Dusty & Digital Media Literacy Workshops: VTDITC's Replicable Approach to Teaching the Hip Hop Arts

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Abstract

Digging in the Crates: Hip Hop Studies at Virginia Tech, or VTDITC, is a pedagogical model that exists to foster a sense of community among artists, fans, and scholars. Based in our campus' main library, we hope to model that students' and community members' personal interests are worthy of academic study and further establish Hip Hop Studies' presence at Virginia Tech, the academy, and in the larger community. To that end, the VTDITC community has designed, taught, and assessed more than 150 community-based media literacy workshops over the past half decade. We have demonstrated, explained, and created opportunities for a wide variety of learners to experience the science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics inherent to the hip hop culture. We have learned alongside a diversity of audiences—from elementary school children to adults. To name just a few of our partner organizations, we have worked with the 4H Virginia Congress, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Southwest Virginia, Higher Achievement, Inc., a variety of public libraries including our regular collaborator Roanoke Public Libraries, the Science Museum of Western Virginia, Virginia's Summer Residential Governor's School for Humanities, and the West End Center for Youth.

In our contribution to *The Global Drumbeat: Permeations of Hip Hop across Diverse Information Worlds*, we will outline and explain an example lesson plan from one of our workshops. We will provide our learning outcomes as well as our assessment plan. Additionally, we will detail the theoretical underpinnings and guiding principles that inform our pedagogical decision making. Our workshops take a hands-on, practitioner-minded, and co-creation approach to teaching media literacy. Inasmuch, this contribution will also provide a recommended list of music creation equipment and other appropriate classroom technology that will accommodate a variety of budgets. Furthermore, we will include several promising practices and recommendations gained from more than 50 years of collective experience creating hip hop music and 10 years of collective experience teaching the hip hop arts. Our hope is that this contribution will inspire other library workers and educators to remix our workshops to suit the needs of their communities.

Keywords: experiential learning; hip hop librarianship; media literacy; pedagogy

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Introduction

Digging in the Crates: Hip Hop Studies at Virginia Tech, or VTDITC, is a collaborative community with a mission to foster a sense of community among artists, fans, and scholars. Based in Virginia Tech's Newman library, VTDITC engages in partnerships to execute programming which models that students' and community members' personal interests are worthy of academic study by further establishing Hip Hop Studies' presence on campus, in the academy, and, most importantly, in the larger community. Since our establishment in 2016, the VTDITC community has designed, taught, and assessed more than 150 community-based, culturally relevant media literacy workshops over the past half decade. In this report from the field, we document two example VTDITC lesson plans that we encourage readers to adapt and put to use with the communities you serve.

Through educational programming the VTDITC community has created opportunities for a wide variety of learners to experience and co-create the science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics inherent in the practice and culture of hip hop. Our workshops span the Rhythm, Rhyme, and Remix hip hop elements of Kumasi's INFLO-Mation Framework (Kumasi, 2018). Having a static qualification for the level of creativity related to a hip hop practice is a departure point for the VTDITC community. We encourage the adaptation of our lesson plans to meet your audience where they are while co-constructing creative learning experiences. Applying the ideas brought forth by Rawls & Robinson's (2019) model for implementing popular culture pedagogy within a hip hop context, VTDITC embraces the "science" of youth culture as it moves at the rhythm of its own drum.

While keeping the foundation of hip hop culture in mind, we have intentionally considered the intergenerational ties of the hip hop community to engage with multi-generational audiences—from elementary school children to adults. The intergenerational aspects of hip hop have been commonly discussed using deficit framing to highlight conflict (Blanchard, 1999), rebellion (Haaken et al., 2012; Rose, 1994), and demonization (Bridges, 2011). Antagonistically, VTDITC uses an assets-based community development approach (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993) to prioritize preexisting community interests (Rawls & Petchauer, 2020) and build critical social capital (Ginwright, 2007). To name just a few of our partner organizations, we have worked closely with a variety of K-12 schools, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Southwest Virginia, Higher Achievement, Inc., multiple public library systems including our regular collaborator Roanoke Public Libraries, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated's Tau Mu Omega STEM Camp, Virginia Tech student organizations, the Commonwealth of Virginia's Summer Residential Governor's School for Humanities, and the West End Center for Youth.

