Throwing the book away:
Incorporating students’ out-of-school literacies
into a secondary school English classroom

by

Bradley Thomas Cunningham
B.Kin., McMaster University, 1998
B.Ed., University of Toronto, 1999

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This thesis explores how the inclusion of students’ out-of-school literacies in a secondary English classroom affects students’ engagement, motivation, and sense of community. A mixed case study and action research approach was used in which the researcher taught a semester long multi-grade senior English class which used hip hop as its core content. Data was collected using audio field notes, focus group, one-on-one interviews, and written communication. Findings revealed that students felt the inclusion of hip hop made this English class more relevant and meaningful to the students and helped to foster a strong sense of community among the class members. This study also found that student-directed curriculum, teacher vulnerability, and the inclusion of community members as mentors were very important to the students’ sense of community. This sense of community, however, did not extend beyond the classroom.
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A note about the iBooks format

When Apple, Inc. released the textbook creation program iBooks Author in January, 2012, I immediately saw a way that I could honour the multimodal nature of hip hop in my thesis. As well, this format allowed me to place the students voices - not just their words, but their actual voices, replete with tone, pitch, cadence - at the center of my research for all to hear. Hip hop is a visual, oral, and aural practice and iBooks Author has allowed me to give an authentic presentation of the sights and sounds of Contemporary English. While this format is quite limiting in that the only devices on which it can be read as intended are an iPad 2 or the third (and each subsequent) generation iPad, I could not pass up the opportunity to make this paper completely multimodal. As you move through this paper on an iPad, please touch every image you see, listen to music and read lyrics as you do, tap through the Keynote presentation, tap on blue words to see glossary definitions and red phrases to link to the appropriate website, tap the videos to see them (you can make them full screen by tapping the arrows once it is playing) and, most importantly, listen to the student voices and what they have to say. It is my hope that you will not just read the words of this paper, but interact with it in its entirety.
A note about the .pdf version of this document

While this document was created to be an interactive experience on an iPad, in order for it to be more accessible, it has been published as a .pdf document as well. In the case that you are reading this thesis as a .pdf document, the interactive elements will not be operational. The .pdf is a ‘flat’ version of the paper; however, should you wish to have a copy of the iBooks version, please contact me at bradcunningham@gmail.com and I will arrange for you to get a copy of the iBooks file.
Acknowledgements

A project like this does not happen without the support of a great many people. I’d like to thank my wife, Sonja, for her support and advice during the many hours of writing. I’d like to thank my son, Holden, for distracting me when I needed time away from writing at the kitchen table. I’d like to thank my school community for supporting Contemporary English. I’d like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Kathy Sanford, for taking this journey with me and always challenging me to see things differently and for her support of me when I did. And lastly and most importantly, to all the students and community members who contributed to Contemporary English, in its creation, in its implementation, and to those who contributed their voices to this research – I am a changed teacher because of you.
I met S-dawg when he became a regular in The Learning Centre (TLC). TLC was a space at Reynolds Secondary School where he could escape the confines of the regular classroom environment — escape was something he had become quite practiced at. He split most of his school day between four spaces: Rm. 216, a learning support room; TLC, a room in which students were able to work on their course work with the support of a classroom teacher; the smoking area across the street from the school; and the vice-principal’s office. S-dawg had confrontation issues, which is to say that he confronted his teachers — often. He didn’t see much point in school when the ‘stuff’ he was studying didn’t mean anything to him. He was not unique in this respect as many students struggle with the relevancy of course curricula. For S-dawg, learning content that he did not care about reinforced his outsider status at school. His younger brother was much better at the confrontation thing, which is to say he confronted his teachers more often.

Figure 1 “New school leaders” by Shad

In this song, Canadian rapper Shad questions his ability to make it as a musician, similar to how marginalized students questions their ability to succeed.

Figure 2 Lyrics to “New school leaders”

Young man, open your eyes: you’re gonna make great music
Just open your soul and sin and raise your voice
If it burns now, the fire will get faster through it
Yeah, be scared that I’ll kill us all with all these lines
Lyric that’s why it’s hard when you share this
Cause all I can say is how to glide to heaven some ways
Endure some bad stuff until it’s done
I need to break things, come on break me now...

What about? Cause when the road ends up and get again
Just to express themselves, you can get your wealth in other ways
I can’t how to concentrate or get your love and price
Cause got your love instead

Heard the story of the man that wrote the book
And every time when they do it
Heard the story of the man that wrote the book

Respect, you love to get but you hate to earn
This time can be a blessing if you wait your turn.

Tap on the lyrics to see them full sized while listening to the song. Swipe left to see the next page.
dawg was an edgier, younger version of his brother. They were part of a crew of about six boys who were interested in getting out of school as quickly as they could. I felt as though they wanted to complete high school, but if bureaucracy was going to get in the way of that, then screw it.

Both S-dawg and C-dawg visibly identified with hip hop culture. The baseball caps askew, the baggier than usual clothing, and the vernacular they spoke all demonstrated their connection to hip hop. They would often be plugged into their iPods, listening to hip hop while completing the self-directed Social Studies packages that they were given by the resource room teachers in Rm. 216. When left on their own, S-dawg and C-dawg would do work that they didn’t connect with, namely, writing out answers found in a textbook. However, they understood how to do this straightforward work and they understood the teacher’s expectations and they could easily find the answers to copy out of the textbook; they would jump through the hoop if it was hung low.

It was interesting times when the whole crew converged on TLC. Whether by chance, or by text, four or five of the crew would end up arriving within 15 minutes of each other, sidling up to a large round table and beginning to collaborate, just not on the work that they brought from class. In these moments, books would disappear and crumpled looseleaf paper would emerge from pockets of hoodies, jackets, or jeans. Pencils would be requested and writing would commence. The boys were writing rhymes. In these moments, the boys were quiet and engaged; these were moments that their teachers would lie in bed at night dreaming about. Every so often they would pass sheets to each other, read them, give some feedback, usually positive, and hand them back, only to continue revising and composing.

It was in these moments that I was put into an awkward position as a teacher. As the TLC teacher I had divided loyalties. I was responsible to classroom teachers to make sure that students completed the assigned work they had missed, often as a result of the student being absent from class, whether skipping or otherwise. However, many of these students chose not to go to class as they didn’t connect with the teacher and/or the content. In these moments I felt like it was my responsibility to connect with the student so that they would develop a relationship with a teacher in the school, thus connecting them to at least one classroom in the school. And it was one of these moments, where these boys had opted out of class to come to TLC to write rhymes, to write rap, to write period, that I felt that I divided. To have them refocus their energy on school work would disrupt an otherwise authentic act of literacy, as well as reinforcing the fact that what they were doing was only valued outside of school. However, letting them continue would be compromising my commitment to my colleagues to ensure that the students were engaged in their course content when in TLC.
I distinctly remember walking over to the round desk and asking Jax to see what he was writing. I knew that he knew that I knew what he was doing was not what he was supposed to be doing, yet he looked up from his desk and, without hesitation, handed me what he had written. I don’t recall exactly what was written, but I remember it being skilled. It was a battle rap, rife with slant and imperfect rhyme, simile and metaphor. There were no line breaks, but it was essentially a first draft. In any case, I was impressed with the skill that Jax demonstrated with words. During that block, S-dawg had also written more than I had ever seen him write in one sitting. These boys were most definitely engaged in what they were doing and had criteria through which they read each other’s work and provided feedback. This was truly an act of literacy. I told them as much. They seem unfazed.

It was about two weeks later that I was absent from school. As coach of the track and field team, I sometimes missed school for meets. It was upon returning from one of these meets that I was presented with the piece of paper seen in Figure 1. S-dawg came up to me and told me that he had designed a hip hop course for high school. It turned out that the day before, during my absence, S-dawg was frustrated with the work he was doing and continued questioning the relevancy of school in his life. Nothing he learned mattered to him and he wondered why he had to do what teachers wanted him to do in order to show that he was smart, to show he was worthy of graduating from high school. Mr. Fisher, a teacher-on-call who had previously held temporary teaching contracts at Reynolds and thus knew the students, suggested to S-dawg that if he was upset about not learning things that were relevant to him, he should be part of the solution. Mr. Fisher and S-dawg sat down and talked through what a relevant curriculum would look like. Fortunately, Mr. Fisher grew up listening and engaging in hip hop, so he had a strong background from which he could engage with S-dawg and his idea. S-dawg wrote down his thoughts and created a comprehensive overview of a hip hop high school curriculum. Upon receiving this hip hop curriculum, it was demonstrated to me how deeply S-dawg knew the hip hop culture he was a part of (and how little I knew of it). It also sparked an idea within me. I had previous experience teaching “at-risk” students and knew the importance of engaging them with content that was interesting and relevant to them. However, these experiences were always in separate “remedial” classrooms, where these students felt isolated from the school community, where they felt that they
were grouped together because they were ‘stupid’. As I looked at S-dawg’s proposal I knew there were two things I needed to do: first, I needed to validate and honour his ideas; second, I felt it was important that his ideas didn’t die on the page. He had used his agency to help to determine his future; to pat him on his back and send him back to the desk to complete social studies would further alienate him from the formal schooling environment. My response was an honest one: to get this whole curriculum enacted would take years and he would be gone from school; however, the poetry node of the mind map could be made into an English course and that could be done relatively quickly. I asked him to leave this idea with me and I would speak to the administration about the possibility of putting this course together. My principal happened to come into TLC shortly thereafter on separate business, but I thrust the hip hop curriculum that S-dawg had created into her hands. I spoke to her about my idea of creating an English class where the course content connected to hip hop, with the idea that the students who may not find much relevancy in their regular English class would take this course. An added benefit would be that some of the toughest students in the school to reach and teach would be in an English classroom that they wanted to be in. This might make teaching easier for other English teachers and I could also work on specific skills with the students in the hip hop class, without them feeling like they were in the ‘stupid kids’ English class. My principal, a progressive educational leader, told me to go for it. After she left, I went to S-dawg and let him know that the principal was onboard and that his idea was going to be enacted. However, it wouldn’t be right away because the 2010/2011 school calendar had been created and all the students in school had already selected their courses for that upcoming 2010/2011 school year. As well, I needed to figure how to teach the course but as I was beginning my Masters degree, I told him that would be a good place for me to do some thinking. We decided that it would have to happen in the 2011/2012 school year, but that it would happen.

The prospect of starting a new hip hop based English class was motivating for me. I have always enjoyed working at the edges of the educational spectrum, with students who are termed “at-risk” or “struggling” and students who termed “gifted.” While I also enjoy teaching the middle of the spectrum, I get energized about working with kids with alternative educational needs. Before I read the literature which validated this feeling, I had always felt that the cultivation of relationships and the creation of community was incredibly important for student success in school. I was looking forward to the course as it was going to be unique. These boys were engaged in complex out-of-school literacies that were being shunned and dismissed in their regular English classroom contexts. How does writing battle rap connect to composing an essay? This connection was not being made for them because teachers didn’t understand battle rap and these boys didn’t understand essays. Here was an opportunity to see if the explicit inclusion of students’ out-of-school literacies had an
effect on their engagement, motivation and sense of community in a classroom context. If I was able to demonstrate that honouring what students were doing outside of school could make their school experience more positive, then that might help to reshape the way that we look at how we engage not only our vulnerable learners, but all learners. In this case it revolved around hip hop, but it could be any number of out-of-school literacies. And, in 2010, with the BC government beginning its move toward more personalized learning, connecting students’ out-of-school literacies to the content used in English class could serve as a model that would work for creating community and strong relationships between teachers and students.

I took S-dawg aside and told him to put the word out to his crew and let them know that it was going to happen, even if it took a full school year for it to arrive. In the meantime, I had a number of conversations with students and sought their input as to what the course could look like and how we could encourage people to be a part of it. During the lead up to the course, S-dawg, C-dawg, and Jax gave me advice, most of which focused on being authentic and not making it boring. However, they also told me about hip hop artists I should listen to before the course started and instructed me as to what the underground scene was like. They also wanted a bit of a practical component where they could write rap, if not perform it. In exchange, I shared with them the progress of the course, any hurdles we faced in terms of timetabling and my own vision for what we could do. However, as a result of the time it took for the course to go from conception to reality, we lost S-dawg and C-dawg from the traditional school system. Jax, however, was heading into Grade 12 and taking the course, which came to be named Contemporary English.
The exploration of out-of-school literacies was established with research such as Heath’s seminal work *Ways with Words* (1983), a decade-long study on three neighbouring communities and how home literacy practices affected children’s experience in a traditional school setting. In more recent times, out-of-school literacies have begun to follow three strands of research (Smith & Moore, 2012). Smith described the first strand as the recognition of the complexity of out-of-school literacies and connecting those skills to classroom activities. The second strand looked to “document the competence of adolescents as they engage in out-of-school literacies” (p. 745). And the third strand “examines what can happen when a school’s or a teacher’s vision of the literacies that count is expanded” (p. 746). A reason out-of-school literacies are now being studied much more closely in the classroom was as a result of the shift in how literacy was understood after the New London Group (1996) published their exploratory paper “A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures”. This paper examined the purpose of education:
if it were possible to define generally the mission of education, one could say that its fundamental purpose is to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, and economic life (p. 60)

The New London Group opined that literacy pedagogy had until that time “been a carefully restricted project — restricted to formalized, monolingual, monoculture, and rule-governed forms of language” (p. 61). As a result of the foundational work put forth by the scholars of the New London Group, opportunities such as Contemporary English are now possible in educational settings, whereas not even 25 years ago a course using multimodal, popular culture text would not and could not exist within the formal structure of a secondary school setting. The New London Group (2006) recognized that with “local diversity and global connectedness” (p. 69) there would no longer be a single standard canon and that students would need to be able to navigate and negotiate multiple Discourses - “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or ‘types of people’) by specific groups of people” (Gee, 1996, p. viii) – in the world. For education to be relevant:

learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities — interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes — students bring to learning. Curriculum now needs to mesh with the different subjectivities, and with their attendant languages, discourses, and registers, and use these as a resource for learning. (Gee, 1989, p. 72)

This is a core idea behind the implementation of Contemporary English. No longer is it enough for a teacher to hoard the curricular knowledge, rather it will become imperative to create a community of learners, one where teachers:

can guide learners, serving as mentors and designers of their learning processes. This aspect of the curriculum needs to recruit learners’ previous and current experiences, as well as their extra-school communities and discourses, as an integral part of the learning experiences. (New London Group, 1996, p. 85)

Teachers who opt to invite students' out-of-school literacies into the classroom need to be aware that simply watching a movie or listening to music will not suffice, for students will recognize and not engage with superficial treatment of aspects of their lives which are an important part of their identity. Teachers who are willing to use students’ out-of-school literacies not just as a connection to curricular content, but as part of the curriculum itself, are beginning to rewrite authority in the classroom as they put themselves into a position of vulnerability by relinquishing their previous expert status; they are recreating the relationships they share with students now engaged as co-learners while...
remaining authentic to the out-of-school literacies they are bringing into the classroom. These teachers will be required to reconsider the manner in which they assess students, and they will be working in a classroom with a very different feel than other classroom, a classroom of community and equality.

To begin, Newman (2005) explored three accepted definitions of literacy: first, that reading and writing are the essential criteria of a ‘literacy act’; secondly, using the domain (e.g., home, work, society) where the act occurred as the criteria by which literate acts are defined; and lastly, a definition which says all human communication is literacy. Newman (2005) critiqued these competing definitions, arguing that their vagueness either makes almost any act an act of literacy or, as in the case of the first definition, only the narrowest acts are viewed as being literate. Moje (2000) followed up on this critique:

It is ironic that many who have asserted that the term literacy includes speaking, listening, dancing, drawing, and all other forms of representation have done so in the name of breaking the hold that print literacy has in social systems and institutions. While well intentioned, such a move seems actually to strengthen the privileged position of reading and writing print because it is so difficult to dislodge the term literacy from its etymological roots into the concept of letter or alphabetic print. What is more, because these perspectives collapse everything into the category of literacy, they do not emphasize enough the ways that symbol systems other than print shape and extend meaning made about print.

Not wishing to discount the importance of multiple forms of representation such as orality, performance, or artistic representations, however, I seek to broaden the sense of what it means to be literate and use reading writing by examining the many symbol systems and signs that are used to make and represent meaning in addition to and in conjunction with written language (cf. Eisner, 1994; New London Group, 1996). (p. 655)

Street (1984), one of the founders of the New London Group, explored literacy as an ideological practice rather than the more commonly held definition that literacy was a neutral set of technical skills. His work in Iran lead him to understand that there were many kinds of literacies and that a school-based, academic literacy was but one literacy situated in a certain place and context and that people who were deemed illiterate by schools and elites actually possessed complex literacy skills for their particular context, skills which would not be recognized by schools nor would the elite possess. Alim (2011) further explored a definition of literacy as it related more closely to hip hop, a culture that until recent interest from academia did not have legitimacy within a school context. He examined “‘global ill-literacies,’ that is, the hybrid, transcultural linguistic and literacy practices of Hip Hop youth in local and global contexts” (p. 120), using the word ILL, not in the hip hop definition of being talented or skilled, but
as an encoded acronym “referring to the three major components of literacy put forth within ill-literacy studies: Literacy must be Intimate, Lived, and Liberatory” (Alim, 2011, p. 123). Alim further suggested that for literacy instruction to be effective, especially for marginalized students, it needed to include all three components; it must be Intimate, Lived, and Liberatory.

For the purpose of this study, in which the diverse and unique ways in which students communicate are examined, I will use the definition of (multi)literacy put forth by the New London Group (1996):

> What we might term “mere literacy” remains centered on language only, and usually on a singular national form of language at that, which is conceived on a stable system based on rules such as mastering sounds-letter correspondence. This is based on the assumption that we can discern and describe correct usage. Such a view of language will characteristically translate into a more or less authoritarian view of pedagogy. A pedagogy of multiliteracies, by contrast, focuses on modes or representation much broader than language alone. These differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural, and social effects. (p. 64)

In using this definition, I am able to honour the multiple ways that students consume and produce texts, without valuing one more than another, while honouring time and space in which students engage in acts of literacy.

**Out-of-school Literacies**

The study of out-of-school literacies has helped researchers arrive at new constructs of literacy, ones that have helped to push literacy research forward in ways that it wouldn’t have had out-of-school literacies not be examined closely (Hull & Schultz, 2001). In the 1980s, Szwed (1981) recognized that the concern around a crisis of illiteracy was too narrowly focussed on the literacy acts that took place in schools, and not enough attention was being paid to what was occurring outside of the place called school. Around the same time, Heath (1983) was making links between what was occurring outside of school and student academic performance, as determined by the assessment standards of school as an institution, ultimately coming to the realization that both teachers and students needed to be involved in literacy research. However, creating a simple binary between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices is problematic. In an interview between Alvermann and Moore (2011), Alvermann questioned the boundaries of in-school and out-of-school literacy learning, suggesting that it was but an assumption that there were qualitative differences in literacy learning occurring between the two. She further suggested to Moore that the “divide exists more in the professional literature than in actual practice” (p. 156). Alvermann used the metaphor of a sieve, rather than a wall, to
envision any division, or lack thereof, between in-school and out-of-school literacies, stating that to keep that false distinction was to limit what researchers ultimately would be able to say about learning in general. Schultz and Hall (2001) also recognized this issue in their review of theory and research on out-of-school literacy, suggesting that a focus on time and space of literacy-related acts may prevent researchers from seeing school-like acts in home settings or home-like acts of literacy in school settings. For instance, in Hull and Zacher (2004) a young girl who created a digital poem did so in an after school program, yet the skills that she developed to understand the genre of poetry occurred in a school setting. As well, she ended up screening her poem at her high school. This poses a problem when trying to situate her acts of literacy as in-school or out-of-school, when both places were integral to the creation and completion of the poem. Accordingly, Schultz and Hull (2008), in reviewing a study by Leander and Sheehy (2008), concluded that youth are never really fully in school or fully out of school, rather “their identities and [literacy] practices travel across those spaces” (p. 243). Gee (1996) put forth the concept of Discourse and in doing so delinked literacy from either inside a classroom or outside the school as he suggested that literacy was part of identity construction, something that would travel with the person across all aspects of his/her life. Yet, with this blurring of in-school and out-of-school literacy practices, there still exists a divide for many youth between the two spaces as they embrace one (out-of-school) and feel alienated by the other (in-school) (Schultz & Hull, 2008).

Another issue with the idea of out-of-school literacies becoming part of school-based learning is that the literacy acts themselves are valued differently depending on the place and the people involved. Smith worried about how current research on out-of-school literacies in the classroom was sometimes presented as “unproblematically positive” (Smith & Moore, 2012, p. 746), failing to recognize both how the use of out-of-school literacies could up alienating students who were not a part of the discourse of the culture being used in the classroom and how they are viewed by people in different positions of authority. Freebody (2001) theorized about out-of-school literacies and how they were viewed in places of formality (i.e., like doctors’ offices and schools). He discussed how the same literacy act was viewed differently based on the situated practice of the person viewing. An example he used examined how teachers working at Australian schools – one designated as disadvantaged and another not so designated – found that “while a certain literacy practice was valued when displayed by one category of person, the same practice was devalued when displayed by the contrasting or supplementary category” (p. 108). This concern about the valuing and devaluing of a literacy practice is concerning as a teacher needs to be clear about how and why they are inviting out-of-school literacies into the classroom and how it may or may not reflect on the capabilities of the students.
that they are working with. If out-of-school literacies are only valued in schools that are seen (or designated) as disadvantaged, while non-disadvantaged schools maintain the status quo by working with canonical texts, it will be a challenge for students’ out-of-school literacy practices to be held up as valid and equal to those that occur in ‘high performing’ schools. There is also concern that teachers may overestimate the amount that students know about technology, overvaluing their interactions with digital technology during out of school time. Due to varied socioeconomic situations and access to the technologies, as well as purpose and intent of use of these technologies, students will enter the classroom with varied abilities in the use of digital technology (Moss, 2006). In a British Columbia secondary school, Weaver (2009) demonstrated that although students were able to use the internet to find superficial information quickly, their deeper understanding of how to be both consumer and producer of information, particularly with Wikipedia.org, was very limited and that they needed specific teacher-centric instruction on how to contribute to a community of knowledge. It is important that teachers not assume that because students have been ascribed to a ‘digital native’ generation, that students are deeply versed in the use of the technologies that they have access to.

One benefit of out-of-school sites of literacy is that youth are able to collaborate and participate in projects that are meaningful and authentic, especially when there is no assessment attached to it (Heath, 1998). As well, the fact that these out-of-school programs are attended by choice, not prescription, is an important factor in the relative success that youth experience in these spaces (Cole, 1996), even when they have poor attendance within traditional schools (Hull and Schultz, 2002). Hull and Zacher (2004) highlighted an example of a young girl’s investment in an after-school program which promoted the use of multimodality and authentic audiences. Concluding that literacy was moving away from reading and writing as independent acts and moving toward what Buckingham (2000) described as a postmodern approach to literacy, where intertextuality – a concept that suggests a single text is embedded in a larger system of interrelated texts – was at the forefront of new ways of composing text, Hull and Zacher (2004) suggested that after-school programs “[offered] youth the opportunity to communicate via multiple modalities” (p. 23). Looking into how out-of-school literacies are incorporated into schools, in interview, Smith and Moore (2012) discussed what three streams of out-of-school literacies look like in a classroom setting: examination of out-of-school literary practices to look for similar traits to in-school literacy expectations; acceptance that out-of-school literacies are just different ways of being literate; and making room for out-of-school literacies to exist within the classroom. Smith framed it as “what kids do, what kids can do, and what we ought to do in new ways” (Smith & Moore, 2012, p. 745–746). These are circumstances under which, with the best intentions, teachers may invite students’ out-of-school literacies into the classroom.
Inviting out-of-school literacies into the classroom can be fraught with tension for students, teachers, and administrators. As Au (2011) expressed in the introduction to his chapter in *Rethinking Popular Culture and Media*, he cautioned teachers about using hip hop without first knowing it and its history, that teachers need to know the popular culture that they are inviting into the classroom before they can begin to develop curriculum for it. Caution must be employed when using students’ out-of-school literacies in the classroom as there are often different expectations as to how the teacher sees it being used in the formal environment of a classroom and how the students use it outside the classroom. Tagging, for instance, is an act of vandalism or a sophisticated act of literacy, depending on who is speaking about it. Harkening back to Freebody (2001), this single act is viewed differently depending on when and where it takes place. MacGillivray and Curwen (2007) explored how tagging was a local social literacy practice, helping to communicate as well as helping to construct identities of the participants (cf. Gee 1989, New London Group, 1996). Moje (2000) described tagging as an “unsanctioned literacy practice” (p. 651), while also noting that other unsanctioned literacies used by youth included “poetry, narrative, journal writing, letter writing, and novel reading” (p. 661). Tagging is a literacy practice that people who are vested with institutional authority (i.e., especially teachers and school administrators and, of course, law enforcement) try to punish. As such, inviting tagging into the classroom could prove to be problematic. However, a teacher conversant with the origins and history of tagging could develop a curriculum around the act, looking to deconstruct its place in society and explore, alongside his/her students, the ways in which it parallels other literacies. While engaging students, this seeming validation of tagging may not be viewed positively by school administrators. In Low (2011), a student who was rapping as part of a high school talent night was prematurely cut off by a school administrator as the administrator’s concern about the potential of the rap getting, in the words of the cut off student, “‘out of hand and chaotic,’ . . . ‘I don’t want to hear any cursing or sexual obscenities in your raps . . . I don’t want to hear it’” (p. 195). Unbeknownst to the principal, Gerard, the aforementioned student, had to submit, in writing, the lyrics he was planning on rapping. In the moment of cutting him off, the principal had thought that Gerard was making the rap up on the spot and thus may not censor himself. This caused the principal anxiety as his experience with rap was limited. However, while the lyrics themselves were not obscene, Gerard had infused them with coded words that would carry different meanings to adults who were on the outside of hip hop culture as compared to the students in the audience who were insiders in hip hop culture. Although to all appearances the principal had been unfair, he had been prescient in cutting Gerard off as there were intentions, not to be obscene, but to circumvent the authoritarian process of vetting his lyrics. Wordplay is an important part of rap, but when Gerard intentionally gave the talent show organizing teacher a glossary with sanitized definitions of the contentious words, he knew he was subverting the system. This was only brought to the
attention of Gerard’s classroom teacher by another adult who was an insider in hip hop culture, who was able to explain the coded language. When inviting out-of-school literacies into the classroom, there are going to be issues that arise and that teachers need to be able to deal with. Relationships between students and teachers are integral in making sure that the out-of-school literacy that is brought into the classroom is honoured and respected in such a way that the students who are engaging with it in the classroom will be open and honest. In Gerard’s case, he knew hip hop wasn’t fully accepted and, as such, was going to subvert the system to make sure he ‘kept it real’.

Out-of-school literacies provide an opportunity for engaging students in the classroom (Hill, 2009; Low, 2011), but it is important that teachers have some background knowledge of the out-of-school literacy they are inviting into the classroom and that they are open to sharing authority in the classroom because they are likely to no longer be the expert in the room.

