Do you remember reciting a poem at a school assembly? No feedback, no questions: just applause. And people never wondered if you knew what the poem meant; they thought you were smart because you memorized it. Later, you learned to find metaphors and symbols in poetry. You were impressed, marveling how poets encode secret meanings in words. Again, no feedback, no questions: just applause. Our students often have this same one-sided relationship with poetry, believing it is a thing to observe and acclaim, yet not feel. As have prior generations, our students question the authenticity of poetry assigned in school. How does it connect to real lives—to the acceptance you gain when your nickname rolls off your best friend’s tongue? How can it complement double dutch chants or rhymes from the latest rap CD?

While educators strive to help students bridge this gap, students themselves have found ways to feel poetry. One source, which would not surprise most urban teachers, is hip-hop culture. Crossing over racial, economic, and class lines, its intense rhythmic word play screams from every facet of teens’ self-expression: fashion, music, art, and attitude. Some students regard hip-hop artists as biographic poets whose narratives mirror their own journeys through adolescence. Others embrace hip-hop lyrics as a reflection of the glamorous, yet painful, young adult world into which they hope to gain admission. Whether they are on the fringe of the experience or in its throes, hip-hop gets more than the applause of our students; it gets their attention.

This past July, for example, the hottest ticket in the Bay Area was to the Def Poetry Slam. As a spin-off of the Def Comedy Jam, initiated by hip-hop guru Russell Simmons, the series allowed young poets nationwide to boast their verbal talents while painting affirming pictures of their everyday lives. As a former CEO of a record label, Simmons has his hands on the pulse of American youth. The experience he creates is reminiscent of the 1960s beatniks who sat in smoke-filled rooms speaking poetry over rhythmic beats while audiences absorbed their stylistic expression. This hybrid of the oral tradition and contemporary trends in music represents the dynamic cycle of youth, constantly changing what is popular while maintaining much of what has been done in the past.

With a rich poetic tradition and a strong appeal for our students, hip-hop and other forms of popular culture can invigorate middle school literacy instruction. If students gravitate toward things that are popular and cool, why not incorporate them into classroom learning? Language arts teachers in the last decades have capitalized on this, using the analysis of popular song lyrics as a segue into critical studies of more traditional works. Albeit valuable, some argue that this model reinforces the primacy of canonical poets, relegating hip-hop lyrics and the like to nothing more than good classroom stimuli. Perhaps the form and content of this contemporary sound are worthy of study in their own right.

To shed light on how this balance is negotiated on a daily basis in the middle school, we interviewed two young, dynamic African American language arts teachers who use hip-hop as a means of connecting students to poetry. Keisha Green teaches fifth grade
at the Cole School in San Francisco, California, and Joy Campbell teaches seventh grade at Parkville Middle School in Baltimore County, Maryland.

After five years of teaching, Green understands that her ability to connect to students precedes her ability to connect students to text: “As a young teacher, students like the fact that I appreciate the hip-hop culture and music that they listen to. I may not know all of the songs and artists but I allow the students to teach me something and we can learn together. I do not have to be the final ‘wealth of knowledge’ because the students enter the classroom with a wealth of knowledge themselves.”

To this end, Green’s primary goal is relationship building: “If I can relate to the kids then I can get them to learn, and this relationship makes the education experience relevant for the students.” Since her spoken word units reflect “rap, hip-hop, and popular culture,” her students are enthusiastic toward poetry. “We talk about different famous authors, uses of poetry, and varying forms. Sometimes we read a poem, discuss it as a group, construct a poem as a class, and then students write their own.”

This year, Green plans on “incorporating spoken word over jazz music.” Her interest stems from the realization that students need models of rhythms and sounds as they search for their own style and unique word choices. “We do a lot of things in class to promote group work. However, there needs to be a balance with individual expression, also. Creative forms allow students to develop and create their own individuality and identity.”

According to Campbell, who has taught English for eight years, intimate knowledge of students’ culture gains her access to their individual thoughts: “I listen to rap and hip-hop myself, and my students know it. This helps me as a teacher because I get to know and understand [students’] perspectives.” She warns, however, that this is not a universal approach: “Every teacher has their own way of relating. That’s what helps me. I would never say all teachers should run and listen to what the kids are listening to because there is no guarantee it will work.”

Although Campbell teaches traditional poetry regularly, she balances “conventional stuff and fun stuff.” Some of her most successful lessons include rap and popular music: “When you first tell a kid the definition of literary allusion, they usually say ‘huh?’ But if you find a rap song where the artist samples a line from another song, you can see the light bulbs go off in their heads. Jay-Z’s Hard Knock Life is an allusion to music from Annie, and Puff Daddy’s Been Around the World uses lines and rhythms from David Bowie and Lisa Stanfield.” By making these connections, students “grasp the literary concept, relate poetic techniques to popular expression,” and are “more eager to delve into poetic analysis.”

One drawback both teachers find is the mature content of hip-hop music and other forms of popular culture. “Issues such as sex, racial wars, and drugs are largely inappropriate for twelve-year-olds and might meet with parental objection,” says Campbell. “But this is not too different from poems in our anthologies that are not always age appropriate or sanitized.” Green concurs. She gets around this by “playing the clean versions of songs and artists with which students are familiar: Jay-Z, Ludacris, or NAS.”

Clearly, educators should tap into what’s important in the lives of adolescents. As classroom teachers, we must challenge ourselves to explore ways to use spoken word, hip-hop, and popular culture meaningfully in instruction, regardless of student population. What harm is there if students meet the learning objective, affirm their generation’s linguistic tools, feel personally connected to texts, and have fun in the process? What harm is there if teachers learn about aspects of popular culture that may have been foreign to them? The least that can happen is that our classroom discussions afford more opportunities for feedback, questions, and, of course, informed applause.

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