁵ Even in the absence of financial capital, Hip Hop celebrated the cultural capital of the residents of its birthplaces, making something from *something* and flipping the dominant culture’s notion of “nothing.” The phrase “something from nothing” obscures the intermingling of cultural heritages already present in the areas where Hip Hop developed.

Returning to MI theory, Gardner describes intelligences as a “computational capacity” (2006b, 31)—in other words, they are the way that a person learns and experiences the world, an inherent way of knowing. He suggests that intelligences are a result of both nature and nurture, that some are related to “genetic heritage” (45) while others are directly related to culture and environment. Gardner also explored other possible intelligences since first introducing this theory: spiritual, humor, moral, naturalist, and existential. He added “naturalist” to his list as an eighth intelligence, and “existential,” conservatively, as “8 ½” (21). I discuss below how these key points of MI theory reveal additional ways that Gardner’s work and Hip Hop culture speak to each other.

In terms of the historical overlap between the two, Gardner’s original intelligences parallel Hip Hop youth’s creative responses to their environments. Each of Hip Hop’s elements stages the creative response of Hip Hop to an oppressive, marginalizing society. For example, writing/aerosol art is a way of asserting one’s presence, creating an avatar-like mobility; in the early days of Hip Hop, writers would sit at a look-out point and watch subway trains as they left and then reentered the Bronx. Even youth who did not have the economic means to leave the Bronx found a way to “visit” all five boroughs virtually through their public art. Similarly, today’s writers around the globe assert their presence on the world’s stage through photography uploaded to the internet.

KRS-One, the founder of the Temple of Hip Hop and known as “the Teacher” (or “Teacha”) in Hip Hop culture, remixed this notion of elements, calling them the “refinitions.” These practices cannot be “defined” (as in “definitions”) because they are ever innovating, morphing, and evolving, and practitioners leave something of themselves while “refining” and “redefining” the form. KRS-One added street fashion, street entrepreneurialism, street knowledge, and street language (179) to the five elements. More recently, Hip Hop theatre and HHED have joined this growing list.

None of the elements exists in a vacuum; they are interdependent, born and developed one in relation to the next. In the early days at parties where there were DJ competitions, the DJs needed the MCs to help draw crowds to their side of the basketball court or rec room and win popularity; the DJs extended rhythmic sections of records known as “break-beats” so that the B-boys and B-girls could dance/battle to them. Even today, writers, as a kind of global Hip Hop PR machine, announce the presence of the culture to the world through their hyper-visible public art. And beatboxers imitate DJing techniques and draw on rap and cultural references to create their soundscapes. Many artists practice more than one element, demonstrating Hip Hop’s interdisciplinary way of being in the world and echoing Gardner’s theory about the intelligences working intersectionally. I notate



FIG. 1. “Abandoned Buildings, Bronx, 1975.” (Photo: Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images.)

in table 1 how MI theory’s intelligences parallel these Hip Hop practices (please add to these from your own experience and/or use as a class exercise).

Other connections between the two thought systems include the “intrapersonal” and “existential” intelligences that overlap in Hip Hop. As I have written elsewhere (2011a), today’s Hip Hop culture demonstrates a deep connection to multiple spiritual forms in its writings, music, and art—including, but not limited to, ancient Kemetic and Yoruban cosmologies, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Indigenous thought systems. Some examples of this spiritual side of the culture include: the frequent utterances and references “*ashé*,” “word!,” “say word!,” “word is bond,” and “word becomes flesh”; KRS-One’s fascination with the *Bhagavad Gita* and flipping the nickname Krishna, originally used to taunt him, to KRS; the RZA’s remix *The Tao of Wu* (2009); and Hip Hop Theatre pieces, such as *Goddess City* and Chadwick Boseman’s plays.¹⁶ These are only a few examples of how, in the United States, Hip Hop culture has embraced a spiritual way of knowing and being in the world. Hip Hoppers from around the globe, similarly, weave their own spiritual foundations into their music and cultural practices.

Gardner, by his own admission, shies away from declaring a “spiritual intelligence.” Yet, this deeply spiritual side of Hip Hop culture is reflected in “existential intelligence”: knowing and understanding the world through, as he writes, “the human proclivity to ponder the most fundamental questions of existence” (2006b, 20). The birth of Hip Hop itself could be explained as a function of existential intelligence in that it was born out of a need to find possibility in an economic landscape of seeming impossibility—that is, something from something.

