



Dispatch

Transformation Towards Social Justice: Artistic Amalgams Seen Through a Hip-Hop Pedagogical Lens

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There is beauty in evolution, a need for us as humans to understand the essence of reform and how it begins. As educators, we seek to explore how students in the United States understand social justice. Classrooms can be an agent of change – a venue where teachers can encourage and nurture new ideas. We were interested in exploring this relationship and sought to explore how our higher education classrooms were an agent of change, a first step in an ongoing societal conversation about social justice as experienced by students in an undergraduate honors course, “Hip-Hop and Social Justice.” In this creative essay, we explore the nature of transformation, specifically how students engaged in injustice when presented through hip-hop culture. We examined explicit (what students said) and implicit (how students presented) responses as students worked to understand the nature of transformation from the student perspective, and how it was related to social justice.

Transformation becomes necessary when human rights are out of balance. This theme – transformation – is a central one touched on within the course and widely represented through the hip-hop genre. Transformation can be defined as a conversion, a change that happens as variables adjust and reconfigure. Piaget’s notions of accommodation and assimilation come to mind – as individuals encounter new information we go through a cognitive process whereby we examine new information and process it. Familiar information and experiences are easily assimilated and fit or enhance our preexisting schema. However, novel concepts or understandings often have to be examined more deeply, leading us to the accommodation process whereby old ideas are

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changed or replaced based on new information. As students go through our classes, we hope that they learn something, gain new insights, and explore alternate perspectives. In this Hip-hop class, we hoped that students would be transformed, that they would have to stretch to assimilate what they were learning, and that those understandings may lead them to a metamorphic experience.

Love (2019) proposes teaching as a practice of pursuing educational freedom for all students, foregoing the idea of educational reform in favor of transformation. There is beauty in renovation and evolution, yet how this transformation begins is deserving of further exploration. We sought to both illuminate student voices and evolve the strategies we used to convert how we teach about multiple types of oppression and racial violence. The use of a critical literacy lens enabled us to look for relationships between language and discourse, examining the power that relationship can hold – providing the space for students to unpack tensions around social justice issues. This is pertinent to society as it continues to evolve and change. Transformation is an indispensable element, challenging the very nature of the systems of oppression still in place.

What follows is an amalgam of student responses interwoven with hip-hop artistry illuminating social justice issues covered in the class. We are presenting them here in a lyrical fashion using a phenomenological theoretical lens and both our students' and the hip-hop artists' voices to explain their experiences. We highlighted the voice of individuals that were representative of larger groups of students and embedded those throughout the piece. Phenomenology is concerned with the lived experience of human beings, especially with meaning and value. The artists and students each had their subjective values, meanings, and perceptions, and we wanted to juxtapose those to explain their understanding of the nature of social justice. It was important for us to use the words of the artists and students to convey their subjective experiences. Further, we wanted to mimic the flow of the original artists. We highlighted elements of hip-hop connected to student responses, including imagery capturing their attention, chiefly the hip-hop songs they studied. What we sought to create was a lyrical series of interconnected events. Our collection sought to demystify the act of the artists creating the song coupled with the students' analysis and response to both the social justice issue and the presentation of the issue through the eyes of the hip-hop artist as experienced by our participants. This provides a concatenation of their lived experiences, where each stanza is reflective of a unique voice, either our own, the hip-hop artists, or the students.¹

¹ We use center-justification for our authorial analysis, right-justification for artist/lyric excerpts, and left-justification for student analysis.

Educators and students alike
contend with persistent disparities
across health, wealth, housing
education outcomes
yield
substantial social and economic losses.
Consensus is
the nature of teaching
of race and oppression
evokes strong emotions; and can create conflict.

Engaging in critical thinking
calls for civic discussion
surrounded by social justice issues.
This is how we evolve
into more than just an entity.

Metamorphosis through Love and *love*...
Pursuit of educational freedom for all,
foregoing educational trauma.
Reform.
No, transform.
We seek to illuminate student voices,
evolve the strategies
to convert how we teach
about oppression and racial violence.

With quiet force, 2Pac offered to the cipher,
“I see no changes, all I see is racist faces
Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races
We under, I wonder what it takes to make this
One better place, let's erase the wasted
Take the evil out the people, they'll be acting right”

Whose truths are valued?
How can we forget
the pain
the fear
the tears.
Will we ever understand
each other?

Nas played with
Ruling the World,
Teased by imaginations within

“Life
I wonder
Will it take me under
I don't know”

Critical literacy lens
looking for relationships
language and discourse,
examining the power held in relationships
unpacking student tensions.

Tensions led students to further revelations.

“Freshman year, tried to find me
ended up feeling more lost in the sea
Ran with the crowd, but the crowd overran me
Grades weren't good because I misunderstood
that running with the crowd would do me no good
Still believed but never made the faith my own,
ended up feeling more alone”

Society is evolving
more than just an entity.
Transformation is indispensable-
challenging systems of oppression.

“Look how far I come
Look how far I come
Look how far I come
Immigrants, we get the job done

Not yet”

In this essay, we applied our authorial reflections to bring light to student understandings explored throughout the course. Student responses exemplified how they had come to understand social justice through the lens of hip-hop culture. In the course, students used a variety of reflective and multimodal literacy skills to better understand how storytelling in hip-hop culture exposes isolation, economic disadvantage, structural inequality, and lack of access to power. This examination allowed students to gain a sense of agency and helps them to use their voice to advocate and “advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice” (CSWE, Competency 3). The consensus within both education and social work scholarship is that the very nature of teaching about race and oppression is likely to evoke strong emotions and create conflict (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Ahad-Legardy & Poon, 2018; Hikido & Murray, 2016; Jeyasingham, 2012; Matias et al., 2016). Our goal within this

course was to broaden students' skills in engaging in critical thinking and civic discussion around social justice, ideally leading to transformative experiences. As Love (2019) has suggested, pedagogy is "useless" unless teachers confront oppression and social justice. Reflections, assignment artifacts, and course participation indicated that our students saw each other more clearly after the course. W.E.B DuBois said, "education must not simply teach work – it must teach Life" (DuBois, 1903, p. 75). Utilizing hip-hop culture as a pedagogical tool provided a framework for students to develop an understanding of social injustice through the lens of popular artists so that they could better understand each other's lived experiences.

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