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7. THE CIPHER AND EMPIRE

Teaching and Mentoring through Hip-Hop

INTRODUCTION

It is September 2009 and the start of a new semester. Students have gathered for the first meeting of my New Politics, New Possibilities class at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, Washington. We are seated around a table and are going through the syllabus. The readings include reports on hip-hop's emergence in the 1970s; America's conservative turn in the 1980s; and a recently-elected President Barack Obama's agenda for the early years of the 21st century. The schedule features hip-hop artists as guest speakers, and over the semester the students will work with hip-hop's artistic practices to examine local graffiti, write performance poetry, develop social change proposals, and produce the do-it-yourself, punk era-inspired graphic publications that are widely known as "zines."

I can hear students responding to what the syllabus promises: "This is going to be great!" "I'm going to love this class!" But one young man, who earlier had introduced himself as a music major specializing in percussion, seems skeptical. He approaches me after class. He tells me he's looking forward to the class but wants to ask me a question.

"What kind of hip-hop music do you listen to?" he asks. "Who do you follow?"

I stammer out an unconvincing response. "I like the music that I hear at live hip-hop shows. I'm not real good at identifying or following specific artists."

The true story behind my statement is that I don't know all that much about hip-hop music. I am studying the history of hip-hop as a post-civil rights cultural and political movement and have been interviewing young underground artists about their work as community builders and political activists. Modeling my teaching intentions on my graduate program where the credo was not to answer questions but to pose them as a way of eliciting more questions, and where my favorite professors had organized seminars around topics they themselves were just beginning to delve into, I had organized my class around the research questions I hoped to explore. In short, I didn't have answers. I just had questions.

The student standing beside me gave me a long, slow look. And then he smiled.

"Can I make you a tape of the hip-hop music I like?" he asked.

I remember sighing inwardly in relief, feeling as if I'd been let off the hook.

"Please do. Even though I'm teaching this class, I still have a lot to learn."

K. Jelly & A. Mandell (Eds.), Principles, Practices, and Creative Tensions in Progressive Higher Education, 149–163.

Looking back at that moment, it seems that I indeed did have a lot to learn both about hip-hop as a cultural way of life and its applicability to teaching the kinds of adult learners in the student-driven, individualized learning way for which Empire State College came to be known from its start in 1971.

Hip-hop, like the College, also was birthed in the 1970s. It evolved out of creative activities in the inner city boroughs of New York City around 1973 as a collection of artistic practices that help its participants develop skills, which most of its earliest figures assert leads to the creation of knowledge. Working with this knowledge is a learning practice that hip-hop practitioners call the "Fifth Element." Although the actual origins of hip-hop are debatable, most documentarians point to dance parties that a then 28-year-old Jamaica-born resident of the South Bronx (Clive Campbell, better known as DJ Kool Herc) began holding with his sister (Cindy Campbell). "Herc," short for "Hercules" because of his muscular build, was a largely self-taught electronics technician who liked to serve as a party deejay. He had figured out that by playing music on two turntables at once and manipulating the record needles, he could prolong the beats of the reggae and funk songs that he favored. Teens – a mix of African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Chicano youth – loved dancing to the prolonged beats, and began making up moves that at times mimicked street fighting and martial arts. Gradually, graffiti-inspired artwork and a practice of speaking politically in poetic form were added to the mix. From this inventiveness, the four artistic practices that are considered the foundational elements of hip-hop developed: deejaying, emceeing (or rapping), graffiti writing, and break dancing (or "b-boying" and "b-girling"). Because hip-hop devotees often used their arts to promote alternatives to violence and to make political statements in ways that helped them understand while informing others of the socioeconomic conditions of their time, pioneering figures began to speak of the Fifth Element as a practice of self-growth through knowledge.

Four decades later, loyal practitioners view hip-hop as a cultural way of life. The dance moves, the artwork, the poetic lyrics of rap and the grassroots creation of beats are for them statements of self-sustainability, entrepreneurial inventiveness, and acts of economic and cultural survival against forces of violence, structural inequality, and racial and cultural xenophobia. Hip-hop also has come to be regarded as a philosophy of teaching and learning tied to critical pedagogy (the idea of helping students view their role in education as participation in both societal critique and collective struggle for a more egalitarian and just society) (Schapiro, 1999, p. 9). In the evolving understanding of what it means to be a hip-hop pedagogue, one can engage with education on one's own, or in partnership with a teacher or mentor, or in collaboration with a peer, or collectively in a classroom or comparable environment. These engagements parallel much of Empire State College's own approaches to adult learning, as other essays in this volume have discussed and as I shall also describe in more detail below.

