

Book and New Media Reviews

Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom

Bronwen E. Low

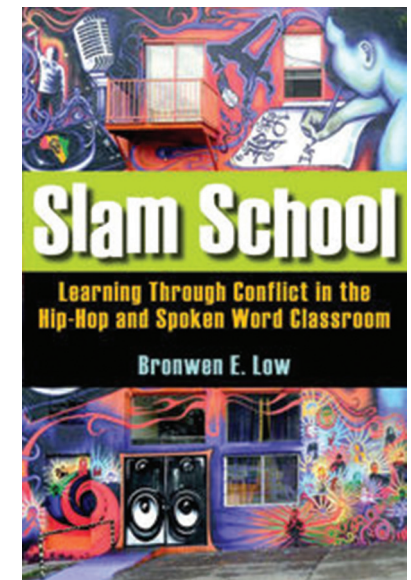
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In *Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom*, Bronwen E. Low argues for the significance of critical hip-hop pedagogies, particularly when engaging with racial and social conflicts in educational settings. Low collaborated with a teacher at an urban arts magnet high school in the northeastern United States through a performance poetry course that was taught using a hip-hop and spoken word curriculum. Overall, Low's book is useful for community literacy scholars as an application and assessment of a popular practice and growing pedagogy in schools and community organizations.

Low collected data, including audio-visual recordings, for two years. She transcribed and coded recordings through the use of grounded theory as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990); for instance, initial coding of broad themes such as race transitioned to more specific codes as the transcriptions offered particular data for Low to identify and interpret. The more general themes were altered, then, once Low discovered that conflict was central to the learning experience in a hip-hop and spoken word classroom. Classroom conflicts ranged from issues of race, ethnicity, and gender to generational distinctions and understandings of hip-hop; the terminology Low used to define and code conflict included "(mis)understanding," "offense," "mistranslation," and "difference" (Low xii).

Low argues for more direct engagement with cultural differences in a context where classrooms are increasingly diverse in terms of ethnic backgrounds, while most of the teachers remain white. This context is of particular interest to Low because of the opportunity for knowledge-making that can come from cultural conflicts bound



to arise in a hip-hop and spoken word curriculum. Low's experiences with hip-hop and spoken word were primarily on a theoretical level, while the high school teacher had had little experience with these genres in either theory or practice. However, Low and her partner teacher made it a point to avoid the view that, because they did not have tangible experience with hip-hop and spoken word, they should not be involved in developing such a curriculum and pedagogy alongside students. Extant hip-hop pedagogy assumes the instructor's intricate knowledge of the culture, but Low claims that the story told in this book—wherein a teacher who is unfamiliar with hip-hop culture nonetheless integrates it into the classroom as part of an exchanged learning experience alongside students—is a more likely scenario based on the current demographics of many classrooms. Indeed, Low identifies “the dynamics of cultural insider and outsider-ness in teaching” as one of the book's main concerns (3).

According to Low, some conflicts arise when hip-hop is introduced into classroom settings because much hip-hop discourse is critical of traditional approaches in education; thus, it can be difficult to convince administrators of the value of a hip-hop curriculum. Low argues that a pedagogy of the complexity of hip-hop culture, in terms of the politics surrounding issues such as “gender, violence, sexuality, materialism, race, and language,” is crucial to curricula, in spite of the potential resistance of administrators in incorporating these subjects into the curriculum (1). At the same time, spoken word and slam poetry, themselves outgrowths of hip-hop, are seen as more inclusive for a diverse population of students than rap, which is “marked as black.” Low claims that there have been well-known slam poets, on the other hand, from “all cultural groups” (14). The performance poetry course detailed in this book exists within this framework and with these assumptions, so that Low forwards a “trans-disciplinary critical hip-hop pedagogy” that “explores racism in intersection with other modes of oppression and is centered on the experiences and knowledge of students of color” (20).

