

## **Hip hop and social education: Insights of EMMY®-award winning students and their teacher**

Julie Anne Taylor<sup>a</sup> & Edward (Amani) Conley<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Education  
University of Michigan-Dearborn  
19000 Hubbard Drive  
Dearborn, Michigan 48126  
(734) 751-7689*

<sup>b</sup>*DuSable Museum of African American History  
740 E. 56<sup>th</sup> Place  
Chicago, Illinois 60637  
(773) 947-0600, ext. 255*

**Abstract:** *This article explores the impact of hip-hop music video production in the social studies. The authors interviewed three high school students, who were recipients of an EMMY® award, and their teacher in Detroit, Michigan. The findings indicate that, in addition to having supported the expression of students' views on social issues, music video production engaged students while advancing 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills. The students' shaping of narratives through the creation and release of multi-media was meaningful and empowering.*

**Keywords:** *Hip Hop, social studies education, music video production*

---

With a global reach, hip hop is both a movement and culture (Price, 2006; Fernandes, 2015; Terkourafi, 2010). Through commentary, many hip-hop artists seek to raise awareness of social and political issues (Price, 2006; Travis, 2016). Originating in the Bronx, a borough of New York, in the late 1960s and 1970s (Price, 2006; Travis, 2016; Deis, 2015), hip hop has essential components: emceeing, graffiti art and writing, b-boys/b-girls (breakdancing), and DJing (Price, 2006; Orejuela, 2015; Au, 2005). In the social studies, the integration of hip hop affords high school students the opportunity to manifest their creativity while engaging in critical thinking and expression.

In 2016, three high school students from Detroit, Deon Butler, Drake Glover, and Kamar Graves, received the EMMY® for best high school music video from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in Michigan. Their video, *Peace*, explores violence and police brutality while calling for peace. In their original lyrics, Butler and Graves wrote about blue-on-black, black-on-black, and black-on-blue conflicts. When interviewed for this article, the students said that the many incidents of police brutality in the news had led them to write the song in 2015. In addition to receiving an EMMY® for *Peace*, when the music video began to circulate in Detroit, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and the Detroit Police Department invited the students to give workshops to middle school students. Local radio stations interviewed the young men, and *Peace* was posted on the website of the Detroit Public Schools. Their social studies teacher at the Douglass Academy for Young Men, Quan Neloms, said, "All of it comes from (their) making something that is purposeful, important, and pertinent to what's going on."

This article is theoretically grounded in deeper learning, a form of constructivism that emphasizes self-direction, critical thinking, and collaboration (Bellanca, 2015). In deeper learning, students cultivate diverse talents while producing creative products (Zhao, 2015). Culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Gay, 2010) and Freirean theory on the cultivation of critical consciousness are also integral to the framework of this article. Paulo Freire (1970/2012, p. 104) wrote, "...appropriate for the methodology of thematic investigation and for problem-posing education is this effort to present significant dimensions of an individual's contextual reality, the analysis of which will make it possible for him to recognize the interaction of the various components... When carried out with a methodology of conscientização, the investigation... introduces or begins to introduce women and men to a critical form of thinking about their world."

### **The school and its history of hip hop music video production**

The Douglass Academy for Young Men is a public, all-boys school in the city of Detroit. The majority of its 166 students are eligible for United States' National School Lunch Program. During the 2015-2016

academic year, over 98% of the students were African American. Music video production began in 2009 when Neloms established the Lyricist Society, an afterschool program. Additional opportunities to create music videos were offered by Neloms when he started teaching an elective course, Digital Storytelling, in 2014. “Our students are enamored with music...for them to be able to make their own music and tell their own stories in their own words was important,” Neloms explained.

In the absence of a studio, the students at the Douglass Academy filmed music videos with cellular phones, and they edited the footage with iMovie software. With local DJs, Neloms coordinated the acquisition of original beats. The students had the option of selecting from a library of beats during the songwriting process. When the students’ music was ready for mixing and mastering, Neloms arranged for sound engineers to bring portable equipment to campus. Neloms’ long-term goal is to establish a permanent, professional studio at the Douglass Academy to facilitate the making of music videos, documentaries, and public service announcements. Hip-hop music video production engages students in the 4Cs for learning and innovation that were established by the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning (2015), namely critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity.