What might be called "the pedagogy of hip-hop" contains two complementary modes of communication: the battle and the cipher.[1]

The battle can be viewed as a dialogue or debate waged with words, rhymes, and/or bodies (Schloss, 2009, pp. 3–4). Historically, it began as the dance moves and beats that youth organized into groups (now known as "crews") used to challenge youth groups from rival communities for control over neighborhood turfs. These battles with dance and with music offered nonviolent alternatives to the fists, chains, and knives deployed in gang fights. Today, battles often are staged performances or informal dialogues. They might begin with insults, challenges, or even simply a series of questions like the ones the student at Cornish College of the Arts presented to me. In this sense, battles are not so much about violence as they are about besting and boasting. They can be used to build relationships with others where the creation of knowledge through conversation in a process of first deconstructing and then reconstructing particular societal assumptions is the goal.

The cipher is a process through which a circle of people work with each other to create new knowledge (Pough, 2004, pp. 11–12), much like a classroom with chairs arranged in a circle or a discussion styled as a Socratic seminar. Sometimes characterized as safe spaces and sometimes as intimidating arenas, the cipher often is the space where battling ensues. In the artistic spaces where the foundational elements of hip-hop play out, the cipher consists of bodies that surround a performer, creating for that performer a safe space free of external distraction. At the same time, the safe space is a vulnerable space in that one must drop one's inhibitions to perform.

As a space where the Fifth Element is enacted, the cipher also consists of bodies – organized around a table in a face-to-face classroom or in a shared learning space such as an online discussion forum. After one speaker expresses a thought, another steps up to speak. These learning spaces also are both safe and vulnerable. If the cipher operates properly, all participants are expected to contribute to the creation of shared understandings and honest insights. In these spaces, it is understood that if you are not honest, the other cipher participants have a right to let you know that they perceive you as not being upfront with them and that you need to change your approach and start speaking your truth.

I opened my 2009 fall semester course at Cornish with activities grounded in a knowledgebase with which I felt comfortable: A panel of voters who had cast ballots in the 1980 election spoke with students about the mood of the country at the time and how they had perceived politics to have shifted in the course of their adult lives. Students viewed and discussed two documentaries on hip-hop history, discussed community-based hip-hop practices in Seattle with guest speakers, and completed an out-of-class visual project that captured graffiti in the city. But as the semester progressed, it became increasingly clear to my students that I was not being upfront with them about my knowledge of hip-hop, and my lack thereof. And, it was becoming clear to me that they were going to let me know eventually, not to

be disrespectful, but because they felt they had a right to know what I knew and how that related to what they knew and might or might not be relevant to their lives.

Their comments in the midterm evaluations said it all: "How can this course engage with hip-hop if we're not listening to hip-hop?" "Why are we talking about hip-hop when we should be listening to hip-hop?" "The teacher is very knowledgeable about history and politics, but does she listen to hip-hop?"

Ciphers also rely on a method of call-and-response. After the students offered their statements on the midterm evaluations, it was my turn to respond. I set aside a half-hour of class time, and the students and I formed a circle around our seminar table. The circle – in hip-hop's language of the cipher – is said to equalize power relationships, lessening the distance between the instructor and students. In this de-hierarchizing space, I put on my hat as a then 47-year-old professor and confessed.

"Well, the reason we're not listening to hip-hop is that, well, I'm an old lady. …"

"Na-na-nnaaaaa," intoned one student, a theater major, mimicking my demise.

"… and, well, yeah, that's no excuse. I don't listen to hip-hop music much."

The room was silent. I tried to take the pulse of the students.

"I don't understand hip-hop like you do," I added. "I see it as a community, as a culture, as a movement. I know it's also about music, but I don't know the music."

The silence continued.

"So, what are we going to do about that?"

One student, a graphic design major, spoke up. "Well, you know a lot about history and politics. Can we bring in the music we listen to and help you?"

