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To cite this article: Derek Greenfield (2007) What's the deal with the white middle-aged guy teaching hip-hop? Lessons in popular culture, positionality and pedagogy, *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 15:2, 229-243, DOI: [10.1080/14681360701403789](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681360701403789)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681360701403789>



Published online: 19 Jun 2007.



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What's the deal with the white middle-aged guy teaching hip-hop? Lessons in popular culture, positionality and pedagogy

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As educators endeavor to engage an increasingly diverse student population, the curricular inclusion of elements of popular culture has been found to represent a particularly meaningful and successful approach. Research has consistently documented how utilizing issues of interest to students enhances affective links to the classroom and engenders stronger academic performance and critical thinking skills. However, the impact of teaching popular culture on educators themselves has been largely ignored, with this paper suggesting that these classroom experiences encourage a mode of reflective practice that heightens awareness of positionality and its impact on educational philosophy. Through an autoethnographic account of a recent course offering on hip-hop culture, the author explains how this pedagogical and epistemological standpoint not only benefits individual educators, but also has the potential to contribute to larger institutional transformation.

Introduction

The terrain of popular culture has become an increasingly desirable field for courses in higher education, as educators have discovered the tremendous benefits of incorporating subject matter of particular interest to students into the curriculum. Despite negative public commentary about the presumed frivolity of these courses (Young America's Foundation, 2005), scholarly inquiry and classroom exploration of diverse topics ranging from punk (One, 2005) to sports (Cochran, 2004) to graffiti (Nieviadomy, 2004) have consistently demonstrated positive academic performance outcomes. In addition to enhancing motivation, these courses provide a meaningful

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context for connecting course material to students' lives, with this epistemological shift ultimately leading to improved student achievement and critical thinking (Ginwright, 2004). To reflect this point and encourage pedagogical reform, an entire journal issue produced by the National Council of Teachers of English addressed the myriad ways in which popular culture could be infused throughout the curriculum to strengthen students' abilities to develop language skills (2004).

In particular, the curricular inclusion of elements of popular culture can have tremendous benefits for students from marginalized populations who are more likely to forge affective ties and maintain interest in school when their cultural realities are affirmed and respected (Nieto, 1999). Embracing this perspective, Mahiri (1998) writes that teaching hip-hop establishes 'nonoppressive human interactions that increase the prospects of individuals finding their personal gold ... [and] make viable connections between streets and schools to create more shareable cultural worlds for learning' (p. 159). As an example, I recall that after a workshop session I conducted, one young woman approached me to mention how excited she felt about her university finally offering a course related to hip-hop culture: 'That class was the only time in my education where I could be myself and explore things that I truly cared about.' Demonstrating the centrality of affective ties in student retention and success, she proceeded to comment how, as the only African-American female in the entire engineering program, this energizing hip-hop course helped her to feel that she belonged and to remain committed to overcoming the persistent challenges.

Indeed, the focus on topics that matter to students increases the likelihood of the development of higher order thinking skills. As Giroux writes, 'Knowledge has to be meaningful to students before it can be critical' (1988, p. 14). Banks (1993) argues that the use of personal experiences within the realm of a multicultural approach to learning can help students to better understand the process of knowledge production and its sociopolitical implications.

Au (2005) suggests that rather than solely appreciating how popular culture studies benefits students by training them for academic success, these classroom experiences can also be utilized to encourage a Freirean (1970) type of social consciousness that challenges existing ideological frameworks and hegemonic practices. More specifically, Au highlights how a discursive interrogation of lyrics in hip-hop culture can assist students in formulating cultural critiques as acts of resistance to dominant societal narratives. In addition to articulating their profound institutional alienation, students could be charged with envisioning strategies leading to productive social action. Thus, on personal, pedagogical and political levels, the study of popular culture has significant positive outcomes for students (Morrell, 2002).

