

What's the Rap? Thinking Critically about Citation Practices Given the Rise of Hip-Hop

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Abstract: Hip-hop offers opportunities to rethink citation and argument. Hip-hop's melding with digital media means that students and scholars alike must keep abreast of citation style changes and continually investigate what counts as evidence in the classroom. This involves considering the ways in which popular culture, namely hip-hop, can help students learn about notions of truth and evidence. Further, hip-hop's ready use of wordplay encourages constant critical inquiry into issues of truthfulness, authenticity, and evidence. Thus, hip-hop offers exciting opportunities to investigate citation and argument in the classroom, even though hip-hop is open to critique.

Keywords: Hip-hop, rhetoric, argumentation, evidence, composition studies

Introduction

Hip-hop demands rethinking what counts as evidence in our written and spoken communication. There are several reasons why this new way of thinking is beneficial including not only a deeper appreciation for texts and cultures, but also because the ability to weigh the relative significance of evidence and use that evidence appropriately are life skills that benefit students well beyond their time in school. Students are no longer confined to the dusty tomes and crumpled journal paper of yesteryear. The confluence of hip-hop music and digital technology means students have ever-increasing opportunities to experience, use, and ultimately cite hip-hop in their academic work. This requires scholars (and students) to improve their thinking about evidence and citation practices. This article contends that teachers, particularly those with more traditional views of learning, must rethink teaching citation practices and ideas about evidence and argumentation to account for music and music videos, and that the ways hip-hop music calls into question authenticity and originality means teachers and students must critically analyze, as they ideally would with other texts and cultural forms, what a hip-hop song purports to argue, and that as a result, hip-hop can help expand, for the better, our understanding of evidence and argumentation.

Hip-hop is not simply ascendant, but rather has ascended. Browse the latest music charts, television channel guides, or bookstore shelves and hip-hop is present. Move through the academic quad, attend a student organization fair, or wander into the nearest bar and one is likely to hear either the newest "trap" music, a sub-genre of hip-hop music popular in the U.S. South, or classics from Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. In many communities across the United States, and internationally as well, it is increasingly difficult to avoid hip-hop music let alone the other classical elements of hip-hop: break dancing, DJing, and graffiti art. Since its birth in late-1970s New York, hip-hop has helped galvanize support for social justice, blossomed into a multi-billion-dollar cultural formation, and affected areas of culture as diverse as law and fashion (Charnas, 2010; George 1998; Price, 2006, Sciullo, 2018). Like many artistic forms, hip-hop is not without its critics. Any investigation of or advocacy for hip-hop must acknowledge its misogyny, homophobia, and violence (Rose, 2008). Rather than disregard hip-hop music because of its faults, studying hip-hop can help produce a deeper understanding of culture despite its shortcomings (shortcomings that are hardly unique to hip-hop music).

Scholars are increasingly studying the impact hip-hop has on scholars and scholarship across a number of disciplines (Sciullo, 2014a; 2014b). This work emphasizes hip-hop as a teaching tool, an object of study, and a way to think about instruction (Weathersby, Jr., 2015). As such, hip-hop's role in teaching and learning is now well studied. However, hip-hop is no panacea: it will not reach all students, it will not solve all classroom instructional difficulties, and it will not avail itself to every class assignment. Yet, hip-hop may still provide important material for students in their studies, helping them to join scholarly communities and become better writers and speakers. In the same ways that other musical forms, from jazz to folk, have found their way into scholarship, so too can hip-hop be an important resources and area of study. However, the study of hip-hop raises important issues.

Discussions of citation practices and the ways they help and hinder academic writing and argument are prevalent in many disciplines. So numerous are the citations that even wading modestly into these waters produces a significant amount of citations and little clarity. Ole Bjørn Rekdal (2014) has argued that the digital revolution has complicated citation and made it more difficult for writers to assess a source's validity. If scholars struggle with these ideas, one might imagine students are also struggling. Hip-hop, which is increasingly digital, and students who are often more digitally literate than their instructors, combine into a perfect storm that educators must address if they follow Rekdal's general claim that the digital era complicates argument and effective citation skills.

Furthermore, handbooks are not the answer as they are often poor citation guides, and teachers are pivotal in helping students appreciate why citation skills are important as well as what those citation skills indicate about writers (Rose, 1996). If handbooks are poor guides, then students might not be expected to cite sources well. Browse a selection of handbooks at the university bookstore, and one is left with little advice on choosing the best evidence even if citation practices are covered thoroughly. Rose (1996) argued that citation credibility builds community, creating disciplinary identity and can be understood as a way to help bring students together. This then positions study of hip-hop as a community-building activity that may afford students not only the time to work on citations, but also the opportunity to better know each other and their discipline. New challenges to what counts as evidence or how one cites a source demand continued investigation by students and teachers alike.

