Teaching Good Kids in a m.A.A.d World: Using Hip-Hop to Reflect, Reframe, and Respond to Complex Realities

It’s a complicated time to be a teacher. We, and our students, are required to comply with a growing number of “accountability measures,” ranging from reductive standardized assessments to scripted curriculum. These mandates steal time from our classrooms and undermine our attempts to develop and implement curriculum that reflects the unique academic, cultural, and situational needs of our students. Thus, as justice-oriented English language arts teachers, we face a dilemma: How can we reconcile our vision with the demands of teaching in an increasingly regulated school system?

This is the question that Tony, one of the authors of this article, grappled with as he prepared to enter the classroom. Tony is white, a hip-hop artist, and a graduate of the predominantly black and Latino/Latina urban district where he now teaches. The surrounding city is known for intense racial segregation, inequity, and violence, but also vibrant justice-oriented and youth-led social, political, and artistic activism. Tony began student teaching in the months following the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and his seventh and eighth graders walked the hallways talking about violence, policing, and protest. However, despite attempts by Tony and his veteran, African American mentor teacher to center racial justice through their selection of texts, students rarely made connections between the analysis of literature and that of contemporary events. There was a clear difference between students’ perception of what matters and what matters in English class.

During his 16 weeks in the classroom, Tony was required to meet a broad array of mandates, including the Common Core State Standards, departmental learning goals and timelines, and university-based student teaching expectations. He also had to prepare students for district-level diagnostic exams, and—in response to an abrupt change in policy—put aside his planned curriculum to focus on PARCC, which would ultimately monopolize two full weeks of class time. Three months before his student teaching began, Tony learned he would have to participate in a pilot test for a new, state-mandated high-stakes teacher performance assessment (edTPA). This assessment required him to submit three to five lesson plans, a 20-minute video clip, student work samples, and approximately 25 pages of narrative for scoring by an anonymous external evaluator. While edTPA is a new requirement in Illinois, candidates in other states suggest it undermines the authenticity of their teaching by pressuring them to teach what they think test developers want rather than what their own students need (Au).

In this article, the authors examine how one of the authors used Kendrick Lamar’s autobiographical hip-hop to provoke mandate-compliant analyses of complex social, racial, and political realities.
However, Tony had previous experience designing justice-oriented curriculum, a supportive mentor teacher, and a university supervisor (Ali-son, the other author of this article) who is a vocal advocate of teaching for social justice. He also approached the classroom with insider status: as a community member, a local hip-hop artist, and a recent graduate of the district. In an early semester journal entry, he reflected on his desire to take curricular risks, despite intense pressure to conform:

I want to take chances. I want to take that which I’ve built from scratch, what I’ve put my own creative energy into, and give it a go. After all, this is work that I believe in [but] . . . I can’t get out of the headspace that reminds me that I’m being constantly watched. This nagging feeling that everything I do, from where I take discussions during lessons, to not telling the students to be more quiet in the halls, is being analyzed. (Tony’s journal)

In this article, we present the unit Tony submitted for his edTPA portfolio, one where he risked using his students’—and his own—dominant language (that of hip-hop) to provoke mandate-compliant analyses of pressing social issues. By using contemporary, contextually resonant nonfiction, and specifically the autobiographical, situated songs of Kendrick Lamar, Tony created opportunities for students to interrogate the complexities of race, identity, and the dominant narrative. This unit also offers a compelling example of “critical compliance” (Gorlewski, “Accountable”) as a strategy for resisting dominant discourses in schools and society, including those seeking to undermine teacher agency and autonomy (Gorlewski, Power 63).

From Hip-Hop Artist to English Teacher and Back Again

From 13 years old to the time I was 21, I was in a mode of mastering how to be a rapper. Like a rapper’s rapper, using my tongue as a sword. . . .

That’s all it was about, slaying words. So when I turned 21, 22 . . . that’s when I started developing and actually constructing my music from a writer’s point of view. good kid, m.A.A.d city was probably one of them albums that you could unfold out into a book and read it. And that’s how I treat everything. Everything is critical like that from here on out. It’s the art of writing.