Yet, despite the increased understanding of the effects on students and classroom dynamics, little attention has been paid to the plausible impact on educators teaching these courses. In this paper, I argue that, through the process of preparing for and implementing courses in popular culture areas, educators are more likely to interrogate their own cultural frames of reference, to examine the student perspective and, as a result, to generate an enhanced appreciation of issues of pedagogy and epistemology. Indeed, taking from Brookfield's (1995) discussion of 'reflective practice,' I

suggest that educators involved in this work may experience a level of awareness of the teaching and learning process that transforms their teaching and helps work towards an institutional culture that values innovation.

Building from earlier critical theorists (e.g. McLuhan *et al.*, 1977), Delpit (1995, p. 10) suggests that students benefit from internalizing 'the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life ...[and] the arbitrariness of those codes and of the power relationships they represent'. I would assert that a similar phenomenon can be applied to teachers, in terms of challenging them to investigate their own distinct classroom 'codes' and the power dimensions explicit and implicit in their instructional approach. It is again my contention that teaching popular culture delivers a unique and dynamic mechanism for accomplishing this worthy goal.

Conceptual and methodological approach

In proposing the notion of 'pedagogical assumptiveness', Greenfield (2006) references the tendency among many educators to resist examining the underlying cultural assumptions guiding their work. By failing to fully understand how identity shapes knowledge construction and pedagogical practice, instructors may be unintentionally establishing classrooms that reflect and serve their own learning styles and interests, and as a result, alienate significant numbers of students. This position draws intellectual strength from King's (1991, p. 135) discussion of dysconscious racism as the 'uncritical habit of the mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given.' While not intentionally oppressive, a state of dysconsciousness obscures the ideological conditions that end up perpetuating practices that disadvantage groups of learners.

I suggest that educators need concrete experiences that disrupt this self-normalizing tendency, with the symbolic interactionist tradition offering insights into how true self-consciousness requires both awareness and social experience. Through interaction, the individual becomes able to more fully 'take the role of the other', and thus, to appreciate one's own contextualized identity framework (Mead, 1934). As a result, these experiences not only can deepen insights into self and other, but also generate greater emotional commitment to tackling critical issues for change.

For example, Upcraft and Gardner (1989) have suggested that the proliferation of first-year student orientation courses across the country has stimulated valuable dialogue around student development and the need for innovative teaching. In particular, academic faculty recruited for these courses encounter a potentially transformative experience, by moving away from their particular discipline and instead concentrating on issues of academic literacy and the socio-emotional characteristics of students. By thinking critically about the students' perspective while addressing material outside of their direct expertise, faculty members may gain greater recognition of how their own identity and background affect the educational process.

Thus, this paper finds conceptual alignment with Tetreault's (1993) discussion of 'positionality' as a significant force in shaping epistemological and pedagogical stances. Through cognizance of the ways in which who they are affects how they think

and teach, educators are in a stronger position to deconstruct the normative assumptions brought to the classroom. It is suggested here that the inclusion of popular culture into the curriculum represents a meaningful vehicle for encouraging educators to become more aware of matters of identity and to implement classroom approaches to best meet the needs of today's learners.

To support this claim, I will provide an in-depth analysis of a recent iteration of a hip-hop course that I have taught for several years. The discussion will primarily center on my work prior to the start of the term and the first month of the class itself, arguing that the bulk of the issues related to this paper emerged during that time-frame. Previously, I offered the hip-hop class at a medium-sized community college serving a diverse range of working-class and middle-class students. I recently started at a small historically Black liberal arts institution in the American South predominantly comprised of traditional college-age students from working-class backgrounds—and with the change in demographics, I became even more interested in examining how my racial construction would impact the classroom dynamics. Technically, the course was a special themed section of Urban Sociology, which was required for all Sociology majors.

For the study, I used an autoethnographic model in which I self-reflexively evaluated my encounter with teaching the course. In discussing the unique epistemological vantage point provided by autoethnography, Fiske (1990) asserts that it offers a mechanism for a 'theoretically structured introspection [to one's] own responses to ... the interdiscourse between social discourses ... and those through which [one] makes sense of "self", social relations, and social experience' (p. 85). Through acknowledging one's identity as a factor in conducting social inquiry, the texts emerging from this methodological approach can be more appealing 'morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 745).

