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Professional Resource:

Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom (2011)

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Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom, by Bronwen E. Low (2011). Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA.

People define hip-hop in different ways based on their personal relationships to it; after all, the most important aspect of “being” hip-hop is arguably possessing a strong knowledge of self and maintaining a sense of authenticity in all realms of one’s life. Whatever one’s definition, it is crucial to understand hip-hop not just as a musical genre, but also as a consciousness, a cultural force, a knowledge base and a platform for expression. The hip-hop based practice and platform at the heart of *Slam School* is spoken word and slam poetry, which Low (2006) powerfully explains is a genre of composition “...designed to win the hearts and minds of the audience: it tells stories that blend and move between the personal and the sociopolitical; it is often urgent, sometimes sexy, and regularly funny, and its language tends to be vernacular and reflect the multilingual contexts of its emergence” (quoted in Low 2011, 14).

The fields of hip-hop studies—typically housed in Africana Studies or American Studies programs—and hip-hop education and pedagogy—often located in education programs—have been gaining traction and respect over the course of the last 15 years or so. Yet, despite a growing body of literature in these fields (see Emdin 2010; 2013; Petchauer 2009; Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 2002; Dimitriadis 2001; 2002; Seidel 2011; Rose 2008), some teachers are resistant to “hip-hop education” because they assume that it requires them to have extensive knowledge about hip-hop or the ability to freestyle or breakdance. This sense of hesitation is often found in the broader literature on popular culture and education (Hobbs 1998; Hobbs and Moore 2013).

Bringing popular culture into the classroom inherently values students’ “insider knowledge,” and threatens to shift the balance of authority and expertise away from teachers making them feel vulnerable (Alvermann 2002; Low 2011). At the same time, hip-hop and media literacy pedagogies are deeply connected by the fundamental goal of better engaging students in school by working with them to create stronger ties between their lived experiences in and out of the classroom (Buckingham 2003). I have been interested in hip-hop culture for many years and as a media literacy educator, I often use hip-hop “texts” in my teaching—deconstructing songs, lyrics and music videos with the Key Questions of Media Literacy (NAMLE); engaging in critical thinking production activities centered around sneaker culture; and exploring our identities through spoken word poetry. As Linda Christensen (2000) explains of poetry, “Too often schools don’t teach students how to handle the explosive feelings that come with adolescence. By writing and sharing the ‘raw core of feelings’ that create havoc in their lives, they can practice a more effective way of handling their emotions” (129). Hip-hop culture “can offer young people across the spectrum a space of identity formation and performance, creativity, and political engagement” (Low 2011, viii). In the last fifteen years, scholars in both fields (e.g. Buckingham 2003; Hobbs 1998, 2010; Hobbs and Moore 2013; Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 2002; Dimitriadis 2001) have started emphasizing the importance of providing students with opportunities and platforms to engage in meaning-making processes that involve creation, production, and practice (Petchauer 2009), resulting in increased feelings of empowerment and self-worth (Hobbs 1998; 2011).

Slam School is an account of the development and delivery of a performance, or spoken word, poetry

curriculum that included studies of rap music and hip-hop culture. The study takes place over the course of two years at an urban arts magnet high school in a mid-sized city in the northeast of the United States. The book makes the case for the power and potential of critical hip-hop pedagogies by examining the ways in which politics of representation, a fascinating and tension-filled aspect of hip-hop and popular culture, threw the classes in this study “into the center of contemporary cultural debates about culture, language, and identity in real and tangible ways” (Low 2011, 2). Drawing on cultural studies, hip-hop studies, sociolinguistics, and poetics, *Slam School* engages in difficult but crucially important conversations about race, the ethics of cultural re-appropriation, and how art creation can be used to explore, express, and explain one’s experiences and perspectives.

The book begins with a concise but comprehensive historical account of the origination and evolution of hip-hop as a sociocultural political movement and music genre in the 1970s—including the groups often undervalued or omitted from these stories (e.g. Puerto Ricans, Filipino Americans, and women). The intersections of hip-hop culture, spoken word and education are made visible, and the notion of *critical hip-hop pedagogies* is introduced through a synthesized account of existing literature (e.g. Hill 2009; Petchauer 2009; Tan 2009) that has served as the foundation of studies of hip-hop education (in Low 2011). Low advocates for a critical hip-hop pedagogy in which rap music, a subset of spoken word culture, is studied “as a product of the imagination shaped by inventing, overturning, and sometimes transcending [and challenging] certain conventions of representation” (27). In chapter two, Low expands her theoretical framework centered on a discourse of authenticity—or “keeping it real,” a highly valued quality in hip-hop—and uses the framework to examine how students use authenticity in the spoken word course. The “pedagogical value of conflict” is explored in chapter three. After a student’s rap performance is cut from the school’s talent night, tensions between black popular culture and schools emerge. Low uses the situation as an example of the “complex conversations and interactions” that often occur between students, teachers, and administrators across cultural, linguistic, and generational differences.