In addition, Gardner’s definition of “naturalist intelligence”—“the capacities to make consequential discriminations in the natural world” (2006a, 36)—might be reflected in what I propose is Hip Hop’s “environmental intelligence,” when thinking about the Hip Hop practice of writing and the ability of Hip Hop-generation youth to navigate an urban landscape. Naturalist intelligence privileges people with access to a nature environment; in the same way, “computational” abilities exist within urban settings, including Hip Hop’s fundamental reliance on entrepreneurial survival, aka “hustling.” The ways of knowing and interacting with the world described by MI theory approximate a manifesto of Hip Hop culture. Although MI theory is not written from a Hip Hop perspective, for the person from outside Hip Hop culture approaching this work, Gardner’s theory may provide a useful access point.

Table 1. Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences and Hip Hop Culture’s “Elements”

<i>Linguistic</i>	MCs and spoken-word artists: rap and poetry. Within the larger culture, Hip Hop language/street language: naming, re-naming, slang, appropriation, and flipping of language. New and repurposed terms for creative forms and practices (that is “scratching,” “bombing,” “Uncle Sams”) . . .
<i>Logical-mathematical</i>	DJs: as relates to beatmatching and backspinning. Beatboxers: creating/matching rhythms, mixing time signatures. B-boys/B-girls: complicated floor moves that defy gravity and the studied and inventive preparation for complex moves, such as spinning on the head or windmills (an overlap with <i>spatial</i>) . . .
<i>Musical</i>	Revealed in almost all Hip Hop practices: DJs, MCs, B-boys/B-girls, beatboxers. Sampling/composition . . .
<i>Bodily-kinesthetic</i>	B-boys’/B-girls’ physical virtuosity. DJs: dexterity in spinning and grabbing records; fancy moves at turntables, such as behind-the-back spinning and scratching. Writers: complex teamwork in creating a large mural; ability to gain access to challenging and off-limits locations . . .
<i>Spatial</i>	B-boy/B-girl: relationship to space and each other; a key intelligence for all dance forms. DJs: navigating crates, turntables, and mixers with skill and style. On a more abstract level, sampling requires a kind of musical/spatial conceptual ability. Writers: how to use public space and organize a crew . . .
<i>Interpersonal</i>	Writing: teambuilding, coordination. All the elements: entertainment, stirring up and pleasing a crowd (needed for successful call and response—for example, “throw your hands in the air . . .”). Also necessary for any kind of crew. Interpersonal intelligence is inherent to winning a battle (perceive opponents’ weaknesses and exploit them) . . .
<i>Intrapersonal</i>	MCs and spoken-word artists: raps and poetry that describe the human condition (for example, “me against the world,” “my philosophy,” and the multiple rap songs from artists around the world with the title “Where I’m From”). The way in which Hip Hop heads connect to their craft and the culture, often as a deeply spiritual sense of path and life purpose; also as a form of self-efficacy . . .

A Hip Hop Cultural Intelligence

Hip Hop culture has the makings of its own form of intelligence. In addition to the elements, equally integral to Hip Hop is an understanding of what constitutes a Hip Hop cultural environment, and how the ethos of the culture plays out in gathering spaces. This structural question is, in fact, one of the crucial dynamics that defines Hip Hop as a culture: it has its own discrete ceremonies and rituals. Below is a preliminary list of practices and values found within the global Hip Hop and Hip Hop theatre communities to which I belong. They are not a recipe, but rather speak to a cultural intelligence, a way that many people born under the sign of Hip Hop perceive the world and one another:

- *Hip Hop culture is essentially a democracy-building practice.* The cipher as a fundamental site of engagement demonstrates this foundational ideal. Hip Hop-generation writer Adam Mansbach calls Hip Hop a “structural metaphor for democracy” (qtd. in Chang 2006, 101), which is one reason for the increased interest in Hip Hop by the field of peace-building.¹⁷
- *Hip Hop has at its core a competition of skills.* This ethic is embodied by battling, ranging from friendly to fierce, and driven by virtuosity. Originally only of value within the culture, these skills have all since been appropriated in commercial markets. Paradoxically, these art forms are often also questioned, degraded, and criminalized outside of the culture (for example, writing/aerosol art classified in media and politics as “vandalism,” rap music as “noise,” and the complex history and aesthetics of B-boying and B-girling reduced to “kids spinning on their heads”).
- *Hip Hoppers live in a world of mixture.* These mixtures often result in something appearing contradictory to a non-Hip Hop or non-youth observer, but they are held and sustained by the members of the culture. This capacity for paradoxical thinking is in the DNA of these generations: increasingly, Hip Hop “gen-ers” come from mixed-heritage backgrounds or live on the intersections of ethnicity and appearance. These youth face a national language of demography that is out-of-date and inaccurate and focuses on the pseudo-biology of “race.” What these prescribed identity locations do not address are the ways that colonization shaped, and continues to shape, contemporary identities. Many individuals of these generations choose not to select one identity, but claim them all, asserting their multiple heritages, backgrounds, and cultural influences.

Other seeming Hip Hop contradictions that will be useful in reconceptualizing a pedagogy for the Hip Hop generations include:

- Hip Hop is revolutionary, and it is also commercially entrepreneurial.
- Hip Hop draws from and acknowledges its past cultural connections and influences while also innovating. Some terms used to describe this process of creating something from something include “nexthetics” and “future aesthetics.”¹⁸
- Hip Hop gen-ers have grown up in a music-video inflected world, which is nonlinear, episodic, and marked by the fragmentation of quick takes. These aesthetics influence and reflect the attention span of a generation of expert multitaskers. Many of today’s young people are pathologized as ADD and ADHD, while the information and stimuli they receive from the world around them, including mainstream media and advertising, promote a behavioral response that matches this energetic signature.

Understanding these and other fundamental aspects of Hip Hop youth’s lived experiences—as Soyinka writes, the “metalanguage of the people”—is critical for developing a pedagogy that is organic to the culture.

Hip Hop as Pedagogy: A Jumping-off Point

“Education as a process of freedom is not just about liberatory knowledge, it’s about a liberatory practice in the classroom.”

—bell hooks¹⁹

In 2009 there were 14,200 Google hits when searching for “Hip Hop” and “multiple intelligences” in the same source; as of 2012 there were 217,000. However, at that time there were still

fewer than ten journal articles that appeared under these search terms across multiple educational and humanities databases.²⁰ This disparity suggests to me that the notion of a Hip Hop cultural intelligence is widely understood in the community and at a grassroots level, but not yet at an academic or research level.

What is also more evident at the community level is that, for something to feel truly Hip Hop, the practice—the rituals of engagement—will reflect the culture. In other words, for the pedagogy to be remixed or flipped successfully it is not enough to create a lesson plan that plays to the individual intelligences of Hip Hop-generation students; HHPED requires a restructuring of the learning environment to reflect the totality of young people's cultural intelligences and values.

Therefore, introducing rap, spoken word, Hip Hop dance, writing/aerosol art, and other Hip Hop elements into assignments while employing traditional methods of discipline and assessment and relying on old-school classroom hierarchies is merely a lure. This practice does not transform the learning environment and positions students as a kind of guinea pig—as if to suggest that an experimental spoonful of Hip Hop sugar will entice students to do their homework or pay attention. *Form* is as important as content. The learning environment needs to reflect and speak to the cultural values of the participant learners. By contrast, a classroom that does not take into account the cultural intelligences of its students reinscribes traditional relationships of power. Such an environment is a form of structural violence, which is clearly not optimal for learning or growth.

This last point explains why some experiments with Hip Hop in the classroom are more fruitful than others. HHPED at its best, like critical pedagogy, is concerned with catalyzing students to have a voice in their own education, thus learning how to take responsibility for their own futures. As Sam Seidel describes in *Hip Hop Genius*, HHPED values a learning environment in which “students are engaged not as consumers but as creators” (3). This approach encourages self-expression and leadership as a path to building community.