Before the start of the term, I spent considerable time pondering aspects of the upcoming course and potential pedagogical techniques. This practice continued during the semester, and by eliciting written and oral feedback from students, I gained a better understanding of their interpretation of the experience. Reflections on this dialectical connection of self and students enriched the data and served as the impetus for several changes in my teaching.

Initial interrogations

The primary area of exploration centered on the complex set of relationships that may exist in a hip-hop-themed classroom. It is a powerful underlying assumption in the typical learning environment that the teacher represents the standard of knowledge for the particular subject being addressed. I believe that in my traditional sociology courses, students rarely question my intellectual authority in the field, believing that my status as professor necessitates that I possess the requisite academic training. As a result, even in the most democratic and collaborative classroom (including my own), students tend to maintain a sense of deference to the faculty member with regards to the material. Essentially, educators are seen as possessing full-fledged

'membership' in the discipline's culture, with students being invited to participate until deemed to have developed the mandatory credentials for becoming members (if they even elect to pursue this goal). As Eastman (1990) suggests, to move beyond acceptance within a culture into membership requires the ability to successfully internalize the common knowledge base as well as the meta-linguistic skills for communicating this competence.

In the hip-hop classroom, this frame could operate in reverse. It seems reasonable to suggest that the vast majority of my students would expend effort considering the presence and knowledge of a middle-aged White male teaching the course. Clearly, some young faculty members who grew up immersed within the culture could be granted credibility through manifesting culturally recognized behavior; yet at least as reflected in my situation, many individuals might not be automatically considered as members of the popular culture elements under study. In traditional classes, students usually do not claim ownership of the material or the criteria by which an instructor's competence would be judged, with the educator usually only losing intellectual authority through egregious conduct. However, for this class, I suspect that respect and status as expert would in some ways need to be earned. While I still possessed the sociological expertise, knowledge of the specific subject matter might be the most salient issue.

Through these reflections, I discovered that, while I always fervently encourage student participation as a means of bringing new insights and energy into the learning process, these contributions typically serve as an accompaniment to my instruction. This case, with students' rich knowledge base often superseding my own, necessitated a different level of involvement and responsibility for the course from them. The concept of students as co-constructors of knowledge that was often theoretically meaningful yet pragmatically challenging to put into practice due to disparate skill levels would be a natural outgrowth of this experience.

Thus, the majority of individuals teaching popular culture have to make a more concerted effort to consider how they navigate their performance in the classroom. For example, if maintaining a purely academic persona, they run the risk of not only being perceived as a true outsider, but also potentially facing derision for using the culture for their own scholarly gain. Depending on the validity and authenticity of the performance, those individuals hoping to manifest full membership in the culture could be highly respected for their efforts or face greater ostracism by trying too hard to fit in.

While I engage in reflection prior to every semester to determine my goals and the most appropriate teaching techniques, the process proved to be far more rigorous for this course. Issues focused on positionality that had relevance before now seemed to be even more essential components to address before entering the classroom on the first day. As a White faculty member at a historically Black school, I thought quite carefully about how the course and my identity would be perceived, and thus, how to ensure that my self-presentation might be viewed as authentic and appropriate.

During the preparation phase, I decided that I would open the first class by reciting a poem I had written a few years earlier that served as a verbal response to an activist's challenge of my authority to teach a course on hip-hop due to my race. On one hand,

this performance would serve the purpose of demonstrating my rhyming skills—with this display of a symbolic connection to the culture also representing an admittedly self-serving desire to gain credibility. Furthermore, by foregrounding issues of race, I wanted to indicate my willingness to actively examine my positionality in the classroom and to encourage critical analysis of the dimensions of identity and authority. I cannot recall any other time in my teaching career when I felt a challenge to essentially ‘prove’ that I belonged. Ultimately, the surprising reality for students that a middle-aged White guy could ‘flow’ reflected a dichotomous reality that my identity placed me in a partial outsider status but that my interest in hip-hop and ability to manifest a degree of competence within the culture generated some respect.

