

Word Up: Using Spoken Word and Hip Hop Subject Matter in Pre-College Writing Instruction

by Geoffrey Sirc and Terri Sutton



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Minnesota Spoken Word associate director E.G. Bailey describes the history of spoken word poetry as a cross-pollination of music and word.

Spin on your head. Find Davy Crockett in Lil Wayne. Hear two University professors contest the psychology of oppression. Write a poem, revise it with a mentor, set it to a beat, perform it onstage, spotlighted. (Watch your high-school English teacher do the same.) Explore the University Libraries' academic search engines. Discover a Lost Poet. Draw graffiti outside Vincent Hall (on paper, please).

Stir the above into four head-spinning days, and you have a day camp for the ages (15 to late 50s, all

told). Last summer, from June 24–27, 2008, the Department of English at the University of Minnesota partnered with the Minnesota Spoken Word Association (MnSWA) to inaugurate an outreach literacy program for local high-school students and teachers. The four-day institute, named “In Da Tradition,” used spoken word and hip hop to teach academic and creative writing to 35 core-city high-school students. In addition, 20 high-school teachers writing and researching alongside the students witnessed an instructive model for utilizing the subject in their

public-school classrooms—both for creative writing and academic research projects. In Da Tradition was supported in part through a grant from CURA's New Initiatives program. Additional funding was provided by Education Minnesota's Affinity Grant Program, the Urban Research and Outreach/Engagement Center, and the Department of English at the University of Minnesota.

Roots of the Institute

Since 1993, English Professor Geoff Sirc has taught the class *Researching Hip Hop* at the University of Minnesota,



Teachers Veann Beutler and Jane Sevald collaborate on the spoken word piece they will perform at the end of the workshop.

first in the General College¹ and then in the Department of English. Underlying that course is the assumption that students learn a great deal about how to think, read, and write like a scholar by focusing on a subject that they already understand in powerful ways. This has been a foundational tenet in the history of college writing instruction. Surveying freshman composition in 1965, for example, Robert Gorrell of the National Council of teachers of English noted, “the most important need is to get the student excited about something so that he is stimulated to write about it.”² Hip hop, as the second largest selling music genre in the United States, easily satisfies the requirement for excitement; students’ prior knowledge of hip hop gives them an easier entrée into the language, strategies, and techniques of college writing at a major research university.

¹ General College was established in 1932 as an experimental college designed to develop new pedagogy to deal with non-traditional students, particularly returning GIs. The College’s mission was shifted in the mid-1980s; rather than granting degrees, the College became a developmental education unit designed to prepare students for successful transfer to other degree-granting units at the University. In 2006, General College was reorganized as the Department of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning in the College of Education and Human Development.

² Robert M. Gorrell. “Freshman Composition.” In *The College Teaching of English*, edited by John C. Gerber. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965, p. 93.

In the spring of 2007, English professor and department chair Paula Rabinowitz and English event coordinator Terri Sutton began talking with executive director E. G. Bailey and artistic director Shá Cage of MnSWA about possible public engagement collaborations. MnSWA was created to inform and help to develop the art form of spoken word in Minnesota. Since 2001, MnSWA has been bringing its Spoken Word Residencies to Minnesota middle and high schools (including continuing relationships with Minneapolis’ Patrick Henry High School, Roosevelt High School, Northeast Middle School, and Marcy Open School (grades K–8), as well as high schools in St. Cloud and Duluth), working to make literacy fun, innovative, and accessible to all kids. MnSWA also sponsors the Quest for the Voice! Youth Slam Series, taking a Minnesota youth team to the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival annually.³ MnSWA co-created the First Wave Spoken Word Learning Community at the University of Wisconsin–Madison; however, Bailey and Cage wanted to establish a working relationship closer to home, with the University of Minnesota.

³ MnSWA provides significant adult programming as well, such as their Urban Griots radio show airing Saturday nights on KMOJ 89.9 FM in Minneapolis. Beyond the programs cited above, MnSWA has worked with dozens of poets to present and develop their art in local showcases.

