education review // reseñas educativas
editors: david j. blacker / gustavo e. fischman / melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

January 3, 2013 ISSN 1094-5296
Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center http://nepc.colorado.edu
and the College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware
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Low, Bronwen E. (2011) *Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Pp. xiii + 189 ISBN 978-0-8407-6366-0

Reviewed by Keith Cross
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"I urge streetwise sistaz with naive souls / to stop bein' hoez…"

There are two minutes before our performance. The building is packed, the news cameras are rolling, and the choir that has been commissioned for this series of Martin Luther King Week concerts watches as I am ushered aside by a representative of our sponsoring organization. Although for weeks they have had a transcript of my lyrics to *All We Got Is Us*, a song about how members of poor communities can work together, I am asked on the spot to replace or omit the word "hoez" from the above line. When I ask "Why?" the representative replies, "We can't have you say 'hoez'. All the press will focus on is a rapper saying 'hoez' at our event." I state, "If you've already examined the lyrics, you know the meanings are positive!

Citation: Cross, Keith. (2013 January 3) Review of *Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom* by Low, Bronwen E. *Education Review, 16.* Retrieved [Date] from http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1200.pdf

If I change it, anyone who may have benefitted, won't." Thirty seconds left… He replies, "The director says you either change it or we're pulling the song." Twenty seconds left… I grab the microphone.

This story, though personal, illustrates the unfortunate reality of Hip-Hop identified youth, for whom the politics of interpretation and representation can be difficult to navigate, particularly when these youths' freedom of expression is constrained by institutions that regard the language practices within Hip-Hop culture as inherently pernicious.

In *Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom*, Bronwen E. Low, explores the counter-intuitive possibility that "the very reasons [educators] might resist the deliberate introduction of Hip-Hop into the planned curriculum…are what make Hip-Hop so pedagogically vital," (p. 1) Through the frames of cultural positioning and authenticity, Low examines how Hip-Hop identified students' expressive and social freedoms are constrained by views of who they are, and can be. She uses Tim (the teacher), Rashidah (the poet in residence) and their students as an existence proof (Borko, 2004) of the power of Hip-Hop pedagogies to develop a critical awareness regarding conflicts of race, gender, language, violence, and sexuality. For those new to Hip-Hop culture or its uses in pedagogical practice, Low systematically orients the reader to relevant research and literature, providing in the first part of every chapter the theoretical and historical context necessary to engage with the data of classroom phenomena (and its associated implications) introduced later in the chapter. Low makes each chapter a virtual standalone resource for both theoretical and practical information about Hip-Hop pedagogies and culturally responsive teaching in general.

Early on, Low makes it known that she is not Hip-Hop, or even American, but a white Canadian researcher. She makes the case that the cultural position of individuals as insiders or outsiders of the Hip-Hop culture impacts their experiences in relationship to the culture, just as her own status as an outsider occasionally led her to misunderstand classroom interactions. Low argues that Hip-Hop culture's near hegemonic influence on urban youth culture, when coupled with the relatively unchanging Whiteness of

the American teaching force, or even the generational differences between students and teachers of color, necessitates an understanding of the dynamics of cultural insider- and outsider-ness. Low provides a convincing example of this in her analysis of the seemingly innocuous decision to make the class a Spoken Word class instead of a Hip-Hop or Rap class. According to Low, anxiety surrounding rap music is closely related to the fact that it is marked in the minds of many inside and outside Hip-Hop culture as "black", and as such it triggers this society's fears of black youth. In contrast, Spoken Word is perceived as less "hard" (not as hyper-masculine), less "black" (multi-ethnic), and less misogynistic (the female gender is heavily and respectfully represented). Thus, creating a Spoken Word class kept one group of Hip-Hop outsiders (the school administration) at bay, while welcoming those students who may have perceived themselves as Hip-Hop outsiders (non-blacks, females, and non-rappers). Low expertly employs this multivalent approach to examining cultural positioning throughout the book.

For Low, critical Hip-Hop pedagogy must take into account the culture's politics of authenticity, that is, the Hip-Hop notion of the "real," the idea that the hyper-masculine sex and violence-filled street and party life conveyed by rappers is rooted in actual experience. Low expresses her concern that if students accept some of Hip-Hop's more oppressive representations and narratives as true, it limits their ability to imagine more for themselves. Though she, Tim, and Rashidah are relatively unsuccessful at dispelling the students' belief that rap artists' lives are lived as narrated, they do an amazing job of using critical analysis to help these students extend their own artistic realities beyond the limited trajectories of the "real". Within this framework, Low provides a compelling case for culturally responsive pedagogies by marking how Tim (in acknowledging his outsider-ness and presenting himself as a humble student to his students' expertise in Hip-Hop culture) is able to gain his students trust and use that trust to push the boundaries of their creativity and its interpretation. This is most evident when, in response to one of their classmates being disrespectfully censored, the first group of students' in Low's study decide to become pioneers, and are prompted by Tim to craft their poetry in a way that champions free speech, while acknowledging

the realities of interpretation and preconception, yet transcending them.

Though it occasionally paired an excessive amount of background information with a disproportionately smaller amount of classroom data, *Slam School* would prove an indispensable resource for the aspiring teacher or researcher of Hip-Hop pedagogies. Low provides a comprehensive orientation to the extant body of Hip-Hop literature, from the theoretical and historical to the pedagogical. For a teacher interested in adopting/adapting Hip-Hop or Spoken Word pedagogies into their own practice, Low provides countless examples of ways to engage students and engage with students. Some of the pedagogies shared also have applications beyond the Hip-Hop or Spoken Word classroom, as they are subject-transcendent, culturally relevant strategies that can be used by any educators concerned with improving their general teaching practice.

References

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About the Reviewer

Keith Cross is a doctoral student in the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Interdisciplinary Policy Studies in Education program at the Stanford University Graduate School of Education. A fervent believer in the power of the word and authentic expression, Keith is a veteran performer and seasoned Hip Hop curriculum designer of programs for youth and senior citizens. His research interests include programmatic, curricular and instructional approaches to education through artistic disciplines, and the continuities between artistic, academic and professional domains.

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