**Authority and Vulnerability**

One of the tensions that arises from inviting out-of-school literacies into the classroom comes as a result of the way it can change the relationship between teacher and student. In inviting students’ out-of-school literacies into the classroom, the role of expert and learning shifts, if not inverts completely (Mahiri, 1996). This shift in authority results in the teacher becoming vulnerable, which has been shown to have a positive impact on the relationship between teacher and students (Hill, 2009). Asking a teacher to become vulnerable is asking a lot when, for both political and professional reasons, teachers already feel vulnerable in their place of work, often as a result of differences in beliefs with administrators (and sometimes parents) about what constitutes good education (Kelchtermans, 1996). Delpit (1988) argued, though, that “[teachers] must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness” (p. 297). Therefore, the importance of cultivating positive relationships with students through vulnerability is even more imperative (although difficult) as it in turn has a positive impact on student experience in school. However, authority requires voluntary submission and is as much about students who obey it as it is about teachers who command it (Brubaker, 2012). Walking into the classroom, the teacher has authority as a result of organizational positionality, whereby the organization of a school imbues a certain level of authority to teachers over students (Brubaker, 2012). It is this authority the teachers relinquish, by choice or not, when inviting out-of-school literacies into the classroom.

There are a number of studies that suggest that relationships are important factors in remaining and engaging in school (Alspaugh,
1998; Black, 2002; Erickson, 1987; Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1994, Lasky, 2005). In Lasky’s (2005) study of four high school teachers, she found that amongst all four teachers the importance of building and maintaining student relationships was paramount. One teacher emphasized the importance of cultivating a strong rapport with students:

They will like whatever I’m teaching, if they’re liking me. That connection is everything. If there’s a connection, and they’re capable, then they’ll learn. If there isn’t, they might, if that’s their inclination. But if they don’t have the internal motivation to say it’s important that I get an eighty-five in this class, then nothing will happen. They’ll fail. (p. 908)

As well, in the classroom context, the teachers interviewed by Lasky said that risking and being vulnerable in the classroom was a worrisome, but ultimately rewarding, part of teaching. The teachers saw that students reacted positively to them taking a risk in the classroom. As one teacher said:

Anytime you take a risk in the classroom, you are vulnerable. It’s as simple as that. Which is probably why we avoid it. It’s easier to do what you know, and what is safe, and it works, and the kids are bored, and you’re bored, but that’s ok, because that’s what school is about. (pause) It’s not fun being vulnerable, but if you completely lose that, then something quite important in your teaching will be lost. Teaching is a very personal thing, and with any kind of interpersonal relationship there is vulnerability. If you lose the vulnerability, you lose the personal relationship within the teaching situation, you lose that dynamic, that element of it. (p. 908)

Furthermore, in her discussion, Lasky noted:

[...] teachers were willingly vulnerable with their students as a way to ensure greater degrees of school engagement than teachers otherwise believed they could expect from students. As one teacher stated, students care more about the subject she teaches, and thus engage to greater degrees, when they know she cares about them. (p. 913)

A student’s willingness to learn depends on the student’s ability to trust teachers and administration in the school (Erickson, 1987; Lasky, 2005). While there are many ways by which a teacher can develop a positive relationship with students, when dealing specifically with students’ out-of-school literacies, trust is earned through the teacher’s thoughtful and meaningful inclusion of the out-of-school literacy in curriculum, or as curriculum, and not earned through superficial or ignorant use of out-of-school literacies for the sole purpose of engaging students in otherwise standard curriculum. In addressing the concern that many teachers have in terms of giving up the expert status in the room, Smith stated in an interview that “[t]eachers don’t have to worry about keeping up if they provide enough opportunities for choice in both the texts with which students engage and the ones that...
they create. Their students will keep up for them” (Smith & Moore, 2012, p. 747). This only occurs when the teacher is able to share expert status in the classroom with his/her students, something that is difficult to do. When bringing rap lyrics into the Twilight Program, an evening high school classroom for students who “did not fit comfortably in the day school environment” (Hill, 2009, p. 15), Hill carefully selected a number of hip hop texts that he felt were appropriate to a classroom setting (albeit an experimental class in which he was co-teaching with a classroom teacher) and that he could use to bridge to more canonical texts. In choosing the rap lyrics himself, Hill – who is African American, part of the hip hop generation, and who had previously been a teacher in the Twilight Program but was now a research professor from Columbia University – did not relinquish the role of expert, and although students formed strong relationships with Hill, they were not formed with the classroom teacher, who was disengaged from the content throughout the whole process. Hill’s position as an outsider helped to facilitate the relationships, especially as he was the one seen as bringing culturally relevant content to the classroom, but ultimately, students knew he was not the authority who would be responsible for grading their work.

In a Canadian context, Smith, Schneider, and Ruck (2005) examined the role of socioeconomic status and views on education for black youth in Toronto and Halifax. They found that even though black youth in these two cities were quite positive about education and they valued the notion of success, they still underachieved in an academic setting. While these youth may believe in the school system, especially when compared with their African American counterparts, the authors hypothesized that the Canadian youth may not be doing the daily things necessary for success in the school setting. Another explanation put forth by the authors was that “perhaps their attempts to achieve were thwarted by closed doors or other social inequalities” (p. 355), aligning with the theories that Delpit (1988) discussed in her paper. The preceding examples demonstrate that it is incumbent on the teacher to become more than a vehicle through which only content is delivered. Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen (as cited in Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001, p. 876) describe expressive morality as everything that happens in the classroom, including, but not limited to, the language and actions of both the teacher and the student. If teaching is to rise above being mere content delivery, the teacher has a moral obligation to become aware of his or her students’ socio-cultural experience; teaching must become a moral act. In this way, the teacher is engaging with his/her students on a level that is deeper than just content transmission, but developing meaningful relationships with students.

Au (2011) suggested that the use of hip hop in the classroom, and by extension other out-of-school literacies, allowed teachers to better understand their students, their culture, and their lived experiences, and in doing so teachers were better able to create relationships and community in the classroom. Pierce (1994) studied a grade seven school classroom where the teacher was
working primarily with at-risk learners. Giving up the role of authority, the teacher helped to facilitated student-led discussion and creation of rules for the classroom, thereby having the students become co-creators and thus developing a sense of community within the classroom. Pierce found that this exercise created a safe classroom space, one in which threat of failure was diminished and students were able to bond over a common assessment at the beginning of the course. Pierce concluded that the at-risk learners also benefitted from diminishment in public classroom competition, focussing instead on learning as a community.

The use of out-of-school literacies in the classroom brings with it a messiness that many teachers may not be aware of when they first think of this as a way to get kids to pay more attention. It does require a teacher to become vulnerable and really rethink all aspects of how curriculum is delivered, how it is assessed, and how all this impacts positively or negatively on their relationships with their students. Using out-of-school literacies in the classroom, when done thoughtfully, is truly a collaborative process between teacher and student, creating a community of learners and experts.

Assessment

Assessment practices also impact the relationships that are formed with students. Being sole guardian of the grade gives teachers a disproportionate amount of authority over students. By engaging students in the assessment process, both a stronger relationship based on respect and development of community occur, both of which support learners and learning. One case where this would be true is with contract grading (Shor, 1996), whereby students choose a grade at the beginning of the course and complete the work required to achieve that grade. A student who chooses an ‘A’ will be expected to do more work and of higher quality than a student who chooses a ‘B’. Students have the opportunity to rewrite assignments until they achieve the grade that they chose. Relating back to Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (Berk & Winsler, 1995), rewriting supports students as they take risks and receive formative feedback on their work, with the opportunity to apply it during the rewriting process. Through dialogue, reduced fear of failure, and removal of public competition for high grades (since everyone chooses their own grade), students are able to be part of a collaborative community. At the end of the course, the teacher and student discuss the student’s work and decide together if the student fulfilled the contract, and if not, the grade is adjusted accordingly so that teacher and student agree on the final outcome. In Australia, Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (2003) saw how assessment strategies that were linked solely to exams and had no relevancy to classroom activities reinforced to students that they were there to learn content, reinforcing the power of teacher over student in the classroom. However, the classes that were most effective in that school were ones that incorporated multiple modes of
communication in which teachers worked alongside students. Reed (2008) explored how assessment works with multimodal assignments, noting that the use of rubrics (cf. Spandel, 2006) cannot fully capture the complexity and thinking used in many multimodal assignments; a more collaborative and detailed approach is needed to account for the uniqueness of the assignments. Wyatt-Smith and Kimber (2009) also examined the messiness of multimodal assessment, concluding teachers need to be involved in the full development of the multimodal text, not just the final product, and that a print-based assessment is not adequate in articulating the complexity of the assignments. As out-of-school literacies tend to be multimodal in nature (e.g., hip hop, manga, movies), using them in class in a monomodal way, or assessing multimodal assignments using monomodal tools, does not honouring the nature of the out-of-school literacy.

Oracy is important not just during assessment, but to the overall classroom community. Stovall (2006) referenced Dimitriardis and McCarthy’s (2001) assessment of the importance of dialogue as a means of deconstructing and situating difficult subject material contained within the lyrics of hip hop when they brought hip hop into the classroom, and the way in which the class became the site for understanding as the roles of the classroom teacher evolved:

Dialogue . . . challenges us to make and remake our own emancipatory educational practice. It challenges us to rethink the discourses in which we operate and the languages we use to fashion the ethics of our professional lives. It asks us to look beyond our inherited way of thinking and acting, to new, unexplored, and perhaps even dangerous pedagogical practices. The role of educator cannot be easily contained today. (p. 10)

Creating space for dialogue helps to contribute to the sense of community as students will begin to know each other and, through understanding one another, begin to respect each other more as well. Brubaker (2012) found that students’ feeling of being able to speak freely lead to a more comfortable and collaborative learning space, one in which students were more willing to take risks. By acting as a facilitator and helping students become comfortable working with one another, and in taking on the role of co-learner himself, Brubaker was able to facilitate the creation of community. This is important as Burnett (2002) found the teacher’s use of praise and/or negative feedback in an elementary classroom could have a strong impact on the relationship students formed with their teacher as well as how they viewed the classroom community, with negative effort feedback negatively affecting the student-teacher relationship while ability feedback influenced the perception of the classroom community.
Hip Hop and the Classroom

Hip hop has been collaborative by nature since its inception, beginning with the DJ and the MC working together to keep the party hyped and rocking. In more recent times, whether the collaboration is between beat makers and MCs, between a beat-boxer and an MC at a cypher, or between DJs and breakdancers, collaboration is central to hip hop culture. As such, using hip hop in the classroom effectively can lead to a strong collaborative environment, based around respect and cooperation, which is supportive of at-risk learners (Belenardo, 2001). A cooperative environment can be the difference between a positive school experience or a frustrating school experience (Metz, 1983). As well, using content that is relevant to students’ out-of-school lives leads to students being more engaged in the classes they are in, both in traditional classroom settings (Au, 2011; Low, 2011; Mahiri, 1998, 2001; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002) as well as classrooms that take place outside the confines of traditional schools (Hill, 2009; Hull & Zacher, 2010; Low, 2011). As a result of their inherent lack of relevance of traditional English classroom content to many youth of today, there has been much focus on using hip hop culture, and rap in particular, to help bridge the divide to canonical texts and academic language (Hill, 2009; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). The underlying belief is that these disengaged and often marginalized students possess the critical analysis skills that are required of them in a classroom, and that the use of hip hop will illustrate this point to the students and help them to continue to develop those skills in an academic setting, with the ability to apply them to both hip hop and canonical texts; however, there are issues with this as students may not accept that their lives should be brought into the classroom where a teacher will teach them about it (Mahiri, 1998).

Hip hop has been validated as an important cultural space worthy of study. Rap, a musical aspect of hip hop, has recently even had an anthology released by Yale University Press, edited by Andrew DuBois and Adam Bradley – two young and accomplished English professors – with a foreword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and an afterword by the respected hip hop artist Common; this anthology has both academic as well as hip hop credibility. A second edition of That’s The Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader (Forman & Neal, 2012) was released this year, featuring over 40 scholarly articles ranging in topic from queerness in hip hop to the space and place of hip hop to technology and hip hop. Other scholars, such as Michael Eric Dyson, a professor at Georgetown University (cf. Dyson, 2006, 2007, 2009) and Tricia Rose, the Chair of Africana studies at Brown University (cf. Rose, 1994, 2008), have written extensively about black culture and hip hop, in particular. There is an understanding that hip hop culture and rap music are complex and worthy of study by both scholars as well as middle and high school students. The challenge, as articulated by Mahiri (1998) and seen in Low (2011), is that bringing hip hop into a traditional school setting can be problematic, yet powerful.
In a study of three secondary English classrooms, Low (2011) and a classroom teacher work together to implement critical hip hop pedagogies (CHHP). Akom (2009) defines CHHP as an:

approach [that] attempts to address deep-rooted ideologies to social inequities by creating a space [for] teachers to re-examine their knowledge of hip hop as it intersects with race, class, gender, and sexual orientation; while analyzing and theorizing to what extent hip hop can be used as a tool for social justice. (p. 52)

As a result of her work with educators teaching outside the school system, Low found that the utilization of out-of-school literacies – hip hop, in this case – can be powerful for youth, with youth often forging relationships with peers and with adults, who are then able to use that relationships to assist in the lives of at-risk youth. The use of CHHP in the classroom is a major focus of many studies (Akom, 2009; Au, 2011; Hill, 2009; Low, 2011; Morell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004). In these cases, the classes were comprised of a majority of African American and/or Latino/a students, students who were outside of the dominant American discourse, even though Chang (2005) argues that hip hop has become the most influential, artistic, social and cultural movements for youth in the world. However, much of the sales of hip hop are driven by white consumers and yet there are a lack of studies in which white students who identify with hip hop culture are the focus. In this way, using CHHP as it has been implemented is problematic in a predominantly white classroom because no longer can it be used as a rallying cry to rise up against the ways in which society is oppressive to non-white people. However, in the definition of CHHP given by Akom, CHHP can still be used to discuss the many issues facing all youth while learning more about the social inequities that do exist, thereby creating more knowledgeable, and hopefully more caring, citizens of the world.

As teachers, there is no need to invite hip hop into the classroom because it it already there; in the way students, dress, speak, and the music they are listening to when they are trying to avoid the work they are being told to do, hip hop has taken a seat with students in the classroom. While hip hop is present, engaging it in the classroom can be problematic because of the language and content of much of mainstream hip hop. To mitigate these issues, teachers will often select hip hop that is “appropriate” for the classroom and for the topic of study. Going back to Hill (2009), he selectively chose songs that he would group into larger themes as he used rap lyrics as a bridge for students to get to canonical poetry. Being well-versed in hip hop, he chose songs that related well to his larger themes of study, “family” and “love” and “the hood”. Mahiri (1998) also documented the struggle faced by two African American teachers when they brought hip hop into the classroom, one struggle being the decision as to what was allowed in the classroom. Unsurprisingly, there were differences in
opinions between administrators, teachers and students as to what constituted appropriate content to be studying, with differences between the students also occurring. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2004) also explored how using rap lyrics of their choice connect to canonical poetry. In all these cases, students expressed a desire to have more say in what aspects of hip hop were allowed to be studied, from content to specific songs. Hill (2009) notes that educators’ choices of hip hop text “lead to the development of curricula that respond to the interests, experiences, and generational orientation of the teacher rather than the student” (p. 39).

While Hill (2009) calls upon educators to move beyond just textual analysis of hip hop lyrics and look into hip hop culture as it relates to all aspects of society, he also cautions educators not to be blind to the entirety of the culture of hip hop, that hip hop cannot be solely viewed as “transgressive, revolutionary, or even resistant practice” (p. 121), rather that hip hop needs to be understood in all its messiness of competing truths, values, and meanings. It is necessary for critical dialogues to occur between students and teachers about the misogyny, homophobia, violence, and drug use in hip hop without it degenerating into “school-sanctioned attack[s] on students’ lives and values” (p. 123). He continued by suggesting that “scholars move beyond esoteric theory and romantic classroom anecdotes in order to develop a vision of hip hop pedagogy that takes seriously the importance of academic achievement” (p. 123). It is in this way, when hip hop is embraced in its entirety, that students will feel as though their out-of-school literacies are honoured, and that meaningful and trusting relationships between students and teachers can occur, thereby giving students, especially those who are marginalized and/or at-risk, a better opportunity to experience academic success.
The choice of hip hop as the out-of-school literacy used in Contemporary English was a result of student interest and suggestion. While the idea of using hip hop was novel to me at the time of its suggestion, a short search of relevant literature showed that hip hop has been used in many classroom environments, in a variety of ways. In his review of hip hop education research, Petchauer (2009) explored three ways that hip hop had been utilized in the field of education research. The first was that:

teachers [were] centering rap music texts in urban high school curricula, often in the name of culturally responsive teaching and critical pedagogy, to empower marginalized groups, teach academic skills, and educate students about how aspects of their lives are subject to manipulation and control by capitalist demands. (p. 947)

The second was that researchers explored how “identity formation [had] the potential to be intricately woven into teaching, learning, and nearly all things
educational” (p. 947). And the third was “more and more higher education institutions around the world, particularly in North America, [were] engaging hip hop in an academically rigorous manner through courses, research, conferences, and symposia” (p. 947). The way that Contemporary English took shape and was enacted utilized each of the three major ways that hip hop is being used in other classroom settings.

What follows in this chapter is the explanation of the context of Contemporary English within the school in which it occurred, the teaching that was occurring at the school (both in Contemporary English and the larger school), the classroom (both the physical classroom and the student composition), the participants involved in the study and the methodological approaches used in conducting the research.

**The School Context**

Reynolds Secondary is a secondary school of roughly 1100 students in a medium-sized western Canadian city. It is neither an inner-city school nor one situated in the more affluent, more suburban areas of the city. Currently, a student in this city is able to attend the high school of his/her choice; catchment areas are not the sole determinant of where a student will attend high school. As such, the population of a school can vary drastically depending on a number of factors, none of which are more important than the school’s reputation within the city. Previously in its history, Reynolds was known as a rough school. On more than one occasion I have met a former Reynolds graduate who has recounted stories from their time at the school in the 1970s, 1980s, and the early 1990s, describing fights both on the fields and in the hallway as regular occurrences. As both Victoria and the Reynolds catchment area have gentrified in recent years, in addition to the removal of catchment borders being the sole determinant in a school’s student composition, Reynolds has correspondingly improved its reputation. In speaking with teachers at the school, the change started in the early 90s with a popular principal who was able to connect to both the students and staff of the school. The improvement continued with the subsequent principal, who introduced a Soccer Academy to Reynolds, thereby beginning to attract more and different students to the school. Subsequent to him, and with the dropping of catchment area restrictions, the current principal has solidified Reynolds’ reputation in the community through a number of measures focused on building school community and promoting support for student achievement. Currently, Reynolds has a strong French Immersion program, a robust Soccer Academy, a band program which boasts over 300 students, and a district program called Flexible Studies: Leadership in Learning. Collectively, these four programs are known as Programs of Choice. The strength of these programs, along with both a nationally recognized “green school” initiative and strengthening ties to the community through volunteerism, has helped make Reynolds a school that is attractive to prospective students and parents. As such, Reynolds has been at near capacity for the past
three years, which is unique in a district which has an overall declining student enrollment. The student body, as a result of all these factors, is quite diverse as it draws from all areas around the city. It is not uncommon to see students who were dropped off at school in a Porsche SUV walking in the front door alongside a student who cannot afford a new pair of shoes. Of course this diversity is not unique to Reynolds, but it has been my experience that the distribution of diversity at Reynolds is more balanced than at other schools, which makes for a unique teaching and learning experience.

The Teaching Context

Three years ago, I received a continuing contract with the school district. The significance of having a continuing contract was that I had more job security than when I only had temporary contracts. With a continuing contract, there was an expectation that a teacher would remain at their current school unless there was a drop in enrollment and/or the teacher requested a transfer. The possibility of continuity gave me the confidence to move forward with ideas such as Contemporary English, ideas that would not be successful without this continuity. As Reynolds continued to maintain a high student enrollment, the likelihood of me being declared ‘excess to needs’ was low and thus I made plans for my teaching practice at Reynolds beyond the scope of one year. My previous teaching experience had me working with ‘at-risk’ students at an inner-city school in the district, where I created and implemented a program to help them stay engaged and connected to school. As well, I worked with ‘struggling learners’ in the lower mainland of British Columbia at one of the largest and most ethnically diverse high schools in the province. These experiences helped to shape my understanding of the importance of relevant content and experiences for students in the classroom, especially for students who didn’t feel successful in a traditional classroom setting.

Although I would have taught Contemporary English if I hadn’t been concurrently completing my Masters degree, the decision to take up this research was a result of my relationship with S-dawg and how important this course was to him. The courses within my degree program provided me the theoretical background which supported what I had been experiencing in the classroom. Completing my thesis also provided a platform for students to share their thoughts about their classroom experiences, a voice that is often directed toward one another and rarely to adults. Much of the research that I had reviewed during my course work for my Masters consisted of adults describing what happened in a classroom they were observing. For me, as a teacher and researcher, it is my goal to provide reflection on both my experience and my students’ experiences from inside the classroom, with my students’ voices being heard in concert with my own.
Within the school, I worked both alongside my staff as well as delivered some professional development workshops. I am actively engaged in seeking out new teaching pedagogies to enhance my own practice. I had the support of my English department in the construction and implementation of Contemporary English, as my Department Head presented the concept for approval to the Collaborative Committee, a committee comprised of all the school Department Heads as well as the administration. They supported the course which allowed it to be part of the timetable. The administration was supportive of Contemporary English from concept to implementation and remained supportive both in their words and their actions. As well, I received support from other non-English department colleagues; especially from our Teacher-Librarian who purchased books and videos to support our course; our drama teacher, who freely provided his classroom space to us whenever we needed it; and from the social studies teacher and math teacher who shared the same classroom location as us, as our class was often quite loud when listening to and/or performing hip hop. Lastly, and most complexly, the teacher responsible for ESL, international, and refugee students whose class we inhabited for one block a day was supportive of us, although culture differences would end up being an important moment in the class, one that could not have happened if we were not sharing their space.

This support from across the school was crucial in the conception and implementation of Contemporary English. I believe that this support occurred because of the fact that the administration at Reynolds has been focused on the development of progressive teaching pedagogy, in concert with providing support for the most vulnerable learners in our school. This course supported both those goals as it approached the traditional English course from a unique angle while providing a classroom in which marginalized students had a chance to feel like experts. The support from my colleagues was a result of the collegial atmosphere that exists amongst the staff at Reynolds. There is a lot of support amongst the staff for people who are trying to do something unique and interesting. As an example, there has been a lot of support for the many green initiatives that are being led by a colleague, in addition to widespread support for our annual Cops For Cancer campaign.

Within the school I am also known among the students as the coach of the cross country and track and field teams as well as the coordinator of our spoken word/slam poetry events. In this role as slam poetry coach, I am able to work and connect with students in a non-academic setting, while addressing their out-of-school

Figure 8 “We are more” by Shayne Koyczan

A spoken word piece performed during the opening ceremonies of the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games.
literacies, namely writing and performing poetry. Spoken word poetry is a form of expression that has become more popular in recent years as a result of the rise of hip hop culture and, in Canada specifically, as a result of Shayne Koyczan's performance of “We Are More” during the opening ceremonies of the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic Games, as seen in Figure 6.

At Reynolds, spoken word has been a small but important part of the culture of the school since 2006 when members of a local spoken word group came into my classroom and did workshops for my students. Since then, students have been writing and performing spoken word poetry, culminating in becoming BC Poetry Slam champions at an event called Hullabaloo, held in April 2011 in Vancouver, and subsequently placing second at Hullabaloo in 2012. Acting in the role of coordinator and coach of poets placed me in a position whereby students were open to sharing their personal writing with me, similar to the way that Jax and S-dawg did in TLC. Since students were willing to share their writing and performances and in doing so were willing to take risk and be vulnerable with me, I believe that students who were interested in taking Contemporary English were comfortable in the knowledge that the teacher would be inviting their out-of-school literacies into the classroom and would honour those literacies and valid and important. This idea of risk, vulnerability and sharing became an important foundation of the class and became an integral part of my teaching practice.

The Classroom Context

Contemporary English was a representative cross-section of the Reynolds student population. Within the class, all four Programs of Choice were represented, as well as what some might consider the fifth Program of Choice - the ‘I’m-not-going-to-class-so-I-can-hang-out-with-my-bros-across-the-street-and-maybe-have-a-smoke program’. The class enrollment was 24 students, and what made it unique from a traditional class in the English department was that it had students from grades 10, 11, and 12 in the class – there was one grade 10 student, nine grade 11 students, and fourteen grade 12 students. The decision to make this a multi-grade course was a practical one; to ensure that there were enough students to run the course, we opened it up to as many as possible. There was a slim majority of girls in the class, surprising due to the fact that so much of hip hop is male dominated, and in many cases, misogynistic. Students registered for this course based on their connection to hip hop and their desire for an English class that was different than the ones they had previously taken. The course description in the Course Calendar was as follows:

Contemporary English 11/12

Prerequisite: Consultation with the teacher prior to enrollment in the course.
The learning outcomes for English 11 and English 12 will be met in a multi-grade classroom with a focused study of Hip Hop, from its roots in Africa through slavery to the streets of New York and finally its prevalence within today's society. As well, students of the class will have the opportunity to collectively determine which themes and content they would like to critically explore. The course will include books, films, plays, poems, music, and essays relevant to our understanding of how hip hop has come to be so influential today. Special attention will be paid to artists who have been especially influential in Hip Hop, looking at their craft as well as putting their songs into context through analysis of their lyrics and allusions. In consultation with the teacher, students will have the opportunity complete an individual project of their choosing at the end of the semester.

As a matter of protocol and procedure, the course needed to be listed in the Course Calendar, but most of the students who registered for it did so because they knew about it from me or their friends. The prerequisite of speaking to the teacher was to ensure that students were aware of what the course would entail in terms of commitment and to make sure they were comfortable and willing to work with students from all different areas of the school. I did not deny enrollment to any student who wanted to be in Contemporary English.

The class was timetabled for the first semester of the 2011/2012 school year, running from the beginning of September 2011 to the end of January 2012. The rationale for this timing was that I felt it was important that we provide students who may not feel connected to the school with a strong sense of community at the beginning of the year, a connection which they would hopefully use to have a successful second semester. The concern about having Contemporary English in the second semester was that students may leave school before getting the opportunity to take the course, which would defeat the purpose of trying to create community. The course ran during the third block of the day. As Reynolds has a timetable that switches the class rotation, this meant that Contemporary English was right after lunch on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and was the last block of the day on Tuesday and Thursday. It also happened to occur in a block during which there was no class in the school’s theatre. With the permission and support of the drama teacher, we were able to use the theatre for guest speakers or when we wanted to conduct workshops that would be louder than our regular classroom would allow for.

The location of the classroom for Contemporary English was initially in a computer lab on the lower floor of the school. This location was a result of the school being at maximum capacity and no other suitable classrooms were available. As it turned out, on the second day of the semester, there were a few classes that needed to switch classrooms, and as such we were relocated to
a smaller classroom on the upper floor of the building, with a
social studies class sharing one wall and a stairwell sharing the
other. We had large windows overlooking what are known as the
Annexes – portable classrooms outside the school building – and
across the hall was a math classroom. We were near to the library
and, just beyond that, was the school foyer and then the theatre.
The classroom we were in was used by international and ESL
students during the other three blocks of the day as well as
serving as a social space for them during the lunch hour.