One of the first ideas discussed by Rabinowitz, Sutton, Bailey, and Cage was a summer camp for high-school youth that would use creative writing—in the form of spoken word—to encourage literacy. MnSWA believes that the tool of poetry can reach students in Minnesota that the educational system has failed; to that end, it also is committed to training teachers in using creative writing in the classroom. Rabinowitz was also interested in teacher training, as Department of English faculty had 20 years ago initiated College in the Schools, an accredited concurrent enrollment program in which high school students take a University course (with the pace and standards that implies) under the direction of a high school teacher trained and overseen by University personnel. It was not long before Bailey, Sutton, Cage, and Rabinowitz decided that participants in any English/MnSWA summer day camp collaboration should include high-school teachers as well as their students. Given Professor Sirc’s interest in hip hop, as well as that of other English faculty (most notably associate professor Evelyn Ch’ien, who teaches and researches hip hop music and literature), the focus of the proposed day camp was soon further enlarged to encompass both spoken word and hip hop, as well as academic and creative writing. Professor Sirc joined the project in the summer of 2007.

In the fall of 2007, the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Minnesota awarded Professor Sirc a 2007–2008 Multicultural Teaching and Learning Fellowship Grant through its Initiative for Pursuing Excellence in Multicultural Teaching and Learning. The primary objective of his proposed project was to investigate the possibility of using the subjects of spoken word and hip hop to introduce diverse high-school students to the inquiry patterns and analytical tools of college-level writing. Again, by focusing on subject matter in which precollege students very likely have expertise, the project aimed to demystify both the process and content of knowledge-making at the college level—and to demonstrate the feasibility and value of postsecondary study (especially in English at the University of Minnesota) for Twin Cities urban high-school students.

The Multicultural Teaching and Learning Fellowship Grant allowed Sirc to hire an undergraduate research assistant to help Sutton raise funds

for and manage the summer camp, which we now call an “institute.” Sirc strategized programming with Bailey and Cage from the winter into the spring. Sutton received significant advice and programming ideas from Muriel Thompson and Kirsten Jansen, directors of the Minnesota Writing Project at the University, who offer annual training programs for Minnesota teachers; in 2006, Jansen had organized a week-long residential summer writing camp for middle-school students and their teachers on the University of Minnesota campus called “Gopher Writing Camp.” In addition, the regular meetings with the other Multicultural Teaching and Learning fellows at the University encouraged Sirc’s thinking and planning around using multicultural subject matter to encourage literacy and interest in cultural analysis—in other words, to expand the understanding and practice of teaching and learning in a multicultural context. Prior to this, nothing like the proposed spoken word and hip hop summer institute was being offered in the Twin Cities. As a former General College faculty member, Sirc became committed to two principles: the imperative for education to address all cultures equally, and the need for the University to broaden its mission to the larger community. This project would do both, in a way that would address the needs of some of the most creative and at-risk students in the Twin Cities’ urban area.

For the department, one of the project’s most appealing goals was to show students who might not be thinking of attending the University that there is a place for them here; students who participated in our summer institute would learn how the University works as a knowledge-making enterprise, how research questions are formed and investigated, how information resources are brought to the problem, how collaboration helps with inquiry, and how the results of analysis are written up in academic prose. Our students would not only be learning academic inquiry, they would also be learning about academic tools (particularly our online library) to see how information is searched, evaluated, and applied to an important cultural question. Although MnSWA had ensured that there were programs in the public schools helping students compose and perform spoken word and hip hop, none were using hip hop as a bridge to academic culture.



Photo © Steve Schneider, 2009

Graphic artist Elliot Looney (above) explains the ABCs of graffiti. Later in the day, In Da Tradition participants took up spray paint cans to create graffiti banners.



Establishing a “Tradition”

At 10 AM on a June morning promising heat to come, the first annual In Da Tradition Spoken Word and Hip Hop Institute took over the basement of Vincent Hall on the East Bank of the University of Minnesota campus. A crowded check-in table processed teachers and students from North High School, Highland High School, Dunwoody Academy, Plymouth Youth Center Alternative High School, and South High School (one teacher came from as far away as South Dakota, where she teaches at St. Francis Indian School). Five spoken word and hip hop

mentors—some still in high school themselves, all experienced writers and performers—encouraged the milling participants to take seats in an auditorium’s air-conditioned luxury. Bailey, Cage, Sirc, and Sutton introduced themselves, welcomed the participants, and explained the program; Cage, a veteran actress (Illusion and Frank Theaters, among others) and spoken word recording artist, roused the sleepy teenagers with call and response. We split participants into two groups, and we were off.