In the second half of the book, Low brings us into the spoken word classroom where she spent two years observing, engaging and reckoning with moments

of both agreement and tension between students and students, as well as students and teachers. Low begins by examining how discourses of race shaped conversations about hip-hop, student identities, students’ poetry, and students’ engagements more generally with the course, each other and the teaching team. Chapter five recounts the moments in class when both students and teachers work to navigate difficult discussions about racist and derogatory language often found in hip-hop music. Debates about the (re)appropriation of hip-hop language and culture, Low argues, are significant and necessary for critical hip-hop pedagogy. In the final chapter, we are pushed to think about hip-hop education as a movement, to recognize the strengths of hip-hop programming happening outside of school spaces, to realize the power of slam poetry, and to celebrate an increasingly multilingual, multicultural and global hip-hop movement. Critical hip-hop pedagogies must tackle the politics of representations, while also being “self-aware of the deep investments students (and teachers) might have in the very representations that a critical educational perspective on hip-hop requires they detach from” (148). Low calls for critical hip-hop pedagogies to have a critical media literacy component where students are encouraged to “grapple with some of the contradictions of hip-hop,” and of the United States’ culture and socially constructed concepts more generally.

One of the most notable aspects of this book is Low’s forthrightness about her own positionality. The first sentence of *Slam School’s* preface reads, “I am not what you think of as hip-hop” (vii). From the jump, Low is upfront about her social identity (she is a white, female, Canadian and notes her ‘outsider’ perspective on the U.S. racial divide created by particular histories of colonization and racism), how she understands and locates herself in a performance poetry classroom, as well as how she first came to hip-hop and spoken word culture. The teaching team consists of two other members: Tim, a high school language arts teacher, who is a white American male (with no knowledge of rap music), and Rashida, a young, accomplished spoken word poet, who is African American, university-educated and a graduate of the city school system. Rashida proves to be an “invaluable” member of the teaching team. She gives the course credibility with the students as a result of her history of involvement in hip-hop culture, the popular arts community and the city school system. Low also addresses the implications of

the dynamics of race for white people doing hip-hop pedagogy with racialized minority students, particularly in instances where white teachers are minorities in the school setting. She acknowledges that it is crucial for teachers to engage in “critical self-reflection” of their own prejudices and privileges in order to understand how their positionality influences their students and the space created in their classroom (105).

Low uses methods of discourse and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 20003; Luke 1995) to make sense of her data, paying close attention to students’ language and metaphors. Critical discourse analysis “sees language as a site of ideological struggle and as both an effect and producer of social change (Fairclough 1992), and it assumes that identities, social relations, and knowledge and belief systems are constructed through language use” (cited in Low 2011, xii). Low argues that the significance of her methodology is that it illuminates the conflicts that often exist between administrators, teachers, and students when it comes to processes of interpretation and misinterpretation around language, identity, and culture; and reinforces the idea that these moments of tension could be central to learning and growing as individuals and as a school community. She also acknowledges the “luxurious and prolonged space” that this book provides for her to engage in pedagogical reflection on practice based on transcribed data from the classroom; she realizes that it is time and information that teachers do not often have.

While she sprinkles anecdotal evidence of successes throughout the book, Low makes it clear that she is more interested in and focused on the “many moments when things did not ‘work’ according to plan, when people and ideas were in conflict, and when students resisted an assignment” (25). Of course, it is important to share successes in teaching and learning, but reflecting and reporting on the “things” that did *not* work or turn out as planned are just as, if not more, important narratives to add to the conversation. This is most pressing for educators—regardless if they are pre-service or tenured—who are committed to continually bettering their teaching practices and building meaningful, trusting relationships with their students. By acknowledging the challenges the teaching team faces with their own identities, their relationships to the curricular materials and the students, and mediating students’ relationships to the school and administration, Low humanizes the difficulties, fears, and important moments of growth that emerge in this kind of work.

Despite the wide influence of hip-hop studies and hip-hop education in various subjects, at times *Slam School* risks reinforcing the idea that this work can only happen within English Language Arts classrooms. With the exception of scholars like Dr. Emdin, who engages hip-hop pedagogy to teach urban science, narratives about incorporating hip-hop education, spoken word poetry, and popular culture texts often take place in English (and sometimes social studies) courses. We see this a lot in the media literacy literature as well (Hobbs 2007; Morrell 2002). While it is important to continue sharing these stories and conducting qualitative research in these spaces, more work is needed on the incorporation of hip-hop and other forms of popular culture into other subject areas as well.

Most importantly, there is still great need for more resources and research dedicated to developing and strengthening culturally responsive education rooted in ideas and practices that are fundamentally *hip-hop*. Low’s ultimate argument is that the very reasons teachers might resist the introduction of hip-hop into the planned curriculum are what make hip-hop so pedagogically vital (1). Throughout the book, she provides multiple perspectives of single events as a way reorient and push back on dominant narratives of seemingly familiar stories. *Slam School* is an important addition to the canon for the ways it illustrates the idea that you do not need to look a certain way or possess certain skills to *be* hip-hop; rather, hip-hop is a culture, a movement, a state of mind, and an educational method that holds great power and promise for better engaging young people in our classrooms.

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