From the beginning of the course, it was important to me that
there was a focus on community. Initially, when first speaking with
S-dawg and Jax and their crew, I thought that would be a
relatively simple endeavour as they were friends and came from
the same school group community, that being the ‘Rogers Crew’,
so known as they would congregate in front of the Rogers Video
store across the street from the school. The reason for this was
that local school laws prohibited smoking on school grounds. As
the grounds of Reynolds stretch for a city block, it was necessary
for the students to cross the street to smoke. However, as word
about Contemporary English began to circulate among students,
more people became interested. I was asked about it by students
who I worked with for spoken word, students I had never met but
were interested in hip hop, and students who didn’t necessarily
like hip hop but loved music and were open to a different style of
English class. In the end, when I saw the class list, I wondered
about how community would be formed with 24 students who
represented a true cross-section of the whole school community.
The female students were, as a whole, higher performing in an
academic sense than the males; however, as a whole, the males
were more knowledgeable than the females when it came to hip
hop. The grade 12s were the largest group of students and with
only one grade ten student, a female, I was concerned about how
she would be accepted and how she would perform in the class.
The grade 11s were comprised mostly of males and many of
them were not engaged in traditional classroom activities. One of
the students, a grade 12 aged boy who was in grade 11 English,
had yet to gain an academic credit that he could use toward
graduation. Obeast, another grade 12 aged male taking
Contemporary English as his grade 11 English credit, had failed
grade 10 English on multiple occasions. With that said, one of the
grade 12 males in the class attended multiple provincial
championships for different sports, was a member of the school
band program, was a member of the school Poetry Slam team
and was a candidate for Valedictorian. The females in the class
were more homogenous than the boys. They were interested in
hip hop, but, as a whole, were less knowledgeable about it.
Where the boys were writing and performing hip hop for each
other and, in a few cases, posting their performances on
YouTube, the girls consumed, rather than produced, hip hop,
although one girl, Macy, a female grade 12 student performed folk
music and was taking guitar lessons – her love of all things music
was what brought her to the class. Another grade 11 female liked
hip hop, but her boyfriend was taking the course, so being in the
same class was her motivation for enrolling in the course. Three females, one grade 11 and two grade 12s, were members of the Poetry Slam team. Of those girls, the two grade 12s loved hip hop and were among the more vocal students in the class. The class proved to be a very diverse group of students who took the class for varying reasons, but they were united by one thing: they chose to be in this class.

The Participant Context

As mentioned previously, the students in Contemporary English were an accurate representation of the composition of Reynolds. They ranged from students who were not engaged in school to students who were among the brightest and most involved in their graduating class. The participants in the research also represented the diversity of the class well. A brief background to the students involved is provided below. Each student selected their own pseudonym.

Obeast

Obeast was a male student enrolled in Contemporary English for his grade 11 English credit, but as it was his graduating year, he took English 12 in the second semester. Obeast identified very closely with hip hop culture and had been listening to hip hop since a young age. He did not enjoy traditional English classes and said he had “failed English 10 like five times”, however, he was articulate and loved Socials. Obeast was an affable student in the hallways, but was very frustrating as a classroom student because he would not complete assigned work until the very last minute. He described himself a shy and never felt physically comfortable in a traditional English class.

Trinity

Trinity was a female graduating student and was enrolled in Contemporary English for her English 12 credit. She was part of the Flexible Studies program and she had been a member of the Reynolds Slam team for two years. She was involved in dance and musical theatre and had helped to choreograph a number of dance performance routines for the school. Trinity is a complex individual in that she has incredible empathy yet does not care what people think of her, even if they may be offended by what she says or how she acts. I taught Trinity in English 10, English 11, and in Contemporary English, her grade 12 year. We shared a very strong relationship as a result of the Slam team, yet that relationship did not make it easier to teach her in my classroom as she often would do as she pleased. However, there was a strong mutual respect for each other, even if there were times where there were arguments. Of note, Trinity was biracial and the only student in Contemporary English with Black ancestry.

Sphere

Sphere was a female graduating student and was enrolled in Contemporary English for her English 12 credit. She was a
member of the 2011 Reynolds Slam team and that is where I first met her. Sphere was one of the more introspective and philosophical students I have ever taught. She sees the inequities of society and feels the need for change to come. She was very involved in Contemporary English, through both the classroom discussion and in the depth to which she completed her work. Academically, Sphere achieved high grades in her courses. While she was steeped in hip hop culture, she did not outwardly appear to be a part of it as she did not wear that would be stereotypically identified with hip hop culture; however, she was most interested in conscious hip hop. She was also dating Nostic for throughout the duration of the study.

**Whispers**

Whispers was a female graduating student and was enrolled in Contemporary English for her English 12 credit. Like Trinity, Whispers was a part of the Flexible Studies program at Reynolds and was in my English class in her grade 10, 11, and then 12 years. Whispers was a quiet student whose outward appearance showed a disinterest in class; however, she was a student who achieved high course grades. She was not involved in any extra-curricular activities. While I knew of her love of music from previous discussions, her interest in the course was more a result of her wanting a different English experience but, as a music lover, she did have an appreciation for hip hop.

**Jax**

Jax was a male graduating student and was enrolled in Contemporary English for his English 12 credit. Jax and I had known each other since his grade 10 year when I worked with him in TLC. I had always known that Jax identified heavily with hip hop because of the writing he shared with me and the websites he viewed on the TLC computers. Contemporary English was the first time I was Jax’s classroom teacher and his suggestions and feedback were important to me as I considered how I was going to teach Contemporary English. Jax was not involved in any extra-curricular activities in the school, but had strong relationships with most of the teachers he worked with. Jax did not achieve high grades, but his work ethic endeared him to those teachers who supported him. He and Obeast had been very good friends for most of their lives.

**Yolo Joe**

Yolo Joe was a male graduating student and was enrolled in Contemporary English for his English 12 credit. I had a connection to Yolo Joe’s family as I had twice taught his older brother in the Flexible Studies program. Yolo Joe was a gregarious student, friendly with both students and teachers alike. He was heavily involved in athletics at the school, was a member of the band program, a member of the Flexible Studies department, and a member of the 2012 Reynolds Slam team. As an academic student, Yolo Joe frustrated teachers with his lack of
follow through on assignments, completing them at the last moment or not at all. While academically capable, Yolo Joe’s marks often reflected his effort more than they did his ability. He was an important part of Contemporary English, as he was willing to perform and speak freely during the class, contributing to both discussion and community of our class.

**Macy**

Macy was a female graduating student and was enrolled in Contemporary English for her English 12 credit. Macy was very involved in the band program at Reynolds and was composing her own music for performance. Macy was a lover of music, which drew her to Contemporary English as she had little background with hip hop and hip hop culture. She was generally quiet in class, but thoughtful in her work.

**Pedro**

Pedro was a male grade 11 student and was enrolled in Contemporary English for his English 11 credit. Pedro was a part of the Centre for Soccer Excellence at Reynolds. I had not met Pedro prior to the beginning of this course. A thoughtful person, Pedro had a long history with hip hop, but he had an appreciation of all music. In class, Pedro was willing to share in discussions and in the hip hop workshops. He was a gentle presence in the classroom and I felt his demeanour helped to create the classroom community we had in Contemporary English.

In addition to these students, two members of the local hip hop community contributed greatly to both the class and this research.

**Nostic**

Nostic was a graduate of Reynolds and deeply involved in hip hop and hip hop culture. Nostic attended Reynolds while I was teaching there, but I did not teach or know him. The one interaction I had with Nostic prior to Contemporary English was being introduced to him after school one day when he came to speak with a colleague about shooting a music video at Reynolds. As Nostic was dating Sphere, he knew about Contemporary English and approached me to see if he could be involved. He ended up coming to the class almost weekly and running workshops for the students, providing a practical side to hip hop in the classroom. He also brought in other members of the local hip hop community and was a strong unifying force in the classroom as all the students respected him greatly. As well, he was a great resource for me when I had questions about hip hop and he was an important part of my first hip hop concert when I went to see KRS One.

**Auto Krat**

Auto Krat was a female **MC** who recently moved to this community from Vancouver. I met her when the Reynolds Slam team were the feature poets at our local spoken word poetry
night. Auto Krat performed during the open mic part of the night, prior to the team performing, and she made quite the impression on the audience and the team members. She connected with the team after their performance and a mutual admiration was born. I connected with her that evening and asked if she would be interested in coming into the class, which she agreed to do. Through the spoken word community we kept in contact and she was a role model for the class, many of whom knew her through the underground scene. Like Nostic, Auto Krat assisted me with this paper in helping to define and explain aspects of hip hop culture for me.

And finally, I will provide a bit of context for who I am.

**MC**

I chose the pseudonym MC because many students call me Mr. C, which shortens nicely to MC, and because it had strong connections to hip hop; the MC is a person who is spitting and sharing their words with the audience. I was in my mid-30s and had been teaching at Reynolds for four years and thus I felt comfortable as part of the school community. My interest in hip hop came from when I was in high school and I listened to R&B and hip hop during the early 1990s. While I moved away from listening to hip hop by my senior years in high school, I still respected it as a musical form. I came to appreciate it as a source of academic study when in my third year of university, I wrote a paper for my American Literature course on how gangsta rap connected to slave songs and hymns. In recent years I had come back to hip hop more through artists like K’naan and K-os, and through hip hop’s rise in popularity within mainstream pop culture. While I self-identify as white, my background is more mixed, being of Canadian and Barbadian descent. Even as a teenager, I have always felt myself to be an outsider to hip hop culture and this was no different as I began teaching Contemporary English.

The Research Context

**Methodology**

Students registered for Contemporary English based on their connection to hip hop culture and/or their desire for an English class that had content unique from English classes they had previously taken. In this way, students self-selected into this class, which was in contrast to the usual way that English classes were selected whereby a computer assigned students to a given class based on the rest of their course selections. As result, this sample group could be viewed as not representative of a typical English classroom at Reynolds Secondary; however, I would argue the opposite. As Contemporary English was a multi-grade classroom, there was more diversity than there would be in other classrooms. Additionally, the students who opted into Contemporary English had diverse school experiences; they represented a range of academic ability and motivation, from some very strong ‘A’ level students to students who were well
known to the administration for their lack of classroom attendance. The class was composed of fourteen grade 12s and nine grade 11s and one grade 10 student. There was an even split of boys and girls in the class (12 and 12), but when S-dawg didn’t come back to class after the first month, there was a slim majority of girls in the class. However, in terms of a sample group, the gender composition of Contemporary English mirrored that of a typical Reynolds English class. Further to that, the group of participants in this study also mirrored both the composition of Contemporary English as well as the larger population of the school as it contained: disengaged and engaged classroom students; students who were part of the larger school community and students who did not feel a part of that community; students from all four programs of choice (Band, French immersion, Centre for Soccer Excellence, Flexible Studies) and students who were not a part of any programs of choice; males and females; students who identified with hip hop culture and students who did not identify with hip hop culture. It was due to these reasons that, although the students self-selected into Contemporary English, I believed that this class was representative of a typical classroom at Reynolds and thus could be used as a strong case study.

Understanding my place as teacher and researcher, I decided to draw from action research and case study methodological approaches in conducting this study. I also engaged in data collection using observation, audio field notes, a focus group, individual interviews, and electronic communication.

Case Study

In many respects, this study had characteristics of the case study methodology. As this was the first time that a course was offered in this manner at Reynolds, there was a need to examine it to see where it was successful in engaging, motivating, and creating a sense of community within the students, and where it was not as successful at doing this. To do this, it was necessary to employ the in-depth and the longitudinal nature of a case study. As Chadderton and Torrance (2011) noted, the case study “asks the basic question ‘what is going on here?’ – before trying to account for it” (p. 53). Following this premise, I examined this classroom to see if students felt more engaged, motivated, and had a stronger sense of community as a result of the use of their out-of-school literacies as the basis of content for the curriculum. The accounting for the ‘why’ came only after looking at how students felt about the course, thus connecting to Chadderton and Torrance’s view on case studies.

The long-term and immersive nature of the study, whereby I taught the class almost every school day for a full semester, aligns with the anthropological/sociological approach to case study methodology. A distinct difference, though, was that I was involved in the class, in comparison to the fly-on-the-wall approach. In this instance, it was more akin to a fly-in-the-soup
approach, and thus the objective distancing that is sometimes employed in case studies was not possible in this scenario. However, I feel as though this was an advantage as I was able to establish stronger relationships with my students than an outside researcher would have been able to, connecting to the students in the same way that other teachers would also be able to establish relationships with their students should they decide to enact a similar style classroom. In this way, my observations were situated in an environment that other teachers will have cultivated in their own classrooms.

This positioning resulted in the development of another aspect of the case study: coming to know the insider perspective. Being a teacher, I have an understanding of what occurs in a classroom; however, every classroom has its own culture and every teacher has their own way of interacting with their students. In this study, though, I was the insider as it was my classroom and my pedagogical choices that were implemented during the semester. However, as a result of my position as teacher, I was never able to be an insider in the students’ sphere of the classroom, but I attempted to create a classroom that was respectful of the students’ interests, honouring their out-of-school literacies and reducing the authoritative distance between teacher and student. It was through a focus group and follow-up individual interviews and that I came to understand the “insider” perspective of the students.

Another connection to the case study methodology was the bounded nature of this study. It had a distinct timeline from September 2011 until February 2012 – the first semester of the Reynolds school year – as well as a limited number of possible participants as only the students registered in Contemporary English were available to be a part of the study. In this manner, it was a very specific case of educational practice and as such I drew upon some of methodological approaches from case studies.

One point of differentiation occurred when it came to drawing comparisons to other case studies. As previously mentioned, this was the only class of this nature at Reynolds, and to the best of my knowledge it was the only case of this class in the district. It was for this reason that comparisons to other case studies was be difficult, if not impossible for this particular location and time. However, the use of hip hop in classroom has occurred in classrooms in the United States and some imperfect comparisons can be drawn with them.

Action Research

Somekh and Zeichner (2009) cited Appadurai when they wrote that the rapidly changing world was “‘a world of flows’ in which ‘ideas and ideologies, people and goods, images and messages, technologies and techniques’ are constantly in motion, despite the appearance of stable structures and organizations in each country” (p. 6). This accurately describes the current British
Columbian educational situation. British Columbia is currently entrenched in traditional assessment practices and classroom structures, yet in documents like the one put out by The Premier’s Technology Council entitled *A Vision for 21st Century Learning*, the current British Columbia provincial government is pushing toward a 21st century/personalized learning model. In this way, the ‘ideas and ideologies’ of the educational system are in motion while the structure of education has the appearance of being stable. I used action research to see if I could “[generate] research knowledge and [improve] social action at the same time” (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009, p. 5, *original emphasis*). Therefore, a purpose of using the action research methodology for this study was to connect theory to practice, giving teachers and policy makers a model of personalized learning that would be easily applicable the stable structures that exists in today’s school, while helping to provide 21st century ideas and ideologies in traditional classroom settings.

According to the SAGE Handbook of Educational Research (Noffke & Somekh, 2011), action research can be broken into three forms: professional, personal, political. This study fit into the professional and personal, with a small aspect of political. First and foremost, I was looking to improve the learning experiences of students in my classroom. In this way, personal learning and improvement were goals of this study. As I improved my practice, the classroom-based learning experiences of my students would improve as well. I believed that if I was able to improve student engagement, motivation, and sense of community in my own classroom, this could also be achieved in other classrooms within Reynolds, thus this study would contribute to the professional knowledge base of teachers. This study can provide a bridge between theory and the implementation of theory in the classroom. The political piece comes in with the advancement of 21st Century Learning or personalized learning by the provincial government of British Columbia. In this way, this study could become political. The framework of this classroom was one that could be used to demonstrate how personalized learning could be implemented in traditional classrooms with little to no extra incurrence of expense to the school districts and, by extension, to the government as they provide funding to the school districts.

As the learnings from this study will be immediately applicable to teachers’ practices in both my school as well as across the district and the province, action research once again fits well with my objectives. Personally, I can apply learnings from the study to every class I teach. Somekh & Zeichner (2009) also wrote about action research arising from the needs of the people in a local setting, where they noted that the struggle between between traditional research and locally produced knowledge needs to be held with the same importance as traditional research generated knowledge. It was through the narratives of my students, with their locally constructed understandings and knowledge, that I created a frame which other educational communities can use in their localities.
As is often the case with action research, my research question followed my inspiration. The driving force for this study came from a student who felt that school, and English class in particular, was not relevant to him and his lived experience. He shared with me a vision of a relevant curriculum, one based around hip hop culture. It was then that I realized that there was an opportunity for innovation and change. As this study focused on student engagement, motivation, and sense of community, it was integral that student voices were at the forefront of this research. In the tradition of Friere’s participatory research, students were active contributors to the research. To that end and in order to achieve the triangulation of data and the objective distance that is need to work through action research, I consulted with students as well as shared my findings and thoughts with my colleagues, many of whom I have worked with closely over four years at Reynolds.

According to Lewin (as cited in Noffke & Somekh, 2011) action research is divided into distinct stages within one cycle: reconnaissance, data collection, and development of hypotheses. The testing of the hypotheses begins the next cycle of action research. For this study, the reconnaissance aspect was completed in discussions with students and careful consideration of literature and the research question. This had been occurring since S-Dawg first proposed the idea of the hip hop curriculum to me in TLC. Once the issue of students feeling disengaged from school because of lack of relevant content had been identified, I used my masters degree course work and readings as an opportunity to review literature. Upon completion of my course work, I began to collect data from the field; in this case, the Contemporary English classroom. The aspect of data collection occurred over the course of the first semester of the 2011/2012 school year (September 2011 to February 2012). After the collection of data, I examined it in order to develop hypotheses as to and understandings that emerged that showed how and why students were affected by the incorporation of their out-of-school literacies into an English classroom. However, while action research fit much of what I was trying to accomplish with this study, it was not a perfect fit. Firstly, this study was but one cycle of the research. As this was a semester-long investigation, there was no opportunity to engage in a second round of research with these students. As well, with many of the students were in their graduation year, it was impossible to complete a second round with them in future years. However, the learning from the first cycle could be implemented in other classrooms and with other classes; in that way I will be able to continue developing practice and testing it with students. Secondly, I was the sole person involved in the research, which was in some ways contrary to the participatory nature of action research. There was not a concerted group effort to effect change across the department; rather, I was alone in the examination of this classroom. I engaged other teachers in discussions about their classroom experiences and to give me objective feedback on my
observations and thoughts about implementation, but I was the principal and sole researcher in this study.

The action research methodology was chosen to specifically compliment the case study approach. The intent of this project was to reflect upon and apply findings to future iterations of similar courses rather than solely reporting on a single instance. In combining the two methodologies, I am able to both share the events that occurred during Contemporary English, and to encourage both its continued growth within the Reynolds environment, and hopefully, the implementation of this pedagogy and shared curriculum construction in other schools.

Data Collection

As hip hop is used to give voice to those who are often marginalized and misunderstood, this research needed to put students’ voices front and center. To that end, this study employed aspects of action research and case study as its foundation for the methodological approach. Data was collected through field audio field notes that I recorded after each class and shared with my supervisor, Kathy Sanford. After the course was completed and the final grades were submitted, in accordance to my ethics approval, the students shared their experiences in a focus group setting as well as follow-up individual interviews and electronic communication. With permission, I also used artifacts students created as part of their regular course assignments. It was through their voices that I discovered what affect using students’ out-of-school literacies had on their feeling of engagement, motivation to complete coursework, and sense of community within the classroom and the school.

Observation

In the classroom setting, one of the key methods of gathering qualitative data was through observation. The act of conscious watching provided a more nuanced and ‘thicker’ description of the classroom than a more quantitative approach of breaking down the multifaceted classroom into scales and numbers. As well, observation was important because many of the interactions that occurred in the classroom could be missed by the teacher and the student and as such interviews alone would be unable to provide the researcher with a full enough view of meaningful occurrences in the classroom.

As for data collection during this study, I engaged in recording my observations through the use of audio field notes. I recounted ideas and events of the class and day in these audio field notes, which were recorded on an iPhone as I drove to pick my spouse up from her place of work. These audio field noted were then emailed to Kathy and we shared ideas about them. The audio field notes later served to act as reminders of the events of the course. In these audio field notes, I reflected on my own practice and impressions of how the students were engaging with the course and each other. I also noted any moments that were important or that I might want to revisit when I had the
opportunity to interview students at the completion of the course. I also attempted to record statements made by students that were pertinent to the broad categories of engagement, motivation and community. I recognized that in this process, the moments I missed or didn’t record said as much about the study and my biases as the moments I chose to record. Recognizing my dual role of teacher and researcher, I was aware that the way that I wrote about my own classroom reflected well or negatively upon me as a teacher. It was my intention to be cognizant of this as I observed my classroom and recorded my thoughts. In being a part of the classroom experience, I was never able to achieve objectivity, but in a teacher’s classroom it is more important for a teacher to acknowledge his/her own biases so that they he/she can move past them and work with students as unique individuals. This mindset was present in my recordings, acknowledging that my biases existed and that I would move through them to treat my recordings as unique and valuable in providing me more information about my students’ experiences in Contemporary English. As well, the focus group and interviews provided students an opportunity to validate or contest my observations and understandings about their experiences in the classroom.

The ontological lens that I used when observing my students was that of an ethnographic approach. As a researcher, I was embedded in the classroom and was highly participatory in my involvement. Similar to what Jones and Somekh (2011) wrote, I was observing in an open-ended manner, looking to record details as they pertain to general categories such as motivation, engagement, and sense of community. While trying to infer other’s inner feelings through their outward behaviours and words is fraught with issues, I attempted to notice patterns or deviations from patterns, and follow up with students about these moments during the course of the focus group or individual interviews. In using an ethnographic approach to the observations, the method of observing I employed was unstructured observation. In this way, it was my intention to remain open to all the events of the classroom, not valuing or judging an academic act as more or less important than a social one.

Focus Group

The focus group was an opportunity for the participants to share their group experience about the course. I felt that the focus group was a valuable tool as it, to some extent, replicated the communal classroom experience. It is not often that a student and teacher sit and speak about the student’s experience in the classroom. This provided students the opportunity to share stories and build on each other’s ideas and experiences. The focus group was conducted using both semi-structured and open-ended interview techniques, guiding the students in a direction and then letting them go and share their experiences. I had a series of questions prepared, but was not beholden to the questions if the conversation began to move in another direction.
The questions served more as prompts for conversation than as a prescriptive question and answer format. When the students arrived in the class, I welcomed them to the focus group, thanked them for their participation and reminded them that at anytime, they could choose to withdraw from the research for any reason without negative repercussions to them or the study itself. After that, I informed them that I would be recording our interview and began recording. I began the focus group by asking them about the ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ of the course and whenever a question seemed to have exhausted itself, I referred to my list of questions and asked one that seemed to connect well to the previous discussion. During answers, I would ask probing questions to elicit more detailed answers and explanations. I also asked clarifying questions to make sure that I correctly understood the meaning of their answers. As this interview occurred during school hours, I was conscious of the time we had to complete the focus group so I tried to keep the conversation moving in order to cover themes from my research question, but I didn’t cut any topic off prematurely to do so and allowed for exploration of tangential topics that students brought up.

Six of the eight students involved in the research were part of the focus group. Obeast, Trinity, Whispers, Macy, Jax, and Yolo Joe were present for the focus group which lasted about 80 minutes. Pedro was unavailable at that time, so I interviewed him using the focus group questions on a separate occasion two days prior to the focus group. Sphere was unavailable for the focus group as well and I spoke with her in a follow up interview to gain her insight on themes and ideas that emerged from the focus group. The focus group also allowed for competing views to be expressed and through these views I was be able to learn more about how different individuals were engaged, motivated, or developed a sense of community during the course, watching for intra-group variations, and looking at differences of experience in this class from previous class experiences. The focus group was recorded using an iPhone and was transcribed by me.

One aspect of the focus group that I was aware of was the quieting of voices of students who may have had something to contribute that was contrary to the group consensus. As well, any peer power dynamic that existed within the classroom could have been replicated in the focus group. In both these cases, the one-

![Figure 9 Focus Group Questions](image)

These were the guiding questions for the focus group with Contemporary English students.
on-one interviews provided an opportunity for those quieted voices to be heard.

Interview

After the focus group, I followed up individually with students in the school environment in order to give them an opportunity to share their ideas and experiences with me in a non-group setting. These interviews were more informal in nature and occurred more a natural conversation, using specific themes or comments that students made in the focus group as our prompts. As well, the interviews also gave me an opportunity to check in with students to be sure that I was being accurate in my interpretations of their experiences as gathered from my observations as well as from the focus group. When statements are put to print, they are taken out of the lived experience and placed into another realm where they can be twisted and reinterpreted, so it was important that my students had an opportunity to ensure that their ideas were being reflected in my writing; I wanted their statements to connect closely to their lived experiences (Barbour & Schostak, 2011, p. 62). While recorded voices can also be understood out of context, the ability to hear intonation at least, provides at least on additional layer of context to the students’ comments. Similar to the focus group, the individual interviews were recorded using an iPhone and were transcribed by me. For me, I was fortunate that access to students was not an issue as the participants were students in my own classroom. While not all students in the classroom were participants in the study, the ones that opted in were easily accessible to me. This was a benefit to me as I was able to share my ongoing thoughts and writing with the participants, ensuring that my interpretations and writing were accurate to their lived experiences.

Electronic Communication

As the writing of the paper carried on past the end of the school year, I was in contact with subjects via email and text messaging in order to clarify and confirm ideas that I had while writing. This was limited to consulting with Nostic and Auto Krat, using their expertise in hip hop culture as a reference for me to make sure that my interpretations of hip hop culture and usage of vernacular were accurate. As a result, I was able to be sure that what I was representing as students’ voices were accurate to the meaning that the students had intended.

Artifacts

The use of artifacts in this paper is for illustrative purposes. There was no intended document analysis for this paper, rather the inclusion of student artifacts is to give a full visual representation of the student work to provide deeper context to the conversations that were occurring about the themes related to the research questions.
Data Analysis

Once the data collection was complete, I had reviewed it in its entirety. First, I listened to my audio field notes and made notes, grouping my observations and any noted classroom events into thematic categories, both based around the identified themes in my research question and any emergent themes. I then reviewed the focus group recordings, once again grouping comments made by students into themes based around my research question as well as any emergent themes that were recurring and significant to the question I was exploring. This was done once more with data from the individual interviews I conducted with student. After completing this data grouping, I examined the themes more closely, looking for both comments that explicated the students point of view as it pertained to my research questions and for any specific examples that they may have used to elucidate those views. From there, I began to write my Findings and Analysis sections, using the students voices as my guide to sharing what we had uncovered through the implementation of Contemporary English.