The daily schedule featured morning and afternoon sessions that

Sirc led on the historical context, social and cultural questions, and research resources of hip hop, as well as two sessions with Bailey on the history, form, and practice of spoken word. In Sirc's sessions, he introduced hip hop as a topic for research inquiry and written analysis, leading off with a Snoop Dogg track which over the week we used as a starting point for researching academic criticism, finding antecedents of hip hop mythology in American literary history, and framing one's own critical argument and substantiation.

Following Gerald Graff's advice in *Beyond the Culture Wars* to "teach the conflicts," students in Sirc's class began by reviewing some of the media's most virulent attacks against hip hop. Then, students were asked to write a brief response to such claims, either agreeing or disagreeing with the media's depiction of hip hop as a problem. Students reviewed those paragraphs the next day, with Sirc explaining that such personal, expressive writing can be made more persuasive in an academic setting if there is some kind of strong theoretical or research-based support to bolster one's opinions. Students were exposed to the University Libraries' website, particularly the index of scholarly articles, as well as some search strategies for using those indexes productively. Each student found a source to support some claim in their argument and then revised their writing accordingly. The students then received a mini-lesson in the principles of research-based scholarly writing. As one teacher commented on the evaluation forms,

Geoffrey Sirc's lectures, taking 'G'z and Hustlers' and turning it into both a teaching opportunity and sociological lesson on oral literature of the last 300 years, was entertaining and a great example for me as a teacher how to use a difficult text to provoke discussion and get students to dig into their opinions.

Bailey led the participants through a history of spoken word poetry, which is often mistakenly thought of as a phenomenon of the last decade. Another teacher participant wrote:

Beginning from the first day, when E.G. Bailey played samples from three generations of spoken word, it was an introduction in the richest sense to the tradition of spoken word and hip-hop. I've been writing

spoken word, listening to spoken word, and using it to teach teenagers for the last two years but had no sense of it coming out of a tradition. In teaching us that tradition, E.G. gave us as both artists and educators a huge dive much deeper into spoken word and hip-hop, to analyze it artistically, to find new artistic resources and to pass the tradition on to a new generation.

Each morning session ended with a demonstration by hip hop artists, including break dancers, a turntable disc jockey, and graffiti artists, as well as time for the students to try each form. We will not soon forget watching champion break dancer Damian "Daylight" Day (the *Star Tribune* called him "Minnesota's most famed b-boy") back-flipping down the stairs of the Vincent auditorium. The Institute definitely attracted attention as high-school teachers and students alike experimented with the "aerosol arts" on a long roll of butcher paper across the Northrop Mall lawn (under the spray-can tutelage of some Twin Cities graffiti artists who shall remain nameless). After lunch, we held two afternoon sessions, and the day ended with writing and research time and individual meetings with mentors. Participants wrote a spoken word or lyric draft on the first day and received advice on revision and performance as the week continued.

Friday, our final day, began with an electrifying artist and scholar panel, which included University professors Alexs Pate, Na'im Madyun, Carol Miller, Pat James, and Julie Schumacher, who were joined by long-time Twin Cities spoken word artist j. otis powell! as well as some of the Institute's mentor-artists (such as 16-year-old hip hop artist Chantz, who has visited Professor Sirc's classes in the past, and University of Minnesota English major and spoken word artist Moira Pirsch). The focus of the discussion was the exciting scholarly and creative work being done on the University campus—which the students, they were told, should aim to join. Many student participants expressed interest in taking University classes as high-school students, which led to a discussion of how difficult doing so is for those intent on the humanities. Although the University has a successful program in which Twin Cities students from grades 6 to 12 take accelerated math and science classes, no equivalent

is available for English and the other humanities.

Friday ended with a rousing showcase at the Whole Music Club in the University's Coffman Union, in which the Institute's students—both high-schoolers and their teachers—took the stage to read what they had created over the week, amid performances by professional Twin Cities spoken word and hip hop artists such as Truthmaze and Maria Isa Perez. At one point, a teacher and two of her students read together, all clutching their papers with shaking hands, each articulating with sincerity and artfulness—and every one high-fiving the others with relief at the end. As one participant put it on her evaluation form: "Treating us as artists!! Priceless!"