I recommend that educators, activists, and artists attempting to weave Hip Hop into their work experiment with a few fundamental distinctions and practices. I acknowledge that many of these will be familiar to readers; yet, I consistently hear from educators that they wish they had access to new resources and ideas for structuring classroom culture and interactions. Therefore I offer these with the hope that they will introduce new approaches to some readers and serve as welcome reminders to others:

1. *Distinction:* Make the space look and feel like a Hip Hop space.
Suggested practice: Meet in a circle, even if it means reorganizing the whole space every class—the effort will pay off. This formation breaks down traditional classroom or group hierarchies and makes it easier for all to connect on an equal plane. If using chairs, only have the number of chairs for participants that are present so the group feels whole and complete. More chairs can be added as people arrive.
2. *Distinction:* Community is the first priority.
Suggested practice: Start with a check-in (and set a time limit, if needed, such as one word, one sentence, or one minute). This process will likely build community and a sense of trust, which result in an ability to focus more clearly on the work at hand. Also, see what happens if you wait to begin until all participants are accounted for (including a phone call or text message to those who are late or absent to ascertain their well-being or to find out if they need help). While there may be initial push-back (“It’s not my fault if someone doesn’t come to class”), this practice builds community-mindedness and deepens levels of caring. I have had students who did not come to class because they were in the hospital or in prison; in one case, we went as a class to visit a student, pre-surgery, in the hospital. This practice



FIG. 2. DJ Center and Eboni Hogan, Hip Hop Theatre Initiative. (Photo: Daniel Banks.)

brings home to the students how interdependent we are. It also contradicts the tendency for students to think that they do not matter and will not be missed; it models community accountability.

3. *Distinction*: The leader does not need to be an expert on the material, only a thoughtful moderator of a group-learning process.

Suggested practice: In the context of HHPED, as in critical pedagogy, the teacher's or leader's role is as a *facilitator*—to introduce the project or lesson and keep it moving while encouraging ongoing student critique and assessment. Allow for an organic process and for the group work to unfurl. If using Hip Hop–related content, the facilitator can *engage the expertise of participant learners* to analyze this subject matter, explain vernacular terms and intertextual “samples,” and suggest further study materials. Non–Hip Hop facilitators, as *respectful tourists*, need to be versed in the core values of the culture, but do not need to feel (nor should present themselves) as authorities. There are many Hip Hops—no one person “owns” its history. As stated above, this structural approach is as important as the specific lesson content.

4. *Distinction*: Hip Hop youth are the experts of their own experiences.

Suggested practice: Teachers from a traditional education background might want to notice tendencies to talk down to or aggressively discipline participant learners (the dominant educational experience of previous generations).²¹ If the goal is to have a student-centered learning environment, the facilitator needs to build community together, as a team. The facilitator-teacher's interactions with students will, therefore, be different if contextualized as being in the presence of a cohort of experts, eschewing "adulthood."²²

Repositioning the teacher's role in this manner—what HHTI calls "take yourself out of the middle"—connects with Freire's pedagogy and engages a fundamental paradigm shift from other models of education. Transforming the learning environment into one that reflects a liberatory pedagogy does not mean forsaking a respectful or ordered gathering space. Rather, this approach builds trust, mutual respect, and collaboration so that everyone has "buy-in" and is empowered to take responsibility for the collective experience. Practices to encourage this ownership might include:

- asking the group at the beginning of the class/workshop/course to generate agreements about classroom decorum and the work environment;
- introducing a conversation about time management and co-creating a group relationship to time; and
- if an exercise or lesson is not working, taking suggestions from the participants how to flip or transform it, thereby inviting students to be partners in the educational process.

In other words, there is great value in being transparent while, at the same time, being rigorous and maintaining clear expectations that the group or class helps generate.

Another way to achieve this decentralizing approach is for the leader/teacher/facilitator to introduce a story-circle or a deep-listening exercise at the beginning so as to privilege the students' or participants' voices. Both of these practices generate community support and a generosity of listening. A deep-listening exercise in pairs is particularly effective in settings where people are reticent to talk or when there is an imbalance of people speaking and not speaking. I have used it for everything from warming up a group conversation to stimulating response to an assignment. It has also proven valuable for checking in when there is something happening in the community or the news that is not part of a curriculum, but is clearly impacting the people in the room. Especially for teachers who are not fully comfortable moderating large group conversations about sensitive topics, it is a way for participant learners still to have an opportunity to express themselves and have someone listen to them.