—Kendrick Lamar, “Writer at War”

Like many artists, Tony fell in love with hip-hop as a teenager. Inspired by the linguistic intricacies of Eminem and Nas and the original hip-hop of his peers, Tony recorded his first song as a high school senior. He went on to college but prioritized freestyle cyphers with friends and late-night writing sessions over coursework, and he eventually dropped out. He later formed a hip-hop fusion band, St. Bagu, that garnered local and regional attention. His band was ultimately one of several selected to represent the Chicago hip-hop scene at the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, China. He has performed throughout the region, most notably opening for The Roots (an internationally renowned hip-hop band) at a major local venue. Tony currently writes and performs for the group Paper. Beats.Rock and is in the process of writing his first solo album.

When Tony returned to college to get his English credential, he looked for ways to bring hip-hop into the classroom. For him, it’s an intuitive pairing: in addition to validating the authentic, culturally resonant language of young people, hip-hop entices listeners to think beyond the text, challenging them to make meaning of complex allusions, insider references, and historical contexts. Hip-hop is both geographically specific and thematically broad, requiring students to make connections to their lives while simultaneously unpacking nuanced details of each artist’s experience.

Hip-hop is both geographically specific and thematically broad, requiring students to make connections to their lives while simultaneously unpacking nuanced details of each artist’s experience.
with key questions of identity and voice, such as those posed by Groenke et al.: “What are stories people tell about adolescents? Who writes these stories? Who benefits? Who is silenced? Who is harmed?” (38).

Tony’s fluency in hip-hop also prepared him to negotiate some of the genre’s challenges. Hip-hop lyrics often depict violence, misogyny, and consumerism; to teach it effectively requires teachers to acknowledge and navigate these themes (Stovall 589). This wasn’t always easy: despite Tony’s efforts to select developmentally appropriate songs, his handouts were full of black lines of censored lyrics that reflect the complexities of using authentic texts in the classroom. However, by balancing the recognition of “not-safe-for-school” lyrics with an analysis of Lamar’s sophisticated vocabulary, use of figurative language, and narrative technique, Tony used this seeming contradiction to challenge students’ preconceived notions of what constitutes “academic text.”

Identity, Context, and Kendrick Lamar

Like most great lessons, this unit evolved in response to an instructional dilemma. Tony’s students were finishing People Wasn’t Made to Burn, Joe Allen’s account of racial discrimination in mid-century Chicago. Their final assessment required panels of students to define justice and determine whether it had been served in different situations in the text. In between presentations, a student brought up the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner as contemporary examples of racial injustice, but other students challenged the characterization of their deaths as illustrative of a pattern.

I was surprised to find that many other students had trouble connecting our discussion of systemic racism to the injustice at hand. They understood the killing of unarmed kids was a problem, but they didn’t quite connect it to our long history of racism in America. It was essentially an isolated incident to them.

So when we transitioned to A Raisin in the Sun, I assigned groups of students the task of developing character sketches for each character. I was thinking, People Wasn’t Made to Burn told the facts of race related housing discrimination well, but A Raisin in the Sun would show them. However, as the students analyzed the character of Walter Lee Younger and concluded that he was simply “greedy” without examining the systemic issues that influenced his decisions, it became clear to me that they were struggling to grapple with the contextual factors that affect who people are and become. It was as if they thought identity, too, was a sort of isolated incident. (Tony’s journal)

So, Tony saw his opportunity to use hip-hop—in this case, Kendrick Lamar’s audio autobiography Good Kid, m.A.A.d. City—to help students grapple with the implications of context, both in literature and their own lives. In Good Kid, Lamar uses nonlinear storytelling techniques to depict the persistent tensions he faced while growing up in a community affected by gang wars, fatherlessness, widespread police brutality, and substance abuse.