Ethics

In accordance to the requirements of the University of Victoria, I had an ethical review of my research completed and assented to by the university. Additionally, I submitted and was granted a request to conduct research in a school classroom from the administration of school district. Furthermore, I gained permission from my principal to conduct research in our school. And lastly, I gained permission from my subjects and their guardians to be part of the research project. At the beginning of the semester, and in my absence, our teacher-librarian read the students a letter detailing the work that I was going to be conducting in the classroom and at that time asked students who were interested in being part of this research project to take a permission package which would be signed by both the student and a guardian. These students were to return signed permission forms to the teacher-librarian and as such I was unaware of which students had chosen to participate in the research. In order for the research to be meaningful, I wanted a minimum of five students to be involved in the research and my teacher-librarian shared with me that I had enough students for the research to continue, but I had no knowledge of which students had chosen to participate. This was shared with me for the first time once final

Figure 10 University of Victoria Ethics Certificate of Approval

A copy of the Certificate of Approval for this thesis.
grades had been submitted to the office, two weeks after the completion of the course. This was the first time I knew who was involved in the research and the first contact I made with the students in regard to proceeding with the research.

Being a teacher and a research provided moments on conflict for me, when, through the duration of Contemporary English, students would share with me information that was of personal nature through their writing and discussions that would be of benefit to the study, but was too confidential to share. In any moment where there was a tension between my role as teacher and my role as research, I always placed my role of teacher above that of researcher. As a result of this, there are aspects of the course that I have chosen not to share to help protect and ensure the well-being and the identity of students. When students disclosed something of concerning personal nature, in my role of teacher the law requires me to share this appropriate school staff and in each and every case, I did so. To the best of my ability, I tried to remain objective in the role of researcher when I reflected on myself as teacher. I tried to show myself as teacher in a neutral light by keeping in both positive and negative comments made about me and my role in the classroom. I also conferred with students I interviewed to see if, in their view, I was accurate in how I was depicting myself as teacher. However, performing dual roles can be messy and it was through the audio field notes that I recorded almost daily after the school day ended that I was able to distance these two roles, performing my role as teacher throughout the day and the role of researcher once I had left the school and was able to reflect upon the events of the class. While this could be problematic as my view and/or recollection of events could change, over the course of a few hours, the fact that Contemporary English occurred in the afternoon mitigated some of this concern as it allowed for relatively prompt recollection of events.

Confidentiality is of utmost importance when conducting research in a school setting with students as subjects. As such, students chose pseudonyms and we referred to each other by those pseudonyms when speaking. While there is a reduced level of anonymity as a result of the voices that are present in this paper, students and guardians gave permission for this to occur and, for the opportunity for students to share their actual voice with people, the students felt that the reduction of anonymity was acceptable. The use of Facebook as a communicative tool in a school setting is not uncommon at Reynolds. For Contemporary English, I created a ‘Facebook Page’ which provided a layer of distance between me and the students as there was no ‘friending’ involved. The students had the option to ‘Like’ the page, at which time they would receive posts from me and their peers as it pertained to Contemporary English. This page could be seen as an extension of the classroom, participation on the page was not required; it was used primarily as a way for students to share ideas and music and for me to make class announcements and send reminders. I have used Facebook pages and email
distribution lists in other English classes I have taught as a way to be able to get information to students, so this was not unique to Contemporary English. Students understood that in using Facebook they were giving up their anonymity during the class, however, for this paper, I have tried to maintain that anonymity by blocking out names and images of people involved.

Ultimately, the dual role of teacher and researcher can be messy, and for good reasons as there can sometimes be competing interests that require a teacher/researcher to make quick decisions. In any instance in which this occurred, I always chose my role as teacher as that is my first and more important responsibility to my students. However, having a dual role allowed for a rich reflection of practice and insights due to the respectful and caring relationship that I shared with my students.
Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, 'and what is the use of a book,' thought Alice 'without pictures or conversation?' - Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

Lewis Carroll was a subversive author who was ahead of his time (Lakoff, 1993). He was prescient when he penned the opening lines of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, as he illustrated the dilemma now facing high school English departments across North America, and specifically, for this paper, in British Columbia. Picking up from Carroll, The New London Group (1996) clearly delineated new literacies and how these new literacies should be addressed in the classroom. That seminal article is now 16 years old and yet, I would suggest, that most English Language Arts classrooms in British Columbia still follow the traditional format of by teaching units: The Novel, The Short Story, Writing, Poetry and Drama (read: Shakespeare). For Whispers, a grade twelve student who had experienced success in previous English classes, including my English class in her grade ten and grade eleven years, she found that format of English class to be a
waste of time because the content studied and the manner in which it was studied wasn’t relevant to her life or, ironically, the standardized provincial English 12 exam. She begins by comparing Contemporary English to “other English classes”:

This English class format of novel, short story, drama, poetry continues to be followed despite the fact that the declared aim of the British Columbia English Language Arts Integrated Resource Package (IRP) is as follows:

The aim of English Language Arts is to provide students with opportunities for personal and intellectual growth through speaking, listening, reading, viewing, writing, and representing to make meaning of the world and to prepare them to participate effectively in all aspects of society. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 2)

Within this progressive definition, there is nowhere that says that the novel must be taught independently of any other medium or genre. In fact, the IRP continues by suggesting that:

- People use language to comprehend a wide range of literary and informational communications and to respond knowledgeably and critically to what they read, view, and hear. Students’ ability to understand and draw conclusions from communications – whether written, spoken, or displayed visually – and to defend their conclusions rationally is a major goal of education and the particular focus of the English Language Arts 8 to 12 curriculum.

- People use language to communicate their ideas through a variety of print and non-print media. In both academic and business contexts, students need to be able to communicate with precision, clarity, and artistry; apply the conventions of language; gather and organize information and ideas; and use communication forms and styles that suit their abilities, specific purposes, and the needs of the audience.

- People use language as a fundamental part of their personal, work, and social lives – to establish and maintain relationships, for enjoyment and diversion, and to learn. Learning to interact successfully with others is essential for students’ success in school, lifelong learning, and for maintaining productive, satisfying lives. (p. 3)

Again, in this further clarification of the nature and purpose of the English Language Arts curriculum, there is no indication that the purpose of an English class is to learn the intricacies of poetic meter nor is it to completely understand the difference between
metonymy and synecdoche (even though knowledge of these are tested for on the provincial exam for English 12). When I embarked on teaching Contemporary English, it was my hope to connect the out-of-school literacies that students were engaged in to the skills and goals as expressed by the IRP, specifically to “draw conclusions from communications . . . and to defend their conclusions rationally,” and “to communicate with precision, clarity, and artistry” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, p. 3). In the following clip, Jay-Z, a successful mainstream hip hop artist who has had achieved both critical acclaim and mainstream success, describes how rap is akin to poetry, linking rap to being able “to communicate with precision, clarity, and artistry” (p. 3).

**Figure 14 Jay-Z speaks about rap and poetry**

As part of his promotion for his memoir, Decoded, Jay-Z speaks his views on rap.

However, it can be difficult for a teacher to invite an out-of-school literacy into the classroom when they are unfamiliar with the culture of that literacy. Few, if any, people who are immersed in hip hop music and hip hop culture would argue that the genre is anything but richly layered and complex in its history and messages; being conversant with hip hop’s history allows the consumer (whether listening, reading, or viewing) to fully have a fuller understanding of the intent and meaning of the messages being conveyed by the artists. Scholars such as Dyson (2006, 2007), Rose, (1994, 2008), Hill (2009), and Low (2011) have written books about these complexities, both in a societal context and well as a classroom context. The use of homophobic, misogynistic, and racially charged language in rap music makes it difficult for teachers to bring hip hop into the classroom (Hill, 2009; Low, 2011; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004), and yet hip hop can be used in the classroom “as a tool for social justice” (Akom, 2011, p. 52). It is quite understandable that teachers who are not familiar with hip hop culture would be reluctant to introduce it into their classroom, but only introducing content that is familiar to the teacher leads to situations that Whispers described earlier, where students are not interested in what the teacher likes. Teachers are not going to be able to be willfully ignorant of their students’ out-of-school literacies without facing significant student disengagement for much longer. While complex and challenging, it is incumbent on teachers to learn about what students are doing outside of school in order to help students see the relevancy of what is going on inside of school.
When I first started to imagine what kind of student would be interested in taking this course, I thought it would appeal to boys who were part of the hip hop culture who didn’t feel connected to school. This certainly was the group of students I was speaking to when I initially connected with students about this course after my initial discussions with S-dawg. This belief that the course would be comprised of about 14-18 disengaged boys illustrated my own bias both toward hip hop culture being the exclusive domain of males as well as my belief that it would solely be boys who would want a course that was not based predominantly around the fiction of novels, short stories, and plays. The thought that boys would be interested was supported by the work of Blair and Sanford (2004), when they discussed how boys “struggled to make sense of school literacy experiences, [while] they talked enthusiastically about their literary practices outside school” (p. 454), suggesting that as educators, “rather than making assumptions about boys’ literacy practices, we need to ask them how they apply literacy strategies to their in school and out-of-school lives” (p. 459). However, my bias precluded me from considering that these considerations should be extended to girls as well. The desire for an alternative to traditional class structure extended far beyond the boys I had spoken to and I ended up with a class of 24 students, evenly split between boys and girls, and pretty closely split in terms of academic engagement. My impression was that no more than 60% of the class closely associated with hip hop culture, while the remaining students enrolled in the class because they generally enjoyed music and/or were looking for a different structure to an English class.

Building on the New London Group’s (1996) notion of multimodality, Kress and Jewitt (2003) also suggested that modes “rarely, if ever, occur alone” (p. 2). With the use of music, speech, art, and movement as the pillars of hip hop culture, multimodality has always been a fundamental aspect of hip hop although multimodality is becoming more prevalent in literature, with novels such as *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Safran Foer, 2005) and in Jay-Z’s memoir, *Decoded* (2010), where images play important meaning making roles; Alice would be excited to see how books were becoming increasingly multimodal in today’s society. As a result of hip hop’s multimodality, connecting the students’ out-of-school literacies to the Prescribed Learning Outcomes (PLOs) as prescribed in the IRP, a different approach to assignments and assessment was going to be necessary and, in keeping with hip hop culture, it also needed to be authentic. In fact, for Contemporary English to be successful, I needed to honour hip hop and hip hop culture in the classroom. As authenticity is a major tenet of hip hop (McLeod, 1999), the people involved, from students to guest speakers to local MCs, – basically anyone who knew about hip hop culture and was going to contribute to the course – needed to see that the course was ‘keepin’ it real’. Honouring the out-of-school literacies of the students, and hip hop culture, was a major focus of mine, and a bit of a concern as a result of my outsider status; a summer of
listening to hip hop and reading about it would not allow me to successfully code-switch (Delpit, 1988), but it would demonstrate to the members of the hip hop discourse that I was making an honest effort to understand their culture and that I hoped that my effort would be meaningful to them.

**Community**

For this study, I used the definition of classroom community as defined by Rovai and Lucking (2000). They suggest there are four components to classroom community: spirit (a feeling of belonging to the group), trust (support from the group for speaking openly without being judged), interaction (task-driven/teacher assigned or student initiated), and learning (knowledge and meaning are actively constructed by the community). This definition addressed the ideas that I had early on in my planning process for the creation of Contemporary English where I wanted students to feel a connection to the class and while trusting each other (and me) enough to share openly in their learning through discussion and class projects. It was my initial belief that the composition of the class would be dominated by students who both identified with hip hop culture and felt disconnected from traditional school culture. Personally, it was important to me that a sense of classroom community be developed as studies have shown that a strong sense of connection to a school community “has been found to be highly related to school success (Hendrix, Sederberg, & Miller, 1990), decreased dropout (Calabrese & Poe, 1990), and decreased problem behaviors (Jenkins, 1997)” (p. 41, as cited in Brown & Evans, 2002). If, through a connection to hip hop, I was able to provide a way for these marginalized students to connect to the Reynolds community – or through the establishment of a course that respected their out-of-school literacies to feel that their voices were being heard and valued – then I hoped this new sense of community would help students feel more engaged in their education at Reynolds.

A challenge in starting any new course in a secondary school setting in British Columbia involves recruiting enough students to the course so that the course is viable enough to be put into the timetable. Funding for the teaching staff at a secondary school is based on classes of 30 students, so for a class to be economically feasible to run, there needs to be enough students enrolled in that another class in the school doesn’t have more than 30 students. In the case of Contemporary English, as it was the first time that this unique approach to English was being attempted at Reynolds, administration wanted there to be at least 21 students to make it feasible to run. Although 30 students maximizes the funding formula, many classes are run with fewer than 30 students and the administration, wanting this course to be successful, felt that more than 21 students would be sufficient to justify the cost of the course. In order to attract that number of students, I opened the course up to multiple grade levels, from grade 10 through to grade 12. This provided a larger pool of students to draw from in order to get the number of students I
needed. I was concerned that this multiple grade classroom would present problems as often grade levels define the social boundaries in a school, but no such tension existed in Contemporary English. As Yolo Joe said:

I was saying that in most classes I don’t even want to talk to other people but in hip hop class I know that, like, everyone in there has at least one thing in common, so I don’t, it’s not like I’m, I don’t know, I don’t have a problem talking to people that I know have the same interests that I do.

The cross grade barriers seemed to disappear in the class. As well, because many of the students didn’t know each other, students were sometimes uncertain as to which grade each of them were in. While this was not the case for everyone, it was enough of the class population that the issue never really came up. In fact, because most students had background knowledge of hip hop, grade level did not become a defining difference between students in the class; they were able to find the common ground of hip hop rather than seeking to discover differences. Additionally, the fact that I ended up giving the same assignments to everyone in the class – with assessment still being tied to the achievement of PLOs for each respective grade – contributed to the homogeneity between grade levels. Providing the same assignments allowed students to be working on the same topics, developing their own projects or presentations together and/or doing the same piece of formal writing. The difference between grades was in the criteria used for the assessment of each assignment. For instance, while everyone wrote a synthesis essay on the topic “Music should be mandatory in school”, I used writing rubrics that corresponded to each student’s grade level.

As noted earlier, Reynolds was a relatively homogenous middle-class, predominantly white school, especially when compared to number of minority students, predominantly African American and Latino/a students, who were part of classroom situations in which hip hop had been used to increase engagement of students (Hill, 2009; Low, 2011; Mahiri, 1996, 1998; Morell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). This lack of racial diversity was partly due to where the school was located, but the lack diversity mirrored the demographics of the city as a whole. Although there was not much racial diversity in this classroom, Contemporary English, however, provided a strong cross section of other kinds diversity. First, the classroom was very diverse as it related to the different cliques that existed at Reynolds – drama, smoke-pit, athletes, band, poets – with each of those groups being represented by more than one person. There was also a diversity in the socio-economic status of the students. Furthermore, there was a vast difference among the students with respect to their success in traditional classes and, finally, the students brought with them varied knowledge of both hip hop music and hip hop culture. As a result of all these differences between students, I knew that a strong sense of community within the classroom was going to be important for the success of the class in general, otherwise, the
potential existed for the class to become a number of different cliques within the classroom, with no intention or desire for students from different cliques to speak with one another. However, I did not realize the unifying power that being able to choose to be in the class would create.

Importance of shared interest and choice

Mahiri (1998) asserted that pop culture can act as a strong unifying force amongst different groups of students, something that students spoke clearly about in the creation of a community of learners in our classroom. I had not understood how powerful this idea was going to be in the creation of community; I had underestimated the power of choice and shared interest in creating community. This first excerpt from the focus group addresses this idea of shared interest. When it begins, I am asking the group, and Obeast in particular, if the fact that they were studying hip hop in English class influenced their impression about English. The excerpt continues as they discuss other courses and why they didn’t feel as though community could be created in a traditional English class.

While Obeast didn’t feel as though the class was full of “book smart kids”, there were a fair number of students who were successful academically in Contemporary English. In fact, 50% of the class was “Fully Meeting Expectations” or “Exceeding Expectations” at their particular grade level by the end of the semester (i.e., conventionally, that would be B and A report card grades, respectively). As a result of the common interest in hip hop, this diversity of skill level was something that was not considered as alienating by other students as it pertained to community in Contemporary English and Trinity’s comment that “we all want to be here to learn how to do this and this more about rap and therefore more about poetry so it was just way more (pause) equal.” Introducing the idea of equality was important in this instance for a couple of reasons. First, hip hop emerged from the ghettos of The Bronx, bringing the voice of the oppressed to a larger audience, seeking to tell the story of the marginalized and in some small way, attempting to bring about equality; therefore, it was both important and unsurprising that students who are part of the hip hop culture would see each other as equals. The connotation in this was that the students now saw themselves differently, no longer as students in a classroom, but as peers. Secondly, the implication in Trinity’s words was that there was inherent inequality in regular classrooms and that students felt this inequality when they were present, leading them to withdraw from academic participation and the community of those classrooms. The irony of Trinity making this statement was that she was one of the most successful English students in the...
classroom. Additionally, she was very well connected to the Reynolds community as she was a part of the Flexible Studies program, she was a member of the Reynolds Slam Poetry Team, and she was an active member of the Reynolds theatre department. One might think that a student who was more disengaged from school would be making these statements, but this feeling was prevalent among students of all abilities.

**Attendance**

As a result of the unifying force that hip hop had on this group of students, the students wanted to be present in class, both physically and mentally. This sense of being present connects well with the idea of spirit (Rovai, 2001), where the students have a sense of belonging to this class, moreso than in a traditional class. This sense of community developed through common interest also created a desire within the students to be regular attenders of the class, something that for some of them was an anomaly in their school career. My experience as an English teacher has shown me that attendance is a key component to academic success and only students with fully developed English skills can miss class and still be successful. For students such as Obeast and Jax, attendance was incredibly important for them to be able to pass the course. Obeast’s failure to pass English 10 five times was not due to a lack of inherent ability, but due to a lack of attendance which, in turn, became a lack of completion of course content. He didn’t want to go to class because he wasn’t learning about things he cared about and he didn’t connect with the people in the class. Obeast didn’t feel that trust (Rovai, 2001) in a traditional class, wherein he would be exposed, either explicitly or implicitly, for not being a “smart kid”. He reasoned that if this was the case, why go?

In fact, a desire to be in class was so much the case that when Contemporary English students were suspended for smoking marijuana during school hours, they pleaded to still be allowed to come to English class during their suspension. If that was not a powerful enough example of the power of choice, they each made their pleas separately, unbeknownst to each other, to different administrators. In one case, a student was allowed to attend during his suspension.

Even when serving a suspension, a student still wants to be an active and contributing member of the classroom.
and in another case, a student still connected with the class through our Facebook page, providing the Song of the Day during his absence. One of the most surprising findings was that academically successful students didn’t want to attend traditional English classes and had to drag themselves there each day. In the case of Trinity and Whispers, both students whom I had taught in the Flexible Studies program the previous year, they spoke about how they found English boring and repetitive. Upon reflection, the constant Short Story/Novel/Drama/Poetry of traditional classes would, indeed, get repetitive; however, I tried to avoid this pitfall in my teaching of traditional English classes, but, apparently, with little success in the eyes of some students. In those traditional English classes I provided opportunities for demonstration of understanding in a variety of ways. Both Trinity and Whispers took advantage of this, with Trinity choreographing, performing, and recording a dance in response to a text and Whispers using visual arts to demonstrate her understanding of a text. These students, to any outside observer, would appear engaged, but this was not necessarily the case. This was not an indictment of my teaching, but rather English courses in general. Their continued attendance was a result of their desire to pass and get decent grades rather than feeling connected to content.

Teacher as community creator

The findings around community have thus far focussed on the community of the students, but as an active participant in the classroom, I, too, was a contributing member of the community. In some respects, a teacher could be seen as the creator of community within the classroom because of the authority that he/she has been vested with, both institutionally and by the students. In previous studies, teachers/facilitators brought their own ideas of what hip hop was to the classroom (cf. Hill, 2009; Low, 2011). In developing Contemporary English, I was most interested in exploring the history and social causes that lead to hip hop and its rise in popularity in both the United States and the rest of the world. Prior to the school year beginning, I had created an outline of a course that I was ready to deliver and all that was left to be done was to create my lesson plans and assignments. A talk with Kathy changed my viewpoint when she suggested that I let the students determine the content of the course. Having already relinquished my role as content expert to the students – I would not be able to match the depth of their knowledge in eight weeks of listening to and reading about hip hop – I fully embraced the idea of having the students determine the direction the curriculum would take in Contemporary English.

After explaining Kathy’s idea to the students, we decided to still chart out the history of hip hop on a timeline, stretching back to the beginnings of the African diaspora and culminating in the local underground hip hop scene of today. The purpose of the timeline was to explore the how hip hop came to be created in the Bronx in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and then chart its evolution to today. Students worked in self-selected groups to
research certain time periods and then make connections to hip hop. Once a group had finished one time period or concept, they would choose another and begin anew. The creation of timeline took place in the library over four periods during the course of one week and it was from this timeline that we would consider the curriculum we wanted to study over the course of the semester. Students broke into their self-selected groups and researched different eras that would eventually have an influence on the creation of hip hop: slavery, the Civil War, the Civil Rights movement, the Blues, Jazz, Rock and Roll, Disco, to name a few. They added their findings to the timeline and from this timeline, students decided what it was that we would study for the course. The students shared with me what they wanted, and somewhat surprisingly, it was not very different from what I had wanted to explore in the course. This may have been because many of the students and I had spoken about the course for over a year and we had calibrated what we wanted out of it, but it may have also been because, like me, the students didn’t want to blindly accept the status quo in hip hop, but to learn its background so that we could understand how it became what it is. With the success of the collaboration on the curriculum, I then had to consider how I was going to deliver and assess the material.

Allowing for this equality in decisions about the curriculum helped foster the community of the classroom. In the end, most of the focus of the daily curriculum delivery revolved around the Evolution of Hip Hop and how that evolution connected with today’s culture of hip hop. My role as teacher was to give context, find content, and present enough information about a given topic so that the students could then begin to do their own work. For instance, when we explored civil rights, I gave a brief overview of the situation in the United States of the era and students then chose groups and topics that they wanted to learn more about. They then worked with me to develop a presentation that they would give to the class detailing an aspect of the civil rights movement. One group looked at music during the civil rights, another explored sport, while others looked at individuals like Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Muhammed Ali. Having mentors like Nostic and hip hop artists like Auto Krat and poets like Zaccheus Jackson (see Mentors section for more details about these people) helped with both the Rap (writing) and the Performance aspects of the curriculum. Due to the depth we went into certain topics, and sometimes the slowness with which students worked, we didn’t end up covering everything we wanted to cover in the timeline by the end of the semester. But even though we didn’t get to do everything, Obeast spoke about how this project and the collaboration involved in general in the class helped to establish community from the beginning of the semester:
Yeah, well everything was talked about too, like, if, like, there was an idea brought up we’d all talk about it or we’d all break off into groups and all our ideas reported to one thing, be spat at you, and it’d all be worked out. Even our timeline, like all that, that we were supposed to work on all semester but we didn’t end up doing, it was the whole class working together as a team and ideas just meshed up.

Obeast’s use of the word “team” is significant because in the BC educational setting, one where students are set up to be academically independent – if not in direct competition with their peers for the highest marks and access to post-secondary spaces, awards, and scholarships – the idea that a classroom would feel like a team is unique. By following Kathy’s suggestion of having the students create the curriculum timeline, I was able to create a situation whereby everyone was able to have a voice about what they wanted to learn about in the classroom, where everyone was able to contribute to a single goal, and where I was not the one dictating what hip hop was coming into the classroom.

Additionally, as a creator of community, I was able to use my contacts in the community to connect with and invite many community members into the classroom. Although the guest speakers/artists had a large impact on the creation of community in the classroom, more so than I did in many cases, my decision to seek out and invite these individuals into the classroom contributed greatly to the sense of community that was developed. Again, allowing myself to not be the expert in the classroom had a positive effect on student engagement and classroom community. During the performances and workshops, I placed myself as an active participant in the class, shoulder to shoulder with the students. This also contributed a sense of equality that is necessary for a community to function and which will be more fully explore in the upcoming Authority and Vulnerability section.

Mentors

As I was thinking about how to teach Contemporary English, I spoke to colleagues and peers who were more knowledgeable than me about hip hop, trying to determine where to begin my own re-education. The more people I spoke to, the more I came to understand that hip hop culture had a strong community component to it; as such, I wanted to figuratively remove the walls of the classroom and invite the hip hop community into the classroom to share their expertise and skills with me and my students. This decision lead to having more community members in Contemporary English than any other course I have

Figure 19 Audio - The community in the classroom

Students speaking about why they enjoyed having community members come to class
ever taught. This was one of the aspects of the course that the students appreciated.

More than ten hip hop artists and spoken word poets came into the classroom throughout the semester, but none was more influential to the community of Contemporary English than Nostic, a Reynolds grad who had discovered a love of hip hop during his high school days and had been pursuing it as an artist since. In fact, it was Nostic who approached me and asked to be involved in the course as he learned about it through Sphere, who was his girlfriend. As I had not taught Nostic while he was a student at Reynolds, I didn’t know him prior to the course beginning except for one time we met while he was speaking to another teacher, asking that teacher to be in the music video he was shooting, as seen below.

As Nostic and I got to know each other and I saw his passion for teaching and the way the students reacted to him, I was eager to keep him involved in the course. Through Nostic, I deepened my understanding of how much collaboration was a fabric of the hip hop community and how important it was to him to be a part of the creation of this community within the school system:

Collaboration in the community of hip hop is like any other collaboration in society, two minds coming together to educate, inspire, and produce a harmonious community. Helping Brad Cunningham teach this class, and hopefully continuing, was one of the deepest and genuine unities I have experienced in hip hop, people, and the community. The most ancient form of teaching is through poetry, song, and stories, and I believe that this class has the potential to bring us back to our purest form of community, communication, expression, and communion as a human race (Nostic, 2012, personal communication).

Building on that notion of collaboration, Nostic took care of the more practical side of hip hop while I remained responsible for the delivery of the curriculum that the students decided upon. However, the students would write much more openly and freely for Nostic than they would for me; he gave them prompts and the kids were very keen to write and share with him. Without the fear of assessment – even though students knew I would never assess their free writes – and with his demonstrated skill as a hip

Figure 20 “Divine Daydreaming” by Divine Element

This video was shot in Reynolds and with a colleague playing the role of angry teacher.
hop artist, the students were excited to share their writing with him. During the course I mused about this in my field notes:

Because he is an artist and has recorded and can spit, kids are, or seem to be, I would say, a bit more willing to extend themselves for him than they are for me and that’s an interesting kind of dynamic in terms of looking at encouraging kids to participate and stuff. (Cunningham, 2011, audio field notes)

Nostic came in almost every Friday and conducted workshops with the students on beatboxing, writing, rapping, as well as bringing his friends from the local hip hop community into the school to perform and share their expertise as well. This included at least three other Reynolds grads, two of whom I had taught during their time at Reynolds. He even tried to get KRS One and Canadian hip hop artist k-os into the class, but to no avail. For me, Nostic reinforced the concept of community within hip hop, and I wanted that same feeling to exist within the classroom, which, according to the students, we achieved.

Figure 22 Nostic - Spitting in class

As was evidenced by the number of non-Reynolds people who “Liked” our Facebook page, this course was also being positively received within the local hip hop community. Nostic was an active member of the local hip hop community, through participating at cyphers or recording CDs or music videos – on his own or as part of his group Divine Element with two other Reynolds grads - or giving local performances, even a spur of the moment performance at the Reynolds Christmas assembly.