I also contacted a student whom I knew well and asked him to recommend songs that might be worth playing and analyzing in the class. As a self-proclaimed ‘hip-hop head’, he simply knew more songs than I did and was aware of emerging trends and artists. While this interaction might have been uncomfortable in another class context, the notion that I would solicit his expertise seemed to be perfectly valuable and appropriate here. In addition to allowing us to think critically about course themes and their salience in the music, the conversation symbolically served to strengthen the commitment to maintaining a truly dialogic classroom.

This interest in privileging the student voice also inspired me to change some assignments for the course. In most of my classes, students must complete a series of short ‘reflection papers’, engaging in a critical response to any aspect of material in the previous week. These papers always carried a small number of points determined by the student’s ability to demonstrate thoughtful and original commentary. For this class, I discontinued the notion of grading the paper and instead granted points for completion, in the hopes of encouraging students to feel more comfortable sharing personal experiences or articulating controversial positions. Thus, their ideas would become the focal point of the papers.

Finally, I needed to problematize the assumption that our intellectual goals are intrinsically correct. My interest in hip-hop studies stems partly from a desire to assist students in critically examining the ways in which a form of internal colonialism has occurred within the culture, as capitalist forces have conspired to successfully market pathological images of Black men and women. I contended that if those students consuming the steady diet of scantily clad females and violent thugs would only recognize their complicity in promoting an anti-intellectual ethos to the younger generation, they might feel compelled to become wiser consumers.

Yet, it was important for me to examine how this framework represented the outgrowth of my intellectual and social experiences—and to be willing to concede that this perspective might not necessarily constitute the singular truth. Indeed, one could make the argument that the music is often ethnographic fiction, and besides, with the typically dysfunctional school, family and economic systems pervasive in urban America, perhaps modeling the path of popular hip-hop artist 50 Cent could function as literally the only avenue for social mobility existing for many inner-city youth. This realization prompted a greater desire to more explicitly and publicly

interrogate this aspect of my positionality for students. In the end, it was hoped that the ensuing conversation would assist us in defining a collective agenda for the class.

Classroom experiences

While I have taught for 15 years and offered this particular course many times, I felt considerable anxiety when walking in the room on the first day. I had heard that the idea of the class had generated considerable campus discussion. Indeed, while the course in previous terms was capped at 40 students, the limit had been raised to 50—and I acceded to the request of an academic adviser to allow a few more students to sign up. A packed house greeted me that morning, even though most professors report that students typically fail to show for their classes until the second week. They seemed eager for the most part, and while the majority of non-introductory courses in Sociology only enroll students who are majors, the class was populated by a significant number of students from other departments.

For the opening experience of the class, I asked students to anonymously provide written answers to three questions: ‘How do you feel about a middle-aged White male teaching this course about hip-hop?’, ‘Are there any benefits to having an “outsider” in the role of instructor?’ and ‘What suggestions do you have for him in terms of producing the most meaningful course possible?’ In addition to delivering provocative answers about positionality, the comments demonstrated that students brought considerable expectations to the classroom—with one individual remarking that ‘this course is practically the only reason I feel like being in school this semester’. To assess the general class attitudes, I perused the written comments while students formed groups to discuss the questions.

After delivering my poem and receiving a strong positive response, I explained that I considered myself a ‘critical fan’ of hip-hop. While celebrating its educational and political potential, I openly declared that I found elements of the culture to be highly disturbing. My particular standpoint is, in part, informed by my status as a latecomer to hip-hop culture. Not having grown up in urban America, I did not gain true exposure to hip-hop until working with inner-city youth a decade before in Chicago and admittedly initially internalized the dominant societal view derogating the culture. But through years of listening carefully to the music and reading about the culture—and with an urban sensibility and attitude that became part of my personality—I gained true appreciation of the culture and can be considered a relative expert in the field. However, as I mentioned, hip-hop was not one of my main agents of socialization, as is the case for many students. While I claim to identify with the culture, I would not lay claims that it serves as the primary mode for defining my identity.