Clearly, there are situations where these ideas are impracticable; they may also function differently at various institutions and levels of education and learning. Reframing a traditional learning environment will take more than a few pages of explanation. Freire's writings are an invaluable resource, as are bell hooks's and the many excellent sources that address critical pedagogy and HHPED and culture.²³

One of the most thoroughly documented examples to date of Hip Hop in the classroom is Marc Lamont Hill's *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*. As part of a graduate seminar in urban education, Hill, working in the field of educational anthropology (3), led an after-school class at a high school in South Philadelphia to discern "how youth use hip-hop texts to negotiate particular conceptions of self and the social world" (5). He employed a methodology he describes as "Hip Hop Based Education" (HHBE). HHBE is similar to what some people call HHED, although it often (but not always) focuses more on the content of the class than the learning environment and the structuring of roles and relationships.

After leading the year-long class and writing about it, including a brave and frank self-assessment of the strategies and pedagogy used, Hill suggests many of the same approaches described in this essay, most notably

- understanding the type of environment necessary for a Hip Hop–based pedagogy;
- educators positioning themselves to keep the students’ experiences at the center of the pedagogy; and
- critically engaging student leadership in planning and decision-making.

While I would not describe the class that Hill taught as particularly representative of my notion of HHPED, his conclusions and self-critique reveal an understanding of how HHPED is more expansive than HHBE or HHED.

Much of this restructuring of the learning environment will be trial and error, with an interweaving of personal style. It is essential to connect with colleagues who are attempting to carry out similar work for mutual support. Hopefully, these suggestions will reveal the productive potential in generating an environment that closely reflects the cultural intelligences of the Hip Hop generations.

In and Out of the Classroom

I now return to HHTI as a case study in how the practical application of working with Hip Hop intelligences can function in an academic context. In 2004 I was working closely with the Hip Hop Theatre Festival and on other similar projects. Students at NYU urged me to create an opportunity for them to combine their love of Hip Hop with professional acting training. One course led to another, and soon there was a core group of students deeply engaged—HHTI was born.²⁴ As described earlier, the program was built on the model of integrating Hip Hop intelligences with critical pedagogy. Its mission, instigated by the students, is: “1) To integrate the rigors of theatre training with the performance elements and politics of the youth-driven, grassroots, activist culture of Hip Hop; and 2) To train participants to lead arts-based workshops and facilitate dialogue about the social issues pertaining to Hip Hop.” We have led this work in ten countries with youth, educators, community leaders, and artist-activists to model this same methodological shift—the classroom and rehearsal room as a cipher with shared responsibility, engaging the group mind and spirit. In almost every venue we have visited in the United States and abroad, participants and community members formed a project or organization after our departure.

The HHTI curriculum at NYU included courses on the history of Hip Hop theatre, including research into African diasporic performance aesthetics and the philosophical underpinnings of Hip Hop culture; strategies for creating devised, ensemble Hip Hop theatre performance pieces; the history of world ritual theatre (linked with the creation of a new devised production with over fifty students involved across three departments); a double-credit, intensive lab practicum; and an applied theatre–based curriculum, “Hip Hop Theatre: In and Out of the Classroom.” In this class, participants learned to facilitate creative workshops in self-expression and leadership-building in the various and intersecting communities with which they identified.

Faculty interest grew out of this student-generated curriculum and I was asked to offer pedagogical workshops. In the resulting “Hip Hop as Pedagogy: Reaching Today’s Youth through Multiple Intelligences and Literacies,” participants working in education and community organizing discuss student-/community-centered approaches to learning and their own roles in the classroom. In the workshop I pose such questions as: What does it mean to teach this Hip Hop generation? How can educators best engage the significant strengths of young people in the classroom environment? What constitutes a safe and productive learning space for this generation?