VTDITC workshops take a practitioner-led (Adjapong & Emdin, 2015), hands-on (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Weiss, 2021), and creation-focused (Levy & Adjapong, 2020) approach to teaching information literacy. It is imperative for hip hop practitioners to develop the ability to make most out of the civic resources in a community. Practitioners who attempt to connect with a community of learners should embrace the complex experience hip hop pedagogy provides (Kuttner, 2016). VTDITC has strategically considered the physical spaces we work in and invested heavily in being able to meet community members in spaces they are familiar with mobile technology that is appropriate. Keeping it real, it is hustling backwards to put cost prohibitive technology into the hands of students for temporary periods of engagement, with little to no opportunity for sustained development.

Resourcing our engagements is an everyday struggle, with technology being both an enabler and limiter depending on the context of the engagement. VTDITC's home base, True School Studios has been equipped with a wide variety of mobile technology ranging from freeware like Audacity to costly controllers like the RaneOne. In effort to share the benefit of the time we have invested in making equipment selections, we have also provided a recommended list of educational technology that will accommodate a variety of learning experiences and budgets. Inappropriately investing in hip hop pedagogy can do more harm than good. We urge adopters of the lesson plans provided to resource their efforts to engage with the hip hop pedagogy just as much or more than they would for any other pedagogical approach.

The practices and recommendations—acquired via more than 50 years of collective experience creating hip hop music and 10 years of collective experience teaching the hip hop arts—will help demystify teaching the hip hop arts for non-practitioners as well as continue a dialogue with teaching artists. Our goal is that this contribution will inspire other library workers and educators to remix our workshops that will suit the unique needs of their communities with relative ease. A more detailed description of the VTDITC: Hip Hop Studies at Virginia Tech program is provided in Arthur et al. (2020). Should you run into issues putting these lesson plans into practice, we are more than happy to answer any questions you may have as best we can.

VTDITC's Guiding Principles

Simply put, a few basic principles lead every decision—pedagogical, programmatic, and interpersonal—that we make as a community. They are:

- to remove barriers to entry

- to recognize art as scholarship

- to learn by doing

- and to have fun

We seek to apply these principles in every aspect of how we move. Prioritizing experiential learning and having fun are arguably our primary concerns when it comes to our community-based media literacy workshops.

VTDITC's Collaboration with The West End Center

The VTDITC community is intentional to actively engage community partners who serve systematically underserved communities. We value our opportunities to enter the powerful communities that are home to people that are responsible for inventing and innovating Hip Hop, the artform, culture, and commercialized practice. Using the words of the legendary Tupac Shakur, "The power is in the people!" (Shakur et al., 1995) As mentioned earlier in this article, the hip hop pedagogy is complex, and we strongly encourage educators to embrace the dynamic nature of the practice.

In 1979, in response to the systematic oppression that increased the prevalence of crime, poverty, and drug trading in the west side of Roanoke, Virginia, community organizations came together to create The West End Center (West End Center, 2017). VTDITC partners with the West

End Center to engage with an organization who for decades has been "Exploring literacy & Empowering possibilities" in a brilliant predominantly Black community that is still fighting for its fair share of resources 42 years later. Working with the West End Center is an explicit example of VTDITC's effort to support youth civic engagement through connections with social justice organizations.

In the summer of 2021, the VTDITC conducted five weekly trips to the West End Center to teach roughly a dozen workshops. We appreciate each opportunity to provide talented and intelligent young minds with time to collaborate with knowledgeable hip hop practitioners and media creation resources. In our workshops, we share lessons with the students on the history of hip hop and give them an in-depth look at the foundation of hip hop—DJing. Many of the West End Center students have been closely akin to hip hop culture and rap music throughout their budding lives, and some of them already feel extremely confident regarding their choice of the best rappers of all time. However, the VTDITC workshop was the first time that many of them were shown the process of creation, and the evolution of the music they identify with so strongly.

We first explain the origin of hip hop through the lens of the DJ and then allow for ample time for hands-on experiential learning. The kids learn what equipment DJs use, the function of the different components of the equipment, the different types of scratches that were invented in the early days of HipHop, and the stories of important DJs who are responsible for these creations. Importantly, we make sure to communicate that the people who created the culture the students love so much were: 1) not much older than the students in the room, 2) often looked like them, and 3) were typically from communities similar to their own.

After being introduced to the origins of the genre, we share the process to create hip hop music, particularly the process of "cooking" beats or "crafting" an instrumental. With minimal equipment, we explain how the art of sampling influenced the unique sonics of hip hop music, and basic music theory. Allowing the students to see that something so grand can be created with relatively few tools gives them agency over a creation practice with a relatively low barrier to entry. Nevertheless, some of the students still do not have access to the resources that will allow them to purchase basic equipment, making public access to equipment at community centers and libraries an important community investment. This is one of the reasons why VTDITC seeks to share information about our equipment choices with others to connect more learners with the affordable tools necessary to produce the art that resonates with them.