This aspect of my positionality can be considered somewhat epistemologically comparable to the realities described by Collins (1990) in her discussion of Black women as ‘outsiders-within’. By participating in but not being granted complete access to dominant institutions, Black women’s experiences provide a distinctive standpoint for understanding the complex dynamics of oppression and identity

construction. A similar discussion is offered by Anzaldúa (1987, p. 102), who suggests that residing in the 'borderlands ... changes the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave ... creat[ing] a new consciousness'. Indeed, the students and myself both could be seen existing in two parallel types of borderlands encounters, with the students being able to speak meaningfully about the academy from an 'outsider-within' status while I perhaps could offer innovative perspectives about hip-hop culture from my position.

The impact of this framing could be seen in a meeting with one student during office hours a few weeks later. During a thoughtful conversation about 'the code of the streets', I referenced Anderson's (2000) classic book on the subject to the student, establishing the author as an expert based on his thorough ethnographic work. After perusing the text for a few moments, Brent acknowledged Anderson's contributions, but still questioned his relative authority on the subject: 'How can someone who doesn't have to *live* by the code of the streets really understand the code of the streets?' That comment served as the impetus for a vigorous subsequent classroom debate that helped students (and me) to more fully interrogate the relationship between positionality and epistemology.

After that first class session, I rushed to my office to more carefully examine their written ideas. In response to the question about the issue of a 'White middle-aged guy teaching hip-hop', students almost unanimously felt that an individual from this background could be successful. However, several students expressed the need to ensure that the professor has adequate understanding of the subject matter, a concern that most likely would not be presented or debated in other classes:

Does he know what he is talking about? If he does, I hope that he is prepared to be challenged. Overall, I feel that as long as the White guy is knowledgeable, then it doesn't matter what his race.

I think it should be a very interesting experience. I really want to know what he knows that I don't.

I have no problem with it, especially if he is very knowledgeable about hip-hop.

Furthermore, some of the comments indicated a concomitant need to evaluate the professor's passion and ability to connect with the students and their perspective. To truly 'know' hip-hop, therefore, requires more than cognitive competence, but also sufficient personal and cultural appreciation:

The concept of a White middle-aged guy teaching hip-hop sounds crazy and far-fetched, but I believe it's possible if the instructor has a reasonable and realistic grasp of hip-hop and the role it plays in young Black society.

I feel that if you know enough about a subject and really feel strong about it, then I feel you can teach it.

I think you've met people in the hip-hop industry and listen to their music. Don't know if you *understand* it [emphasis mine].

As a result, a few students suggested that the experience established the classroom as a site for reciprocal learning and closer student-professor bonds:

The teacher can teach and also learn from the class.
Teach this course with an open mind.
The teachers needs to be around ... and get to know the students.

Several students also provided comments about the need for the instructor to 'stay yourself', highlighting the centrality of authentic performance and establishing the context for genuine learning about one another's perspectives and positionality.

Indeed, my reputation as someone interested in hip-hop culture and the connection built with students from previous classes may have allayed some plausible concerns about an individual from this background being capable of teaching this class. Thus, the notion of positionality still factors heavily into student interpretation, albeit a broader view that incorporates an instructor's personal style and background:

I think that if I didn't know the person, I would think he must be crazy. I don't have a problem with [the author] teaching [the course] because I know that he knows more about it than I do.

Honestly, if I did not know who the professor was and these were the characteristics that I did know, I would probably hesitate. However, I am a very optimistic person.

When asked about potential advantages, the majority of responses focused on discovering new viewpoints about hip-hop, especially through gaining insight into the views that presumed 'outsiders' hold towards the culture:

The advantage is that we get outside perceptions ... from an individual who doesn't necessarily 'know' hip-hop or thought to not know hip-hop.

He has an outsider's view of the usual African-American view of hip-hop. Therefore, he can challenge us as African-Americans to why we feel so strongly about hip-hop.