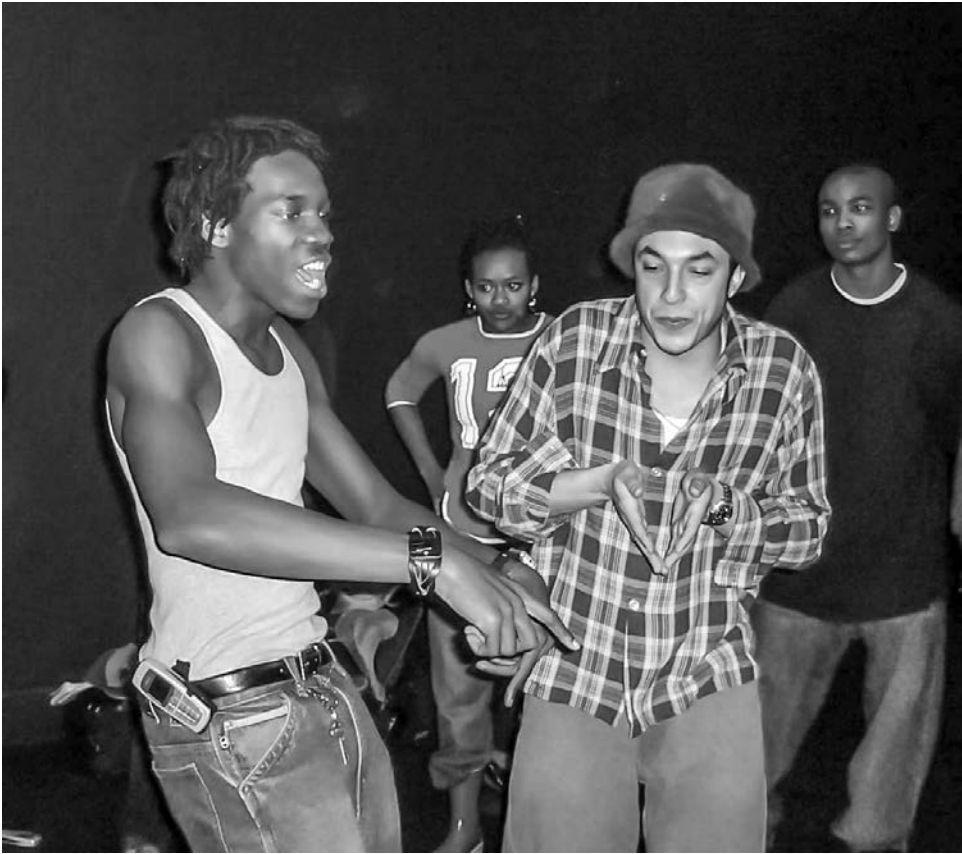


FIG. 3. Akil Davis, Jaquita Ta'le, Wade Allain-Marcus, and Carlton Byrd, Hip Hop Theatre Initiative. (Photo: Daniel Banks.)

The workshop begins with listening exercises, including an in-depth examination of participants' own educational experiences and the lasting impact of top-down pedagogies and adultism. Next is an introduction to Freire's pedagogy and how it connects to elements of the history and ethos of Hip Hop culture. Then, through an elementary beatboxing workshop and call-and-response exercises, each participant has the experience of standing in the cipher, working together, listening to and vibing off of one another's creativity from within a rhythmic, ensemble-based soundscape. When asked to describe how they feel, frequent responses include "energized," "connected," "inspired." I then ask what the attributes of the cipher are (responses: "community," "listening," "teamwork") and if, based on this experience, participants can better understand why young people fiercely defend their participation in this culture of collective self-expression.

We may also read through Hip Hop theatre texts so that participants can begin to make connections with the form and content of these writings to the history and ethos of the culture. Finally, we end with a "clinic"-type forum in which participants use the group knowledge-base to brainstorm and address classroom and administrative challenges that they face. It is an opportunity, as a community of leaders, to begin to think through alternative classroom methodologies that are resonant with the intelligences and literacies of today's young people. The intent is that this learning experience for teachers also structurally models a Hip Hop, culturally-based environment.²⁵

HHTI was the first of several campus-wide Hip Hop-related initiatives with which I was affiliated. I was one of the conveners of a new HHPED work group, and I co-founded the Hip Hop and Pedagogy Initiative with colleagues Marcella Runnel Hall and Martha Diaz.²⁶ Diaz was herself in the early stages of creating the Hip Hop Education Center (HHEC), on whose founding board I

serve (currently connected to both NYU and Columbia University). Both of these initiatives brought together faculty from different disciplines throughout the university to connect with students in their shared, growing academic interest in Hip Hop history and cultural production. I relate all of this to demonstrate the breadth of activity and educational innovation in the field.