And, thus, an agreement was struck. Every class session would open with one or two songs that students would bring. Students would describe the artist and their interest in the song. We would listen to the music; examine its beats, lyrics, mood and political messages; and look at how the music might converse with other course materials. In the process, the students and I would practice a third component of hip-hop, which is building. In the spirit of the Fifth Element, we would build knowledge together and create something new (Rob "Blue Black" Jackson, personal communication, July 2013).[2]

THE CIPHER AND EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE

Just as the battle and cipher shaped my interactions with my Cornish students, both processes and the principles underlying them have come to inform how I teach at Empire State College and how I articulate my place within the history, mission, and core values that have come to comprise the College culture. Well before I understood what I was trying to articulate, I was convinced that battling, ciphering, and building contained a sense of pedagogy that resonated with Empire State College's mission of educating the adult learner. My move in 2010 from urban classrooms in Seattle to rural northeast New York resulted in a geographic relocation as well as a significant shift in my teaching life. I was removed from teaching in face-to-face classrooms on three separate campuses and placed instead in a mostly online teaching environment

in which I rarely met face-to-face with students but was available to communicate with them in an ongoing electronic environment. I underwent these changes as the College itself was changing, and my work with hip-hop has continued to inform how I sort out these differences between face-to-face and online teaching.

This reflection leads me to suggest that hip-hop might provide other faculty and staff an opportunity to cipher in a way that both battles and builds upon the College's mission of helping older, "nontraditional" students better their lives through individualized learning, independent education, and growth through mentoring. Such an opportunity may help all of us consider how to be more effective educators at a time when Empire State College and other institutions of higher education are engaged in debates over whether education can or should become a commodity and if students should be treated in this vein as "customers."

As noted above, like hip-hop, Empire State College came of age in the early 1970s, celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2011. And, as the College developed, it came to be defined, also like hip-hop, as a set of localized entities where teaching and learning would take place not on a unified campus but in numerous regional centers loosely linked but strongly defined by their particular geographic characteristics and local affiliates. Such centers represented a radical departure from the conventional college or university campus in that the students were not asked to come to the college; the college would come to them.

Learning, like learning in hip-hop, was conceptualized as being a process of shared creative curricular development in which students would work one-on-one with mentors to design learning plans that worked for each student. In these mentor-mentee relationships, the hierarchical distance that a professor's credentials might command would be lessened and the prior learning – academic and experiential – that students brought to the educational process would play a part in the teaching and learning. Although not articulated as such, students in this framework were like hip-hop artists. They would engage creatively with topics that interested them and in the process would develop the skills that would produce the knowledge needed to make them stronger, more engaged civic participants. The mentors would facilitate students' growth, and through these relationships co-learning journeys would evolve. When I joined the College, I sensed that this learning process matched many of the practices I had tried to enact, sometimes covertly, in prior teaching experiences so I was delighted to come to a place that advocated such experimentation.[3]

Yet, one battle that exists in the ESC cipher is that the legacy of its past is a nonconsensual understanding of the College's history and of its present. Hence, how we as younger, newer teachers and mentors within the College articulate our roles does not necessarily find a comfortable fit with the perceptions of more longtime faculty. While I understand the mission to be alive and in conversation with my understanding of how one should teach and learn, others presume it is dead – or perhaps never was enacted at all.[4] Adding to this contested terrain is what was superimposed over the intricate network of regional sites, that is, the center with which I am affiliated, the Center for Distance Learning (CDL). Formed in 1979,

CDL is both the largest and least geographically-specific center site in the College. As a CDL mentor, I occupy an office in Saratoga Springs, New York, the small town where the College's administrative headquarters are based, but work with faculty and staff and teach and mentor students all over New York state, not to mention the world.

The global virtual community that CDL cultivates is similar to that of hip-hop. While artists affiliate with a local space – naming one's self in terms of one's "hood" is a time-honored hip-hop way of introducing and positioning one's self – they understand themselves to be a part of a hip-hop "nation" or "planet" that is global in scope. Like the members of the "imagined communities" concept that Benedict Anderson coined in the 1980s, participants in hip-hop may never meet one another face-to-face but still imagine themselves to be a community with a shared set of beliefs, values, and practices (Forman, 2012; Anderson, 1991). Hip-hop practitioners understand the origins of their artistic and knowledge-building practices to be closely associated with block parties that took place in such locales as the tenements in the South Bronx. There, African-American, Caribbean, and Latino musical beats and rhythms co-mingled in a tense post-civil rights era socio-economically marginalized space, whereas on the internet activities are defined by social media sites, and participants might be multimillionaire celebrities and entrepreneurs.