We may see things from a different point of view. This sort of breaks the boundary line of hip-hop being a 'Black' thing.

While the questions encouraged students to concretely examine the notion of positionality, I was also moved to more carefully consider additional elements related to my performance as the professor. Certainly, it was critical for me to demonstrate competence, but the underlying theme of 'understanding' to me represented not just 'technical knowledge' but also 'personal knowledge' of their life experiences, the very factors that led many students to embrace hip-hop culture so strongly. I have always privileged the building of relationships in the classroom, believing that learning is indeed probably more due to affective than cognitive factors (Greenfield, 2005). Yet, the success of this class seemed to be even more linked to the personal dimension, and I needed to make my own life available to students to encourage more openness as well as to ground information in reality. hooks (1994, p. 21) similarly articulates the importance of educators modeling this behavior for students:

I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share ... It is often helpful if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material.

Thus, stories about a variety of encounters in urban America that I never previously had shared with students ended up becoming prominent features of the class. For example, I talked about a challenge posed to me when beginning work in an inner-city neighborhood. Standing next to me at the corner store, one young man announced to his friend, 'You know, we haven't beaten and robbed a White man in a while'. I knew the threat was not literal—they just wanted to see if I would be easily intimidated or instead be able to demonstrate the heart needed to survive and receive credibility on the streets. Despite initial discomfort, I manifested my 'cool pose' and moved smoothly through the encounter, ultimately passing the street test.

Reflecting the hip-hop mantra of 'keepin' it real', I offered the anecdote to present more of my authentic self in class. Drawing directly from my positionality, I felt compelled to offer these stories as testimony—not only to show my awareness, but more importantly, to encourage students to take risks in sharing with me so that I could truly 'understand'. But this example also yielded concrete academic gains, as we were able to examine the men's behavior as a reflection of cultural capital and the notion of in-group/out-group thinking. Later in the term, I referenced the situation when exploring the emotional factors that contribute to many urban youth feeling trapped in their communities and avoiding escape routes such as matriculating in college.

With the ethos of performative self-expression permeating the culture and their interests in participation as revealed in the written comments, I also resolved to provide students with an opportunity to share their talents and celebrate the collective gifts in the room. Thus, I created 'Throwdown Thursdays', setting aside the final 20 minutes of class each week for a student-directed experience. Essentially, the class could utilize the time however it wished, from students reciting their own rhymes to debating particular topics of importance to discussing issues from their own personal lives. The most powerful experience took place when a particularly shy young woman asked to perform an original composition and proceeded to deliver an incredibly beautiful and moving song—prompting a lengthy standing ovation from the entire class that heightened the student's confidence and enhanced class bonds. It would be safe to assume that this kind of spirited and emotionally meaningful encounter probably had never previously occurred in many of the students' school careers.

With hip-hop culture encouraging participants to manifest autonomy, this level of ownership of the class allowed for a greater sense of empowerment. I argue that, by feeling respected and free to be themselves, students appreciate the fact that they are not being forced to accommodate completely in their academic endeavors. This willingness for mutual compromise increases the likelihood of students putting forth greater effort throughout the course and creates a closer classroom environment. Yet these personal bonds are not merely 'nice' entities, but as Meier (2002, p. 63) suggests, valuable factors in encouraging true critical thinking: 'Caring is as much cognitive as it is affective. The capacity to see the world as others might is central to unsentimental compassion and at the root of both intellectual skepticism and empathy'. Again, it was precisely my own recognition of positionality that prompted a desire to solicit viewpoints that led to these important developments.

At the close of the first week, I asked students for written feedback about the class. While some students offered valuable suggestions about topics or expressed initial confusion about the link between hip-hop and urban sociology, the comments generally provided support for the course focus and the pedagogical approach. As one student wrote, 'For once I get to learn about something I love'. A few remarks centered on the issue of positionality, and the need to properly interrogate the dominant racial essentialism surrounding the culture:

So far you made us see that we don't know [as] much about hip-hop as we thought. We just assumed that because we're 'Black' that we knew what hip-hop was. Keep teachin' and do your thing.