Results

The students provided baseline academic writing samples at the beginning of the Institute, which they then fleshed out and revised during the week's activities. At the end of the week, Sirc collected the revised works, which showed a clear improvement in the use of research to back up arguments, more thoughtful construction of arguments (less "ranting"), and more deliberate use of language. One student described what he/she had discovered: "I learned a lot about all types of artists and how each artist defined themselves. How to research and back up arguments. Timeline of hip hop. Elements of hip hop. Different authors/critics. Ways to review albums. Vocabulary."

Evaluation forms from both student and teacher participants gave the programming high scores for breadth, intensity, and inspiration. Nearly all the teachers said that they were carrying useful new tools back to their classrooms—and that they would enthusiastically attend a second offering of the program next summer that presented an advanced track for this year's participants. "[The Institute] is a huge tool for teachers who want to introduce spoken word and hip hop into their classrooms," wrote one teacher. "There are few opportunities for teachers to learn about the history of these traditions, and understanding the tradition is a great way to create connection between older teachers and younger students." As for the students, most agreed that "this Institute needs to reach more people around my way, because it will at least get people's minds thinking a lot more. I know my mind is."



High school students hear from University of Minnesota professors about the various scholarship possibilities available at the University.

In February 2009, we polled the teacher participants again as to how the techniques that they learned at the Institute had worked out in their classrooms. We received a 50% response rate from the 20 teachers who attended. Asked how much Bailey's and Sirc's class session tracks affected their teaching practice, on a scale of 1 (very little) to 10 (very much), all but two responded with scores between 6 and 9. Two low scores of 3 came from two teachers who filled out the survey together with a note that said that the classes "helped strengthen" their teaching practice, but that they "already had a strong foundation." (When asked if they would return for a second year of the Institute with an "expert" track, the two responded "Absolutely!!") The teachers described what they had done in their schools as a result of the Institute, including expanding spoken-word units, initiating poetry slams, hosting class guests who were guest artists at the Institute, applying and receiving grants for expanded hip hop programming, establishing Open Mic events, and in general enhancing classroom teaching with the knowledge gained. Teachers mentioned regularly using Bailey's writing strategies and Sirc's analogies about the importance of research in the construction of an argument. One teacher wrote:

I ... loved the research process that Professor Sirc modeled. As a learner, the materials were engaging and thought-provoking.

Another responded:

[H]e was able to find a topic (hip hop lyrics) that sparked a reaction by everyone in the room. I've definitely used that technique to engage students who don't seem to be otherwise interested in reading and writing.

Our goals for the Institute were two-fold: to develop in urban secondary students a sense of confidence in themselves as scholars and writers, and to show high-school instructors how to use multicultural subject matter to encourage students' literacy and their interest in cultural analysis—subject matter with which students are already familiar. We witnessed the development of the former through the week in the construction of creative and scholarly writing pieces. The Friday artist and scholar panel benefited from the students' confident questioning of their mentors and advisors. In terms of the latter goal, the high-school teachers told us they were energized by how much they learned regarding teaching multicultural communities, while at the same time giving us great advice for expanding and improving the program for summer 2009.

Future Traditions

Both the University's Department of English and MnSWA are on board to make a second edition of *In Da Tradition* a reality. Together we have

critiqued last summer's programming and compiled ideas we believe will strengthen the Institute, including more hands-on opportunities to try out hip hop art forms and more individual mentoring in both creative and scholarly writing. We also plan to more widely publicize the Friday showcase within the University and local communities. This year we will host students from new schools (Perpich Center for Arts Education, Southwest High School, the Multicultural Indigenous Academy St. Paul charter high school) alongside previously participating schools (South, North, Plymouth Youth Center, Dunwoody Institute). After experiencing some student dropout last year, we decided to focus on the schools that participated successfully. As a consequence, the program may involve one-third fewer participants than last year, but we feel more certain of their commitment to the program. Finally, this past year we were only able to involve one University of Minnesota undergraduate in a limited capacity; after the fact, we discovered more than a few undergraduate and graduate students interested in playing a part in the activities, whether as mentors or participants. This summer three undergraduates with backgrounds in creative writing, hip hop, and service learning around literacy will act as mentors for Institute participants. Stipends for the students will be funded by a University of Minnesota Academic Initiative in partnership with Coca-Cola.

