A Hip Hop Dialogic: Exploring Hip Hop Feminism in the College Classroom

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Introduction

The growing body of literature on Hip Hop pedagogy illustrates how dialogue can be used to engage students in discussions related to voice, identity politics, power, and social justice (Uca et al., 2022). Hip Hop is a topic that is not only culturally relevant (Buffington & Day, 2018; Cherfas et al., 2021) to Gen Z students, like those who comprise our college classrooms, but is also an avenue to explore narratives about Black and Latina women’s identities found in popular culture (Gordon, 2020). Hip Hop pedagogy, informed by a Black feminist reading of these representations, reveal interesting, if not controversial conceptualizations. Thus, we wanted to create a Hip Hop feminist (Morgan, 1999) classroom experience that generated dialogic communication about issues pertinent to Black and Latina women and their positions in American society.

We eventually settled on the framework of dialogic communication. Dialogic communication may be described as “any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325). Intrinsic to this understanding is that dialogue is the foundation of authentic human relations. As such, the concept centralizes the relational and communicative features of human existence. We were specifically interested in the expression of dialogue as “a feature of ethical/moral communication” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 23). The genesis of this conceptualization of dialogic communication is multidisciplinary but is most often associated with the ideas of theologian Martin Buber. Buber (2003) conceived of dialogue as an effort grounded in mutuality, suggesting that “dialogue involve[d] an effort to recognize the value of the other—to see him/her as an end and not merely as a means to achieving a desired goal” (p. 220). Buber further suggested that individuals should view others not as objects—the “I You,” but as equals—the “I Thou” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 22). The concepts of the “I It” (or “I You”) and “I Thou,” connote Buber’s emphasis on dialogue as grounded in “reciprocity, mutuality, involvement, and openness” (p. 22). In other words:

Buber viewed communication as a way to appreciate the other person’s views as one’s own. He suggested that humans engage in conversations to gain an understanding of the other. For Buber, dialogue is a process that requires commitment and concentration from both parties, and people involved share a relationship of respect and openness with each other. (Arslan, 2019, p. 86)

This framework guided the class activity discussed in this paper. The aim of the activity was to encourage critical dialogue among our students as informed by perspective taking, respect, and openness regarding the representations of Black and Latina women’s identities in Hip Hop culture.
(Theoretical) Rationale

Hip Hop feminism is based on the founding elements of Hip Hop culture which are, DJing, MCing, graffiti art, and breaking. Also recognized as essential to the culture are street fashion, beatboxing, street knowledge, language, and entrepreneurialism (Bridges, 2011; Buffington & Day, 2018). We first see the term “Hip Hop feminism” from Joan Morgan (1999), who theorizes the representations of Black women and girls in Hip Hop culture as “empowering and problematic” (p. 59). Morgan’s framework filters Black women’s embodiment in hip hop through the Black and White dichotomy of sexism and feminism” (Davis & Kenney, 2020, p. 75), arguing that “Hip Hop feminism grants us [Black women] permission to exist in multiplicities as artists, citizens, activists, scholars, and Black women that resist injustice” (Davis & Kenney, 2020, p. 72).

A Hip Hop feminist pedagogy helps students to: (1) understand the ways systems of oppression exist in society and work against women and people of color; (2) explore how Black and Latina women’s bodies are implicated at the intersections of race, class, and gender oppression; (3) engage in open and honest discussions about ways to dismantle systems oppression, and how this dismantling benefits everyone; (4) recognize that social change and social justice work happens through dialogue; and (5) understand that people’s stories and cultural knowledges are not limited to individual experiences, but reflect larger social trends and perspectives (Morgan, 1999; Rose, 2008; Scott, 2021). These assumptions, which are inherent to a Hip Hop feminist pedagogical approach, are reflected in the learning objectives guiding the in-class dialogic activity. Additionally, we use Hip Hop feminist pedagogy as a cultural lens to engage students in sociological and communication discussions to help them explore topics of “inclusion, resistance, transformative possibilities, pleasure, and healing” (Horsley, 2020, p. 105).

