

Friday, Dec 18, 2015

## Reaching students through hip-hop

By Rene Wisely

Emery Petchauer believes that hip-hop is the most important cultural phenomenon to emerge from the late 20th century.

“Hip-hop crosses race, culture, class, geography and gender lines. It has become an important subculture, one that often deliberately hides its affiliation, yet is as vital as any other group found on a college campus.”

The assistant professor of **Teacher Development and Educational Studies** in Oakland University’s School of Education and Human Services urges educators teaching a new generation to embrace this modern culture movement in the classroom.

“Hip-hop is an aesthetic — a self-expression,” Dr. Petchauer continues. “It is linguistic (rapping, DJ-ing, emceeing); kinesthetic (b-boy and b-girl, or breakdancing); visual (graffiti); musical (beat-boxing) and filled with self-knowledge.

“People filter themselves and define themselves through *all* these elements — not just the music. It is one cultural resource we should take seriously and figure out how it can be used for teaching and learning.”

Dr. Petchauer theorizes that hip-hop masks itself to avoid being painted with the broad brush of rap music or being dismissed as nothing than “cursing, drugs and scantily clad women.”

Students fear being perceived as anti-intellectual if faculty members discover their hip-hop interest. Others fear being accused of trying to “black” when they aren’t, he says.

Educators need to challenge themselves to create a hip-hop-friendly classroom, whether it is through attitudes, philosophies or inspired activities. Students should be encouraged to show who they truly are, an essential ingredient to any healthy learning environment.

Dr. Petchauer suggests that educators emphasize how students feel about something as an initial step in teaching.

“In hip-hop, feeling comes first, after experiencing something. Then you think about your feelings and what happened, and then you finally understand it,” he says. “It’s a fundamentally African-centered idea. It’s even in the language — ‘I feel you,’ rather than, ‘I understand.’”

To accomplish this before each lecture, Dr. Petchauer asks himself how students will respond to the material.

The classic circle time of kindergarten days is also essential to today’s hip-hop-inspired college classroom.

Participants use a cypher, or circle, when they gather to rap, dance, DJ, and respectfully take turns at competing.

“The cypher is improvisational, but there is this unspoken organization where there is social exchange and social learning going on,” he says. “Any classroom would benefit from a cypher.”

Dr. Petchauer has written two books, ***Schooling Hip-Hop: Expanding Hip-Hop Based Education Across the Curriculum*** and ***Hip-Hop Culture in College Students’ Lives: Elements, Embodiment, and Higher Edutainment***. His course, “The Education of Hip-Hop Culture” is being taught at Oakland’s Honors College this fall.

What is most important for educators is helping students be themselves.

Marcia Neel, a retired public school music educator who oversaw the Clark County School District in Las Vegas, won praise for adding a mariachi program that engages struggling students.

“The more a teacher can be open to trying new techniques, the better they will be and the better they will reach the student,” says Neel, president of Music Education Consultants, Inc. “We need to find more creative ways to reach out to those who need to be reached.”



special events showcasing his b-boy and DJ skills, kindled during high school after first seeing break dancing. His interest continued at Wheaton College in Chicago, where he received his bachelor's degree in English.

The marriage of hip-hop and education occurred when Dr. Petchauer was teaching English at Mar Vista High School in Imperial Beach, California, living within a few blocks of the beach and a couple of miles from the Mexican border. He had his bachelor's and a master's degree in teaching, with no intention of pursuing a doctoral degree.

Remembering Dr. Petchauer's penchant for hip-hop, his mentor called him. "He suggested I study education and look into how hip-hop could impact it," Dr. Petchauer recalls. "It was a no-brainer."

Dr. Petchauer enrolled at Virginia's Regent University, winning the School of Education's outstanding doctoral student award in 2007.

Hip-hop's power today, he says, is wide-reaching, despite first emerging in New York in the 1960s.

"Without even trying, it has spread to every habitable continent around the world. It is evocative, provocative and attractive to them, so many where people have taken it up and reinterpreted it as their own, which makes it a highly leveraged practice.

"Any culture that powerful has to have educational potential."