Figure 21 “Walk with me” by Nostic

Figure 23 Reynolds Christmas Concert
As a result of a fortuitous quirk in the timetable, the Reynolds theatre was available during the Contemporary English block, so with the support of the drama teacher, we were able to use the theatre for the classes where community members were coming in or we wanted to be a bit louder. During the performances and workshops that we conducted in the theatre, it was common for the senior Reynolds students who spent their spare block sitting at tables in the foyer outside the theatre to wander into the top level of the theatre to observe and listen to what was going on. The community that we had created in the classroom was starting to reach not just outside the school, but also into the hallways, which is often a harder place to reach. And as students in the class became more comfortable with the classroom community, they began to participate more fully in the performances, both as an audience and as artists. In one instance, a boy who was among the least successful students in the entire school, beatboxed alongside Nostic and Najjah Callibur, to great acclaim from both the class and the artists. Another student spit to beats that Auto Krat and DJ Spiro had created and in another instance Trinity spat spoken word to Nostic’s beatboxing on the last day of class. The students had created a space where they supported risk, and received positive feedback, from peers and mentors alike.

Nostic’s validation of the class and his willingness to volunteer his time meant a lot to the students and helped to demonstrate to them that I was sincere about creating a community around this course. I believe that Nostic’s Reynolds connection also created an opportunity for the students who were about to graduate to consider being a part of the course in future.

MC
Are you guys going to come help out next year?

Obeast
Yeah.

Trinity
Yeah.

Jax
For, for what?

MC
In the course.

Jax
Yeah. Doing what?

MC
I don’t know. Doing what Nostic did.

(End of school bell rings)
I would liked to help for a long time.

The desire to come back to high school after graduation was simultaneously surprising and unsurprising. Obeast was an introvert at heart, but most saw him as a larger than life personality. While he did not perform well in classes in which he was not engaged (interestingly, he really enjoys Socials), he was also eager to do things that he finds interesting. In this way, it was surprising that he would want to help out in a subject in which he had not been successful so often before, but unsurprising knowing that hip hop was something that he closely identified with. Community begets community. Three Reynolds grads came back to support Contemporary English by volunteering their time in a classroom with students that, with the exception of one or two, they didn’t know. Now the students they worked with eanted to continue to help develop that community.

Song of the Day

Song of the Day resulted from a quick brainstorm I had near the start of the Contemporary English as I tried to find a way to incorporate students use of oral language into the classroom with a task that was to be fun, interactive, and without assessment. What came out of that desire was Song of the Day. This was a way to encourage students to be on time to class and to start the day with some music. It didn’t make sense to me to have a class about hip hop without music being a central focus of it. However, I also didn’t want to be judging music, suggesting that one song was good while another song wasn’t; I was not well-versed enough to be a critic nor did I think that suggesting that music one person liked was or greater or lesser quality would benefit the creation of classroom community. Furthermore, I wanted this initial daily task to be about sharing and aesthetics, so while there was a structure, there was no judgement by either myself or the studens, although there was often praise for the presenter because students were excited to hear a song that they liked. I did the first Song of the Day and shared with the class an old-school hip hop song, “Ain’t no half-steppin” by Big Daddy Kane. I explained to the students that I was trying to model the manner in which I hoped that they would all present their own Song of the Day, by giving a personal story and some background as to why they chose the song as well as presenting lyrics so students could read along and appreciate the song’s writing and musicality. My personal story was that I grew up listening to hip hop until about grade 10 when I had friends who started listening to harder rap and I had other friends who introduced me to rock and roll, specifically Led Zeppelin and The Black Crowes. For me, at that time, Big Daddy Kane was a bit of a edgier rapper, wearing lots of gold and rapping harder lyrics than the “milk chocolate” stuff I listened to. However, I revisited him as I researched hip hop history as I had read too many places that he was among the most talented rappers to every spit, that both his rhymes and his flow were sophisticated and smooth. In listening to him again, I appreciated the music much more and I came to realize how
edgy current hip hop had become because this song was no longer edgy to me. When I saw how much the students enjoyed sharing music, I thought back to the colleagues that I had spoken with about hip hop and how much they enjoyed those discussions. In a move to try to have my students see teachers differently, I invited a number of my colleagues to present a song of their choice to the class for Song of the Day. To my surprise, some of the teachers got quite nervous about this because they were afraid that their musical tastes would be judged by the students. The position of expert had been reversed and now it was the teacher who was nervous to share in class. However, most every teacher I spoke to ended up sharing a song with the class and enjoyed the conversations that came as a result. In the most ironic case, one of the vice principals who had had to suspend Contemporary English students for smoking marijuana, presented Song of the Day shortly after they came back to school. What the class learned about him that day was that he was a musician and music teacher and he had worked with kids who were into hip hop, just like they were, when he was living in his hometown of Minneapolis, Minnesota. After his song of the day, the vice principal showed some youtube videos of one his old students, DJ Snuggles, which blew the minds of the students in the classroom. The students enjoyed seeing that teachers shared their interest in hip hop and learning that some were just as into it as they were. In this way, the community of Contemporary English grew a little bit larger.

Oracy

As Rovai (2001) discussed, trust is:

the feeling that the community can be trusted and feedback will be forthcoming and constructive...With safety and trust comes the willingness of community members to speak openly. This candor is important to a learning community because with trust comes the likelihood that members will expose gaps in their learning and feel that other members of the community will respond in supportive ways. (p. 4)

Trust, in this definition, is developed though oral communication, which is the basis of hip hop. The Contemporary English classroom was based on oral communication, from students sharing their Song of the Day, to group discussions on slavery, the Civil War, and lyrics to songs. Not only were students who would not have had much to contribute to a discussion on Shakespeare now able to share insights into the lyrics of a Snak the Ripper song, but they also received positive feedback for their

### Figure 24 “Iron Man” by DJ Snuggles

*A promotional video for one of the vice principals former students from Minneapolis.*
contribution from both their peers and teacher, validating that their knowledge was valued. Trinity supports this idea when she comments on how a traditional classroom values voice:

successful [students] seem to always be the ones who have things to say or, like, other [unsuccessful] kids’ ideas are usually kind of, like, shunted out or they don’t have as much voice or there is less credibility given to them by the other kids because they are not the typically successful students.

For a student like Obeast, who hadn’t enjoyed his previous experiences in English, having expertise in hip hop also allowed him to feel as though he had something to contribute, as evidenced when he spoke positively about the oral collaboration on ideas with his classmates and “the whole class working together as a team.” In addition to receiving validation from their peers, students in Contemporary English also had opportunities to receive positive feedback from adults and mentors. With myself and mentors like Nostic providing positive feedback to the class, students began to feel that they could take risks and share. One such case was when Nostic was conducting a cypher workshop with the class. For this workshop, the class started the cypher as a whole before breaking into two groups: one for students with more experience rhyming and spitting lines and one for students with less experience. Interestingly, the group split along the lines of all the girls with one boy (becoming the inexperienced group) and the other group was comprised of the remaining boys all boys (becoming the experienced group). I went with the inexperienced group and Nostic worked with the experienced group. Almost immediately, two girls from my group – one of whom was well known as a someone who left class for prolonged periods of time to wander the halls and the other who had an almost debilitating fear of speaking in front of her peers – didn’t want to participate in the cypher, so individually, one after another, they asked to go to the bathroom. Interestingly, both came back a short time later, which was not always common. As well, upon their return, they both participated in the cypher, and while it took coaxing on my part and their participation was minimal, they did participate, which spoke to the trust they had in the group. In their time away, they had the opportunity to leave the school, or bide their time until the end of the class, but they demonstrated trust in returning to the class and participating in an oral language exercise. This was confirmed by Obeast when he and the group spoke about how the cypher helped to create community, sometimes in unintentional ways:

MC
But you felt community [when you were battle rapping with that student]?

Obeast
Yeah.

MC
How?

Obeast
Cause it was like he was Nazi Germany and we all turned into the Allies. (group laughs, some in what seems like disbelief at the comparison). No, but I mean (inaudible)

Trinity (laughing)
Oh my god, don’t include that! Cut that shit!

Obeast
No but, I don’t know, yeah, I guess because we worked as a team. Or even when we weren’t focussing on outdoing [the other student], like I mean, it was us all cyphering, regardless of it was two groups or one big circle, and also group discussions were also awesome.

This was not the way that I would like a class to develop a sense of community, wherein part of the class feels frustration toward another student. This can be a challenge in inviting hip hop into the classroom because both the out-of-school literacies and the out-of-school relationships make their way into the classroom, hand in hand.

MC
Is there a moment at which you can recall when you felt like there was community in the classroom? Like, is there any event or anything that kind of jumps to mind? For instance, and, I don’t want to give you guys any...

Jax
Cyphering?

MC
Well, I didn’t want to give you guys answers, but yeah. Can you tell us about that? Or how you felt community existed in that moment?

Jax
I don’t know. How everyone was involved, I guess. I don’t know. It was fun. How everyone was laughing.

Obeast
Yeah, but it kind of turned into battle rap, though. It was like everyone versus [another student]...

Jax
Oh yeah.

Obeast
...just because he thought he was like the almighty in the rap game.
Jax
So it was starting to battle rap?

Obeast
No, it just kind of like...

Jax
Turned into one.

In battle rap there is an implicit agreement that insults are the way to gain the upper hand against your opponent. The interesting part of this instance was that while there was gentle ribbing of the student in class, I never perceived it to be more than what would happen between friends, and in fact, there were far worse insults between other students in class than there ever were with this student.

Obeast
I don’t know, he was like really arrogant in the way that he was into the whole rap thing, so then he’d like spit some weird, like crazy thing about like the sun and like try to insult one of us and then we’d be like “What the hell did you just say?” (seemingly more confused than angry in tone) so someone would respond back to him and he’d be like “Ah, man” (wiping tears from his eyes with his sleeves) and it was like, yeah, well, you know, we can respond too, like you’re not like that good at all, you just happen to have the courage to go up and rap in front of everyone about stuff that you’ve never experienced or things that don’t really make sense like his own molecular theory - that really threw me off when he spit that.

Figure 25 Epic Rap Battle of History #9
William Shakespeare vs. Dr. Suess

This video was shared with my by a colleague, but when I went to show the students, they were already well aware of it. It is a great example of a rap battle parody.

I followed up with Obeast about his comments regarding the other student. Obeast explained that he and the student are actually good friends and that the way he interacts with his friend in a cypher reflects their hip hop personas, rather than their everyday persona. So, while he and other students bonded over the rap battle against the other student, this did not affect the dynamic of the classroom community because these students were part of and understood hip hop culture and they knew the rules of that went along with being part of the culture. As I was outside their discourse, I needed Obeast to explain to me how he could rip into this other student and yet there seemed to be no tension between them in class or in the hallways or when they...
were chilling together outside of school. It was interesting, as well, to note that the frustration Obeast felt toward this student was a result of a perceived sense of arrogance. This is especially ironic since current hip hop deals with self-promotion to an astounding degree and yet humility is something that should be practiced within the ranks of underground/independent poets.

Another instance of the importance of oracy builds on Obeast’s comment about the group discussions – “also group discussions were also awesome” – which mirror Kathy’s comments arising from her observations of the how the students were engaging in a classroom where conversation is a focal point of learning:

They’ve got something to say now. So you’ve actually given them something to say, where that doesn’t always happen in a class, where I see “Read stuff and now write something about it”, they have no engagement in it, so you know, you may not be where you want to be as far as having you know addressed all these kinds of things, it might have taken you more time but actually it takes a lot of time to get them to have something to say. And, you, I saw that they had something to say today because they all wrote, except for those two, they all had something to say. We skip that part, we say write, but they don’t have anything to say yet. so you know that whole process thing is what’s really been modeled really effectively in the two classes I’ve seen (Sanford, 2012, personal communication)
Through intentional structured talk – posing a question, having students discuss the answer with each other in small group, reporting out the ideas from the group to the larger class, discussing those ideas – students were able to hear their ideas discussed and debated in meaningful and respectful ways. In allowing their voices to be shared between and amongst each other, to debate ideas, the students feel as though are a part of the class, through the sharing of voices, thus helping to create a stronger sense of community. Also, through the oral collaboration of ideas, the students are able to formulate more considered responses to writing prompts and thus, as Kathy states, “they all wrote...they all had something to say.” Add to this that many of the students, especially those who would most likely withdraw in a traditional English classroom, have deep background knowledge in hip hop and thus contributed to the development of knowledge within the classroom and were able to connect their own knowledge to the new ideas being discussed (slavery, civil war, identity), making for a more confident student in the classroom.

Authority and Vulnerability

As evidenced in popular music, authority derived from the power of the dominant discourse is not well received in hip hop culture. One only needs to look to a few of the more famous hip hop artists – N.W.A (Niggas With Attitude), Public Enemy, 2Pac – to see this rejection of authority also exists in hip hop, and specifically in gangsta rap, especially as it relates to police. For N.W.A., “Fuck tha Police” (N.W.A., 1988) was an anthemic song that was prescient in relation to the Rodney King beating of 1991.

Public Enemy’s Fear of a Black Planet (1990) bore songs such as “Fight the Power” and “911 is a joke”. Tupac Shakur also promoted the thug life and anti-authority attitudes through songs such as “Violent” on his album 2Pacalypse Now (1991), where he opens with the lines:

They claim that I'm violent, just cause I refuse to be silent
These hypocrites are havin fits, cause I'm not buyin it
Defyin it, envious because I will rebel against
Any oppressor, and this is known as self defense (2pac, 1991).

The use of these examples is not to suggest that all hip hop culture is anti-authority – no more so than other genres of music such as punk or grunge – rather that students who identify with hip hop culture may be more predisposed to be suspect of
authority than students who identify with the dominant discourse. One could imagine that this would be the case with students like Obeast and Jax who, due to their lack of success in school, have long felt alienated by, and at times discriminated against, the educational system they have been raised in. Obeast makes this clear when he spoke about being forced into a system that he didn’t fit:

Obeast expressed how the institutional authority excercised by teachers in other classes alientated him from participation in traditional classes where his voice was not valued unless it was to tell the teacher what they wanted to hear. Yet surprisingly, students like Sphere, who know how to ‘do school’ (Pope, 2001) and have expereinced success in traditional classrooms, still question the authority of both the teacher and the curriculum. When posed this line of questioning, “You are someone who succeeded in school and yet you still question it. In what ways do you question the authority of school? And did you have that critical eye prior to becoming engaged with hip hop? Or did listening to and participating in hip hop culture create or add to that critical eye?” Sphere had this response:

I question the authority of the school in the same way I question any form of authority...This does not mean every person has a bad bias or opinion - but every human contains some sort because of our nature and the influence of experience. I think it is necessary to analyze and question every thing in order to gain the most understanding of our environment (some might call that the gaining the most consciousness possible but I don't like using a term that is interpreted differently by every person).

I definitely did have that critical eye prior to hip hop, but it obviously opened me up to new things to question, things I could not fully question before due to my lack of knowledge about it. The culture of hip hop opens a new set of things for anyone to question.

Sphere, who was dating Nostic and was already open to the idea of questioning the status quo, used hip hop to deepen her questioning of society and from where authority was derived from within it. With the assistance of debriefing conversations with Kathy, I realized that authority would need to be enacted differently for this class to be successful. In order to be authentic to the culture of hip hop, and thus authentic to the students in the class, I had to become vulnerable as a teacher.
As Delpit (1988) noted, authority in the classroom was something that a teacher needs to be acutely cognizant of in order to best reach his/her students, especially marginalized students, in the classroom. This requires that “teachers cannot be the only expert in the classroom” (p. 288) and that “both teacher and student [can be] expert at what they know best” (p. 288). Also, by relinquishing the need to be the expert of all content in the classroom, by giving “students opportunities to act as teachers” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 480), I created relationships with students that were equitable and reciprocal (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In doing this, we “encouraged a community of learners, rather than competitive, individual achievement” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 480), thus creating a space where students felt more comfortable to participate and create community. In acknowledging student expertise, I made myself vulnerable to my students, but in doing so, I also allowed myself the opportunity to understand and learn about the reality of my students’ lives, something that would never have occurred if I had not looked to them as teachers, as well. In more than one instance, through the completion of multimodal assignments and the subsequent collaborative oral assessment, students shared with me aspects of their personal histories that they would never have had a chance to share if they had been asked to write an essay on a Shakespearean play. In two cases students shared with me medical histories that had an incredible effect on how they saw themselves, another student shared with me his feelings of isolation and depression, and another shared with me her difficult family history. In this clip, Obeast shared his thoughts on how my becoming vulnerable by sharing my own writing and performance had an effect on how students felt about sharing and risking in the class.

Teacher Authority and Vulnerability

My initial experience in Contemporary English supports Buzzelli’s and Johnston’s (2001) assertion that in “the vast majority of the world’s classrooms, the teacher has authority” (p. 874). In Contemporary English, I was the person who had the allowance to create the class and, as a process of enrolling in the class, I had students meet with me to make sure that they understood the scope and tone of the classroom. While we would embark upon a shared authority classroom, we would do so because I decided we would. The paradox I found in my classroom was that by giving up institutional authority and being open to being vulnerable in the classroom, I developed a stronger relationship with my students, especially with students who were marginalized.
within the education system. Make no doubt, I was an authority, but in this class, not the authority, for the students had much more content specific knowledge than I did.

In order to address this imbalance, or should I say balance, of authority in this class, on the second day of the class, we completed a process called “My Job/Your Job” that I learned while teaching at New Westminster Secondary School. This process, as part of Restitution, a program run by an educator named Diane Gossen, helps to set out a fair and equitable classroom, as explained on the F.A.Q. section of their website:

“We adults haven’t the habit of talking to youth about the persons they see themselves being because we have habitually focused on changing their behavior, on making them conform, rather than on them self-evaluating”. The process of My Job/Your Job includes the teacher asking the students what they see as the Teacher’s Job as and what they see as the Student’s Job. In a traditional classroom, I have received answers along the lines of:

- be fair
- not have favourites
- not hit children
- not clean up after students
- encourage everyone

However, in Contemporary English, the students brought hip hop culture into the classroom for my role, asking me to be more of a ‘bro’ than a teacher. Using urbandictionary.com, the definition that most closely fits the classes intention of the use the term ‘bro’ was:

*Figure 31 Urbandictionary.com definition of ‘bro’*

This was a difficult job for me to perform as the class lent itself to a more informal learning environment, and yet I had to maintain a level of professionalism as required and expected by my administration and school district, one that I felt even more compelled to represent given that this class was unique and had the potential to be noticed by district staff, for both good and bad reasons. While this course was fulfilling many progressive pedagogical ideals, I had also invited all of hip hop into the classroom and it has been noted in other case studies (Hill, 2009; Low, 2011) how hip hop can cause some issues in the classroom. It was my fear that an administrator at the district level would not feel comfortable with the content of the class and exert influence upon it, thus limiting what the students and I could do. However, my fear was unfounded as I experienced nothing but support from any administrator I spoke to. However, to fulfill my
students’ expectations, once again, I was placing myself into a position of vulnerability – whereby if I failed at being either a teacher or a ‘bro’ (or both) I could easily lose all authority afforded a teacher, either institutional or earned – as I attempted to bridge the differing discourses of a ‘bro’ and a teacher, wanting to maintain strong relationships with the students while not compromising my professional obligations. Moving between a hip hop discourse and an academic discourse was something that I wanted my students to understand (cf. Delpit, 1988), so I thought that being able to see me model it for them would help them to understand how to do it. As previously noted, the students asked me to be a ‘bro’, which would require me to straddle the line between a buddy and a teacher. That line is a delicate one, and one that when not tiptoed on precisely, can have disastrous results. During a debriefing conversation with Kathy after a class in which Nostic had conducted a writing and spitting exercise and one in which I spat rhymes for the first time, the students acknowledged that I had achieved, in some sense, the balance between being a teacher and being a ‘bro’. In a conversation with Kathy after that class, I recalled:

Well, it’s funny because one of them was like “Now you’re a bro”...They wanted me to be a bro, and I was like “What’s a bro?” and they like laid out all that a bro is and then I’m like “I can’t be that all the time” and then we talked about identity and discourse and like “I’m not part of your discourse” but [spitting rhymes] was one step into it, I guess, in their eyes.

And then I thought that the really interesting connection piece was when I was like “It sounded so much better in my head” and everyone was like “It always does”. I’m like, “You’ve had this experience too?” and they’re like “It always sounds better in your head”. I’m like, “Wow, that’s really hard”, so I think that there is that connection there, which is kinda cool. (Cunningham, 2012, audio field notes)

By standing up in front of the class and participating in the activities that they were doing outside of school, and now as a result of this class, inside school, by sitting shoulder to shoulder with them and sharing their experiences – “It always sounds better in your head” – I was able to step onto the ‘bro’ side of the line. During the penultimate class of the semester, I once again spat in front of the class during the workshop that Auto Krat and DJ Spiro put on for the class:

This school ain’t a bus
But Rosa Parks inspires us
To not take a back seat
In the way they educate us
To stand up the way she sat down
To rise up against the content weighing us down
And like a maestro declare this a showdown
A throw down
That we want to close down
The old ways of knowledge transmission
And get us content we wishin’ to learn
And like Parks
Even if they ain’t listenin’
We gonna be heard

Figure 32 Cunningham spittin’ rhymes
The reaction of the class typified the support that they showed for me as I tried to learn more about hip hop and participate in the hip hop discourse. In this moment, I was very vulnerable because I was risking looking foolish, but I was also fulfilling the ‘bro’ discourse as I was participating alongside the students, and in this case, local hip hop performers.

Another way I attempted to be a ‘bro’ was to not censor the class. Through My Job/Your Job the students had set clear expectations that there wouldn’t be any hate-related speech in the classroom, so I was comfortable allowing the culture of hip hop in the classroom and being a part of it.

Yolo Joe
I think a really cool thing too was like the lack of censorship. Like you could come in “fuck, shit”, like it wasn’t, no one was going like to say anything to you. It definitely made us feel like equal instead of you, like the teacher, like you were just with us.

Trinity
Not that person who is always looking down on you

Yolo Joe
Yeah. Not that teacher who is (lots of inaudible chatter about this)

Obeast
(as a teacher) “Language!” “What’s that?”

Trinity
(in an arrogant teacher voice) I know everything and I’m here to tell you! Learn some of my vast knowledge! Why can’t some more like sharing of learning than like (sound like a dragon breathing fire).

Yolo Joe
I think it was necessary, like not to have control...

Obeast
And you participating, too.

Trinity
Yeah, that makes a difference.

Obeast
All of us being like “Holy fuck” and you were like “Yeah, fudge”. (laughter) You would say it with us. Like, it was good.

MC
Did I straddle the bro/teacher line?

(laughter)
Trinity
You were too bro, but that’s ok.

Yolo Joe
Um. Yeah. Yeah. I think it was good.

Trinity
You can work on it.

It was interesting to hear Yolo Joe confirm that I had straddled the bro/teacher line – although there was hesitation in his voice as he contemplated the answer – as he was the one who had put forth that term and that idea of being more equal with the students. Yolo Joe’s hesitation, I believe, mirrored my tension about how well I had straddled the line. During the focus group, the students informed me that I had done a decent job of straddling the line between being a ‘bro’ and a teacher, and while my being a ‘bro’ had helped with classroom atmosphere and their comfort, the more academically successful students wished I had been more of a teacher as well. On more than one occasion, I struggled with how hard to push the students in the work that they were to complete. Students remarked about this quite bit in the focus group, as Trinity noted that I should have been “a little harder” throughout the semester, although Obeast disagreed with her sentiment (this is further explicated in the Tension section). But the students once again acknowledged that my participation in hip hop related activities in which I was not experienced nor skilled, helped to create a feeling of equality. Obeast also spoke about how my ‘bro’ demeanour helped him to feel that he was able to be successful in the class, recognizing that the students were teaching me throughout the course as well. He spoke about how hip hop gave him content that he felt he could work with, rather than traditional English classes where he did not have anything meaningful to say about the content being studied.

While I struggled throughout the semester to balance being a ‘bro’ and a teacher, to varying degrees of success, my attempt at changing how authority worked within the classroom set up a classroom situation which made it very difficult for a teacher who was a true outsider to both hip hop culture and the classroom community to come in and try to assert authority. Things did not go well for a colleague who taught the class for me when I had to leave unexpectedly to support my wife during her pregnancy. I had explained to Mrs. K that the class was not like a normal classroom and that these kids were a little distractable, especially when working on individual projects. She assured me that she would be fine, but when I returned to school the next day, the note in my mailbox indicated that the class had gone very poorly and that the kids, except for Obeast and Jax, whom I had seen prior to my leaving school and asked to be “good” for Mrs. K (they were), was out of control. She told me she had never experienced such disrespect and whenever she asked the students to do the work they were to be completing, they would completely ignore her. This report saddened me but,
unfortunately, I was not surprised. While I had hoped this wouldn’t be the case, I realized that this scenario demonstrated both the power of relationships and how authority works in the context of relationships. Very few, if any students, had a previous relationship with Mrs. K, who was a newer teacher to the school and taught Spanish in the Languages department. As such, the class saw her as an outsider and not even her institutional authority as a teacher had an effect on the students. While the students were not outrightly rude to her, they did ignore her and her instructions. This passive resistance on the part of the students was not a unique response by a class to a substitute teacher, but I had hoped that the community we had created in the classroom would be accepting of an outsider person. Ironically, they had been accepting of substitute teachers, but those teachers had both connections to hip hop and to the students from previous classes or activities. In Mrs. K’s case, the community excluded her. As Sphere explained:

Sphere is honest when she said that the class was going to be uncooperative regardless of who was in the room, but the lack of relationship with Mrs. K, and her limited understanding of how the existing class authority structure contributed, according to Sphere, to a bit more lawlessness in the room. This is not to let the students off the hook for their behaviours or the disrespect they demonstrated to someone who is a caring person and passionate teacher, but rather to demonstrate that the quality of relationship and the sharing of authority had an effect on how students chose to behave.

**Becoming a non-expert teacher**

“We can learn a great deal from the very students we teach. For this to happen it is necessary that we transcend the monotonous arrogant, and elitist traditionalism where the teacher knows all and the student does not know anything” (Freire, 1985, p. 177). Being vulnerable as it related to content knowledge was a risky endeavour for me. If I had had no concept of hip hop, I could not have run this course effectively; a base of knowledge was still important for me to connect with the content and the students. In order to engage in critical dialogue and to ask intelligent questions of the students, I needed to have a base of knowledge from which to draw from while teaching the course. To know the history and current state of hip hop, even at an introductory level, was necessary for me to engage with the students at this critical level. Since I listened to hip hop from grade eight to grade ten,
which coincided with some of the golden era of hip hop, I did have a cursory knowledge of hip hop from my youth. For this reason, I had some previous knowledge of hip hop upon which to build in preparation for this course, but as I told my students, my knowledge of hip hop, even during the golden era, was “milk chocolate”, denoting that I listened to easy hip hop and shied away from harder rap. This video by Heavy D and the Boyz exemplified the type of hip hop I listened, where the lyrics focussed on softer themes of love and having fun, as compared with the grittier imagery and politics of the gangsta rap written about earlier. 