These relationships, local and global, both in hip-hop events and at Empire State College are, however, contentious. Community-based hip-hop artists and educators fight to preserve a sense of individual identity against a profit-oriented discourse of corporate capitalism that has defined many products of hip-hop – particularly rap music – as commodity items. And at Empire State College, some members of regional center and local unit affiliates characterize CDL as the online faceless behemoth that is going to obliterate the character of each center and each unit, as well as their relationships with one another.

There have been other similarities between the College and hip-hop, too. Related, for example, to the ideas of sampling and mixing, contributors to this volume have delved into and shared reflections on the early roots of ESC's mentoring practices and highlight a mixing of trial-and-error and an emphasis on process over the philosophy that informed foundational elements of the College's mission. These time-honored practices bear resemblance to practices in hip-hop like sampling, where artists pull together beats, rhythms, lyrics, dance moves, and thoughts from an array of historic and genre traditions, and then create what are referred to as mixtapes or remixes – blends of old and new. Sampling and mixing are artistic practices, which hip-hop artists honor as innovative and scholars in hip-hop studies point to as representing the artistry innate in those who are self-taught.[5] However, some critiques of ESC's practices liken the result to having created a foundation for a learning experiment with no philosophy. Because of this lack, the argument goes, the College is struggling to retain an identity as it approaches its 50th anniversary; and faculty, administrators, and professional staff are not in agreement over how the tenets of adult learning might – and should be – put into practice. In this

environment, how might one learn as a faculty member to participate and contribute to the College's intellectual life?

From the lens of hip-hop, it seems that Empire State College did have more of a philosophical foundation than such critiques suggest. The practices of sampling (trial-and-error) and mixing (blending varieties of experiences to create individualized study plans for students) were built, like hip-hop, on a premise that knowledge was neither static nor inviolable. Yet, this understanding was not apparent as I entered the cipher. At the time that I arrived at the Center for Distance Learning, enrollments in the humanities in particular were falling, and discussions among my new colleagues hinted that the time-honored practice of customizing courses to meet student needs was endangered. Faculty at the Center for Distance Learning were debating whether to do away with individualized degree plans in favor of the more structured approaches associated with conventional colleges, as well as the merits of creating new classes and studies that might not find a robust market. Longtime faculty noted the growing prominence of CDL within the College and issues of overwork associated with an obligation to be online and available to students all of the time.

For me, the loss of a unique mission was a paramount concern. I believed in the idea of knowledge as conversation, and of learning as a co-creative experience that would allow students to share and exchange lived experiences and knowledge acquired outside of the classroom in a way that would enable all classroom participants to grow in their learning together. I liked how Empire State College placed the adult learner at the core of its mission and sought to tailor education to each student's need. I also liked the fact that Empire State College spoke of professors as generalists who could stretch disciplinary training in new directions. These reflections of the College's core values resembled the knowledge-building that hip-hop's Fifth Element encouraged via its ciphers.

At the same time, I did have questions about how the Center for Distance Learning's practice of developing predesigned courses in the asynchronous virtual world of the online learning environment meshed with the experiences of a cipher in a face-to-face classroom. Among the questions I asked were: How does learning take place in hip-hop? And, if hip-hop's past resembles Empire State College's past, but if I teach for CDL, how might I sample from both pasts to remix a course for the present?

LEARNING IN A HIP-HOP CIPHER

It is February 2009, and I am at a coffee shop in Seattle interviewing Lee, a 23-year-old break dancer. Our conversation happens to take place a few days before a big community-based event, the anniversary of 206 Zulu, a chapter of the worldwide organization Universal Zulu Nation.[6] The culminating event is a break dancing battle in which dancers and crews from all over the nation will perform in a competition. Because Lee will be among the competitors, I ask her to tell me about battles and suggest that she do so by describing the upcoming event.

"The doors will open at 7 p.m.," she begins, "but the actual battle won't begin for at least two or three hours."