Conclusion

Returning to my initial point of fascination—the synergy between the early development of Hip Hop culture and the beginnings of MI theory—Gardner writes about assessment as “simple, natural, and occurring on a reliable schedule.” He suggests that “after a while, much assessment would occur naturally on the part of student and teacher with little need for explicit recognition or labeling on anyone’s part” (2006b, 180–81). This point is at the core of critical pedagogy: ongoing, continuous (self-) reflection and examination. In terms of HHPED, it is important for the educator-facilitator to remember that Hip Hop is a self-critical culture and practice. From battles in which artists reference and version one another’s performances to raps that critique political and social systems, Hip Hop developed among young people who created their own governance and mentorship systems in an environment where adults (often single parents) worked long hours to support families; did not appear to understand or sympathize with the struggles of the young people in their lives; or were absent altogether. Therefore, a work or learning environment in which there is a pre-agreed structure for ongoing critique and assessment will activate the fullest use of Hip Hop intelligences. As previously discussed, I recommend creating these assessment strategies in partnership with the communities being assessed so that it is not a top-down, imposed process, but rather an organic, grassroots approach. This practice is another example of how, at its best, Hip Hop proposes to dismantle certain traditional power structures.

Several practical implications regarding HHPED emerge, given that Gardner’s description of MI closely resembles Hip Hop culture’s ways of knowing and being. MI theory is useful when developing a pedagogy for today’s Hip Hop generations, who have inherited this legacy of a resistant arts practice. First, it is a practical lens for understanding how to engage young people effectively in the classroom. In addition, as a framework, MI theory helps describe the interdisciplinarity and intertextuality of the first generation of Hip Hop youth’s self-expression. Finally, Gardner’s theories elucidate the biopsychological drive behind the continued global development of Hip Hop culture’s creative production and activism.

On the flip side, educators and community leaders practicing HHED and HHPED may be able to persuade more conservative institutions and gatekeepers of the validity of their work by invoking the ways in which MI theory is in close dialogue with these approaches. Those of us engaged in this work envision the day when Hip Hop and its canon will not need such vetting; but in the meantime it could be useful in environments where MI theory is respected and has currency to show its deep resonance with Hip Hop.²⁷ Applications of MI theory in the classroom often translate into using a Hip Hop skill or Hip Hop–related object of inquiry to stimulate learning. An attention to HHPED can help both Hip Hop and non–Hip Hop educators discover new ways of engaging youth that extend beyond content, and to understand that it is not enough only to tap into intelligences that speak to practical skills. A specific context needs to be created to activate the *cultural* intelligences of Hip Hop–generation youth so that they can fully engage their inherent creativity and brilliance.

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Notes

1. Mark Bamuthi Joseph, "(Yet Another) Letter to a Young Poet," qtd. in Jeff Chang's edited volume *Total Chaos* (2006, 17).
2. Wole Soyinka, qtd. in Susan Haedicke and Tobin Nellhaus's edited volume *Performing Democracy* (2001, 17).
3. Author's note: Given that readers of this essay will most likely have a wide range of familiarity with the subject matter, I am specifically writing for a broad audience. For both the new Hip Hop audience as well as the culturally familiar I have attempted to clarify as many words and concepts as space will permit. Where there has not been room to go in-depth, I have included references for further information.
4. HHED has been around almost as long as Hip Hop. It is a global practice that in the United States alone has resulted in numerous national and international symposia. The Hip Hop Education Center (HHEC), for example, sponsored three years of international think tanks on the topic, attended by over 500 educators, activists, and community leaders. HHEC has also completed an international scan of organizations participating in Hip Hop education and pedagogy and is soon launching an online platform—"A 21st-century Communitivity"—to facilitate discussion and training of leaders and educators around the world (see <www.hiphopeducation.org>).
5. As many readers will be aware, there is a substantial body of literature challenging the validity of MI theory, and an equal amount of responses to those challenges attempting to disprove their criticisms. While it is not the intent of this essay either to validate or disprove MI theory, these arguments/conversations provide a fascinating window into the relationship between educational theory and in-classroom experience, what is valued in each, how education is currently discussed, and how success is measured. This essay instead focuses on the intersection of a cultural movement and an education-based theory/practice/approach, and the potential productive synergies that emerge by putting the two in dialogue.
6. Borrowing from Michel Foucault's notion of *genealogy* as "cultivat[ing] the details and the accidents that accompany every beginning" (144).
7. See Banks, "Youth Leading Youth" (2011b).
8. For more information on the birth of Hip Hop and its politics and aesthetics, see, among others, Banks (2011a), Chang (2005), and Rose (1994).