The real concern, as mentioned before, was that I was going to be in the vulnerable position of not being the expert in the classroom. However, as an English teacher, I had been in this position before as student choice had become more of a focus in my traditional English classrooms, and as such, I had a degree of comfort with both this concept and being in this position. In my traditional English classes, I had not conducted a ‘whole class’ novel study in the past three years, favouring individual student choice of novels, even if I had not read them. Students and I would then discuss the novels as they read them and decide on final essay topics together. While I may not have read the novel, I was still very much a part of the novel study process. However, the difference between my traditional English teaching duties and what I was experiencing in Contemporary English was the depth to which these students cared about the content that we were going to be studying and how important it was to their own personal identities. In the previous example of the novel study, students had the choice of what they wanted to read and because of this they were likely to be more engaged in what they were reading than if they were forced into reading a novel of my choice. However, this kind of choice is superficial in nature; they were still reading a novel and still writing an essay. Although there was increased choice and therefore increased engagement, they were still “doing school”. In the case of Contemporary English, many of the students were bringing their personal identities to the classroom. Hip hop, as described earlier by Nostic, Auto Krat, and Obeast, is a way of life. To have your identity be the content of
study in the classroom was very risky, especially as prior to the first day of class, these students were not entirely sure how I would be using my authority in conducting this class. I had to be cognizant that the kids were putting themselves in a vulnerable position by allowing me to use an important part of their identity as the content for an English course, especially since many of the students who most deeply connected to hip hop were the least engaged in school. I knew that the way I treated hip hop in the classroom would be the way I treated my students. It was for this reason that I needed to learn what I could about hip hop and its culture before the class began.

Understanding that I couldn’t become an expert but that I needed to grow my base of knowledge, the summer of 2011 was a crash course on the history of hip hop. To complete this, I read a number of books associated with hip hop, spoke to friends who considered themselves hip hop aficionados, and consulted a number of websites and popular music publications. However, talking and reading can only go so far; nothing was going to be as important to my education as listening to hip hop because this is where hip hop lived, in the beats and rhymes of the artists. As such, I listened to as much hip hop as I could, trying to round out my knowledge base with the artists that often cited as most influential and/or most talented. This list included rappers such as: The Notorious B.I.G., 2Pac, Eminem, A Tribe Called Quest, The Roots, Big Daddy Kane, The Beastie Boys, De La Soul, Common, Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Nas. For some Canadian content, I continued to listen to K’naan – whom I was already quite familiar with – and added k-os, Shad, Maestro Fresh Wes, Buck 65, and Radio Radio to my iTunes library. It was my summer of hip hop and I quite enjoyed it. As a youth, I was more enamoured with the musicality of hip hop than I was with the lyrics, which is in part why I think I shied away from the rougher and edgier sounds of hardcore rap (although the lyrical content did not sit well with me at that time). In this second encounter with hip hop, now in my adult years, I have an appreciation for the complex rhymes of the more talented lyricists and a deeper understanding of the history of the black experience, both of which lead me to an appreciation of the grittier, more real content, replete with swearing and violent imagery, that I was formerly uncomfortable with as somewhat sheltered, middle-class, suburban youth. I was pleased with my re-education because I had developed a deeper, but not yet deep, understanding and appreciation for hip hop but, when I returned to school in September, the students I was teaching were not that interested in what I had just listened to, which they described as mainstream hip hop. They appreciated it and respected it, but their hearts, for the most part, were with underground hip hop. Earlier, Obeast provided a strong differentiation between underground and mainstream hip hop, with specific reference to a Vancouver underground hip hop artist Snak the Ripper. So, after a summer of research to get me ready to have some familiarity with the artists that the students would be talking about, once class started I realized that my position as outsider was exposed and I was
vulnerable. However, even though I was vulnerable, the students appreciated my efforts to understand the music they held in such high esteem, and this acceptance allowed us to have begun having conversations about hip hop in authentic and meaningful ways. And it also opened up an opportunity for them to teach me about underground hip hop, which culminated in an assignment whereby I asked students to write a synthesis essay using Snak the Ripper’s song “Poison” and Zaccheus Jackson’s poem “Recovery” as the main texts. The class appreciated the fact that I used an underground rapper as one of the texts, demonstrating to them that I had listened and learned from them about the music that they most appreciate. Obeast, in particular, was incredibly surprised and joyous that I had chosen the use of his favourite rapper for this assignment. It is not enough to just learn from the students, I found, but it is necessary to apply that knowledge in a visible and meaningful way in order to have them fully understand that you are listening and taking seriously what it is they are bringing to class, much the same way we as teachers expect our students to do the same.

**Authentic Assignments and Assessments**

*I don’t like English period. I don’t know. I failed English 10 like five times. And passed Grade 11. I hope I passed Grade 11 (smiles). And now I’m in grade 12.* - Obeast

Where many writing-focussed assessments conducted in more traditionally delivered English classrooms at Reynolds showed students like Obeast and Jax to be deficient (and caused them to disengage from the class), allowing students like Obeast and Jax to “communicate their ideas [about hip hop related themes] through a variety of print and non-print media” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2007) allowed for them to more fully demonstrate the depth of their thinking and understanding, thus showing them to actually be quite proficient in being able to achieve the Prescribed Learning Outcomes for English. For this proficiency to be demonstrated on an ongoing basis required me to rethink how the assignments in Contemporary English would look. This would require both me and the students to stray from the paths that we had repeatedly trod, and with this came
excitement and, as the students articulated later, some concern and frustration. Rather than focussing on traditional units of the novel, the short story, drama, and poetry, we decided to look at larger themes and time periods as they related to hip hop in today’s society. After a few years of teaching, I realized that I was teaching students in the way that I was taught. Teaching had been modeled for me for 13 years as ‘read, answer questions, write.’ Over the past seven years of teaching, I had been slowly moving away from that model and Contemporary English pushed me farther away from that well trod path. Rather than the ‘read, answer questions, write an essay’ sequence, we viewed, we discussed, we presented orally and visually, and we wrote. We talked and created meaning as a class and then, once we had something meaningful to say, we did, in many different ways: graffiiti, song, essays, poetry, rap, visual art, stories.

Unlike other scholars who have used hip hop pedagogy to engage the students because of cultural heritage or to help the students connect to more canonical texts (cf. Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Hill, 2009; Low, 2011), the goal of this class was skill development through using content that students related to. Not only would the choice of assignments be a delicate balance, but the assessment of those assignments would be problematic. At Reynolds, the creation of criteria-based writing rubrics with students is standard practice; however, trying to remain authentic to hip hop’s multimodal form, through the use of monomodal assessment would be problematic. In her reflection on the use of rubrics for her students’ multimodal assignments, Reed (2008) wrote that rubrics helped to diminish the representations her students had completed, rendering what was a “magical” representation into something that was “mundane.” To take what was important to the very identity of some of these students and make it mundane would have been the death knell for Contemporary English, and very likely the relationships that had been forged between me and the students. To avoid this, a different practice of assessment was needed. The task in front of me in this instance, and educators more generally, was to determine a manner in which to assess multimodal texts in an authentic way, while still adhering to the expectations of how grades would be reported at Reynolds. This was a delicate balance as the two often seem incompatible; nonetheless, it was a balance that was necessary to find in order to honour the complexity of the knowledge that my students brought with them into the classroom. One way that I found worked in Contemporary English was through the use of collaborative dialogue. Collaborative dialogue was adapted from Ladson-Billings (1995) and her use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims with teachers in making meaning of their practice and
“rather than [using] the voice of one authority (read: me), meaning (read: assessment) is made as a product of dialogue between and among individuals (read: the student)” (p. 473).

My epiphany about the value of collaborative dialogue for assessment happened after I went through the process of the collaborative dialogue assessment with Pedro and his Audiobiography; my view of the need of written explanations for assessment purposes changed dramatically in that moment. Previously, when students had completed a multimodal assignment for me, I asked them to write out an explanation of their assignment and to submit that piece of writing to me with the completed assignment; I framed it as the “Director’s Commentary” on a DVD, whereby the director (or the student in this case) gets to explain to the audience the thinking and rationalization that went into the decisions that were made in creating the film (or, again in the case of the student, the assignment). I had been using this technique for a number of years, but two major inconsistencies dawned on me after working with Pedro: 1. Director Commentaries on DVDs are oral, not written, and yet I was having students write their ideas out and 2. A student who chose to complete a multimodal assignment over a written one likely had a reason that they were opting out of a written assignment, so there was a sick irony that I was making them write to explain the work multimodal work they created. Like Reed, I didn’t want to create rubrics for the creative multimodal assignments that students were completing. As well, I felt that it was unfair for me to use the students’ artistic abilities as a basis for assessment in an English class. I told students that if they drew a beautiful picture but there was no deep thinking behind the beautiful picture, it would receive a low grade, but that if there was a less skillfully drawn picture with deep thought put into it, that assignment would receive a high grade. I wanted to assess the thinking that lead to the picture, and the written Director’s Commentary was a way I could do that. Ladson-Billings (1995) described this as “the voice of one authority” (p. 473) and I was it. I assessed the “deep thinking” behind the assignment based on what the student wrote in their Director’s Commentary and comparing it to grade level performance standards. In previous classes, I did not share the authority of assessment, but as Contemporary English was more egalitarian in its authority structure, this kind of assessment practice no longer felt authentic. After my conversation with Pedro I realized that no student would ever have been able to achieve the depth of discussion we had about his art had they been required to produce a piece of writing for me. In Pedro’s case, it was not because he was a poor writer (he was a skilled writer), but because the extensive depth of knowledge he demonstrated orally was too much for a student to put on paper. Further to that, a written explanation was one-way communication and as I learned more about the importance of collaboration within the culture of hip hop, forcing Pedro to write out his thinking would again be inauthentic to the culture we were developing in the classroom. And finally, hip hop is oral, and thus the most
authentic way for a student to present their ideas to me to assess was through collaborative dialogue.

Collaborative dialogue worked as a conversation between myself and the student. We would sit down together and I would start by asking the student to describe the assignment they had completed. As they were speaking, I would ask for clarification about an idea or ask them to go more in depth about something they said that demonstrated their deeper understanding of the task they were completing. After the conversation, I then asked specific questions about the piece, looking for answers to questions that I had that they hadn’t covered in their initial explanation. Lastly, I asked the student if there was anything more that they wanted to share about their work. Once that we were done our dialogue, I asked the student what level of assessment they thought fit the assignment. This was always incredibly awkward for students as they felt that I had a grade in my head and their job was to guess what I was thinking. I tried my best to explain to them that this was a co-assessment and that both our ideas were valid and that we would work until we agreed on a grade. This seemed to assuage their concerns to an extent and we entered into a discussion about the assessment with justification as to why we believed what the grade the assignment deserved. Rarely was there much discrepancy between our ideas, and students left the conversation knowing the grade of their assignment immediately and why it had received that grade, and pleased with the process.

Figure 38 Examples of Contemporary English Assignments

Tell a story. It could be yours, it could be your family’s, it could be your friend’s, it could be your imagination.

The three examples included give an idea of some of the assignments that students had in Contemporary English.

Figure 39 Pedro’s Audiobiography

Tap on the image to it full sized.

Figure 40 Audio - Collaborative Assessment

A shared assessment practice with Pedro on the image in the gallery above.
After the success of this process with Pedro, I quickly employed it in Contemporary English for any assignments that I felt were outside the realm of rubrics, which is to say any assignment that had an element of creativity and/or an element of uniqueness and/or an element of personal truth. In Contemporary English, that were for more assignments of a personal nature than in my traditional classes. For more traditionally completed essays or stories, I used rubrics for the assessment, but as always, students were encouraged to consult with me and rewrite the assignment until they achieved the level of assessment they were satisfied with. Collaborative dialogue would be useful for more traditional assignments but the time it takes to complete an assessment with collaborative dialogue makes it difficult to do it with every assignment. While this is not ideal, it is reality. This practice of collaborative dialogue quickly was incorporated into my traditional English courses as well, where I began to give students the option of a written Director’s Commentary or an oral collaborative dialogue.

The use of hip hop in the classroom necessitated a change in the way that I viewed authority and the way I approached teaching. I had once been told not to smile until December when meeting a new class in September, the idea was that being a stern and authoritative teacher would provide for easier classroom management. Easier classroom management is a result of the most vulnerable students no longer coming to class because they don’t feel connected nor respected. When I opened myself up to being vulnerable, the quality and depth of my relationships with my students increased, as did their engagement in the class and trust in me. Having experienced how becoming vulnerable can create a strong community in a class, I feel it is incumbent upon me to remain open to being vulnerable with all my students, not just with Contemporary English; however, walking the line between being a ‘bro’ and being a teacher was difficult, and with it came many moments of tension for me as a professional.

**Tension**

Inviting students out-of-school literacies into the classroom created tensions that I had rarely encountered before as a teacher. Whether the tension was regarding being a ‘bro’ and being a teacher, or whether my students experienced as they struggled with being true to themselves or doing school, these tensions created moments of important learning.
Being hip hop and doing school

Authenticity is at the core of hip hop as it tries to resist its complete assimilation into the mainstream (McLeod, 1999). As hip hop is threatened by greedy record executives who are catering to white, suburban teenagers with ready-made hip hop acts, there is a push back by the underground to remain authentic to hip hop (McLeod, 1999). Therefore, to be hip hop has huge ramifications in terms of its place within mainstream culture, which school is a central part of because of its position as a transmitter of information to youth. Contradictorily, it is also a place where youth can resist its purveyance of the dominant discourse. For someone to be hip hop, it is not enough to listen to and enjoy the hip hop music, but one needs to also be conversant with its stories and history, as well being open to the original ideals of the culture as described by Nostic, Obeast, and Auot Krat. When posed the question “What does it mean to be hip hop?” Nostic replies with rhymes and wordplay:

H - harmonious, harvest, highly, heavenly
I - innocent, inner-dimensional, integrity
P - poise, point to personality, a perfect peace
H - hagiography, humanly, hypnotic
O - omnipresent, organic, opportunity
P - philosophical, polyglot, pulling prudence

To be hip hop is to be. Hip is a style, to be, with nothing else but to express it in an art form and Hop is the action of pursuing it. (Nostic, 2012, personal communication)

Obeast expressed a similar sentiment, confirming that hip hop is open to everyone: “I wouldn’t say that hip hop is a clique or something you identify as, it is a type of modern art that anyone from anywhere can potentially connect with.” Finally, expounding more on how hip hop connects to people at the personal level, with it being slightly different for each person:

Hip hop is the way you look, the way u talk, even the way you walk. It’s a style of music as well as predominant culture within north american society. Hip hop means everything to some and nothing to others. The term "keep it real" came from hip hop in the mid 80’s when hip hop was an underground movement. Underground movements are always special because they consist of people who choose to stray from the conformed mind of the average youth to young adult. Though the phrase has become somewhat of a meaningless cliche in modern times, its origin solidifies its importance as to where it came from, when hip hop was about being yourself, not doing what your told for the sake of fitting in, and keeping it true to what you believe. Rap music has made hip hop culture be viewed as something negative, but it started as something positive; it stands for the kid who has nothing except hip hop to give him a personal voice of his or her own and a culture to
back him or her up with pride! (Auto Krat, 2012, personal communication)

Being hip hop, as described above, is often at odds with ‘doing school’ (Pope, 2001), where students are expected to be and act in a certain way. Being able to be hip hop and do school, that is to say being able to move between discourses, is integral to being successful in school (Delpit, 1988); however, as other researchers have discovered (Alim, 2011; Hill, 2009; Low, 2011; Stovall, 2006), there is great tension that is created when a student is hip hop in a school which is decidedly not hip hop. While there are still English classrooms where desks are lined in rows and the teacher delivers the curriculum to a silent audience, more and more English classes, at Reynolds in particular, are becoming focussed around students and teachers engaging in discussions as they co-construct meaning of texts, providing more opportunities for student choice in how they will demonstrate understanding, and a using variety of forms of assessment. This speaks to the progressive nature of the English department at Reynolds, where even though the school as a whole was not hip hop, there was an acceptance, and even an embracing, of Contemporary English and hip hop. For me to create an environment that was both hip hop and school required me to reconsider what “doing school” meant. In this way, it was important for me to look at my teaching practice through the lens of hip hop and reconsider how the class was constituted, how students would demonstrate understanding, and how I would assess student work.

As noted by Nostic, Obeast, and Auto Krat, being authentic in hip hop means being true, in words and in actions. This was very evident in the assignments that the students completed, most notably our Identity assignment, the Audiobiography, and the final Showcase. An old English teacher maxim is ‘write what you know’, and as hip hop is about telling stories, whether they are personal or giving voice to those who aren’t being heard, our assignments focussed around the sharing of stories. However, a tension in the school context was about what experiences were appropriate to share in a classroom context; could a student write about dealing drugs? Being raped? Abuse at home? While these may be truths, if they were to be shared with me then there were professional obligations that I had to engage in in order to protect these children. However, acting out my professional obligations based upon their writing might have been seen as betraying their trust, which we had worked hard to establish. Again, my role as ‘bro’ and teacher was called into question and if I performed the role of teacher in this instance, I could lose the trust upon which the class was predicated. To ameliorate this, I made sure to verbalize to the students that they did not have to share personal experiences. They could make things up, they could write about a friend (without naming names), they could write about something they read about or saw in a movie or TV, or they could write about their own personal experiences. It was
important to me that they knew, in this classroom, they didn’t have to ‘keep it real’. However, I found that the level of disclosure in Contemporary English was much higher than in the traditional English classes I taught. Even after being told that they didn’t have to be personal with their writing, students shared very personal and sometimes traumatic and heartbreaking stories. The submission of the assignments became less about the grade and more about sharing.

As Obeast mentioned, it was important to both the culture of hip hop and to his own feeling of authenticity that he share his stories, no matter how difficult, that they were truthful. Previously, Obeast had mentioned how he felt that for an underground hip hop artist to be able to connect with a listener through sharing a story was the demonstration of a skillful rapper. These ideas of truth and connection as being hip hop are borne out when the Auto Krat said “hip hop was about being yourself, not doing what your told for the sake of fitting in, and keeping it true to what you believe.” Obeast himself said “[hip hop] is a type of modern art that anyone from anywhere can potentially connect with also being hip hop. Even students in the class who were skilled at ‘doing school’ shared personal stories. Whispers, for example, who was not part of the hip hop culture and chose to be in Contemporary English to experience something different in an English class, wrote a very personal spoken word poem about her involvement in a devastating car crash which badly injured one of her friends. Often school is about getting the highest grade possible, but in this case, when given an opportunity to share their stories, students did so freely and without expectation of grade. Again, Obeast shares his motivation for completing his assignments:

In my role as teacher, it was my job to assess the assignments that students submitted, but when a student submitted something so personal and so meaningful, it was very difficult for me stay in the role of teacher, look the student in the eye, and tell them their personal story was a C+. As students created deeply personal work, I was forced to reconsider my assessment practices and begin to involve students more closely in the assessment of their own work. The tension resulting from the
assessment of personal work lead me to engage in more collaborative dialogue, whereby the student and I would collaborate on and justify their grade. Surprisingly, though, it never occurred to me to reconsider the assignments I had provided, either steering them away from or supporting the exploration of the personal. The assignments were open ended in that students could demonstrate their understanding in many different ways, so it was a choice on the part of those who chose to submit personal work but I did not think that the level of disclosure would be as complete as it was.

Students were also presenting this personal work in a variety of ways. For a few years I have been open to students demonstrating their understanding of content in multiple ways (i.e., visual art, music, film, creative writing, etc.). For some, like Pedro, the opportunity to express themselves through multimodal texts was something that freed them from always having to use structured writing as predominant mode of assessment. However, what I found interesting was that while I was ultimately comfortable with students using a variety of methods to demonstrate their understanding, some of the students themselves found tension in this, especially as it related to grades. Some students expressed concern that other students would get a good mark because they would be able to use methods other than writing essays to complete their assignments; in particular, Obeast felt that one student used his talent in graffiti too much in the class to get higher grades. It was interesting to see the tension within Obeast between not needing grades to validate the completion of own work, yet having a firm idea about what type of work should get credit for marks. I believe that it wasn’t the fact that the student used graffiti as a method of his demonstration of understanding, rather that Obeast felt that the student used graffiti too often during the course as his method of demonstrating understanding, although the student used graffiti for only two of ten assignments.

Furthermore, more senior students, while wanting to have hip hop and multiple forms of expression validated within the class, also sought the structure found in more traditional classrooms. This may be, at least for the graduating students, that they felt it was necessary to be versed in writing essays as they knew that was what was going to be expected at the post-secondary level. This was something that I also struggled with through the semester as I wrestled with the reduced amount of formal writing in the Contemporary English curriculum. In fact, those comments came from students who were most likely to attend post-secondary institutions. While the students appreciated the choice that was provided to them, they also sought a structure that I didn’t provide and one that they suggested I provide to future classes. In this way, I was too ‘bro’ and not enough teacher. In this clip, Macy, Yolo Joe, and Trinity, three graduating students who ‘do school’ well, discuss their frustration with the flexible nature of the class (especially as it relates to due dates) and the lack of prescribed formal writing:
Interestingly, the students appreciated being treated more like friends and equals in regard to authority in the class, yet they still held me accountable as needing to tell, near force, them to do more essay writing. The tension students felt reflected a struggle I felt as a teacher, as I wondered if I had not been doing enough formal writing. My comments about losing a large number of students in the class reflected the fact that many of the students in the class had rejected formal writing in previous English classes and when I assigned formal writing in Contemporary English, there was incredible resistance to it from everyone, although Yolo Joe, Trinity, and Macy, in particular, would begin writing relatively quickly when asked. The tension I felt was realized in the comments of the students when they said that I should have made them do more essays. This speaks to two things: the importance of teaching to the test, in this case the provincial exam that Trinity mentioned that she felt ill-prepared for (although we did two weeks of provincial exam prep at the end of the course for the grade 12s), and that the students opted not to do essays when presented with the opportunity to do something more meaningful and creative. This, however, is not to say that there were not any preassigned essays; at least three of the ten assessed assignments for Contemporary English were formal writing assignments, with no option for something multimodal. While 30% of the assignments being essays may have been a low amount for a traditional English class, the class was not without them.

Also mentioned was the flexibility in the due dates, which again was a fascinating issue. There was always a deadline set for each assignment, but if students didn’t have the work done by that date, then they were permitted to hand it in as soon as it was done, without penalty. The catch was that the class would continue on and the students would be responsible for the missed work while new work was assigned. This was in keeping with the Reynolds English department policy of not giving a zero on an assignment. The philosophy behind this policy was that if we, as teachers, deemed the work we assign to be important enough to assess, then we expected the student to complete the work. Should they not complete the assignment, then they would not complete the course and thus would not receive credit for the course. This was different than failing the course, which was what usually occurred when students began to accumulate a large number of zeroes. This policy ensured that we, as teachers, were assessing students’ English skills, not their ability to complete (or avoid) work. The challenge with this policy, as articulated by the students, was the flexibility in handing in assignments didn’t
work well as a motivating factor for many of them. While students asked me to be a ‘bro’, they also recognized the importance (and challenge) of walking that line, suggesting that my leniency around due dates was one area that I could benefit from being more of a teacher than a ‘bro’. It was also interesting that these recommendations were not made during the course itself but were made for students who have yet to come into the course. I appreciated that students recognized the difficulty that a teacher faced in being both a ‘bro’ and teacher, and this demonstrated that the sincerity the students had when they were telling me about how they wanted me to treat them.

It was imperative that the authenticity of hip hop be preserved in Contemporary English, both as a source of identity for the students as well as how I brought hip hop into the classroom, because if either of those were compromised, then the course would not have been successful and students would have ‘checked out’. However, the conditioning that students and teachers have received throughout their educational career was evident in the way that when new and unique opportunities were provided, students still sought a degree of structure to their educational experience and I struggled with feelings of guilt that I was not ‘doing teaching’ correctly.

Administrators, Teachers, and Students

In her detailed account of a high school talent night rap, Low (2010) observed and reflected on the tensions that occurred between administrators, teachers, and students, when hip hop was brought into a school that was not prepared to accept it in its entirety. In the classroom that Low was co-teaching in, she and her co-teacher, Tim, informed students that hip hop was going to be the course of study for the final term of the semester in their English class, at which point a student asked for Low’s voice recorder because “there’s a lot going on in the school teachers don’t know about” (Low, 2011, p. vii). This student’s comment illustrates the tension of inviting hip hop into the classroom, as it is difficult to parse and separate hip hop into neat parcels to teach or ignore. In the case of the talent night rap, Low detailed how two male students were engaged in a rap song/skit on stage in front of an audience of both students and parents, as well as staff from the school.

However, Gerard and his friend never made it past the initial shout-out to the audience: When one of their microphones was accidentally unplugged, the principal stepped in and cut the act. He first explained, as paraphrased by Gerard, “that it was old people in the crowd and he didn’t want things to get out of hand and get chaotic,” but then said, “I don’t want to hear any cursing or sexual obscenities in your raps . . . I don’t want to hear it.” (Low, 2010, p. 195).
In this case, Low goes on to discuss the tension that was felt between the students, who had been a part of the planning process for the talent show and who felt as though they had permission to be hip hop, and administrators, who were still fearful of the consequences of a misspoken or misinterpreted word from the mouths of the students. In other cases, teachers act as filters for the amount of hip hop entering the classroom, as noted Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2004) and Stovall (2006), students in both studies wished that they had been allowed to have more input into what was brought into the classroom. Hill (2011) also recognized that he was acting as a filter when he chose the songs that the students would be studying during his teaching in the classroom. Even though he was thoughtful in his choices, he later recognized that he was dictating the terms under which hip hop entered the classroom, rather than allowing students to have choice. Furthermore, Newman (2001) observed how teachers attempted to resolve tensions between MCs in a high school context through the use of a cypher whose content was directed by teachers, but “at best, was only partly accepted by students” (p. 59), who then ignored and subverted the content the teachers wanted explored. In all these cases, hip hop was seen by adults as an uncontrollable child who would, at the slightest hint of opportunity, act out in a way that would publicly embarrass the parents. It was this prospect of public shaming, the proverbial screaming child in a fine dining restaurant, and the potential for repercussions from parents and/or administrators, that prevented hip hop from being invited to be itself in a school setting. And, in these cases, the inclusion of an out-of-school literacy in the classroom becomes less authentic because outside of the classroom, the rules and boundaries are defined by the students, not the adults.

This context, however, exposes another fact of cultural resistance - the resistance on the part of teachers, administrators, parents, and educational researchers to the potentially provocative images, and language of hip hop. Though the project’s curriculum attempted to draw from the more positive elements of hip hop and rap, the very issue of what is positive was itself contested. Disagreements were often along the generational lines. Students felt they had the right to decide what was positive for them, and the adults felt they had the responsibility for those decisions (Mahiri, 1998, p. 336).