That introductory statement along with her continuing explanation illustrated how hip-hop's practices of teaching and learning are at work in all kinds of events. What matters is not so much the purpose of the event but the prior learning brought by participants and how they share what they know. The battle was to take place in a dance hall. As the space filled up, ciphers would form. While the battlers on stage would engage in learning as a sort of spectator sport in which the competitors interacted with one another while others observed, the cipher participants would do so more intimately in a way that might enable a dialogue to emerge among all those who were part of the circle creating the cipher. To battle formally, one needed an invitation, the ability to pay a registration fee, and a crew with which one could affiliate.[7] However, anyone could join the less formal ciphers. As Lee explained it, while the battles created a larger sense of community for the whole group in attendance, the ciphers were about building relationships and forming community among smaller circles within the larger group. They were a chance to practice dance moves and perhaps get some feedback about what was working and what could be improved. They also were a chance to show what you knew how to do and where you fell short. Even watching was a chance to learn further, she said, because you could see what someone else was trying out, ask them questions, or emulate their moves. In this sense, the smaller ciphers were like breakout groups or smaller units of students working within a particular classroom.

"Around 9 p.m. or so, the emcee will start bringing the crowd together by letting people know that the battle is going to begin," Lee said. "But he'll also start with some knowledge. He'll begin with a story."

"A story?"

"About the history and roots of hip-hop," she explained. "If the emcee is good, he'll use the history to frame the battle so people will know why hip-hop exists and what it means to be a part of it."

From Lee's description, one sees the event as a learning experience that engages a student on several levels. The emcee fills an authoritative role of a teacher by framing the moment with a narrative for listeners to debate and consider. The onstage battlers also teach through their moves while the emcee suggests what makes a particular bodily expression stronger than another. At the same time, the battlers are learning because they are in an onstage cipher conversing with opponents. Conversing with the battlers are the others watching as spectators or participating in ciphers.

I had stumbled into hip-hop in 2007, shortly after defending my doctoral dissertation while working in-between teaching jobs as an early morning coach at a local branch of the women's fitness center Curves. My coworker was Naj, who was Lee's elder sister and, like her, a competitive break dancer. Naj would arrive at work at 10 a.m. to relieve me, usually yawning. She spent most of her evenings at practices in churches and community centers, or dancing at after-hours clubs. She would show up at work carrying a bowl, a box of cereal, and a carton of almond

milk. She would wish me good morning, confess to being tired because she had been dancing all night, and use the down time at the fitness center to study videos of dances of which she'd been a part or which she had been encouraged by her mentors to watch.

Interested in finding out more about how Naj and her community of break dancers had come together, I began to ask her questions, attend her performances, and bring her and Lee and other artists with whom they connected me into my classes. I learned through them that while many people saw hip-hop as "just music," they saw it as knowledge, self-discovery, and transformation of self. I didn't understand this point of view entirely, but I felt that it might resonate with my students and that we could then connect their statements to the readings on politics, society, and civic participation that I was asking them to do. I also wanted to learn more about their language and culture. Naj and Lee were optimistic that the world could be made better through education and they saw participation in hip-hop as education. Conscious of the gendered, racial, and economic stratifications of society, they seemed dedicated to creating through dance, art, and music a more environmentally sustainable and socially just world. I felt somehow that their stories might be transformative, not just for my students but also for me.

Their quest mirrored the battling, ciphering, and building that occurred in my Cornish class. When I allowed myself to profess ignorance and to invite guests or other students to participate in the learning process, I was engaging in hip-hop's Fifth Element in that I was allowing myself to gain knowledge in ways that democratized the classroom and valued the learning and experiences of others. Coming to Empire State College as my understanding of this view of knowledge was just burgeoning, I saw orientation materials offered to new mentors on process learning, prior learning assessments, the development and design of independent studies, and treating mentoring as an act of listening as other ways of understanding the art of ciphering.

But even if I did not realize it fully, I also was joining the College in an era of a changing institutional culture and, too, I held a less conventional role in the College because of my affiliation with CDL. The question that I faced was one of how to bring the intensely personal exchange of knowledge-building that characterized the hip-hop cipher and the intimacy of mentoring to my online classes. Could one create a cipher in a space where you never met your students face-to-face?