Tony’s Lamar unit explored the idea of “becoming” in a complicated personal, racial, and political climate: themes central to the album, the texts students read earlier in the year, and his students’ lives. He highlighted three loosely
Teaching Good Kids in a m.A.A.d World: Using Hip-Hop to Reflect, Reframe, and Respond to Complex Realities

progressive tracks (Figure 1), tracing Lamar’s evolution from an adolescent who reacts to peer and community pressures to a young adult able to love himself and be “real.” In “Art of Peer Pressure,” Lamar describes himself as both a peacemaker and a participant in criminal activity, requiring listeners to make sense of conflicting representations of self. “Good Kid” invites listeners to evaluate the subjective and situated nature of being “good,” especially in the context of community strife. The final song in this sequence, “Real,” represents Lamar’s resolution of his experiences. In it, Lamar empathizes with his former self, reconnects with his parents, and begins to use his story to help other young people, inviting listeners to “sing my song, it’s all for you” (“Real,” Bridge).

As a white hip-hop artist teaching about race in a community of color, Tony knew he was navigating complicated waters. ELA teachers often use hip-hop to scaffold students’ analysis of canonized literary texts (Kelly 51), but that carries the risk of reinforcing the appropriation and marginalization of the voices of people of color. Tony wanted to avoid diluting the power of hip-hop’s social commentary by positioning it as a supplemental, or springboard, text (Kelly 51–52), while simultaneously helping students see their fluency in hip-hop as “academic knowledge” in itself.

Thus, he kept his central focus on Lamar’s work, using outside texts to situate Lamar’s lyrics and connect gaps in students’ background knowledge. Early in the unit, for example, Tony screened Crips to provide an external reference point for discussions of gangs, then referred back to it when students missed Lamar’s paradoxical symbolism in “Good Kid,” where “red and blue” represent both gang colors and police strobe lights. Tony also explicitly treated Lamar’s lyrics as academic texts, guiding students in applying previously taught literacy skills (highlighting, annotation, etc.) to their reading of hip-hop. See Figure 2 for examples of lessons Tony used to support unit goals related to the relationship among identity, perception, and context; explicit and inferential reading; and students’ analysis of hip-hop’s literary, syntactic, and thematic depth.

Tony’s summative assessment required students to make an evidence-based analysis of how Lamar’s context informed his identity, using lyrics to support their claims. They then extended their analysis to their own lives by making a personal “identity claim” and explaining how it reflected their context. This allowed students to demonstrate that they met overarching unit goals, while also using hip-hop’s relatability to deepen students’ understanding of themselves.

Reflections on Complex Realities: Learnings and Next Steps

Teaching this unit was a critical point in Tony’s development as a teacher: it enabled him to integrate his personal and professional passions with the demands of teaching in a heavily regulated context. He was supported by his colleagues and gained
FIGURE 2. Exemplary Lessons

Key Concept: Understanding Context
- Introduction: Screen “Growing up in Compton.”
- Discussion questions: What does Kendrick say Compton was like growing up? How might growing up in Compton affect someone psychologically or emotionally? What elements of Compton are reflected in Lamar’s songs?

Key Concept: Explicit and Inferential Identity Claims
- Introduction: Guide students in a close reading of “The Art of Peer Pressure,” focusing on the explicit identity claims throughout the song (e.g., “I’m a sober soul,” “I’m a peacemaker”) as well as Lamar’s actions (carrying a gun, drinking and driving).
- Discussion questions: What is the relationship between Lamar’s identity claims and students’ interpretation of his actions? What can students infer based upon this relationship?
- Next steps: Independent analysis of identity claims in Lamar’s lyrics.

Key Concept: Abstract Nouns and Subjectivity
- Introduction: Present contemporary symbols (e.g., President Obama, controversial pop star Iggy Azalea, the American flag, LeBron James) and ask students to decide whether or not they represent something “good.”
- Bridge to discussion of cultural and contextual subjectivity of abstract nouns.
- Next steps: Introduce “Good Kid,” focusing on the analysis of lyrical evidence related to Lamar’s characterization of himself as a “good kid.”

confidence in his authority as an early-career teacher. He used this unit to articulate his educational philosophy during job interviews and was ultimately offered a position teaching English language arts in the community where he student taught. These are the sorts of experiences that sustain justice-oriented teachers throughout their careers, as they learn to seek solidarity, artfully interweave social justice and standards, and balance critical compliance with reflexive resistance (Gorlewski, “Accountable”; Dover 94; Picower 1129).