Following the lesson, they receive on production is a lesson on the creative process for lyrics. Many of the stories that are written in rap music contain experiences that these kids have lived through and seen around them, and without being completely aware of it, the children have naturally gravitated towards a genre of music in which they see themselves and the people they love. With the goal of helping them understand the intellectual efforts behind creating a rap song and increasing their appreciation for it, the steps of songwriting are explained. Since rap is rhythm and poetry, we give the kids a foundational understanding of what a bar in music is, then we explain how a line of poetry and bar in music are synonymous and work together to create a rap. The popular two 16-bar verses and eight-bar chorus song structure in rap is also dissected in order to give them terminologies and a more concrete view of what they are already familiar with.

Towards the end of the workshop the children are given an opportunity to have hands-on experience with the DJ controller, portable turntable, microphone, and also get the chance to

compose their own rap to share with the other students. VTDITC puts great emphasis on experiential learning in order to help students understand that they are capable of making music they love. We also create an encouraging environment that allows them to tap into their creative writing abilities without fear of being ridiculed while also providing them with guidance on how to enhance their skills. Through hip hop people can learn how to process their emotions, express their wants and needs, and be heard by the people around them. These types of skills are extremely beneficial for mental health and self-awareness; these qualities lay the foundation for success in many areas of life.

Lesson Plan #1: The Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics of DJing

Minimum Time Needed: 60 minutes

Objective: Help students understand various science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM) concepts inherent to DJing

DL Program Learning Outcomes:

> 2.1. Recognize the value of curiosity, exploration, and play in the discovery process

> 5.1. Recognize that the creative process can involve a variety of emotional experiences

> 5.3. Practice an iterative design process towards specific goals

> 5.4. Engage in troubleshooting while using tools

> 5.5. Create original works and repurpose or remix existing works

Session-level Learning Objectives:

- Learners will identify different kinds of digital and analog music production technologies and theories

- Learners will use different kinds of digital and analog music production technologies and apply theory at an elementary level

- Learners will create original digital (and analog) works as a means of personal or group expression

Intro (5 min)

- Who we are

  o Introduce your name/ stage name

    ▪ Introduce your practice

      - Why did I begin DJing?

      - How has it benefited me over the years?

- How does this relate to my job as a librarian?

Equipment Explanations (10 min)

- Controller
    - o Rane One
        - Start/Stop button
        - Pitch Control – how you speed up or slow down songs
            - Guiding question: "Why is this feature important for DJs?"
        - Slipmats
            - Guiding question: "Why are these important for DJs?"
        - Control Vinyl / "Records"
            - Briefly explain how records work
            - Guiding question: "Even though this "record" doesn't work like old-school records, why do you think it's important to this piece of equipment?"
        - Serato DJ Pro software
            - Guiding question: "What do you think the advantages of using this setup would be compared to old-school DJ equipment?"
- Pads & Banks
- Microphones
    - o Explain proper mic technique

Demo (10 min)

- Basic DJ history
    - o Be sure to highlight contributions from luminaries such as DJ Flowers, Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Grandwizard Theodore, DJ Jazzy Jeff, Spinderella, Pam the Funkstress, Roc Raida, and more
- Demonstrate basic techniques and explain their backstories
    - o Looping breaks
        - This is the foundation of the hip hop arts!

- o   Baby scratch

- o   Forward scratch

- o   Transformer scratch

- o   Chirp scratch

- Demonstrate live beat making

    - o   Most popular American music is 4/4

        - ▪   Demonstrate counting bars

        - ▪   Using the midi pads on the controller, put the snare where the snare goes (2 & 4) and the kick where the kick goes (1 & 3)

            - •   It's all math!

        - ▪   Finger drumming show & tell

- Guiding question: "What questions do you have?"

Experiential Learning (25 minutes)

- Let the students use the equipment (supervised but also self-directed)

Wrap up (10 minutes)

- Sum up what we learned together

- Guiding question: "What questions do you have?"

- Guiding question: "How many of you plan on learning more about DJing?"

- Share any relevant resources:

    - o   How can they learn more?

    - o   Where can students record their music for free?