THE CYBER CIPHER

Hip-hop events like the battle in Seattle open spaces where a skilled emcee is able to show through narrative how the activities of the immediate fit into a larger story. The online classroom depends often on preset curricula, where students are able – if they wish – to "read" the entire class from start to finish before a term starts. The structure is asynchronous, which means that while there are project deadlines and start and end dates for learning activities, the work needs only to be done by – not at – a particular date. This asynchronous structure makes learning more convenient for

the busy adult, but it subdues spontaneity and erodes the possibility of the surprises that occur routinely in face-to-face interchanges. Such surprises create "teaching moments" that offer insights and ignite learning in ways that could not have been predicted by an instructor in advance.

Hip-hop educators often see such teaching moments as opportunities to freestyle, or to drop all inhibitions and speak frankly from the heart. These words from the heart comprise the knowledge-building that pursuit of the Fifth Element advocates, and, in many cases, change the tenor of what learning means. In one classroom at a high school in St. Paul, Minnesota, which is organized with a hip-hop pedagogical ethos, I watched such freestyling in action. Students were discussing their neighborhoods. One young man had grown up in Gary, Indiana. "If you don't know anyone in the city," the student said, "you're fucked. If you don't have a weapon to protect you, you're fucked. And you don't want to carry anything you don't actually need on your person." As other students began to titter over the student's use of obscenities, the teacher asked: "How many of you know where Gary is, what Gary is?" Silence fell and the teacher said, "It's a city that's been completely destroyed by urban decay."

"Yeah, 'Ghost Town Gary' was what we called it," the student said, quieter and more serious now.

"So when a town's industry leaves, when people move out, what remains?" the teacher asked.

Other students spoke up: "Guns. Violence. Drugs."

Incorporating that kind of give-and-take dialogue comes easily face-to-face. Shifting to the online, asynchronous format forces one, however, to consider differently what is of value in the knowledge that is co-created in conversations. After my first term of teaching at ESC's Center for Distance Learning, I began to believe that gaining knowledge through conversation, while a way of engaging students, also offered a way for instructors to evaluate a student's performance through a co-learning practice. Such a practice focused on students sharing and instructors listening to how students learned through an application of knowledge emerging in the activity and enhancing their prior knowledge. That knowledge may have come from lived experiences, from other classes, or from a text assigned in the class at hand. What mattered was not the source of the knowledge, as much as the meaning that students made of it. With an understanding of learning as a connecting of multiple dots of experience, I began to see how the cipher might be built in cyberspace so that knowledge-building was conceptualized as a lifelong learning practice that was not dependent on the immediacy of the face-to-face moment; and I also could see how that practice would continue ESC's mission of encouraging the education of adults by facilitating an integration of prior learning with present inquiry.[8]

I also quickly saw that such a cyber cipher need not occur synchronously and need not even be collective in its process. While the discussion forums that form the core of many CDL courses offer one vehicle for creating a cyber cipher, these forums are linear in format and rely on what are often formally written questions that tend to produce essay-type responses as opposed to freestyled discussions. In addition, the

in-and-out presence of the instructor can have the effect of freezing a knowledge-building conversation-in-progress because when the instructor weighs in, students remember that they're in a course, receiving a grade, and that freestyling might make them look less studious.[9]

As a result, in my course, Hip-Hop America: The Evolution of a Cultural Movement, I sought to build a learning cyber cipher from the ground up. Instead of focusing on vehicles for dialogue, I shaped the course's entire structure around hip-hop's multiple modes of conversation-generated knowledge. Students study hip-hop history through several documentary films and three required texts. Several video interviews in which key hip-hop figures discuss the history, foundational elements, and knowledge-building practices of hip-hop also are embedded in the course. Learning activities include participation in five discussion forums, the writing of two papers, the completion of two creative projects, and the maintenance of a learning journal throughout the term. But the students do not just read and regurgitate their learning. They converse with each other about their own place in hip-hop history, and share with one another stories about their favorite songs. As they articulate their experience with their songs, they identify the meanings and reflect on the messages of the songs in relation to the histories they are gaining from the course, as well as from the lived experiences that their classmates share. I, too, participate in this sharing by talking to the students about my own experiences of encountering hip-hop as a woman in my 40s and about the connections I see between the music they share and socio-economic conditions of the past and present.

