Can I Kick It?: A Case Study of Representation in English Classes

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Abstract

Representation can manifest itself in many ways in the classroom, but this conversation is becoming tougher at predominantly white institutions. This study specifically looked at the curriculum taught in English departments and if that curriculum truly embodies representation for all. Through interviewing a professor with experience teaching African-American literature and hip hop aesthetics as well as surveying undergraduate students on their opinions of representation and hip hop, the results are clear: universities need to do a better job of promoting representation within English classes, and hip hop is one of many ways they can promote conversation around the social and political issues that students should walk away with knowledge of because of their higher education.

Introduction

Diversity and inclusion are buzzwords that are constantly used on college campuses, especially at predominantly white institutions. As a person of color, I have had to face many struggles throughout my time in education, whether that be blatant discrimination, microaggressions, or tokenism. I have also had to hide parts of myself within the classroom in order to avoid confrontation within the spaces I have to frequent for my education. This is something I am not alone in experiencing, so it is important for universities to look at their curriculum and see who they are leaving out of the conversation in their quest for knowledge. Through an interview with a professor in higher education as well as surveying student populations, this work begins to start that conversation.

"Hip-Hop Literature: The Politics, Poetics, and Power of Hip-Hop in the English Classroom" by Lauren Kelly was a key piece that informed the way I wanted to approach my research. In her essay, Kelly focuses on the importance of creating a separate space to study hip hop to promote critical skills, rather than teaching it as an introduction to traditional English cannon. We can all picture in our minds what our English classrooms were designed as (in K-12 or in college), so it is important to recognize some of students of color do not respond to some of the literature and lessons that are taught. For example, teenagers from underserved areas reading *Romeo and Juliet* in the 10th grade might not find it relevant when walking to and from school is a matter of life of death. Of course, this is not the reality for all students of color, but education should respond to the shifting cultural dynamics of our society. Kelly addresses this when she says, "Many students feel that they must shed their true selves to be successful academically; those who refuse to shift personas resist education, since they find that it conflicts with their own identities" (52). It begs the question, why

do we want to leave different ways of thinking out of the classroom when they fall outside Eurocentric thinking? I don't think we should.

We shouldn't be asking students to hide any form of themselves, but that starts from what we choose to value as an English department, or even as a school. Jennifer Martin suggests that critical race theory "seeks to determine how racism is perpetuated, for the purposes of undermining racial bias within systems and institutions, dismantling white privilege is a necessary component of this mission. This necessitates the cooperation of white allies (246)." At a PWI like UCCS, that starts with our administration and the faculty.

Within the primarily white English department here at UCCS, there have been many conversations about what we do to promote diversity. Currently, all English students are required to only take one "diversity" course, and most of the students in the program only use that class to check requirement boxes, rather than force themselves to learn how to have critical conversations about race and the intersections that fall within and around it. Crystal Belle in "Don't Believe the Hype: Hip Hop Literacies and English Education" posed hip hop as a way to do this: "Hip-hop as a literacy resource has the power to be used to create influential classroom spaces that challenge traditional conceptions of knowledge, while reimagining schools as sites of possibility" (228). Hip hop can be a way for us to bridge the learning and cultural gap between white students and students of color. It is, of course, not the only way to bridge this gap (and not all students of color respond to hip hop), but this can be a start for a shift in what we value in our texts or what we consider "traditional" and "important" for a well-rounded, informed liberal arts education.

Method

My research involved both an interview with a professor familiar with the teachings of hip hop and critical race theory as well as a survey for undergraduate students inquiring about their views on hip hop and representation overall. The interview transcript and the interviews were coded using a grounded theory analytical approach (Charmaz, 2014).

The interview was thirty minutes and in-person, and it involved six set questions with room for elaboration on those answers, and these questions can be found in Appendix I. The interviewee is a PhD holding professor who has had years of experience teaching hip hop aesthetics and focusing on Black literature and culture in both their K-12 classroom as well as in the undergraduate environment. The questions reflected a lot of their scholarship, but also student reactions to material that they have taught in the past and what they think about representation. The interview was recorded and transcribed through the Otter app and later edited to fix any mistakes the app may had made during the interview. The professor will remain anonymous for the purposes of this research.