9. An early founding member of HHTI, poet and playwright Chinaka Hodge had been a Youth Speaks participant prior to attending NYU, and then a facilitator after she graduated. Her experience greatly influenced the growth and development of the program.

10. In the interest of performance genealogy, the first exercise came to HHTI from DNAWORKS co-director Adam McKinney, the second one from the students at the MA in Applied Theatre at CUNY, and the third from HHTI student Archie Ekong. For more about HHTI's work, see Banks, "How Hiplife Theatre Was Born in Ghana" (2008) and "Youth Leading Youth" (2011b).

11. Bamuthi was one of a core group of artists who worked closely with Hip Hop Theatre Initiative students.

12. I corresponded with Gardner and several of his then researchers, as well as colleagues at Project Zero, to inquire about this relationship. No direct connection was offered.

13. See Gardner (1983, 2006a, 2006b) for more specific information on each of these intelligences. He has a set of criteria for what constitutes an intelligence that includes a neurological component. For the purposes of this essay I am not going to address this part of his theory, and focus instead on the question of cultural context. This neurological area, however, merits further study.

14. For example, the title of a 2012 documentary by Ice-T and Andy Baybutt is *Something from Nothing: The Art of Rap*.

15. See Chang (2005).

16. See also *Ruminations* by KRS-One (2003), a book dedicated to his spiritual philosophies.

17. For more information on Hip Hop and peace-building, the anthology *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict* (2011), a project of Theatre without Borders and the Coexistence Project at Brandeis University, has two chapters on Hip Hop in conflict zones. See also <www.hiphopdiplomacy.org>.

18. Hip Hop-generation playwright, poet, and producer Claudia Alick coined the first term to describe her work with Hip Hop culture and theatre at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (see Oregon Shakespeare Festival, "Nexthetics"). Roberta Uno began using the term *future aesthetics* in about 2001 to describe the work being done at New World Theatre with Hip Hop theatre artists.

19. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994, 147).

20. And in 2015 there are 299,000 web hits for both terms on the same page. It is hard to know if this reflects an increase in the terms being used, a change in Google's search algorithms, or a combination of both. Since many of the sites have both terms on them, although not in relationship to each other (for example, in the form of an advertisement), I would suggest that there has been a spike in usage, but not quite as large as the numbers suggest. There are still relatively few journal articles that discuss both topics; however, several dissertations have been written engaging the two subjects.

21. This point is critical not just to the philosophy of educational practice, but also in terms of its efficacy (see Quinn and Kahn 2001).

22. *Adulthood* is the systematic oppression of young people by adults. An excellent resource for classroom use is Margaret Pevec's "Adulthood" (2008).

23. Refer to the resource list found at <<http://hhti.org/resources>>. The Hip-Hop Education Center is also an excellent source for materials and support.

24. For its first five years HHTI was in residence in the Department of Undergraduate Drama in the Tisch School of the Arts, NYU. It is now a project of DNAWORKS (<www.dnaworks.org>). For more information, see <www.hhti.org>.

25. I want to recognize the support of such institutions and organizations as Southeastern Theatre Conference; University of Wisconsin–Madison; Association for Theatre in Higher Education's Theatre and Social Change focus group; Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival; Black Theatre Network; and the "Preemptive Education: Language, Identity and Power" symposium hosted at NYU by Urban Word NYC, NYU Center for Multicultural Education, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, the Hip-Hop Education Center, and the Hip-Hop Theater Festival for supporting the development of this work.

26. The Hip Hop and Pedagogy Initiative was one of the funders of the Hip Hop Theatre Lab (see Chavolla and Hall 2010). HHTI received funding widely from both within the university and outside partners and sponsors.

27. Take, for example, Harvard professor Cornel West's much publicized departure from the university in 2001, in large part due to the school's then president (Lawrence Summers) criticising West's recording a Hip Hop–inflected album including rap (see Steinberg 2001).

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