    - o   Anything else you can think of that is pertinent to how the class went

    - o   Provide your contact info and the program's social media info

VTDITC's Collaboration
with Radford University's Governor's School for the Humanities

This year the VTDITC community was invited to teach four workshops to support the Commonwealth of Virginia's Summer Residential Governor's School for Humanities. Authors Jon Kabongo and Craig Arthur traveled to Radford University to engage with high-achieving high

school students from Virginia. Dr. Stephanie Bradley, a VTDITC Leadership Board member, instructs a Sociology of Hip Hop course as a part of the summer program.

The maturity of the rising juniors and seniors allowed us to deal with subject matter that may not be appropriate for elementary or middle school groups. Additionally, the ability to scaffold two workshops for both sections allowed for pedagogical opportunities that are not possible in a one-shot session engagement. When the opportunity to explore socially conscious topics with mature audiences presents itself, we strongly encourage strategic planning and considerations to protect vulnerable members in your audience. Being labeled as a high-achieving student has an underrealized negative impact on students, specifically Black males (Bonner et al., 2008) which should be considered critically. While using culturally relevant, or sustaining pedagogical approaches (Ladson-Billings, 2014) can be beneficial for Black students, careful consideration should be given to potential for tokenism, isolation, and minstrelsy in this context.

We believe that while the presented lesson plan worked well in the context of the Governor's School, the following writing workshop should be remixed to fit the needs of other groups. Time is a major constraint in the educational context and if you cannot meet the minimum time requirement in lesson plan two, please consider adjusting your approach dramatically. Providing students with less than 30 minutes to write about complex topics should be done sparingly.

Lesson Plan #2: Hip Hop Song Writing Workshop

Minimum Time Needed: 75 minutes

Objective: Engage with students to identify beats, devise concepts, prepare for an audience, select a tone as a part of the song composition process.

Digital Literacy Learning Outcomes:

5.1 Recognize that the creative process can involve a variety of emotional experiences

5.3 Practice an iterative design process towards specific goals

5.5 Create original works and repurpose or remix existing works

Intro (5 min)

- Introduce yourself authentically

    o   Consider the audience and extend an opportunity for connection

    o   Universal starting points:

        ▪   Name/Stage Name

        ▪   Where you represent

        ▪   Scholarship interests

        ▪   Your creative practice

- How long you have been practicing

- How your practice benefits your life

- How your practice relates to other aspects of your life

Objectives of the workshop and community guidelines (10 min)

- Explain to the students what they'll be doing for the workshop

    o Outline what success looks like ---> a rough draft of an original song

- As a group, establish community guidelines (we find this goes a long way to create trust with a new group and help repeat groups hold each other accountable)

    o Guiding question: "There's going to be the opportunity to perform in front of the group! How do we want to convey support to our fellow learners when they are brave enough to share their art with the group?"

    o Guiding question: "We're going to create art together. While we don't want to censor each other, we also want to make sure we're creating something we can all respect. Is any topic or word unacceptable to our community?"

        ▪ Developing a social responsibility agreement depends on context/age of the group

Beat Selection (5 Min)

- Identify the type of sound the class wants to go for

    o Search for a beat on YouTube that matches that sound using "type beats"

    o Collectively evaluate different options to iterate selection criteria to result in selecting one instrumental

Concept Selection (5 Min)

- Guiding question: "How does this beat make you feel?"

- Guiding question: "What do you think of when you hear it?"

    o Keep track of responses in a way that the whole class can see, to show that every contribution is considered and valued

- Collaboratively decide on a broad topic related to one emotion or a combination of emotions that complement each other

Audience & Tone Selection (10 Min)

- Guiding question: "Who are we creating this song for? How does that matter?"

- o   This can be a powerful way to reinforce the community guidelines/topic/vocab discussion

- Guiding question: "Who would be willing to hum or share a flow that would work well over this beat?"

   - o   Collaboratively decide on the melodies and flows for the hook and verse

Song Composition (30 min)

- Write 2 verses and a chorus

   - o   Keep the discussion moving as a group as we write every line of the song together

      - ▪   Whiteboards are invaluable for this process!

   - o   Allow anyone who wants to perform to do so

   - o   Encourage writers to appreciate whatever they write, no matter the quantity or quality

Conclusion/Wrap Up (10 min)

- Sum up what we learned together

- Guiding question: "What questions do you have?"

- Guiding question: "How many people plan on doing what we just did together to create their own music later?"

- Quickly share any relevant resources:

   - o   How can they learn more?

   - o   Where can students record their music for free?