A Hip Hop feminist classroom also engages students in critical responses to the emerging ways that women and girls are represented in lyrics, imagery, and music videos. Such a classroom invokes discussions about the sexual and racial politics inherent to Hip Hop, including the objectification, hyper-visualization and marginalization of Black and Latina women in mainstream and even Hip Hop culture. A Hip Hop feminist classroom also helps students to unpack how Black and Latina women simultaneously participate in this dynamic in ways that may be identified as empowering. A Hip Hop feminist dialogic engagement with these issues equips students to investigate circulating narratives about Black and Latina women, while encouraging them to recognize Black and Latina women’s resistance to dominant male discourses (Halliday & Payne, 2020). A number of women Hip Hop artists, such as Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B, are often mentioned by some sections of the Gen Z population as being at the vanguard of contemporary forms of feminist resistance to racist and patriarchal discourses about their communities. A Hip Hop feminist classroom, therefore, fosters dialogue through which students may explore the fluidity of Black and Latina women’s identities through the works of these artists (Horsley, 2020).
Hip Hop feminism is a personal as well as a pedagogical framework for us as Black
women scholars. It is from this vantage point that we introduce specific class activities and
assignments that seek to foster meaningful engagement with the subject of Black and Latina
Women’s racial identities. We understand that the topics therein constitute what may be deemed
a “difficult dialogue” (Landis, 2008) for students, particularly for those in predominantly White
institutions as ours. As such, we considered multiple ways we could encourage expressive and
critical conversation in the classroom which might eventually lead to transformative change,
introspection and civic action among our students.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for the in-class deliberation are as follows. Students will:
1. apply gathered information from the literature and engage in ethical argumentation on
   Black and Latina women’s bodies, gender construction, and identities
2. draw connections among ideas and demonstrate critical reasoning regarding how
   representations of Black and Latina women’s bodies can be simultaneously empowering
   and problematic in hip hop culture
3. defend a position and respond to counter arguments presented during the in-class
   deliberation
4. show respect for civil discourse regarding diverse standpoints

Explanation

The undergraduate sociology course, *Black America, Culture and Hip Hop*, is taught over
a 16-week term. The class is usually composed of predominantly white students, roughly one
third are students of color. The course is divided into three curricular units: **Unit One**: History of
Hip Hop, **Unit Two**: Hip Hop’s global reach, **Unit Three**: Cultural politics in Contemporary Hip
Hop music. Each unit builds on the prior and culminates with an assessment. The in-class
deliberation is the culminating assessment for unit three, which explores political and
controversial arguments surrounding rap music. For this unit, the students deliberated on the
topic of the representations of Black and Latina women in Hip Hop. As such, we wanted students
to discuss the duality of the depictions featured by artists’ Meg Thee Stallion and Cardi B and
presented students with two deliberation topics:

**Deliberation Topic One**: Do women rappers like Cardi B and Meg Thee Stallion reinforce
gender stereotypes about Black and Latina women, or do they represent women’s
empowerment?

**Deliberation Topic Two**: Do the depictions of Black and Latina women’s bodies in Hip Hop
reinforce Sara Baartman-like images of women otherwise known by racist terms like or
“Hottentot Venus,” the modern-day THOT (That Hoe Over There), or do Black and Latina women’s bodies represent contested spaces that “clap back” at the hypercritical, patriarchal gaze that demonizes, hypersexualizes, and marginalizes these bodies?

The deliberation issues were written on the board, and students wrote their names under the topic they wanted to explore further. Each topic had 3-4 students, and students decided among themselves which side of the issue they wanted to defend. They were also given one class period (1 hour and 15 mins) to gather research on their argument, as well as work collaboratively on the opposing arguments. Students were also required to watch the 2006 documentary *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* by director Byron Hurt, read *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* (Morgan, 1999), and read chapters five and eight in *Hip Hop Wars* (Rose, 2008). The scholarly readings and film documentary provided arguments for each side of the deliberation.

On the day of the deliberation, students were given 10 minutes to present each side of the argument, and 5-10 minutes for rebuttal. The topic was then opened up to the larger class for discussion. This offered the opportunity for students to rebut or agree with the points shared. Some students also shared their own personal stories and feminist standpoints on the issue.

**Debriefing**

The academic engagement of students, especially as it relates to discussing difficult topics, is a well-documented concern among faculty members, particularly women of color, in higher education (Landis, 2008; Uca et al., 2022). Instructors who are concerned about student engagement with issues concerning race, gender, and sexuality often struggle to find pedagogical tools that foster meaningful and productive dialogue in the classroom (Landis, 2008). Such issues are deeply connected to civic engagement and are of increasing importance to many institutions of higher learning.