One student subsequently utilized his reaction paper to more formally interrogate his ideas about race, expressing that he initially doubted that a White individual could meaningfully teach this kind of course. Brian proceeded to offer an intriguing original viewpoint that in some ways continued to operate under an essentialist framing:

In class, I thought that perhaps I wouldn't be able to learn as much from a White man. But after listening to his insights and awareness of the culture, this so-called White man is to me actually better described as a 'Clear' man, as he does not act like I presume a typical White man to act.

Indeed, based on factors such as my knowledge of the culture and genuine street-influenced dialect, I had been seen as transcending the perceived cultural limitations of my race. This position generated some anxiety for me, as I still recognized the existence of White privilege and how my Jewish cultural identity most likely influenced aspects of my connection to the struggle against injustice. Drawing intellectual energy from the paper, I invited a classroom conversation around the question of 'acting White' and 'acting Black' that challenged students' stereotypical perceptions and generated new models for understanding their own racial identity markers.

As a result, during collaborative examination of lyrics in the classroom, I encouraged every participant—including myself—to consider how their positionality might shape these divergent interpretations. Indeed, our ears often hear and feel the music differently than young people, and one could plausibly claim that the music does not always impact them in the manner in which we presume. Early in the term, I played a recording of Nas's (1999) acclaimed song, 'If I Ruled the World' (Jones, 1996). While offering several pro-social elements of an ideal society in which parents were 'more conscious of the way we raise our daughters', Nas also provides a steady diet of narcissistic fantasies such as 'smoking weed with no cops harassing', 'owning stuff' and having 'every girl I meet go downtown'. I asked students to look beyond the notion of an individual envisioning his perfect world and to investigate how the presentation perhaps spoke to larger issues and realities found in urban America; the subtext was a statement about the potential confusion or hypocrisy contained within the message.

One student from New York City stated how he felt personally connected with Nas's dream that reflected the wishes of marginalized people to be free to live as they please. Despite years of working in inner-city communities and a consciousness of

these issues, I cannot fully appreciate the psychic impact produced by the emotional constraints of living in poverty. He proceeded to challenge my interpretation of Nas's message as duplicitous by claiming that the images presented in the song could simply be fantasies—and that all of us have private desires that perhaps would not represent our best spiritual selves. Again, this startling revelation of the power of my positionality—and the dominant ideologies that in some ways were being obscured in discussions of assumed obvious truths—provided a meaningful educational moment for the students and for me. To successfully teach popular culture mandates that one be open to recognizing one's limitations and to being taught by students.

A turning point

During the third week of the class, I detected that a significant number of students had not been consistently completing the assigned readings. Indeed, as other popular studies professors have similarly stated to me, a segment of the class typically comes to believe that their life experiences within the culture under study provides them superior knowledge when compared to scholarly discourse; thus, completing readings or assignments is sometimes interpreted as yet another exercise in academic co-optation. While at first using encouraging words, I quickly became frustrated and allowed these emotions to surface on several occasions. When I felt that the situation had become problematic, I asked students to pair up so that they discuss any feelings or concerns they had about the class. In order to obtain honest commentary, I requested that students write their ideas on the board anonymously while I removed myself from the room for five minutes. This dramatic performative act of leaving our community signaled both a potential state of crisis as well as hopefully my deep interest in their feedback.

As I was later informed, following a few moments of awkward silence, the students proceeded to engage in a lively discussion and placed a number of ideas on the board. When I attempted to return, the students demanded more time. I reappeared a few minutes later to find a chalkboard covered with thoughts ranging from praise for aspects of the experience to elements of concern. I read the words out loud, and forcing myself to remain calm and truly listen to my students, requested further clarification regarding some statements. For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on one particular comment that elicited tremendous reaction from students and a vigorous and meaningful subsequent conversation.