### **Research objectives and methods**

In this IRB-approved study, the authors had essential research questions: a) *What impact did the creation of a hip-hop music video have on the students?*; b) *What were the students’ objectives in making the Peace video?*; c) *How did the students’ view the community’s response to Peace, including their receipt of the EMMY®?*; and d) *From Neloms’ perspective, what were the educational benefits of hip-hop music video production?*

With the consent of the principal, two separate semi-structured interviews of the students and their teacher were held in May of 2016 at the school. Semi-structured interviews offer latitude to researchers by allowing follow-up questions and the exploration of topics that may spontaneously arise (Adams, 2010). The digitally recorded interviews were transcribed and read repeatedly. In the findings section of this article are the researchers’ inferences as well as comments by the students and their teacher. The participants agreed to the publication of their names and images.

### **The making of *Peace***

“There was a lot of killing, and black people were all over the news. That was just the only thing that we wanted to really talk about,” explained Glover, when asked why the students had created the music video, *Peace*. “I knew what was happening. I knew how to say what was happening in a million ways...What influenced me was the killing. That influenced me,” said Butler. Deeply moved by what they had read and seen, the two young men collaborated on the writing of the lyrics to *Peace*. The following year, they both performed as the lead rappers in the video. Graves managed the production, including the recruitment of students, who attended the school, to be extras. Filmed during lunch hours with an iPhone 6, many students participated by holding handmade signs and by chanting the refrain, “Peace.” To make the video more interesting, Graves filmed in three different locations at the school. The students carefully edited the video with iMovie. With regard to music video production, Graves advised, “You have to have the vision, and then shoot your video.”



Figure 1. Drake Glover in the music video, *Peace*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFndnkt1wMw>

### Findings and discussion

Butler, Glover, and Graves joined the Lyricist Society because they valued music, and they viewed music videos as a means to convey their ideas and views to a wide audience. “I wasn’t just rapping. It wasn’t just rap...It was an issue that needed to be addressed. And I feel like I addressed it,” said Butler during the interview. “You’re speaking on a topic that actually matters. It makes you feel like you have an important voice,” explained Glover. When asked whether or not the voices of high school students were heard to the extent that they should be by the public, all three young men agreed that they were not. “I think that when older people look at us, they don’t think that we would have a mind for what’s really going on. They probably think that we’re not tuned into the outside world. A lot of kids do have a voice, but it’s not heard,” explained Glover.

*Peace* begins with a quotation by Martin Luther King, Jr. about non-violence. In 1968, the day before his assassination, King told an audience at the Mason Temple in Memphis, “It is no longer a choice between violence and non-violence in this world. It is non-violence or non-existence.” King’s words, “Non-violence or non-existence,” reappear throughout the video on the students’ signs. In their rap, Butler and Glover evoke the name of Freddie Gray, who died while in police custody in April of 2015. They offer advice on interactions with the police. In the complex song, they lament killings within the African American community, and they acknowledge the pain of African American mothers. They call for the keeping of the peace. Below are excerpts from *Peace*:

Freddie Gray gone today  
Anyone could be next

Keep your hands up high  
And ask for your lawyer  
So you can go home safe  
To your son and your daughter.

All I see is murder  
What’s with all the violence?  
We killing our own brothers.

Murder rate going up week after week  
Killing on street after street  
Instead of killing police,

can we just keep the peace?

Should I drop? Should I stop?  
The quickest way to get dropped by a cop.

Every time I see the news, it's another brother shot.  
Yeah, it's another brother got.  
Yeah, shout out to my brothers who died.

Black mothers all around here crying... Let's keep the peace.  
Can we just keep the peace?

According to Neloms, most of the students, who create music videos, engage in social or political commentary, which is part of the hip hop tradition (Gosa & Fields, 2012; Seidel, 2011; Travis, 2016; Deis, 2015). The cultural values of hip hop include artistry, expression, protest, empowerment, and community improvement (Travis, 2016). In *The healing power of hip hop*, Raphael Travis, Jr. (2016) contrasts hip-hop culture with commercialized hip hop music that glorifies violence, drugs, and materialism. Travis calls for the types of critical dialogues that Neloms facilitates with his students. Within the Lyricist Society, students analyze, discuss, and share music videos in a discursive space.

Music is a communicative medium that fosters social interaction and relationships (Cross, 2012; Turino, 2008). In diverse classrooms, the integration of hip hop may lead to increased cross-cultural understandings by teachers and students. As an expressive practice, music conveys cultural knowledge, transfers meanings, and fosters social solidarity (Turino, 2008; Elliott & Silverman, 2015). Throughout the world, music has been used in political movements (Turino, 2008; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). Hip hop, like other styles of music, has the potential to raise awareness or consciousness (MacDonald, 2012). According to Freire, heightened awareness leads to self-efficacy, agency within social contexts, and authentic democracy (Freire, 1974/2007).

