Using Rap Lyrics as a Resource in the Secondary English Classroom

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Abstract:

Rap music is a fascinating new art form, created just thirty years ago. It sprang up, from no directly attributable source, during a time of great change and adversity in New York City’s Bronx. Rap combines layers of material sampled from other music with sometimes strikingly original, humorous and touching lyrics to be like no other musical form.

Like many innovations, rap has met with a mixed reception. Dismissed as a fad, disdained for borrowing from other music, criticized for anti-social messages, still rap thrives.

Not only is rap beloved by many of my students, it is also relevant to students’ lives because it tells stories about the lives of black people, of young people and of people living in the city. These connections allow my African American, city-dwelling students to see their lives and interests reflected in the curriculum and to participate as experts in their own learning.

Rap is topical, commenting on current events, and controversial, which of which qualities make it high-interest. Rap also has the potential to illustrate for students all of the literary skills Philadelphia's Core Curriculum and Pennsylvania's State Academic Standards require. I have designed a curriculum unit that uses rap lyrics in several ways: first, as examples of several categories of literary devices; second, as an African-based American art form that deserves to be examined, enjoyed and analyzed; and third, as a way for students to trace themes, ideas and literary styles across the literature of several eras.