Tony’s students were excited about and engaged by the unit, both overall and as a validation of hip-hop as something worth studying. Many embarked on unassigned, out-of-school research into Lamar’s life or suggested additional songs for analysis; one student even focused her final assessment on other, unstudied, tracks. Students knew Lamar’s lyrics and were intimately acquainted with the contentious relationship between people of color and police. They saw themselves in Lamar and were able to shift fluidly between close reading of his lyrics and broader analysis. While some of this was surely due to the nature of the genre, which uses storytelling to elicit responses from listeners (Kelly 54), it also reflected students’ increasing ability to “read the word and the world” (Freire and Macedo).

The relevance and accessibility of hip-hop also led students to consider how the lyrics might represent—and re-present—their own contextual realities. In the words of one student, “I already liked the music, but didn’t realize there was so much depth there.” Another student likened his father’s experience growing up in their local community to Lamar’s experience in Compton, saying that in both cases “the [gang] life chooses you.” This student connected Lamar’s claim that he was “all for you [other young people of color]” (“Real”) to the student’s father’s attempt to help his son learn from his own childhood mistakes. Students also related to the events depicted in supplemental texts. After watching Fruitvale Station, a dramatization of the last day of Oscar Grant’s life prior to his murder by police, several students were moved to tears, noting that “that could have been me, that could have been my friends.”

While this unit was clearly effective at challenging dominant constructions of “complex literature,” it wasn’t perfect. Despite students’ nuanced ability to cite rhetorical and practical factors that influenced Lamar’s depiction of self, their final assessments revealed that some still struggled to articulate the impact of their own context. In the words of one student, “I am confused. There is a lot of things that I do not understand in this crazy world . . . I just don’t understand things that I believe or why I believe them.” Tony reflected on this in his final journal entry of the year:

I suppose it would have been naïve of me to expect everything to turn out exactly as I had planned and hoped it would. I mean, it’s teaching, and I’m a beginning teacher at that. The classroom can be unpredictable . . . it’s made up of human beings who are complex, and that very human complexity is exactly what I wanted them to see in their study of these songs by Kendrick Lamar. That is, people shouldn’t be reduced to bullet points and snap judgments. And so when one of my students is asked to evaluate not only Kendrick Lamar, but himself at the end of this unit, and responds with the identity
In today's mandate-driven schools, the loudest voices rarely emerge from the classroom. However, by finding ways to affirm the authentic voices of students—and teachers—we have the opportunity to critically examine the narratives that shape our reality.

Works Cited


Alison G. Dover (a-dover@neiu.edu) is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Inquiry and Curriculum Studies at Northeastern Illinois University. A former urban English language arts teacher (and NCTE member since 2006), her research examines approaches to enacting justice in the context of accountability-driven P–12 and teacher education.

Tony Pozdol (tony.pozdol@gmail.com) recently earned his BA in Secondary English Education at Northeastern Illinois University. Tony has 14 years of experience as a hip-hop artist and is in his first year as an English language arts teacher in his hometown of Chicago, Illinois.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

This lesson begins by playing the chorus of rapper Kanye West's “Diamonds from Sierra Leone.” Protest songs serve as a means to combat social ills and cover a wide array of topics, including racism, sexism, poverty, imperialism, environmental degradation, war, and homophobia. This lesson makes a connection to popular culture by asking students to work in pairs to research and analyze contemporary and historic protest songs. After learning about wikis, each pair posts their analysis of the protest songs to a class wiki, adding graphics, photos, and hyperlinks as desired. The class then works together to organize the entries. Finally, students listen to all of the protest songs and add information and comments to each other's pages. http://bit.ly/6Pbg5