Because music impacts students cognitively and emotionally (Finnegan, 2010; Levitin, 2006; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998), its use in educational contexts is impactful. Neloms has observed that many of his students' songs are personal and introspective. He encourages self-expression and autonomy. "Self-direction is a natural step in teaching. You are directive at first because they are just learning. Once they get the skills, you want them to run with it," stated Neloms during his interview.

Neloms' basic rules for music video production are a) The students must write songs about substantive topics, and b) No profanity may be used. Having autonomy is motivational, according to the students. "When it's you, you want to be good. When it's all on you, you're going to do the work," said Glover.

The study of music has the potential to advance students' knowledge of culture, society, and history (Pellegrino & Lee, 2012; White & McCormack, 2006; Michener, 1937). In their essay, "Is hip-hop education another hustle?," Travis Gosa and Tristan Fields concluded that the hip-hop movement had generated a "vibrant ecosphere" in education (Gosa & Fields, 2012, p. 195). As students read lyrics while listening to music, they engage in decoding (Pellegrino & Lee, 2012). In writing and performing songs, students build vocabulary, and they gain appreciation of artful expressions of the spoken word. As they make music videos, they acquire technological skills. Hip-hop music video production supports multi-literacies.

During the interview, the students described Neloms as a caring and creative educator who had made history and current events relevant to their lives. They expressed appreciation for his integration of multi-media and his cultural responsiveness. "(The Lyricist Society) gave me something to look forward to at school. When I knew that I had a Lyricist Society meeting that day, I'd make sure that I came to school, and I had everything ready. I made sure that I didn't get in trouble because I didn't want to miss recording, or be out of school and miss Lyricist Society meetings," said Glover.



Figure 2. Drake Glover, QuanNeloms, and Kamar Graves at the EMMY® awards. Not pictured: Deon Butler. Photograph courtesy of Bruce Johnson.

At the heart of the *College, career, and civic life (C3) framework for social studies state standards* (2013) is an inquiry arc that calls for communication and informed action by students. To engage his students in real-world fora, Neloms often enters their work in local, state, and/or national competitions. Recognizing its high quality, Neloms posted *Peace* on Lyricist Society website, and he submitted the video to the National Academy of Television Arts & Science. Of the receipt of the EMMY®, Neloms said, “I was very proud of the boys. They came suited up, and when they got on stage, you could just see it in them. They handled themselves so elegantly. They actually had a chance to speak – to give an acceptance speech. Just to see the pride on their faces...It made me want to create more experiences like that for other students...Being in control and creating their own media empowers them. They are changing the narrative singlehandedly.”



Figure 3. Kamar Graves and Drake Glover hold the EMMY® for music video production. Not pictured: Deon Butler. Photograph courtesy of QuanNeloms.



When asked how they felt about the publication and circulation of their work on the Internet, Butler and Glover spoke about having a voice and making an impact. “It feels good to know that our voices are being heard,” said Glover. Graves was intrigued by the prospect of the Internet’s serving as a repository of their work. He commented, “I can always click on the website, even when I am 20 years older than I am now.”

The students were appreciative of and honored by their receipt of the EMMY®. Butler was unable to attend the awards ceremony, so Glover and Graves described their initial reactions of astonishment. “I just didn’t think it was for real...At the ceremony, when they called my name, I was just shocked, and I was stunned. It was a blessing to win,” said Glover. “I was nervous. There was drum rolling...Next thing I remember, Drake was giving handshakes to the judges. I was so excited,” explained Graves. All three young men think that hip-hop video production should spread beyond the walls of the Douglass Academy to other schools.

### **Resources for integrating hip hop**

To teachers considering the integration of hip hop, Neloms recommends artists such as Lauryn Hill, TalibKweli, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Mahogany Jones, Common, Lupe Fiasco, Karega Bailey, Nas, Tupac, and MosDef. Rich instructional resources may be found online. The Hip-Hop Education Center has created a timeline of hip-hop history and culture with embedded media: <http://www.hiphopeducation.org/interactive-timeline.html>. The center is currently developing a curricula. The Hip-Hop Educational Literacy Program has created interdisciplinary resources that integrate hip-hop lyrics on social topics: <http://www.edlyrics.com/lessonplan>. On the Flocabulary site are rap videos on various topics in United States history, world history, civics, and geography: <https://www.flocabulary.com/>. Additional resources include lesson plans, lyrics, activities, and quizzes. Teri Tibbett’s (2004) book, *Listen to learn: Using American music to teach language arts and social studies*, has instructional materials on rap music. Partnering with schools, Hip Hop 4 Life offers youth empowerment programs, such as Shades of Beauty and Man UP!: <http://hiphop4lifeinc.org/engaged/about/>.