The book is organized around the following subjects: Low gives a historical overview of hip-hop, spoken word, and slam poetry, in addition to a summary of her methods and purpose (Chapter 1). Low also discusses the idea of “keeping it real” as a theoretical framework and considers how students interpreted and learned about the concept of “authenticity” (Chapter 2). She considers how to foster critical detachment in relationship to the issue of authenticity and its significance to youth. She then argues for a pedagogy that values conflict as well as awareness of multiple interpretations as conflict unfolds (Chapter 3). These pedagogical queries are used as a way to analyze how discussions about hip-hop, students' production of poetry, and identities, as well as specific interactions within the class, may have been influenced by the subject of race (Chapter 4). Discourses of race connect with an examination of the language of hip-hop and controversies surrounding language, such as the prominent use of “bitches” and “ho's” in rap (Chapter 5). Low rounds out the book with a general discussion of how hip-hop curricula are spreading, while arguing for greater communication among schools and community organizations regarding how such pedagogies can be shared (Chapter 6). Low proposes four elements to consider in hip-hop education: “(1) hip-hop education as a movement; (2) the fluorescence of hip-hop programming outside of schools; (3) the slam poetry movement taking America by

storm; and (4) multilingual, multicultural, and global hip-hop,” all of which “respond, in different ways, to the challenges posed by hip-hop education” (146).

Low devotes a large space in the book to the question of authenticity, or “keeping it real”; this is a significant query in terms of the development of young people and the knowledges they bring to the table that enhance and can guide educational experiences. Much of the book is focused on the pedagogy and practices that encouraged students to explore how they define and are defined by notions of authenticity. Low's analysis offers the opportunity for other scholars to more deeply consider the relationship between authenticity and the performative, in terms of forming a viable curriculum that honors personal experience and invention while fostering critical cognizance of socially constructed elements of experience and genre. As Low notes, the concept of authenticity is problematic in that performativity must be taken into account and a focus on an “authentic self” is essentialist. Yet the concept cannot be ignored in relationship to a hip-hop curriculum, as so much of hip-hop is focused on self-revelations of “truth.” Low discovers that it is challenging to encourage experiential artistic production while fostering an awareness of the representational nature of such productions; in the classroom, it is difficult to determine how to fit together critical awareness with a vibrant, genuine connection with one's experiential expressions, particularly if these expressions are critiqued based on perceived authenticity.

Also of interest is the fact that Low works across disciplines (e.g., poetics, cultural studies) to build her study and argument, thus emphasizing the significance of interdisciplinary engagements—particularly in relation to the focus on conflict in the classroom. Low also works to read events from multiple interpretations, to argue “against easy analyses of what actually happened,” and to look for the unknown or unexpected (26). This method encourages openness about the limitations of her perspective. It also emphasizes the opportunities and limitations in perspective offered by various constituents involved in the hip-hop curriculum—from students to teachers to parents. Low's approach, of juxtaposing multiple interpretations of an event, is one step toward focusing more intently on listening and audience. This practice is one that any discussion of conflict and pedagogy should feature, and scholars who engage with this book will have found another tool for doing so.

Slam School has several implications for community literacy studies. Its broadest implication is the possibility of bringing together work in the community and in schools through an established and complicated art form. The book offers a practical delineation of a curriculum that articulates context-specific conflicts but demonstrates broader significance for diverse community literacy contexts. Low also calls for more work between community organizations and schools, in terms of sharing and learning from these pedagogies. Finally, the book provides a working frame for cross-cultural communications and community literacies, and for interacting across cultures along with youth.

The book's exploration of conflict through a hip-hop pedagogy converses with other recent attempts to progress through and across conflicting ideas to promote and act toward social change. For instance, Linda Flower's *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* (2008) offers strategies for resolving conflict and creating active change as it draws on the lessons of a community partnership that lasted nearly a decade. In contrast to Low's work, Flower's long-term project occurred out-