Having the benefit of having read about the experiences of these authors prior to the beginning of the course, and having had decided to share authority with students as a result the aforementioned discussion with Kathy where she challenged me to let students dictate the curriculum, I opened the door pretty widely to hip hop.
**Song of the Day and Censorship**

The first invitation I made to hip hop was through Song of the Day (as described in the Community section of the Findings). I felt pretty strongly that a course with hip hop as its central focus needed to include the music of hip hop. It was through the music that students came to know and identify with hip hop, so Song of the Day was a necessary, and ultimately an important, part of the classroom. As noted in the Community section, I introduced Song of the Day to the class through sharing a story about “Ain’t no half-steppin’” and providing lyrics so we could appreciate the writing of Big Daddy Kane as we listened to the song. Finally, I shared with the class ideas about why I enjoyed the song so much and touched on some of my favourite parts of his rhyming. I then invited the class to share a song of their choice at the beginning of class each day. This activity fulfilled the Oracy PLOs for the curriculum, thereby granting it validation in terms of the IRP, while building community through the sharing of music and stories. With the diversity of hip hop music, there could be justified concern about what songs would be shared and what content those songs would contain, whether it be explicit language, sexual content, and/or misogynist and homophobic lyrics. This was the content that administrators and teachers in previous studies were concerned about when hip hop was used in the classroom. I shared this concern as well, but I thought it important to trust that the students would be able to speak intelligently about they were going to share with the class. When asked after the course ended, my students did not recall me giving any parameters as to what they could or could not present for Song of the Day. As one student shared with me later, the creative freedom I extended to the class was different from most other teachers, so they never thought to abuse that freedom.

After each student had presented Song of the Day once, we embarked on the second round and I challenged students to make connections between their song and some other text or idea. The purpose of this was to begin to make connections between hip hop and other songs to texts, while having students begin using some of the compare/contrast skills that they would need for more formal writing, especially around the provincial exam. This round did not fare as well as the inclusion of the academic aspect of it, rather than just the aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1978), just listening to music for the pure pleasure of it, which is more akin to how music is listened to outside of school. This request put kids into a situation where they felt it was now school work and so, to varying degrees, Song of the Day continued, but as the semester wore on, the frequency with which we had Song of the Day diminished. In that moment, like Hill (2009), Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2004), and Stovall (2006), I had started to use hip hop to bridge to academic work, not canonical texts as the previously mentioned authors had, but to the academic skills associated with traditional English classes. As well, now that students were no longer just sharing something they liked and they had to seem ‘smart’, fear and nervousness crept back into
the presentation for many students. Coupled with the coming end of the semester, this more academic Song of the Day resulted in it being done less frequently. Sometimes kids would come in and ask, sometimes plead, for a Song of the Day, but in an act of authority, I would say no because the students were not using time during class effectively to complete their Civil Rights projects and I was a little upset that students were not extending themselves and trying this different way of presenting Song of the Day.

One day, though, after repeated asking, I acquiesced to a student’s request that we watch a skit by Dave Chapelle, a famous black comedian known, akin to Chris Rock, for his satirical portrayals of racial tension in the United States. For the reasons mentioned above, we had not had Song of the Day in a few days, and it was nearing the end of class and we had no more work to complete, so without having viewed the skit, but knowing Chappelle’s reputation, I allowed “The Black White Supremacist” to be viewed in class.

![Figure 45 Dave Chapelle - “The Black White Supremacist”](image)

This video cause me to feel a great deal of tension as a teacher because of the satirical content.

We ended up viewing about eight minutes of the nine minute video (the bell to end class went around the eight minute mark), and I felt discomfort for almost the whole time. While we had discussed the use of the word nigger in class as it related to slavery and civil rights, I still did not feel as though the video was appropriate for class, and yet, in many ways, it was. With songs, there was a lyricism and flow that we could appreciate and while the songs dealt with, in some cases, difficult content, I had no issue in talking it out with students as the poetic components of the songs, the similes, metaphors and rhymes, gave an excellent entry point into the discussion. However, the use of satire around hate-related content such as white supremacist notions, was more difficult. The fact that we were laughing (although I was trying to mitigate my laughter, I was laughing) at such a horrific notion in a classroom environment, without having first contextualized it, was uncomfortable. As well, the added visual component was another layer of both humour and meaning that was being shared, whereas the majority of the songs for Song of the Day were audio only. While I felt that the class was laughing at the absurdity of the irony of a blind black man joining in with white supremacists yelling “Kill the nigger”, I was uncomfortable because the laughing was directed at such a horrific word and idea. The interesting aspect in regard to this video was that a number of the songs students brought in for Song of the Day contained the word nigger, but I felt most uncomfortable with it when people were laughing. I couldn’t be completely sure if they were laughing at the satire of the piece or if they just thought the
juxtaposition of it was humorous. A big part of the tension I felt was resulted from me not having previewed the piece and having the class end without being able to speak about it. I was able to debrief with the class the next day and we discussed appropriation and how we, as white people, had to be extremely delicate with, to the point of never saying, the word 'nigger'. Dave Chappelle, being a black man and a comedian could choose to use the word, and although we personally did not enact slavery, we were of the dominant culture and therefore, in my opinion, the only acceptable time to use the word nigger was when we were discussing academically. There was a tension here as much of hip hop music invokes the use of the word nigger as hip hop artists appropriate the word, defusing its negative power. Even though this word is prevalent in hip hop culture, the use of it by white artists is limited as well. Alim (2011) wrote about how white hip hop artist Eyedea “maintains “racial boundaries” through strategies of “avoidance” (e.g., never using the term nigga) as well as his use of “hyper-rhotic/r/” as a means to mark himself racially as White and as middle class” (p. 126). This group of students had done thoughtful studies of slavery, pre- and post-civil war life for African Americans, and the civil rights movement, and thus they were somewhat versed in the treatment and the struggles that African Americans went through, and continue to engage in, in order to gain equality. Yet, the laughing was difficult for me to condone in the classroom even if it was satirical in nature. With that said, I didn’t turn the video off. Again, the tension about inviting all of hip hop into the classroom was there, especially when race became involved.

As students had opted into a class that was based around the content and culture of hip hop, and I was working with predominantly senior students, I felt comfortable that they were conversant with the culture of hip hop and would be able to process the content that was being shared through Song of the Day, but, for me, I was more concerned about teachers and students in the hallway getting negative impressions about the class as a result of the content they might have heard in passing. This tension never really left me throughout the semester, although it diminished as I continued to get positive feedback from teachers who taught around our classroom. For instance, we shared a false wall with a Socials 9 classroom and they were able to faintly hear every Song of the Day we had. The teacher in that classroom happened to love hip hop and would try to guess the song based on what he could make out of the song, more often than not being correct. Across the hall was a Math 9 class and a younger female teacher who also liked hip hop; she would jokingly complain that her students wanted us to turn the music up so that they could hear the songs more clearly. In both these cases, the music rarely disrupted the classes, mostly because Song of the Day was over within the first ten minutes of class, although on a couple of occasions, when there was a math test, we turned the music down at the kind request of the math teacher. Based on the collaborative atmosphere created by our
administration and professional development committee, the staff at Reynolds are quite supportive of each other as we take risks as teachers, and Contemporary English was definitely one of those risks. I had the support of both my English department and the staff in general. Much of that support, I believe, came from the idea that this course was helping to support the more disengaged senior students in the school. These students were actually well known by teachers in the school because everyone saw their potential, but their perceived lack of motivation to succeed in traditional classes was frustrating. As well, I think the time it took to develop the course – over the period of a calendar year – played an important role in building support amongst the staff because I was able to get input from many of my colleagues and involve them in the development of the course and then, during the school year, a number of them came into Contemporary English to present Song of the Day. As a result of this, school staff were aware of the course goals of creating community and developing these students’ skills, and thus they were willing to have extra noise emanating from our class. With that said, the placement of our classroom within the building helped to minimize the disruption of other classes as, besides the Socials 9 class, there were no other classes sharing walls with us, but still, even though there was support for Contemporary English, I closed the door each day so that both the music and the lyrics wouldn’t float freely down the hallway. I struggled with my role as teacher and with my role being a ‘bro’ for my students. In the end, the turning down of the music and the closing of the door were ways that I attempted to reconcile the two discourses I was trying to occupy simultaneously. Not once in the semester was I approached about the content that the students were studying in Contemporary English, except one time when a physics teacher mentioned to me how impressed he was with the presentation that a student was developing on the Black Panthers for our civil rights unit. This lack of negative feedback did not mean that there was not any conflict within other teachers about hip hop being used as core content for an English class, but if there was, it meant that the person/people did not feel comfortable mentioning it to me or that there was enough visible support for the Contemporary English that they felt it was best not to mention anything.

International Students and Racism

As part of our Civil Rights presentations, the student-led class discussions that followed were often rich and examined not only what was going during that era, but also how this applied at Reynolds. Some students, when confronted with the extreme segregation that occurred in the USA, and still does today, didn’t think that Canada had a segregation issue. I brought up the fact that Toronto was about to have a second Africentric school, and we discussed how curriculum could bring about segregation. Trinity, a biracial girl and the only student in the class with black ancestry, noted that the only black content she studied in her BC schooling experience was one unit during Social Studies 11,
noting that the students received more content on African American history in Contemporary English than they had at any other point in their formal education. However, when I mentioned that racism existed at Reynolds, the students did not agree. I noticed that there was a significant tension in regard to race as a result of the classroom that we occupied for Contemporary English. On one hand, throughout our studies, the students in Contemporary English looked openly and positively at race. I cannot recall a time when a racially motivated comment, neither humourous nor insulting, was made about the people or the content we were studying. However, this consideration did not seem to extend to students of other races within Reynolds in the same way, and in this case, ESL, international, and refugee students.

Reynolds, as other schools in the school district do, relies on the enrollment of international students to help supplement the funding for programs that run at the school. For each international student that attends a school, the school receives additional funding derived from fees paid to the school district by the international students. This funding applies to international students who have chosen to come to Canada to study for a year or two or three and then return to their native country or, often, go on to Canadian post-secondary institutions; the vast majority of these students come from China, Korea, and Japan. This funding does not extend to students who are landed immigrants and ESL and/or refugees from other countries, many of whom are from pan-Asian countries. However, at Reynolds, these three groups of students – ESL, international, and refugee – are often seen as and spoken about as one, by staff and students alike, referred to collectively as “the international students” (with the term *international* often used as a euphemism for Asian). This may be in part because all three groups of students are overseen and supported by one teacher, Ms. B, who is a thoughtful and caring educator. Ms. B invested in these students much the same way that I invested in the Contemporary English students, by learning their stories and being an adult that the students felt that they could trust. For Ms. B, this meant that she knew about the stories of these students, both the beautiful and terrifying, and that she had a vested interest in them becoming part of the larger school community, much the same way that I had hoped that Contemporary English would provide a bridge to the larger school community for my marginalized students. With the similarities that these two groups shared, one might think that there would be empathy and connections between them, but that was not the case, and sharing a classroom made that all the more evident.

This shared space became an increasing source of tension in the classroom as three times a week Contemporary English occurred immediately following lunch. As Rm. 218 was the hub of activity for the non-native English speaking crowd, the room would be full each lunch hour, replete with international foods and food smells, predominantly of Asian origin. Ms. B had a prep block during the Contemporary English block and would often stay in the
classroom for the first twenty minutes of class, working on administrative tasks associated with her role as ESL/International student coordinator. It was during this time that Ms. B would hear some students in Contemporary English complain about the mess left behind after lunch by her students. As someone who values community and respect, Ms. B spoke with her students to make sure that this would not occur again, hoping to make the Contemporary English students feel that the classroom was a space that they were a part of. However, while there was no longer garbage left behind by the Ms. B’s students, the commentary didn’t stop. Now, this commentary was not ongoing nor was it pervasive, but it was enough that Ms. B, who is so attuned to the marginalization of her students within the larger school context, felt offended. This offense culminated when one lunch hour a few Contemporary English students arrived a bit early to class, before I had arrived, and commented on how the room stank. Understandably, the smells of foods from other countries may be foreign to the noses of Canadian students, but it was the tone of exclusion and otherization in their voices that touched a nerve with Ms. B.

“Brad, I bitched them out. And I am not a bitch.”

Ms. B is not a bitch. She is a wonderful and caring teacher who feels deeply the plight of students who are already at a disadvantage because of their language skills, let alone the underlying marginalization that occurs with these students on an everyday basis, whether it be at school, in the community, or at home. The comments, focussed around the word “they”, hurt Ms. B and she let the students know that, in few uncertain terms.

The students were taken aback and, frankly, were offended. They did not see what the issue was. The Contemporary English students were commenting on a smell that, to them, was bad. They did not feel as though they were passing judgement on others, rather, they were stating their truth; the food Ms. B’s students ate made the room smell bad. For Ms. B, this was another example of ignorance and lack of acceptance demonstrated toward her students. It was interesting that my students, for whom community was such an integral part of the classroom, were unaware of how their words and actions influenced the negation of community in general.

Ms. B asked to apologize to the class as a whole and be given a chance to explain why she reacted in the way she did. The class listened attentively and since we had been looking so intently at race as it pertained to the black experience in America, at my behest, I thought that this would be an ideal time to discuss racism in a local context. Ms. B was reluctant to have her students involved in this because she was concerned that things could get worse if they were to be honest about their experience at Reynolds with their Canadian counterparts. I was convinced that this would not occur and that sharing our stories, which had been an important part of our curriculum to this point, would help
the Contemporary English students to understand what it would be like to be marginalized, hopefully making the connection to how in many ways they share a similar experience at Reynolds, existing just outside the mainstream.

The talk occurred and it was interesting to see how the students interacted. Ms. B invited three of her more articulate, and brave, students to speak with the Contemporary English students. We moved the desks out of the way so that we would be able to create a large circle. We introduced ourselves and then we began to share stories. The conversation touched on all emotions, becoming passionate and heated at times, with fears and wounds being exposed by Ms. B’s three students, and, surprisingly for me, a lot of defensive posturing by the Contemporary English students. The Contemporary English students, as a group, felt as though comments were being personalized to them and, likely as a result of being involved in anti-bullying and anti-racism programs throughout their whole lives, the Contemporary English students were reluctant to see themselves as part of this problem, definitely because of the negative connotations associated with it. As one of the students said to me prior to the talk: “We’re the least racist class in here; we’re the ones learning about different cultures” (Cunningham, 2011, audio field notes).

This meeting was an important moment for me for a number of reasons. Rarely are students presented with real-life scenarios of racism where both the dominant culture and the marginalized culture sit down and talk things out. In Contemporary English, we learned about the slave trade and the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement, so the students were steeped in the idea of dominant cultural norms, but they saw that from the outside. Being part of the dominant culture didn’t allow them the objectivity to see how the words they chose to say aloud could affect others. This was evident as much of the conversation focussed around the idea that “they” is any group of people – grade nines, band geeks, jocks, skaters, any group that had a similar connection and of which the speaker was not a part of – and that the food smelling bad wasn’t being racist, it was being real. Much the same way that a given fruit or food may taste bad, the smell of the food being consumed at lunch just smelled bad to them and that shouldn’t be an issue for people; it wasn’t a value statement about a culture, but rather that a particular smell was unappetizing to someone who is not familiar with it. As well, some of the Contemporary English students hung onto the idea that the ESL, international, and refugee students didn’t make enough effort to be a part of the dominant culture. There was a feeling that these students came to Canada to get into Canadian universities, and this feeling is difficult to dispute when there are multiple media reports about how BC is courting and using international students to help bring funds into public education. (Article A; Article B; Article C)

The Contemporary English students failed to recognize the difficulty of the marginalized group to engage in the dominant
discourse. As Gee noted (1989), one cannot slip from one to
discourse into another without being seen as an outsider. In this
case, the ESL, international, and refugee students needed to not
only overcome language barriers, but also social and cultural
barriers to begin to engage with the larger school community.

While there was a strong sense of being a community in
Contemporary English because the students could speak and be
heard without judgement by those who were ‘book smart’ – that
is to say those who had figured out how to succeed in school and
thus were part of the dominant school discourse – for the majority
of the students in the class, this sense of community did not
make the leap to the larger school context. A couple of students
understood what Ms. B’s students were experiencing and
corroborated what they were saying: Sphere had experience
moving across the country and into a new school and thus could
relate on some level with what Ms. B’s students were
experiencing and another boy who had previously been at a
private school with many international students and thus had a
connection with them and knew about what it was like for them in
Canada. Other than that, the Contemporary English students,
while understanding that moving between discourses would be
difficult, still felt as though the “blame” had to be shared as “they”
were not making enough of an effort to be part of the whole
school; instead they sequestered themselves into a little room
(Rm. 218) at lunch and only hung around and spoke to people of
their own culture. (This was disputed by Ms. B who noted that
while many of the students may have similar appearances to
Canadian because of being unaccustomed to the nuances of
different nationalities and cultures of Asia, the students were often
not in country groupings while in the room.) I am not sure that this
conversation achieved what I had hoped, which was that my
students would gain an understanding of what others who are
marginalized are going through, but I don’t think it resulted in Ms.
B’s worst fear, which was that things would become worse for her
students as a result of trying to stand up and speak to truth. I
hope that, much like teaching, the results of the meeting will be
seen long after the students have left school and that they will
draw upon this experience at some moment in their future lives
and be more wary of their choice of words, understanding that
there is inherently more responsibility on the dominant culture to
reach out to the marginalized than the reverse. That having power,
which, in a school context for some of these students is a foreign
concept, requires that one be aware of how that power is exerted.

The fact that Contemporary English is going to be conducted a
second time and that there is a strong demand from students to
be in the course speaks to its success. As Obeast said:

I’m jealous of the kids who are going to be in this class after
you have like taught this class like five more times because
. . . you are going to learn something new from every group
of kids and eventually your class is going to be like so good,
like, I don’t know, it is going to be crazy hip hop class and
like, by the end, instead of having kids like write and spit once, like I didn’t spit once, I was like “Holy shit, that looks really scary”, but like you’re going to have a full class of kids who are like, “Hell yeah, let’s spit, let’s cypher, let’s battle, let’s do everything”. Like eventually you are going to have a full class of the kids who are, like that class is fucking nuts and it’s going to be insane, and you’re going to hone all your skills and you’ll be like “Well, I can spit with the kids, too” and like your class will be so much better when you teach it like five more times.

However, the tensions that existed within the course, within the students, and within me are valuable as they force us into positions where we must begin to consider what it is we are doing and why we are doing it. In articulating these tensions, the opportunity to develop the course as Obesat envisions it becomes possible as we will be able address the tensions and learn from them. And while this may be the case, it is in the tensions that I feel as a teacher that I am learning about myself and my students, and for that reason, I hope that as one tension is resolved, another crops up.
To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin (hooks, 1994, p. 13)

The focus of this study was to explore how the use of out-of-school literacies affected students’ engagement, motivation, and sense of community in the classroom environment. Drawing from the findings, it was evident that the students developed a very strong sense of community within the classroom; however this sense of community did not extend to the broader school community in a meaningful way. The students were more engaged in Contemporary English than they were in previous English classes because they had chosen to enroll in this course and the students chose what curriculum we studied. This resulted in students speaking more openly and frequently during classroom discussion and an increase in student attendance, again as compared to their previous English classes. Students’ motivation varied depending on the task they were completing; when completing tasks that aligned with more traditional classroom structures...
(e.g., formal writing, test preparation, assessed presentations), the students displayed behaviours that they have displayed in other English classes, but when given the opportunity to engage with tasks that were more personal or multimodal in nature, students worked very hard with, in some cases, no consideration as to the grade they would earn.

For this study, I relied heavily on the work completed by Hill (2009), Low (2011), and Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002). In these three case studies, the authors were in classroom environments working within English curriculums with senior high school students. In other studies focussed on hip hop and youth, the use of after school or out-of-school programs created a different relationship between the “teacher” and the “student”, often because in both cases neither had the “identity kit” (Gee, 1996) of a teacher nor of a student. As they were in school-based settings in credit English courses, Hill, Low, and Morrell and Duncan-Andrade most closely resembled the classroom teaching experience I was involved in. However, while these situations were most closely related to my own, there were significant differences between them. The three aforementioned studies occurred in the United States with predominantly black classrooms where the researchers used hip hop lyrics and songs to bridge to more canonical texts, whereas we were situated in a Canadian city with a predominantly white classroom and using hip hop as the core of the curriculum rather than using part of it to bridge to other more traditional and canonized texts. It was as a result of these differences that my study was able to contribute to the body of research in the use of out-of-school literacies, and hip hop in particular, in classroom environments.

Petchauer (2009) wrote a review of studies done on hip hop in education research. Of the 22 studies he reviewed in the journal article, not one educational space (classroom or outside of school setting) was predominantly white (Appendix B). Of the 24 students in Contemporary English, there were only four who were non-white, and there were no Black students, with Trinity being bi-racial (black father and white mother). While one of the three classes Low (2011) was involved in was predominantly white, they were also an Advanced Placement (AP) course – a course comprised of students taking university level English at high school to earn first year university credits. This created a very homogenous classroom, both racially and academically, and one in which few students identified with hip hop culture. Low explained that “the “survivors” were predominantly African American, the other group, an advanced poetry class (the “AP class”) that attracted many of the top academic students in the grade and was coed, was made up mostly of European-American students” (p. 149). In Contemporary English, there were students who would have felt comfortable in that AP classroom, but there were also students in Contemporary English who would have been comfortable in “the survivors” classroom that Low worked with – “students who have not traditionally done well in English but have managed to persist into their senior year” (p. 149). This
difference in Contemporary English’s class composition, being racially homogenous and non-African American, yet academically and socially diverse, is unique in the literature.

The fact that the Contemporary English students had all chosen to be in a class that had hip hop as the core content of study contributed to the sense of community and differentiated this study from others that were done. In the other studies, hip hop was used to bridge to canonical texts (Hill, 2009; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002) or hip hop was used alongside the more acceptable content (e.g., spoken word poetry) during one unit of study during a semester (Low, 2011). In all of these cases, the students were assigned to their class and the researcher happened to use their class for the study. In the case of Hill, he found that the use of hip hop ended up freeing students who had been marginalized in the past, but silenced voices from those who did not identify as being hip hop and thus did not feel as though they had the authority to contribute. In the case of Contemporary English, students specifically selected it as their English course for the year, so while there were voices that were quieter than others, it was a classroom that people had chosen to be in and learn in. The knowledge that people had chosen to be there was one of the reasons that community formed quickly as students identified the fact that there was an equality among them, not in terms of knowledge of hip hop, but in terms of wanting to know more about it.

Low, a European-Canadian researcher, worked with Tim, a European-American high school classroom teacher who was not part of the hip hop discourse. Like their team of researcher and teacher, I worked closely with Kathy, a white Canadian professor. Like Tim, I was also outside the hip hop discourse, although not as completely as he was. However, Low’s previous research gave her a stronger base of knowledge than Kathy and I had. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade were both high school classroom teachers and researchers and part of the hip hop discourse. This was similar to Hill, although he was no longer a high school teacher but was a researcher who worked alongside a disinterested high school teacher. That Kathy and I were a researcher-teacher team was not unique, but was distinct from the other studies whereby neither of us were part of the hip hop discourse when we began this study, which meant that the learning that we would be doing from the students would be authentic. As well, in our case study, the teacher was the lead researcher, as opposed to the reverse in other case studies. Our interested outsider statuses helped provide authentic opportunities for the students to inform and teach us, helping to develop a stronger relationship and feeling of equality within the classroom, both of which lead to a stronger community environment. It was our genuine interest that was of utmost importance because as Hill noted, while the classroom teacher he worked with allowed hip hop to be studied in his class, his lack of participation and visible disinterest created an environment where the students connected strongly with Hill, but not with the classroom teacher.
Authenticity and the need for vulnerability

Authenticity was at the core of all the findings: relevant curriculum; collaborative assessment; meaningful classroom discussions; equality amongst all members of the classroom; involvement of community members in the classroom; teacher and students taking risks together; an invitation to hip hop culture into the classroom; teacher as learner and students as teachers; sharing of personal stories through assignments. All of these aspects of the course come back to the core tenet of hip hop - being authentic or keepin’ it real. It was this realness I believe students desire yet lack in their educational experience. Relationships that are based around the teacher-student binary no longer work for students who are seeking authentic experiences. While motivated students like Whispers, Trinity, and Pedro will complete the work necessary to do well in school, they do so with little passion or engagement. Others, such as Obeast and Jax, have a lower tolerance to complete work that they don’t see as relevant to their own experiences. The best example of this was S-dawg, who went so far as to design a new curriculum to meet his needs, and which unfortunately were never fully met.

To make up for my lack of credibility, and to both engage students and extend the community, I invited as many community members into the class as I could. In all but one case, the hip hop artists, spoken word poets, and academics who came to speak to the class volunteered their time to do so. This volunteerism speaks to their support of a class of this nature, one that honours both the students’ interests and identities; in every case the community members commented on how much this course would have meant to them in high school. This use of the hip hop community in a classroom context was unique in the literature as well and was a key component of the success of the course, with many of the interviewed students stating that it was one of the highs of the course. Students also recognized that I wasn’t trying to teach them something that I didn’t know how to do and they respected the fact that I found experts to do that. During the time that the community members were in the classroom, I sat shoulder to shoulder with the students, participating in writing exercises and sharing my work or participating in group discussions with them. This equality between me as a teacher and them as students was important in maintaining the authenticity of my role in the classroom, that of being a ‘bro’ and a teacher, and for the students to see I was willing to risk and mess up in front of them, especially as it related to me trying to spit. The first time I tried spitting in front of the students, which came at the end of a writing exercise that Nostic put us through, was a pretty epic failure and in that failure students accepted me as a ‘bro’, telling me as much. The second time I tried spitting, during Auto Krat’s performance, was a much better success and the students were impressed, not by my skill as much as my willingness to be vulnerable in front of them again. Having community members in the class provided an opportunity to practice hip hop, rather than just learn about it, and it also
provided an opportunity for me to be vulnerable while modeling the risk that I was hoping the students would take.

Some of the community members that came to Contemporary English were graduates of Reynolds. In one case, Reynolds grad Nostic, came regularly to the class. Every Friday, Nostic would come to class and work on the practice of hip hop with the students, whether it was running a beatboxing workshop, a cypher, or a writing exercise. Nostic was also an underground hip hop artist so he usually performed at least one song, which the students loved. He would provide honest and encouraging feedback to all the students when they submitted writing or took risks by performing something for the class. This regular attendance of a former Reynolds student provided the students a role model of someone who hadn’t loved school but had loved hip hop and had graduated. He was also instrumental in bringing in other local hip hop artists to the class. This type of collaboration engaged and motivated the students as it created opportunities for students to share in ways that would never happen during a novel study, leading to a stronger sense of community. It also allowed me to mentor Nostic as an educator, a role he took on more seriously as the semester continued. At the beginning, he and I weren’t sure what his presence in the class would look like, but I gave him freedom to do what he thought was best. We discussed different ideas and I helped him learn how to better facilitate workshops and classroom discussions, taking into account the needs of students as well as how long to allow for writing exercises and how to facilitate sharing of that writing so that students feel comfortable. I took the opportunity to teach Nostic these skills of teaching, skills that work in any classroom with any subject, so that he would continue to evolve as a teacher, something he was taking to naturally. Students felt the same way, with Obeast suggesting to me that Nostic needed to forget about the film school he was attending and become a teacher. Nostic’s involvement with conscious hip hop informed his world view and contributed to his desire to support and grow the community of Contemporary English.