   - o   Anything else you can think of that is pertinent to how the class went

   - o   Provide your contact info and the program's social media info

Conclusion

The scholastic and intellectual dimensions of hip hop culture provide an exceptionally literate and information rich platform for marginalized communities to report from the field. Merriam-Webster (n. d.) defines working the "field" as "the sphere of practical operation outside a base (such as a laboratory, office, or factory)" (definition 2b). In the VTDITC community working in the field takes on a similar, yet more advanced definition. Hip hop practitioners and community members conduct scientific experiments and develop philosophies that serve justly and equitably. Hip hop is a youth culture that has an intergenerational history of teaching understanding, freedom, science, economics, mathematics, faith, peace, unity, and respect.

Please use this report on our field work to inform your efforts to keep the global drumbeat going in your local community. The authors of this article invite correspondence from readers. From community members volunteering at community centers, to K-12 students, teachers, and library and information science professionals—we are all community. May we all come together and exchange knowledge, show love, and engage respectfully.

> "Remember, we walked past the teacher, take the chalk and laugh. We wrote punishments: 'I will not talk in class.'" - Black Thought (2017)

Appendix

Equipment List

Below is a list of educational technology that we regularly use in our workshops. We have included both a less expensive but still reliable and capable option and a more expensive, often professional level tool for each category. According to our calculations, with a minimum $1,000 budget, one could purchase nearly all the equipment they need to replicate our workshops.

DJ Controllers

[Pioneer DDJ SB3](#)

- Approximate cost: $250

- This controller features all of the functionality that a beginning DJ will need. However, it does not include a license to Serato DJ Pro (the leading DJ software) but, instead, a more limited software Serato DJ Lite is included with purchase.

[Rane One](#)

- Approximate cost: $1,600

- One of the most full featured (and therefore one of the most expensive) DJ controllers that is currently available, the One is unique in that it has rotating platters. These platters replicate the feel of DJing on turntables. It also includes a license to Serato DJ Pro.

Portable Turntables

[Numark PT01 Scratch](#)

- Approximate cost: $150

- This portable turntable is a good choice because it includes a crossfader-like "scratch switch" and is relatively inexpensive. Should someone want to learn the fundamentals of scratching, a PT01 Scratch, a slipmat, 7" scratch records, and headphones would be the only equipment they would need. The PT01 also offers multiple opportunities for

modifications (adding a lithium ion battery, switching out the cartridge and tonearm, and upgrading the platter are all relatively simple, for example).

Reloop Spin

- Approximate cost: $250

- The Reloop Spin is similar to the Numark PT01 with a few minor additions. It features a more standard crossfader, Bluetooth connectivity, and recording via a USB port. A 7" scratch record is also included with purchase.

Speakers

Ion Block Rocker Plus

- Approximate cost: $200

- This speaker is a versatile portable option with Bluetooth connectivity. We have used our Block Rocker Plus for workshops of up to 50 people.

JBL Partybox 100

- Approximate cost: $350

- The JBL Partybox is a more robust option. While we would not recommend using it to DJ a large event, for instance, both the battery life and sound quality are impressive. (Younger audiences also enjoy the LED lights that correspond to the music.)

Microphone

Samson R21S

- Approximate cost: $20

- The R21S is a basic and durable dynamic microphone.

Shure SM58

- Approximate cost: $100

- The SM58 is the longstanding industry standard for a dynamic microphone for live applications. Chances are, if you've used a microphone, you've used a SM58.

Laptop with Music Library

- Approximate cost: Priceless

- This important component is difficult to price. Most major DJ software requires music files (usually MP3 or WAV) be available on the respective laptop's hard drive. However,

some collaboration with and integration of streaming services and DJ software companies are beginning to take shape.

Cables, Adapters, Extension Cords, and Powerstrips

- Approximate cost: $100

- You'll need a variety of RCA, XLR, ¼", and ⅛" cables as well as a few headphone adapters and powerstrips to connect the equipment.

7" Scratch Records

- Approximate cost: $25/each

- The 7" scratch record market has exploded in recent years. Series to consider include Turntable Training Wax's "Practice Yo Kuts!" and DJ Chris Karns "Visual Vinyl."

Several Sets of Inexpensive Headphones

- Approximate cost: $100

- Behringer HPM1000

- Audio Technica ATH-M20x

Travel Cases and Bags

- Approximate cost: $200

- We highly recommend purchasing substantial cases and bags for your equipment if you will regularly be moving it.

Acknowledgements

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