Exploring Hip Hop feminism through deliberation topics can foster civic engagement among students as it involves the movement of individuals and organizations “away from disinterest, distraction, ignorance, and apathy and towards education, understanding, motivation, and action” (Obar et al., 2012, p. 2). As direct participants in civic engagement, students, faculty and staff bring their knowledge, skills, and resources to bear on issues affecting various communities (Bowen et al., 2017). Therefore, deliberation topics like Black and Latina women in Hip Hop move students from simply reading about a topic to publicly arguing against or defending an issue.

Further, using a Hip Hop feminist pedagogy fosters a culturally relevant teaching approach in the classroom. For instance, our in-class deliberations took on a similar practice known in Hip Hop called cyphers. Cyphers, which we argue is a form of signifying dialogue (Gates, 1989), are practices where emcees “take turns freestyling, battling, and/or exchange stories and rhymes” (Scott, 2021, p. 108). Cyphers can be emotionally charged as individuals
showcase their skill sets as a rap artist, often in tense fashion. When witnessing a Hip Hop battle, the unstructured space can be insulting, boastful, and provocative. The most skilled rappers thrive and leave triumphant in these settings. The film 8 Mile (Hanson, 2002) provides examples of Eminem in these scenarios.

In the classroom setting, the cypher can take on an energy of challenge and battle, particularly when students are asked to discuss a politically charged topic as it relates to Black and Latina women’s bodies, gender construction, and the formation of identities. However, this is a necessary tension and an opportunity for self-reflexivity that students can write about in a post activity reflective journal.

It is also important to build a classroom environment of open and critical dialogue leading up to the deliberations. For instance, group projects and in-class presentations occur throughout the first 12 weeks of the semester to help students get acclimated to engaging in group work and presenting in class. The preceding weeks help to inform students of the cultural practices within Hip Hop and the crafty ways rappers use lyrics, rhyme, and beats in signifying dialogue to discuss difficult topics. Therefore, by week 12, it comes as no surprise for students to engage in a Hip Hop dialogic that is grounded in societal critique and political activism.

We understand, however, that there are students who experience extreme anxiety when presenting publicly, and particularly on topics that are deeply controversial. We value all students as contributing members of the classroom community and offered students the space to participate in ways that they found most comfortable. In such cases where students expressed discomfort, they are exempted from presenting in the deliberation, but were still required to contribute to the group by reading the literature, gathering information, and identifying arguments for the deliberation topic.

Assessment

The use of deliberation topics engages students in a higher Bloom's Taxonomy of learning. The rubric below assesses students on critical reasoning, ethical argumentation, and organization and preparation using a 10-point scale. The rubric helps the instructors assess the degree to which learning outcomes were met by the assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Did not meet expectations 0-3</th>
<th>Moderate 4-7</th>
<th>Proficient 8-10</th>
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### Critical Reasoning

| Students presented one argument relevant to their issue and do not cite literature sources | Students presented two arguments and counter arguments relevant to their issue and cited one scholarly feminist readings and cited author’s names | Students presented three-four arguments and counter arguments relevant to their issue and cited two - three scholarly feminist readings and cited authors’ names |

### Ethical Argumentation

| Students’ standpoints showed little respect for diverse perspectives | Student standpoints reflect some degree of respect for diverse perspectives | Student standpoints reflect critical self awareness and respect for alternative argumentation and perspectives |

### Organization and Preparation

| Arguments were not well thought out nor organized | Some arguments were well thought out and organized | Arguments were well thought out and organized |

Individual self-reflection:
Each student wrote a 3-4-page reflection paper that highlighted their individual experience participating in the deliberative dialogue as well as their thoughts about the issues explored in the activity. The assessment rubric for the individual reflection was based on a five-point criteria using the rating scale of fails to meet expectations, needs improvement, and meets expectations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Fails to Meet Expectations 0-1</th>
<th>Needs Improvement 2-3</th>
<th>Meets Expectations 4-5</th>
<th>Your Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clearly organized introduction, body, and conclusion</td>
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The in-class deliberation is just one activity instructors can use to engage students in critical discussions about Black and Latina women’s socially constructed identities through the lens of Hip Hop feminist pedagogy. Other pedagogical approaches might include analyses of the ways women are represented in other media outlets such as magazines, news articles, or advertisements. Students can use these as a basis to further interrogate intersectional Hip Hop feminist concepts such as race, class, and gender oppression. Taken together, we believe that exploring a Hip Hop feminist framework opens up endless possibilities for in-class discussions around systems of oppression, how women are positioned and represented within these systems, and the ways marginalized women resist and claim agency over their bodies.

References


Hanson, C. (Director). (2002). *8 mile* [Film]. Universal Pictures.