Using In Da Tradition for Public Engagement

Involving more Department of English students at the University in the Institute presents an exciting opportunity to strengthen the department's public engagement. Currently, the department is involved in a two-year process through the Engaged Department Program (run by the University's Office of Public Engagement). The Department of English on the Twin Cities campus is one of seven departments systemwide to be awarded \$10,000 to plan, establish, implement, and evaluate strategic initiatives that advance the integration of public engagement into research and teaching activities. For years, the Department of English has been implementing a variety of public-engagement initiatives. For example, it trains both current and future public-school teachers; in addition to working with current teachers through College in the

Schools, many Department of English graduates become K–12 teachers. The department also puts many of its undergraduates to work in the community, as it has one of the strongest service-learning programs in the University's College of Liberal Arts. The department's primary goal now in terms of public engagement is to establish an integrated curriculum around engagement from introductory to capstone courses, and to create extracurricular opportunities for teaching and mentoring along the way. Connecting service learning-oriented English courses with the department's public engagement programming (such as the In Da Tradition Institute) will broaden and enhance students' public engagement arc within English.

As more than one of our teacher survey respondents noted, hip hop culture *is* youth culture. Engaging with it engages students who may otherwise be uninterested in reading and writing.

The Institute focuses on the history, significance, pedagogy, and performance of spoken word and hip hop in order to encourage literacy, to inspire core-city high-school students to work toward postsecondary education, and to expand all of our ideas of what is possible both in academic scholarship and in creative writing. As we witness the teachers and students (one now acting as a teaching assistant in her teacher's classroom) bringing knowledge gleaned at the Institute to schools and centers across the Twin Cities metropolitan area, we can see those goals in action. "[W]hat we learn through the course of these workshops, lessons, and discussions," noted one teacher participant, "goes further than what one person takes away." Or in a student's simpler terms, "This is dope."

Geoffrey Sirc is professor of English at the University of Minnesota. His research and teaching interests include the history,

theory, and practice of writing instruction; popular culture; and digital media. **Terri Sutton** is the Informational Representative for the Department of English. She received her MFA from the Creative Writing Program in the Department of English in 2001.

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Update on CURA's Neighborhood Partnership Initiative

During the last two years, CURA has funded 24 innovative neighborhood partnerships through the Neighborhood Partnership Initiative (NPI). Made possible by a two-year grant from the McKnight Foundation, the purpose of NPI is to foster innovative, effective partnerships that increase involvement of immigrant, under-represented, and youth constituencies in solving neighborhood problems in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Response to the program has been impressive, with 61 innovative project proposals received. Many of the organizational partners had not previously worked together, but came together to leverage their program skills and neighborhood connections. Some examples of projects that have been funded include the following:

- ▶ "Sidewalk Saving Lives," a partnership among Hawthorne Community Council, Juxtaposition Arts, Kwanzaa Church, Avenues for Homeless Youth, Northside Arts Collective, and Homewood Studios, organized

a one-day event involving 75 youth painters and 10 adult artists to paint positive HIV/AIDS prevention messages on 10 north Minneapolis sidewalks. The sidewalks, which were painted in September 2008, attracted hundreds of community members and provide continuing education about this important community health issue.

- ▶ Lyndale Neighborhood Association and Youth Farm organized diverse community members to transform two garden sites into safe public spaces in south Minneapolis. Strong connections were made with and between Somali, Latino, and other community members in this project. These relationships also helped identify important community concerns that continue to inform the work of the neighborhood organization.
- ▶ Thomas/Dale District Seven Planning Council and the Center for Hmong Arts and Talent (CHAT) partnered to create a 10-week pilot program

to engage Hmong youth in neighborhood issues while using their talents as artists. This project has contributed to greater participation of Hmong residents in the neighborhood, and the election of two new Hmong board members to the Planning Council Board of Directors.

The success of NPI underscores the value of seeding partnerships between community organizations to broaden community involvement and leverage the resources and experience of community organizations. Funding is being sought to continue the program for 2010.

On the evening of November 19, 2009, CURA will convene participants from the NPI-funded projects to share their experiences and insights. Future plans for the program will also be discussed. For more information about NPI or the November event, visit www.cura.umn.edu/NPI.php or contact Jeff Corn at 612-625-0744 or jcorn@umn.edu.