The relationship between students and teachers is particularly important in the context of citation styles (Robillard, 2006). Educators can help frame if not enable students' expression of self, helping students to discuss what matters to them and what texts and ideas are important. Expanding discussions of evidence and citation to include hip-hop can only help make students better writers and speakers even if they chose to not work with hip-hop or have interests that are neither written nor musical. Hip-hop is an access point into "a more productive, respectful, and legitimate relationship to students and their writing" (Robillard, 2006, p. 269).

Hip-hop requires a rethinking of citation practices to account for lyrics, digital dissemination, and music videos. Yet, college students are notoriously weak at citation skills (Bessette, 2013). This may be the result of a number of issues: high school teachers who focus more on content than citation, college colleagues who do the same, lack of student effort, difficulties understanding teacher expectations, confusion over citation norms, etc. The rise of computer-generated citations produces difficulties as well, as students find recourse in shortcuts instead of learning citation styles, occasionally to the disastrous result of incomprehensible strings of words and punctuation meant to be citations.

With changes in technology, teachers are tasked with informing students of new citation practices relative to those advances. They must also keep up-to-date on changes in citation practices as well as individual journal practices, which occasionally modify established citation standards. Long gone are the days of citing book and journal articles in their paper form. Increasingly, journal articles are accessed only via the Internet. Webpages are becoming popular sources of information, many scholarly in nature, and quite a few peer-reviewed. This also means that music videos, playlists, lyrics, and album art may find themselves into student assignments. The world of multimedia requires scholars to devote time to multimedia instruction in the English classroom, and no doubt beyond (Dvorghets and Shaturnaya, 2015). That hip-hop is disseminated through multimedia means students using or studying hip-hop will be confronted with changes and sometimes complex norms about how to cite musical and electronic material. Scholars must then teach citation skills that account for these texts and the world of multimedia affecting students at increasing rates.

Despite students' limited citation skills, students tend to understand that books and scholarly journal articles are citable resources. Many have been taught this for some time. Teachers, of course, recognize this. It is fairly easy to understand the formats for citing books and journal articles with minimal effort. But, students may not understand that music and music videos are in fact citable resources. This is complicated by teachers who might be skeptical of music and music videos as evidence. The author has heard everything from "music is not a text" to "English class should be only about the canon" and variants of this sort of thinking. Most scholars likely have colleagues across departments and schools who have made similar statements, even though they seem out of touch with the modern world in which our students live. Every major United States citation style (MLA, APA, Chicago) provides for music and music video citation. First year students armed with their Hacker (2012) style manual may not though receive the complex citation instruction to comfortably cite digital and aural texts. Furthermore, college students might have only written papers where teachers mandated citations that were

confined to books, journals, and newspaper articles that could be found in the high school library, for example. Therefore, teachers must help students work through citing these new resources (Vedanham and Hassen, 2011).

Working with this deficit of experience, students also often want to write and speak about issues that matter to them making desire for meaningful discussion and lack of experience in citation converge on hip-hop's role in scholarship. Teachers should not do away with the substance and style classics of English instruction, but they ought to embrace the world of multimedia around them, appreciating that doing so can help students learn. Many of today's students would not be inclined to compose work on Chaucer, World War II, Thomas Jefferson, or the tenets of classical republicanism. While those topics are fine avenues of study, there are also many new ideas, people, and texts worthy of exploring. One might reasonably argue that forcing students away from popular culture texts could inhibit their learning by discouraging them from engaging their lived experience. It might also, generally, create an inhospitable environment for learning. So, students interested in hip-hop often chose to write and speak about social justice, current events, and new texts. This ought to be encouraged in order to assure students that their voices matter, and that scholarship can pertain to their lives in explicit ways. This is to argue; hip-hop helps expand curricula to include new texts and issues that matter for students.

For their part, teachers are busy and understanding the minute differences in citation style guide updates is difficult. Furthermore, citation style guide editors often debate how to cite new and old formats in online discussions, which can make keeping up-to-date difficult. One also should be careful to fault teachers who teach what they know (citing books and academic articles, and perhaps not blogs, music videos, or poetry slams). Yet, as students become more savvy media consumers, and old models of knowledge dissemination become less helpful, all teachers must begin to engage new texts and resources. This means helping students do the same. Therefore, teachers must be critical of their citation skills knowledge as well as their own citation practices (West and Brown, 2013). This means knowing about and teaching the ways to cite songs and music videos, among other nontraditional texts. This is not meant to do away with traditional evidence, but to augment it. The English classroom can be expanded to encompass more opportunities to learn, research, and write by giving hip-hop its due.