In comparison, I also constructed a survey though Qualtrix, an online survey builder. The survey was first advertised to my peers in my UCCS ENGL 4810 Research Methods class, but I later expanded it to a Facebook post on my personal page in order to ensure a diversity of answers. Overall, I collected 23 responses in one week, and every response was anonymous to me. The participants took on average 5 minutes to complete the survey, and the questions covered their

opinions on representation in the classroom as well as their opinions on the genre of hip hop (questions can be found in Appendix II). The questions were a mixture of multiple choice and open-ended, so students could feel more comfortable sharing their opinions in a way that best suited them. I was also careful not to define representation for the students answering the questions, and I did not ask for any identifying information other than their current year in college because I wanted to ensure students would give a genuine answer, rather than one they felt obligated to give because of their identity.

My preliminary coding found that the emerging themes from the answers I received were personal opinions and actual experiences with representation and hip hop. After finding the sets of themes that emerged in that analysis, I moved onto the focused coding step. This is where I found my three specific categories of data: student responses toward hip hop and representation, professor goals in using hip hop, and interest in having hip hop/representation in English classes. I picked three representative examples of the categories and used quotes to further explain and put context around the examples I had chosen. Once I had those quotes that informed my research question, I folded them into what I personally know about representation as well as what I had learned through my secondary sources to promote an understanding of where I was coming from in my research space.

Results

It should be important to start with that the results stemming from the interview with the professor informs a lot of the responses that I have received from the student survey. The majority response from the students surveyed were positive or neutral toward both hip hop and representation. It is important to note, as well, that I had one outlier out of 23 students that had extremely negative responses toward hip hop and representation. This outlier could be due to a small sample size and more representative of a large group of people if the sample was bigger, as the professor said they faced a lot of pushback from students: "I get a loud contingent of, 'I don't want to have to listen to these angry black people'." Although this is a generalization of what students actually say, it is representative of how some white students ultimately feel –uncomfortable material and conversations that shake up their perspective on life can be hard to take in, and some choose to either push away from it or not take those classes at all. It is possible this was not just an outlier, but it was also not the majority feeling of the students polled in this case. Important takeaways from the professor interview will be found in Appendix III, and examples of student responses will be found in Appendix IV.

The majority of the students that took the survey were in their fourth and fifth (or more) year as a student, so they had an idea of what type of curriculum was taught and how they generally have responded to it. When these students were in the process of signing up for English classes, students were divided evenly between the camps of thinking about representation either a lot/always when signing up for classes or a little/not at all. There was also a 50/50 split in responses for students who felt mostly/always represented in their English classrooms and those who felt

somewhat/never represented. However, that did not mean that those who barely thought about representation felt like they were represented, and those who did think about representation felt like they weren't. It was a mixture of responses, and that probably has something to do with the variety of identities that these students have and align with – something that can make creating a diverse curriculum difficult.

Representation was something the professor was forced to learn and be fluent in from their students. As a white teacher in a majority-minority K-12 school, they quickly learned that *Romeo and Juliet* was not going to inform the lives or the experiences that these children had to face. When moving into a majority white undergraduate environment, especially teaching hip hop aesthetics, the professor had faced a group of students that were uncomfortable with the curriculum they were being taught, especially because they did not have the conversation centered on them. The biggest finding from the professor's experience teaching was that minority students are harmed by not ever being exposed to curriculum that shows their experiences, but white students are doing a disservice to their education because they, as the professor said, do not find something "valuable about a cultural conversation that doesn't involve them."

This is where hip hop comes into play. Most of the students that responded to this survey had a range of opinion on hip hop from either loving it to not being a frequent listener but had the historical understanding of its importance. And for all but five students, the responses indicated excitement toward the possibility about a class that was structured around hip hop aesthetics. Remarkably, all but three students reported that hip hop would be a valid way to promote representation in the classroom. However, the professor said that was not the exact case for students when they are enrolled in the class. When listening to the lyrics and the stories behind these men and women of hip hop, a lot of students were pushing back to the experiences because it confronted their privilege and existence: "If I help students see how to analyze the hip hop has poetry, they might hear it differently, and they might respond to it differently, and that that might bridge some racism." Different experiences in the United States can make some students shut themselves off from the material that they are learning about, but this professor ultimately wants students to understand that they should not run away from the discomfort or the difference, but rather embrace it, so they can hear and understand a culture different from theirs.