Students also work in a collaborative learning space known as a "wiki" to create both an historic timeline of significant hip-hop events and resource guides for hip-hop activities in the communities where they live. The information that students contribute to the wiki becomes part of a resource pool that they are able to tap to develop their creative projects: a mixtape of hip-hop history prepared in an artistic or academic genre of their choice, and an ethnographic project on a hip-hop activity in their communities. The knowledge that is built and shared in the wikis remains in the course template, with each contributor's name beside it, after the term ends. In this way, students not only help those in future classes but also contribute to the body of emergent work on hip-hop.

I first taught the class as a guided independent study with two ESC students. One was nearly 50 years old and had served as a deejay in her neighborhood in Queens, New York for more than three decades. The other was in her early 20s and was working at an afterschool program run by the Hirschhorn Museum in Washington D.C. called ARTLAB+. When the term opened, the students were hesitant. They told me they didn't "get" how they could study hip-hop as an academic topic because it was all about their lives. I asked them to start by talking about their experiences, and as they opened up, I began suggesting that they apply the work they were doing as deejays and with youth to their mixtapes and community projects. Since then, other students have submitted poetry books, drawings, musical pieces, and autobiographical essays that frame their understandings of their lived histories within the history and their

awareness of and relationship to hip-hop. In the learning journals that they submit about once a month, they document their progress in the course in terms of their personal growth. The course continues to evolve as my relationship with hip-hop and Empire State College grows.

CONCLUSION

Working through the processes of battling, ciphering, and building has helped me see how hip-hop's central components embody a pursuit of knowledge that requires a simultaneous engagement with dueling practices: speaking and listening, teaching and learning, breaking down concepts and rebuilding them anew. When applied to the adult learning relationships that Empire State College encourages its faculty to cultivate with students, the practices of battling, ciphering, and building can encourage an engagement with active learning through reminding faculty that a central goal of the College is to create an environment where students can take control of their learning and their lives' development in the process. These practices force faculty to step aside as disciplinary experts, and invite them to shrug off their credentials in order to do what one hip-hop pioneer, George Clinton (2011), advocates, which is "not to learn tricks" but "to learn how to be open to learning" in and of itself (p. viii).

Such practices, all components of hip-hop pedagogy, informed how I myself learned and taught as an adult who returned to graduate school in a midcareer shift. Even with the title of "professor," I have a difficult time understanding anyone who claims that her expertise is paramount. The challenge perhaps is promulgating that understanding of learning as a dynamic, ever-changing process in an era where both hip-hop and higher education are transmogrifying into powerful, profit-oriented corporate forces seemingly beyond one's control. Hip-hop nears its first half-century known less as a grassroots set of artistic and communal practices and more as a billion-dollar global music, video, and clothing industry – an industry that mass produces symbols of greed, gangsterism, and sexual misogyny.

Empire State College struggles to educate tens of thousands of working adults through technologies that can appear machine-like, inhuman, and demoralizing. Calls to increase student enrollments through an embrace of such things as massive open online courses (MOOCs) and pre-structured degree plans threaten to replace the individualized relationships between mentors and mentees, the co-learning that occurs, and the wonderfully localized characters of regional centers that gave the College its initial intellectual and cultural fervor. In this environment, it is only fair to ask, can the cipher survive? Can mentoring practices that were grounded in tenets that also informed hip-hop still be relevant? Can they be sustained in a political and social environment where debates about the meaning, value, and pursuit of higher education have grown increasingly contentious? Can they prosper in an era where tightening budgets, limited public resources, and a contracting economy are resulting in declining enrollments? Can they withstand increased challenges to

colleges to base their success on collecting tuition by enrolling more students and not necessarily on how well the students are educated?

I do not know the answers to such questions. Yet, one recent encounter with a faculty member from another university gives me reason to believe that Empire State College still offers an example of success that should translate to hope. I was at the national conference of Imagining America, a Syracuse, New York-based consortium of higher education, arts, and community organizations with a mission of rekindling democratic revival through partnerships with each other. The faculty member and I were walking from one session to another, and she, upon learning that I was with Empire State College, began praising lavishly a student project she had visited the previous year at the Settlement House in Manhattan. The student had connected her work in the world with the learning experiences she had gained through the College in a way that the faculty member found inspiring.

Pressing me, she asked, "How do you teach? Who are your students? What are your classes like?"