Some may scoff at this argument, assuming all teachers of English or any other subject are not only actively teaching how to cite all sources, but as well that they readily accept music and music videos as evidence appropriate for academic writing. The picture, however, is likely more complicated. Some teachers were schooled in an era where hip-hop was not yet a part of the music scene, others may have little to no exposure to hip-hop, and yet others may hold traditional notions of what constitutes a reliable source. As a result, educators may have trouble dealing with hip-hop's oppositional tendencies (Daspit and Weaver, 2005). This problem is not unique to hip-hop, as other musical forms present similar issues. For every scholar interested in phenomenological inquiry or autoethnography, there is a scholar who never leaves the archives. For every digital humanities scholar, there is a Stanford Literature Lab-trained quantitative scholar. These differences in training, department structure, job description, and personal interest mean scholars approach texts, evidence, and argument in different ways. Recognizing one's own text and citation preferences can only help educators do a better job teaching students.

Along with questions of how teachers think about evidence and how students cite that evidence, the question of music's truthfulness remains important (Nichols, 2011). To be sure, music like other writing and speaking can both abide some notion of truth as well as readily avail itself of the flourishes of fiction. And, if educators are to teach students about citations, then they ought to teach students about weighing the validity and importance of material to be cited. If a hip-hop song is offered as evidence of a proposition, one may be called upon to assess whether this citation actually supports the claim for which it is proffered. Citations to material that is untrue, unreliable, or unimportant can call an author's ethos into question and in turn lead readers to question the veracity of an argument. Recognizing that hip-hop music may not in fact be true, in the colloquial sense, does not diminish its persuasive importance even while it may call into question what hip-hop as evidence means or how it helps an argument. Put another way, Aesop's *Fables* are not persuasive because they are true. Hip-hop then requires educators to help students think through questions of evidence and proof when using new sources in their writing and speaking.

Assessing sources' veracity is not always intuitive. While scholars may be adept at weighing the truthfulness of a source, students face more difficulty. Understanding the veracity of a source is an art honed over time and with practice. Scholars and students should ask: What is this artist's ethos? Are the artist's claims supported? What do we know from other sources about the artist's claim? Does this song ring true given other claims by this or other artists in other songs? As with every source, comparison and weighing are key. A hip-hop song or artist

deserves the same scrutiny even if one might recognize that part of hip-hop's persuasive power lies not in truth, but instead in style (Cobb, 2008). So, being able to divorce music's truth from its persuasive capacities, that is to indicate understanding hip-hop as rhetorical, can help educators and students incorporate hip-hop into their work in meaningful ways.

One might counter that even if hip-hop is persuasive or a valid source of evidence, that it might not belong in the classroom because hip-hop often has violent and misogynistic themes. Simply because hip-hop music does some good for the writer or speaker and in the classroom, opponents may argue that the music or culture has no place in school. The causal relationship between violent hip-hop lyrics and violent crime has had its supporters over the years from C. Dolores Tucker to Bill O'Reilly. For these individuals, correlation appears to apply causation, even though the correlation between hip-hop and violence is negative (Bump, 2014). To be sure, hip-hop artists also embellish, lie, exaggerate, engage in hyperbole, and carefully practice wordplay (Sciullo, 2009). This means students must consider a song's lyrics, context, and even artists' biographical details in assessing what a song might support or prove. These skills are important regardless of a student's discipline or their plans after school. Rather than dismiss hip-hop as too violent or reduce it to its worst lyrics or least exemplary artists, scholars should consider the ways hip-hop helps students understand the grammar of life. And, it is not as if many of the authors cited on a regular basis have not exhibited their own fair share of problematic practices and ideas from Martin Heidegger to Kenneth Burke to William Shakespeare.

Hip-hop helps scholars and students expand their understanding of evidence and argument, as well as encouraging students to learn more about citation practices. These skills are necessary for the rest of one's life, not only in college. Hip-hop presents new challenges given its relationship to digital media, and as a result presents ample opportunities for teaching and learning. Hip-hop is culturally relevant because it spreads across the multimediated intercultural world, and today's students have more exposure to it than ever. Because students are likely to be influenced by and interested in hip-hop, even if they do not realize this influence, educators would be well-served to teach citation skills and evidence comparison with respect to this salient cultural form. If scholars and students do this, they stand to benefit from a richer understanding of culture and an expanded appreciation for the complexity of knowledge circulation. These are laudable goals for students and teacher, and will produce both with opportunities to engage hip-hop as an object and method of study.

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