Conclusion

As James Baldwin said in *A Talk to Teachers*, "The paradox of education is precisely this – that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated." That is the biggest take away from this study. English departments at predominantly white institutions should provide curriculum that is relevant, thought-provoking, and uncomfortable for their students. While hip hop aesthetics was popular and the vehicle of choice for this survey, it is not the only way for students to be challenged by their curriculum, and it is not the only way for professors and departments to challenge themselves by having to produce a curriculum that shows the diversity in experience and culture we have not only in the United States but also in the world.

Limitations of my research include access to an appropriate number of students studying English and by the time frame for the project itself. However, this does not mean there are not several lessons to be learned from this project. Whether our students are going into public or private sectors, into teaching positions, or into fields completely unrelated to English, we should be giving them the tools to navigate the intricate problems our society have placed upon us by designing our systems around racist ideals. Without tough curriculum, our students will be unable to produce real change in education, corporate America, or in public service. This study is not revolutionary, but it can be for any department at a school like UCCS looking to truly reflect their diverse student body and give them the tools they need to be productive members of our society. Because Dead Prez said it best – *it's bigger than hip hop.*

Appendix I
1. How long have you taught classes involving hip hop?
2. What did those classes involve? Provide a brief description of the themes and goals of this curriculum.
3. What drew you to this genre specifically?
4. What are some specific examples of lessons that you found to really excite students?
5. Compared to other classes that involve writing that you have taught, is there any difference with the class or classes that involved hip hop? If so, what are they?
6. What value does hip hop, to you, have in the classroom?
7. Have you faced any negative feedback? If so, did it make you do anything differently?
8. Is there anything you would want audiences to know about this genre of writing?

Appendix II
1. What year are you in college?
2. How comfortable are you with undergraduate level writing, regardless of your major?
3. Do you feel your English professors encouraged interest in the subject?
4. What is something that would encourage your interest in English classes?
5. Do you think about representation when you are signing up for or actively while you are currently in English classes?
6. Do you find yourself represented in/by the material your English professors used?
7. Is representation something that is important to you when signing up for classes?
8. What are your general thoughts about the genre of hip-hop?
9. Would a class that taught writing/literature/poetry through a hip hop lens be something you would be interested in? Why or why not?
10. Would using a genre of music, such as hip hop, be a valid way, to you, to promote representation?
11. How likely would it be for you to sign up for a class, English or not, that involved the study of hip hop?

Appendix III

On getting students to become hip hop critics: "So I invited them to get in there and do it, and most of the students really shown. I thought that was like the most exciting assignment I've ever done. It was the most fun grading I've ever had."

On teaching a class using hip hop aesthetics: "There are students that will fight me tooth and nail on hip hop, but in the same room as a contingent of students who are full on hip hop heads who show up, like, often from other majors not English majors, taking it as an elective so stoked that someone's talking about hip hop on campus. And when you put those two groups of people in a room, the former group gets very angry very quickly. Yeah, because they're experiencing – maybe for one of the first times – the experience of being in a conversation where there's an expectation of cultural knowledge that they are completely unfamiliar with."

On making students comfortable about the material they're learning: "I said on day one is the first thing I say, I'm not censoring this. Part of hip hop is profane. It is part of their aesthetics. If you are uncomfortable with that, I strongly recommend you drop, because I'm not – I can't fight you all semester on it. If you can't hear curse words, I respect that. But I not censoring it in here… You can't learn hip hop and want it to all be clean. There are clean rappers. But, if we're looking at the history of it, not gonna look like *Rapper's Delight*, right?"

Appendix IV

General thoughts on hip hop:
- "It's alright"
- "Early 2000s was the best"
- "I do not listen to hip-hop, but I can respect it as an art form."

Would a class teaching hip hop aesthetics be interesting?:
- "Yes; it is a growing part of our culture in the United States and everyone should be educated on things they are exposed to regardless if they like the genre of music or not."
- "Possibly depending on how they presented it."
- "Potentially yes. I think it would be interesting to see the different take on things rather than the traditional way."

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