The question 'Why are you so emotional?' seemed to stand out both by its huge presence on the board but also its bold power. Indeed, these words could either be read as an indictment of my style/personality or as a sincere inquiry to better understand the factors driving my approach. Again, while routinely inviting public feedback from students, I have never faced potentially such a strong questioning of my very being in the classroom. Even uttering the words out loud seemed to generate some anxiety among students—some of whom appeared to be worried for me. I paused and again solicited their additional feedback. One student mentioned that my frustration level had been somewhat disconcerting to him, as it had changed the previously

upbeat mood in the class. His comment actually served as a precipitating force in allowing some students to offer some other concerns such as the reading load. Again, I worked hard to avoid responding verbally or non-verbally, ensuring that students felt safe to share and validated for their point of view.

However, after about five minutes of fervent discussion, a 25-year-old sociology major and football player who was well respected on campus raised his hand. In contrast to his usually upbeat energy, Marcus shook his head and soberly offered a profound statement:

I'm so embarrassed right now. Here we are Black students, and we have a chance to learn about our culture. And there's a White man who knows more about us than we do and cares about us and wants to teach it. Yet, we're complaining. I'm so embarrassed.

After a moment of reflective silence, a few students engaged the class in a provocative conversation about the notion of being taught by a White professor. While not overtly bothered by the situation, they did explain how it felt different for them—and others chimed in to examine how these dynamics allowed us to learn from one another and plausibly gain new insights.

Waiting for an appropriate moment, I addressed their concerns carefully and thoroughly. First, I apologized to the class for losing my cool during the previous few classes and agreed to monitor these reactions. But I then boldly asserted that I would not apologize or feel any shame for being emotional, for being me or for being passionate about their lives, the subject and the educational process. A significant number of students burst into applause for the statement.

This moment seemed to become a defining one for the class, with the messy and noisy process of making ourselves fully present and vulnerable generating a greater sense of understanding of and commitment to one another. I discovered that teaching popular culture had produced within me heightened expectations and emotions, and that I owed it to my students to provide more detail about my own feelings regarding the teaching of this course. Again, while appreciating how such experiences could emerge in any class, I suggest that the particular context of popular culture opens up greater possibilities for holistic, reciprocal learning.

Concluding thoughts

The continued increase in offerings of popular culture studies in higher education attests to the desire among scholars and students to explore matters of social relevance and personal importance. By encouraging students to examine their celebrated icons and images, faculty members have a unique opportunity to develop critical thinking skills, enhance understanding of course content and strengthen affective ties to educational institutions. Yet, at the same time, as the discussion here suggests, this work must be undertaken with considerable care and planning. Students who feel that 'outsiders' do not appreciate their culture will likely resent and rebel against these efforts. Thus, educators considering implementation of popular culture in their courses need to be cognizant of how their experiences and

positionality shape their reactions and responses to the culture as well as their pedagogical approach.

With regards to hip-hop, I consistently face opposition from older educators who remain convinced that not only does the culture lack academic legitimacy, but also that its inclusion in the classroom constitutes capitulation to destructive social forces and a degrading of the sacred curriculum. With the 'gangsta rap' genre as their only frame of reference, these individuals are unaware of the more 'positive' aspects of the culture and also fail to appreciate the considerable value of helping students become critical consumers of the worlds in which they inhabit. Continuously telling them that their music is pathological—and that, by inference, so are they—is counterproductive in the mission of promoting discourse and understanding. Educators who utilize a collaborative style that grants legitimacy and authority to the student perspective not only enhance student motivation and learning, but also can experience their own tremendous intellectual growth opportunities.

As Buckingham (1998) suggests, teaching popular culture subverts dominant paradigms by positioning students as emerging 'experts', and thus, successful implementation requires educators to be open to learning from and with their students. Through constructing collaborative classrooms where participants can bring their complete selves into the process of exploring issues of personal interest to them, teachers and students can realize the full potential of the educational enterprise. In the end, these experiences can transform the pedagogical practices and philosophical mindset of educators—and when this kind of progressive approach insinuates itself into the fabric of institutional life, it can lead to a broader revolution of curricular inclusion and conscious education.

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