I explained to her that I was at the Center for Distance Learning, and taught two online classes a term. I added that I usually worked with between five and 10 students in one-on-one studies that either centered on their degree planning or focused on studies that interested them. I also explained that my students were mostly from New York but also from other parts of the U.S. and that I worked with mentees and others abroad.

"How do you do it?" she asked. "Well, I mostly just try and listen to what the students tell me they want," I replied. "And then I suggest ways that they can study what interests them. A lot of time, I work with them myself because I'm pretty interdisciplinary in my approach and don't mind being stretched. But if their interests are too far out of my academic range, I try to find someone who can work with them."

"Is that the norm at your college?" she asked. "Or are you the radical fringe?"

I laughed, because I felt that it was the College mission that was radical. I was only marching to the beat it established. Yet, I also would not be writing this chapter if I did not believe that hip-hop as a way of thinking and being with the world might help keep that spirit of radicalism alive.

NOTES

[1] I draw this understanding of hip-hop pedagogy from my ongoing work with the Hip-Hop Education Center at New York University as part of a nationwide taskforce to draft a document on articulations and practices of teaching and learning that are used by artists, community organizers, and educators at the K-12 and university level who self-identify with the arts and values that hip-hop culture advocates.

[2] Jackson, a longtime emcee and entrepreneur who shapes his personal and professional ethics around his engagement with hip-hop, describes the idea of building as being akin to a practice in academia of deconstruction, in which existing truths or prevailing views are broken down and taken apart in order that one might see the forces of race, gender, and economic hierarchizing that gave them the power of truth in order then to reconstruct new, more egalitarian views.

[3] I did not understand the processes I refer to in a particularly intellectual way when I was first hired, which is perhaps typical of faculty joining the College new. I am just now beginning to gain an epistemological understanding of what it means to be both a teacher and a mentor at Empire State College through conversations with colleagues, readings in the in-house publication *All About Mentoring,* and the co-authored book *From Teaching to Mentoring* by Lee Herman and Alan Mandell (2004). This lack of an epistemological awareness of what Empire is about perhaps contributes to the crisis of meaning that the College community appears to be grappling with. Yet, when meaning is unclear, there are opportunities for dialogues within the mode of ciphering to flourish and for new understandings and knowledge practices to emerge.

[4] By way of example, I appreciate the historical insights that Xenia Coulter and Wayne Willis offer in their essays, and thank co-editors Alan Mandell and Katherine Jelly for sharing them with me. At the same time, I question assertions made by both that new faculty are more focused on preset degree requirements, disciplinary expertise, and concerns that might be voiced by professors at more traditional colleges than the pioneering Empire State College mentors of the past.

[5] I served as an evaluator in September 2012 for an Empire State College student requesting college credit through prior learning assessment for The Art of Hip-Hop. The student's ability to articulate in written and oral statements what was meant by sampling and mixing, and to demonstrate how he used these practices to create songs and music videos effectively showed mastery of these art forms at a college level.

[6] Universal Zulu Nation, formed by early hip-hop figure Afrika Bambaataa in 1975, is perhaps the leading voice worldwide in perpetuating an understanding of hip-hop as a form of philosophy and knowledge creation. Bambaataa, who continues to be active in hip-hop, has defined the Fifth Element of hip-hop as the underlying core of the genre and articulates it as the binding source that brings not only the foundational elements of hip-hop but its wide-ranging practices globally together. Bambaataa was also an early member of a group known as the Five Percenters, as well as the radical black empowerment group the Black Panthers that called attention to racially demeaning practices inherent in westernized forms of Christianity and governmental public policies.

[7] As earlier described, the "crew" in hip-hop is the group of people with which a dancer, artist, or writer most closely affiliates. The concept is derived from gangs who engaged in violent street fights before some members saw the arts as a peaceful alternative to voice grievances and assert selves. Many of my interviewees liken their crews to their families. For more, see Pabon (2012).

[8] Much of my understanding of this iteration of knowledge through conversation came through workshops offered at Empire State College in January 2011 and October 2011 by Dan Apple of the Pacific Crest Institute on assessing student learning and course activity design.

[9] I work around that dilemma by using a different space within the course to share my observations on the learning in discussion forums such as the course announcements or bulletin board. But, in doing so, I am conscious that I am not democratizing the learning space because I am separating myself – as the instructor – from the cipher.

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