### **Conclusion**

The insights of three EMMY®-award winning students and their high school social studies teacher suggest that hip-hop music video production is a promising educational pursuit. In the process of writing songs and creating videos, students contemplate critical social issues. They demonstrate originality, artistry, and technological finesse. Through the publication of their music, the students’ views are communicated in real-world contexts. Hip-hop music video production engages students in deeper learning while advancing their social education.

### **References**

- [1.] Adams, W.C. (2010). Conducting semi-structured interviews. In J.S. Wholey, H.P. Hatry & K.E. Newcomer (Eds.), *Handbook of practical program evaluation* (pp. 365-377). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- [2.] Au, Wayne. (2005). Fresh out of school: Rap music’s discursive battle with education. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 73(3), 210-220.
- [3.] Bellanca, J.A. (2015). Advancing a new agenda. In J.A. Bellanca (Ed.), *Deeper learning: Beyond 21<sup>st</sup> century skills* (pp. 1-18). Bloomington: Solution Tree Press.
- [4.] Cross, I. Music and biocultural evolution. In M. Clayton, T. Herbert & R. Middleton (Eds.), *The cultural study of music* (pp. 17-27). New York: Routledge.
- [5.] Butler, D., & Glover, D. (2015). *Peace*. [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFndnkt1wMw>.
- [6.] Deis, C. (2015). Hip-hop and politics. In J.A. Williams (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to hip-hop* (pp. 192-205). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7.] Elliott, D.J., & Silverman, M. (2015). *Music matters* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [8.] Eyerman, R., & Jamison, A. (1998). *Music and social movements: Mobilizing traditions in the twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [9.] Fernandes, S. (2015). “Obama Nation”: *Hip hop and global protest*. In T.L. Gosa & E. Nielson (Eds.), *The hip hop & Obama reader* (pp. 88-93). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [10.] Finnegan, R. Music, experience, and the anthropology of emotion. In M. Clayton, T. Herbert & R. Middleton (Eds.), *The cultural study of music* (pp. 353-363). New York: Routledge.
- [11.] Freire, P. (2012). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Bloomsbury. (Original work published 1970)

- [12.] Freire, P. (2007). *Education for critical consciousness*. London: Continuum. (Original work published 1974)
- [13.] Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- [14.] Gosa, T. L., & Fields, T.G. (2012). Is hip-hop education another hustle? In *Hip-hop(e): The cultural practice and critical pedagogy of international hip-hop* (pp. 195-210). New York: Peter Lang.
- [15.] Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- [16.] Levitin, D.J. (2006). *This is your brain on music: The science of a human obsession*. New York: Dutton.
- [17.] MacDonald, M.B. (2012). Hip-hop citizens. In B.J. Porfilio & M.J. Viola (Eds.), *Hip-hop(e): The cultural practice and critical pedagogy of international hip-hop* (pp. 95-109). New York: Peter Lang.
- [18.] Michener, J.A. (1937). Music and the social studies. *The Social Studies*, 28(1), 28-30.
- [19.] National Council for the Social Studies. (2013). *The college, career, and civic life (C3) framework for social studies state standards*. Silver Spring: NCSS. Retrieved from <http://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/c3/C3-Framework-for-Social-Studies.pdf>.
- [20.] Orejuela, F. (2015). *Rap and hip hop culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [21.] Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning (2015). *Framework for 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning*. Washington, D.C.: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/docs/P21\\_framework\\_0116.pdf](http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/docs/P21_framework_0116.pdf)
- [22.] Pellegrino, A.M. & Lee, C.D. (2012). *Let the music play! Harnessing the power of music for history and social studies classrooms*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, Inc.
- [23.] Price, E.G. *Hip hop culture*. Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2006.
- [24.] Seidel, S. (2011). *Hip hop genius: Remixing high school education*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- [25.] Terkourafi, M. (Ed.). (2010). *The languages of global hip hop*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- [26.] Tibbett, T. (2004). *Listen to learn: Using American music to teach language arts and social studies*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- [27.] Travis, R. (2016). *The healing power of hip hop*. Santa Barbara: Praeger.
- [28.] Turino, T. (2008). *Music as social life: The politics of participation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [29.] White, C., & McCormack, S. (2006). The message in the music: Popular culture and teaching in social studies. *The Social Studies*, 97 (3), 122-127.
- [30.] Zhao, Y. (2015). Paradigm shift: Educating creative and entrepreneurial students. In J.A. Bellanca (Ed.), *Deeper learning: Beyond 21<sup>st</sup> century skills* (pp. 83-108). Bloomington: Solution Tree Press.