Choice of texts

In his review of hip hop and education, Petchauer (2009) reviewed a study completed by Newman (2007), part of which looked at how his students perceived conscious rap, which was by far the most popular form of rap within Contemporary English, and hardcore rap, which was more admired by the students from his Queens, NY classroom. Newman’s (2007) ethnographic and genre analysis study also highlighted some of the overlooked issues in hip hop-based education, mainly that students sometimes prefer the genres of rap music more often eschewed by teachers. His study looked at how a class of Black and Latino high school students in a creative rap course in Queens, New York, responded to conscious and hardcore genres of rap music. By conscious rap, Newman referred to music by artists such as dead prez or Talib Kweli that often identified systemic causes of...
violence, poverty, and racism experienced by ethnic minorities, generally critiqued capitalism, and affirmed a Black identity. In the category of hardcore rap, Newman included more commercially successful rap artists such as 50 Cent and Jay-Z, whose music and entrepreneurial successes (e.g., clothing lines, record labels) affirm free market capitalism, which in some instances could be seen as materialistic, and contain no direct affirmation of Black identity.

Newman (2007) concluded that his students favored the hardcore rap over the conscious rap because the latter was understood by students as containing little desire for economic mobility or stability—things these working-class students desired. By contrast, the hardcore, capitalist-affirming rap offered students a form of hope for individuals who are skilled enough to overcome their environments. Artists such as Jay-Z are often seen as heroes to young people because their narratives frequently describe skillfully navigating dangerous social contexts that students also experience (Hill, 2009), and some artists’ real lives demonstrate entrepreneurial successes and shrewd business investments. Overall, Newman’s study illustrated that boasts of success (however materialistic they may be) can be more desirable to working-class students than a critique of capitalism or affirmation of racial identity and solidarity (Newman, 2007, p. 954–955).

This was in direct contrast to the findings in Contemporary English, where mainstream – or as Newman termed it, hardcore – rap was eschewed for perceived lack of artistic merit and the glorification of capitalist ideals. Nostic and Auto Krat were both conscious rappers and even Najjah Callibur, who was more mainstream in tone than either Nostic and Auto Krat, was still accepted because the content was not self-obsessing or consumption based (whether that was drugs or clothing or alcohol or cars), but was about love. Obeast made it very clear that while Jay-Z was talented early in his career, he had sold out as his career progressed by rapping about topics and ideals that sell records instead of sharing stories that matter. Returning to the ‘keepin’ it real’ culture within hip hop, students interviewed in Contemporary English, who live in a predominantly middle class Canadian city, felt that underground hip hop – of which conscious hip hop is a predominant form – was the truest form of hip hop. However, these students come form a more privileged position of not facing the racial discrimination nor the same degree of poverty as the subjects in Newman’s and most of the other studies. This allowed these students to hold a negative view of the boasting of materialistic wealth within mainstream/hardcore rap and rather than seeing it as emancipatory, it was viewed as symptom of the societal issues about which conscious hip hop provides a strong critique. While Contemporary English students faced their own personal struggles, they did not face the same degree of economic or political struggle that the students in Newman’s study did and thus were able to focus on the struggle.
for equality in a different way. Both groups of students wanted change to occur and looked to hip hop to see that change, just from different ends of the hip hop spectrum.

Hill (2009) chose the texts that the students would study in the Twilight Program, but he had hip hop credibility with his students as he was African American and he was part of the hip hop generation. Being knowledgeable about hip hop, he was able to select texts that would be both appropriate for a classroom while providing opportunities to enter into discussions about society, focusing on the critique that conscious hip hop is known for. In the following case, though, the students resisted the ideas that Hill had as they pertained to a song of Hill’s choice:

For example, in studying the song “Things Done Changed” by The Notorious B.I.G., a nostalgic rap text that Hill believed might illustrate the structural and social forces behind neighborhood violence and drug economy, 12 students interpreted the text to suggest that their generation was an exception compared to previous ones and more morally corrupt in comparison. These student interpretations held despite Hill’s challenges for an alternate and less self-deprecating one (Petchauer, 2007, p. 957).

While I did bring in songs that I wanted the class to study, I tried my best to listen to what the students were saying about their musical tastes and attempted to match them. In one instance, I brought in a 2Pac song, “Violence”, for us to examine how it related to the theme of identity. This academic exercise went well and the students seemed engaged. However, the second song I wanted to study was Snak the Ripper’s “Poison” and use this song as the basis of a synthesis essay with Zaccheus Jackson’s poem “Recovery”. When students arrived in class to see that we were going to be studying a Snak the Ripper song, the mood was one of disbelief. Obeast in particular was beside himself that I had chosen a Snak the Ripper song of my own accord. In listening to the students speaking about underground rap, I had heard a few names more often than others and the Snak the Ripper song was a good fit to analyze alongside Zaccheus Jackson’s poem. In this case, the interpretation of the song and the poem between teacher and students was in concert. However, when we engaged in a class discussion with international, ESL, and refugee students about racism at Reynolds, the Contemporary English students as a whole, like Hill’s students, were unable to move past their own interpretations of the situation at Reynolds and see the view I had. Even upon explanation later on, students held on to the interpretation that the ESL, international, and refugee students needed to do more to become part of the community of Reynolds. This distancing of responsibility was interesting to watch because it made me consider whether or not these students actually existed in a post-race state, that they truly did not see skin colour as part of a student’s identity. While this may not be the case in every instance, I do believe that these students did not group students by race, yet I don’t think they had a strong understanding of the power they possessed as members of the
dominant culture. It may be a lot to ask of high school students who may have never been in a situation where they were not fluent in the language of the culture to empathize with the plight of the students they were speaking with – especially when there had been press that could be read as negative about foreign students coming to BC – but the students’ resistance to my vision of the events was evidence that they held true to their world view.

The racism talk was also a demonstration that the community formed in the classroom, which was a strong and integral part of the success of Contemporary English, did not extend beyond the classroom doors in a meaningful way. The importance of the fact that the students had created a classroom community cannot be understated and this is an admirable and worthy thing. But coupled with the way that the students treated Mrs. K and the othering of the ESL, international, refugee students, the classroom community was an insular one. This should not be surprising because the community was formed around the fact that everyone in the class was interested, to varying degrees, in hip hop. That was the common starting point and from there, through sharing and classroom discussions and risk taking, the students created and strengthened their bonds with each other and with me. As well, the community members who came to our class and performed and did workshops were readily and eagerly accepted into the community. Again, though, these community members identified with hip hop. The challenge for me as a teacher is find a way to extend that sense of community outside the classroom, an attempt I made by inviting other teachers into the classroom to do Song of the Day. It was my hope that seeing other teachers who were into hip hop might help these students make a connection in a Socials or a Math or another English class. With that said, students did support each other outside the classroom, with some students who had never been to a lunch hour Open Mic, going to watch and support students from Contemporary English who were performing. This was evidence that students were beginning to engage in the greater school community, but I believe that it was more because they were connected to their classmates than they were the school as a whole.

**Collaborative assessment**

Equality extended to assessment as I was put in a difficult position as a teacher when I was required to assess multimodal assignments and/or student work that dealt with deeply personal stories. As a result, I began to use collaborative dialogue to co-assess the work with students, giving them an opportunity to share their thoughts and intentions while having a say in their grade as well. For me to assess the artistic or musical quality of an English assignment would be disingenuous as well as faulty; I am neither proficient nor trained in either of those disciplines and thus have no real right to be judging them. It is my belief that this vulnerability – the lack of expertise in being able to assess these multimodal assignments – is what restricts teachers from using
them in their classroom. While my lack of artistic or musical expertise may seem to have undermined my ability to assess these multimodal assignments authentically, in actuality, it was neither the art nor the music that I should have been assessing; it was the thinking behind the creation of the assignment. In this way, the collaborative dialogue with the student allowed me an insight into the student’s thought process. I initially struggled with collaborative dialogue for a few reasons. The biggest reason, and one that I had long discussions about with Kathy, was that there would be a lack of tangible evidence of work. If the student was to just talk, how could I prove to mom/dad, principal, other teachers, other students, that this student’s work was of high quality or low quality? Where would the physical evidence of “work” be that I could then hold up to justify to everyone who might ask why this student received the grade he/she did? And then I realized that there have been very few times that anyone has ever asked for justification. And I realized that I don’t have the physical evidence of student work after the semester ends. And I realized that if anyone asked me why this student received a certain grade, after going through the process of collaborative dialogue, I wouldn’t have to justify the grade because the student would be able to. But, in these early stages, and with permission of the students, I chose to record our conversations about their work in order to provide any evidence that may be required. What I learned in this process is that there was no way that I was getting everything that a student was putting into their work. Collaborative dialogue addresses a point made in the most recent issue of Learn, the magazine of the BC teacher regulation branch, in which a student-penned article decried the manner in which teachers failed to involved students in the practice of assessment.

How learning is assessed and graded is also important. The present grading system often does not emphasize the importance of students being engaged during the process; rather, evaluation often focuses solely on the final product – the grade. Within this system of evaluation, students can easily become disengaged when they are not invited into the process as equal participants in their own assessment and success. Too often students are not even aware of how or why they received the grades they did. If students are not involved in the process of their own learning, the grades will have no meaning. (Utter, Cannon, & Nash, 2012, p. 18–20)

While many of my experiences in Contemporary English mirror those that previous researchers have found in their studies, the unique aspects of Contemporary English add to the growing base of knowledge around hip hop in the classroom, and the need to incorporate students’ out-of-school literacies into the classroom when possible. However, it was made very clear that it needs to be thoughtfully done because if the students do not feel that it is authentic, that they are trying to be placated or coerced into doing work because the topic or content is something that they like outside of school, there will be limited success for a limited
time. As hooks wrote at the beginning of this section, we need to appeal to the souls of our students for deep learning to occur, and that comes through authenticity and vulnerability, first from the teacher to model for the students.
Changing Paradigms

This animated video of a Sir Ken Robinson TED Talk is an engaging look into the history and purpose of schooling and how it can be detrimental the development of creativity in school. It is a video that I show to my students at the beginning of a semester and challenge them to look at our class differently, encouraging them to think differently and see different possibilities for what we can do in class. However, in my traditional classes, we have only taken baby steps in that direction. With Contemporary English, I feel as though we have taken a large leap towards what is possible.

Contemporary English and 21st century learning

This song by Saul Williams, who is also a spoken word poet, parallels Antony’s plea in Julius Caesar for the masses to fight for change.

Figure 48 “Act III Sc. 2 (Shakespeare)” by Saul Williams

This incredibly popular YouTube video animates a TED Talk given by education researcher Sir Ken Robinson on the changing paradigms in education.
Politics of 21st century learning

“21st century learning” is a term that has become synonymous with the future of education, especially as it pertains to British Columbia. Beginning in 2010 with the Speech from the Throne, then Minister of Education Margaret MacDiarmid promised that things were going to be changing. Vancouver Sun columnist Janet Steffenhagen reported about this in her blog “Eduction Report Card”, citing a number of people who alluded to upcoming changes as a result of John Abbott’s connection to BC. This change may have actually had its seed as early as 2005 when John Abbott spoke with the BC School Superintendents Association. In 2010, then and current deputy minister of Education James Gorman commented to Steffenhagen that John Abbott “certainly challenged our thinking within the ministry.” Also in 2010, Abbott’s 21st Century Learning Initiative prepared a paper entitled “Schools” in the Future: What has to change, and why”, which ended with a postscript reading:

This paper has been prepared by the 21st Century Learning Initiative drawing upon the ideas contained within *Overschooled but Undereducated* and additional research from around the world, to be helpful to those in an English city, and in British Columbia, who are seeking to bring about radical change (emphasis added, 21st Century Learning Initiative, 2010, p. 8, )

The presentation below further details the ideals of the 21st Century Learning Initiative and discusses how they can be applied to this jurisdiction.

And most definitely, John Abbott’s influence in the development of the BC Education Plan was clear when he and current Minister of Education George Abbott co-presented the BC Education plan to the BC School Superintendents Association in February of 2012. As governments around the world speak about the importance of reform in the way schooling occurs, in BC there continues to be tension between the people who want it implemented (the government) and the people who are responsible for its implementation (the teachers). This is paradoxical because both groups are advocating for the same ideals - engaged students working with expert
teachers. One would think that with a common goal like this, moving toward its implementation would be easy, but this is BC and it is not. This excerpt from an opinion piece from the left-leaning online magazine TheTyee.ca captures the frustration that many people in BC feel when to comes to the acrimonious relationship between government and the BCTF.

After four decades of public rancor and mistrust between federation executives and governments of all political stripes, the conversation about public schools has degenerated into simplistic and rarely useful discussions about resources -- or more often, the lack thereof. Year after year, the BCTF and some trustee boards insist that schools are badly underfunded. Year after year, the province parades out statistics illustrating increased levels of fiscal support, despite shrinking school populations. Amid teachers’ job actions, political posturing on both sides and the language of distraction that prevents true debate, one thing is clear: neither the teachers’ federation nor government is really addressing the core issues confronting public schools, the things that really matter in the 21st century (Fleming, 2011, http://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2011/11/02/Public-School-War/).

As mentioned, this scathing view is, unfortunately, not uncommon as trust between each side of the triad is tenuous, at best. Even upon signing a collectively bargained agreement in June of 2012, current BCTF president Susan Lambert had this to say in a media release about the bargaining process:

After a long and difficult round of negotiations, we were compelled into this process under threat of huge fines and further punitive legislation...We’ve concluded this agreement in order to prevent government from imposing a contract that would further erode teachers’ hard-won rights and do more harm to students’ learning conditions,” even telling reporters that “she is convinced that Clark, who was once the Liberal government’s education minister, has a "vendetta" against her union. (http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/story/2012/06/27/bc-teachers-tentative-agreement.html)

From the government side, Minister Abbott said “that despite which government is elected in 2013, one thing is clear: I do think the BCTF needs to sit down and try to build that mature constructive relationship that has proven elusive for so long” (http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/story/2012/06/27/bc-teachers-tentative-agreement.html). With this background of distrust, it is not surprising to see the BCTF questioning the implementation, though not the ideals, of 21st Century Learning. In a 2010 article in Teacher, the magazine of the BCTF, Emily O’Neill notes “The influences of John Abbott and the 21st Century Learning Initiative on Margaret MacDiarmid and the Ministry of Education - with their calls for increased student engagement through personalized, hands-on learning guided, rather than dictated, by
teachers - are evident,” concluding the article with these concerns, that are still relevant to teachers today:

While the idealism of the ministry’s 21st century learning proposals is certainly admirable, it is still unclear how all of these laudable goals will be achieved in today’s economic and political climate. There is a disconnect between the vision that the ministry is putting forward and what is actually happening on the ground- where pervasive underfunding, fewer electives, larger classes, a lack of teacher autonomy, the constrictions of the accountability agenda, and the realities of child poverty all would seem to conspire to hamstring the ministry’s proposals. Unless fundamental, systemic changes are made, do the ministry’s reform plans stand a chance? You can expect to hear a great deal more about this in the coming months as the ministry fills in the details. (O’Neill, 2010, Teacher Magazine).

Further to that, a BCTF research discussion paper written by Dr. Charles Naylor suggests:

This [21st century learning] initiative reflects a welcome change in the sense that the government is sharing its thinking and ideas without launching into directives or policies, allowing for initial discussion and reaction, and for potential consultation and collaboration. However, they are late to the discussion, and well behind many BC public-school teachers, whose twenty-first century learning initiatives have been either thwarted by government policies or consistently ignored by government and ministers. (Naylor, 2010, p. 2)

Not to be left out, in 2010 Steffenhagen reported about Vancouver School Board chairperson Patti Bacchus, to which Steffenhagen wrote:

Vancouver board chairwoman Patti Bacchus said there have been suggestions that “personalized learning” will mean fewer teachers in high-school classrooms and more students either in apprenticeships or taking courses online. She urged everyone with an interest in public education to pay close attention. “We’re hearing a lot about the 21st century learning issue but I think it’s more than another buzz word,” she is quoted as saying in the Cowichan Valley Citizen. “There’s a lot of good things about it – good work has been done around the world – but there’s also a huge potential for the term to be hijacked and used as cover for something else” (Steffenhagen, 2010).

Today, the BC Education Plan has a flashy video and a website dedicated to soliciting information from the whole of BC about how they think the current education system can be improved.
However, in both the video and the website, the details as to implementation are still not present. Even the Premier’s Technology Council (PTC), a group “which is comprised of 23 members from the private sector and academia [whose mandate] is to provide advice to the Premier on all technology-related issues facing British Columbia and its citizens” and who released an important document in 2010 detailing the needs of education to compete in the knowledge-based economy, did not even attempt to deal with the details of implementation. In the Foreword to the report entitled *A Vision for 21st Century Education*, the president of the council, Eric Yolo Joe, wrote:

> This special report highlights a vision of education in the 21st century. As a result of our research, we believe that our system must transform to properly serve the citizens of a knowledge-based society. The PTC fully understands that the current education system is both large and complex and that engineering the kind of transformation discussed will be a significant challenge. The PTC has not chosen, however, to discuss the specifics of implementation at this time. We have instead chosen to envision what a new system might look like were we able to begin with a blank slate. As there are no implementation steps considered in this special report, it contains no recommendations. (Yolo Joe, 2010, p. i)

The conclusion of the Executive Summary of the 46 page report states:

> The intent of this paper is to lay out a vision for education in the 21st century. The rate at which our knowledge-base is expanding and the impact this is having on the pace of change demands a system that teaches all students, regardless of background, to thrive in such a world. Such a system is one that individualises learning so students engage in issues important to them while learning the skills critical to participating in a knowledge-based society. While engaging the student in charting their own path it would demand greater involvement of the parents and a shift in the role of the teacher from one of lecturer to one of guide.

BC has discussed similar kinds of changes in the past and has made some steps toward implementation. However, the pace of global change is combining with our shift to more a knowledge-based economy to create greater urgency around the need for change. There is a high level of consensus in this vision amongst education experts and professional adminis-
tators as well as agreement that changing such a complex system is a significant challenge. While BC’s educational system is evolving and dialogue about these issues is on-going, the PTC believes government should place high priority on accelerating the pace of change to become truly transformational (PTC, 2010, p. 4).

However, the PTC acknowledges how slow change comes to “large and complex” institutions, and thus urges the government to move quickly, in contrast to the 21st Century Learning Initiatives’ understanding that while urgency exists, patience must prevail:

It has to start by ensuring that all those – politicians, legislators, administrators and school and teacher leaders really understand the nature of what is involved – if they are to make the changeover between two very different ways of doing things. There is a paradox... this is so urgent it must not be rushed (21st Century Learning Initiative, 2010, p. 8, http://postmediavancouversun.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/schools-in-the-future-april-2010.pdf)

Building consensus is even more important when there are political motivations to maintain the status quo, for without it, there will not be buy in from all parties:

One hundred and thirty-nine years after its creation, the institution of public schooling is defined by three interlocking bureaucracies that serve -- intentionally or otherwise -- as agencies for the prevention of change. Public schooling, for the most part, is dominated by the Education Ministry, the British Columbia School Trustees Association (BCSTA) and the BCTF. Although rarely acting in concert, these organizations exhibit certain common characteristics. All are bureaucratic in nature, anti-visionary and unimaginative in outlook, prescriptive in behaviour, non-cooperative in manner, anti-technological in practice and committed to the status quo. Nevertheless, all three organizations rhetorically embrace the idea of change as long as it requires no actual alteration to their own organizations, or to the existing school system” (Fleming, 2011, http://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2011/11/02/Public-School-War/index1.html)

Again, this pervasive view of the bureaucracies involved in education is created through the almost constant bickering that occurs in the media, especially around times of collective bargaining. Though less apocalyptically put, the OECD reached a similar conclusion about the rate of change within educational structures in 2008 in their review report 21st century learning: Research, innovation, and policy – Directions from recent OECD analyses.
These organisational structures are functional in the sense of creating the predictability and responsibilities needed in order to organise at large scale. However, they produce boundaries which limit the possibilities of learning, because they limit the scope of inquiry, interaction and information flow, in teaching and learning activities. It results in a combination of stability and incremental change which allows the traditional model of schooling, and of bureaucratic school systems, to adapt continuously to all kinds of external change. It is thus well able to deflect the disruptive potential of almost any innovation, no matter where it is coming from.

The lesson [Tom] Bentley draws is that, rather than seeking to subvert or bypass the adaptive capacity of existing systems, new reform strategies for improvement need to harness them. They must connect them with the relentless, open-ended pursuit of better learning outcomes, rather than to the implicit preservation of their own core values and underlying structure. For that, we need a new view of innovation and its relationship to system design, and a refreshed sense of the global context into which we should put education (OECD, 2008, p. 9).

This is where Contemporary English enters the picture. Contemporary English fits the ideals of 21st century learning as defined by the BC Education plan and it can be implemented immediately, without the necessity of overhauling the educational system in order to make it happen. While John Abbott and Sir Ken Robinson would argue that we would not have dealt with the mechanization and factory model of education, I put forth that a course like Contemporary English can act as an intermediary, a bridge between what we have and what proponents of 21st century learning would like to see. A course like this can serve as an exemplar, to both teachers and government, as to what personalized learning in a classroom community can look like.

**Contemporary English and 21st Century Learning**

While there are many factors that are important in the implementation of 21st century learning pedagogy, for the purpose of this discussion I am going to focus directly on the British Columbia sce-
scenario that we are facing, the impending implementation of the BC Education Plan by the government and the resistance it may very well indeed face from the teachers in the province. In the hope of ameliorating that resistance, I will look at how the implementation out-of-school literacies – in this scenario, the use of hip hop – can address the concerns of both the government and the teachers and the BCTF.

The BC Education Plan outlines the five key elements that need to be implemented so that:

... every learner will realize their full potential and contribute to the well-being of our province.

To move our education system from good to great, the Plan has five key elements:
1. Personalized learning for every student
2. Quality teaching and learning
3. Flexibility and choice
4. High standards
5. Learning empowered by technology”
(http://www.bcedplan.ca/assets/pdf/bc_edu_plan.pdf, p. 5)

A course like Contemporary English is in a unique position to simultaneously address the outcomes of the BC Education Plan while also honouring the notion that “large and complex” systems resist quick change. It honours the fact that teachers are an integral part of the learning process and that students should be able to have choice and feel that what they do at school is relevant to their lives. By incorporating out-of-school literacies into a classroom, all this is possible. Contemporary English addresses many more elements than the five that the BC Education Plan has chosen to focus on. Most importantly among them is the development of community and the commiserate relationships between students and teachers. These elements are incredibly powerful for learning engagement and success, not just as students but in the development of young citizens, and as such I believe should be at the core of education. However, in demonstrating that Contemporary English fulfills the mandate of the BC Education Plan, and possible moves beyond it, I will focus on the elements as outlined within it.

**Personalized learning for every student**

A key element in all views of 21st century learning revolves around more student choice. Students have articulated very clearly to me that they want what they learn to be meaningful and relevant, and providing choice for students is a key way for this to happen. Already, many teachers are providing choice within their classrooms, but this choice happens with the strong constraints of the curriculum as teachers, especially in core subject areas such as math, socials, and the sciences, are tied to numerous PLOs that are difficult to cover in the time they have for the semester. Choice then become the teacher providing two or more
options for a student to choose from for an assignment. For example, in my English 12 classroom, I provide 25 different short stories for students to choose from during our short story unit. While there is ample choice, I have chosen the short stories and students must choose from that ample list. While this may be better than assigning one short story to everyone, it is still not authentic choice. Having students choose to enroll in a class in which hip hop is the core subject matter, students know that the content that they will be working with is something that they care about. As commented by Trinity, and affirmed by other students in the focus group who were already engaged in school, they jumped through the Shakespearean hoops in regular English classes because they knew they had to, but they didn’t feel any connection to the material nor the class. Students were able to personalize their learning by choosing to study content that was meaningful to them and in doing so the students found a greater sense of community and were more engaged in what they were studying.

Quality teaching and learning

The government has put a premium on teacher quality, stating that they will bring in new teacher regulations, ensure proper use of professional development days, institute teacher evaluations by principals, and work with universities to ensure teachers are prepared when they graduate. This is one of the most contentious parts of the BC Education Plan because the suggested changes could strike at the heart of teachers’ professional autonomy and the aforementioned lack of trust leads many teachers to believe the worst. At best, this could be the support that many teachers who are already practicing 21st century learning in their classrooms have been waiting for. The situation at Reynolds is such that the administration is supportive of teacher initiatives and provides time and support for these initiatives to develop and thrive. In the development of Contemporary English, I was in contact with teachers across the school: counsellors when I was speaking about students who would benefit from the course; teacher-librarian when I was looking for ideas and materials for the course; administrators when we discussed the development, implementation, and logistics of the course; English colleagues when I was describing what was going on with them; classroom neighbours when we debriefed why there was music coming out of the classroom every day; drama teacher when we negotiated the use of the theatre for workshops and performances; and other colleagues who were interested in hip hop when I invited them in to present Song of the Day. Contemporary English created a community within the classroom for the students, but it also fostered a strong collaborative community amongst the staff, something that is vital to create progressive schools. In creating stronger relationships with my own colleagues, the opportunities for collaboration and sharing greatly increased and that is what the staff at Reynolds feels is the best professional development: the opportunity to share and collaborate with our colleagues. In his research paper for the BCTF, Naylor describes what happened in a school when teachers were supported in their personal growth:
With an interactive whiteboard in every classroom, teachers in the school have developed new curriculum units and engaged in collaborative inquiry for several years to extend their reflection and understanding of changing practice. The teachers believe that their changing teaching practices have increased the engagement of all learners, from the gifted to those with special needs, while also creating a role for teachers which is more facilitative than directive. (Naylor, 2010, p. 22)

This, of course, was a report commissioned by the BCTF, so the results of it should be read with that in mind. However, a course such as Contemporary English would provide the opportunity for collaboration to occur in a school and, as described above, once a group of teachers have the time and space and impetus to share pedagogy, everyone benefits. In this way, the goals of the ministry for increased quality of teaching can be met without overhauling the system, instead there can be a focus on empowering administrators to support teachers who want to engage in practices that reflect 21st century learning ideals.

*Flexibility and Choice*

Flexibility and choice can occur at the systemic level (e.g., course selection, timing of the course) and the classroom level (e.g., choice of assignments, flexibility of due dates). In the BC Education Plan, the government looks at flexibility and choice as relates to where and when students take classes. They plan to give school boards more autonomy to set the school calendar year, give credits for the out-of-school involvement in arts, sports, sciences, and leadership programs that students are involved in, and provide choice as to when and where the student takes classes. The scope of Contemporary English does not encompass such systemic changes, but as acknowledged earlier, sweeping changes of society’s embedded understanding of how school works (e.g., summer vacation vs. Full year schooling) will face resistance and likely move slowly as the changes would have a large effect on not just students and teachers, but the societal structures that have developed around such long-standing understandings of how and where school fits in the community (e.g., summer camps, family vacations, part-time employment, etc.).

*High Standards*

Sir Ken Robinson’s comment that no one has ever suggested lowering standards is a keen observation of the issues with the rhetoric around raising standards. Of course high standards are incredibly important for the continued success of an education system, but the idea of “standards” is one that is conflict with the idea of “personalization.” In the case of secondary schools, the external influence on the establishment of quality, through provincial standardized testing and school rankings, is in contrast to the idea that every learner should be involved in the establishment of his/
her own learning path, which I believe should include both the setting of goals and the reflection on the attainment of those goals. Where the Contemporary English model would support both of these notions is in collaborative assessment, whereby the teacher is the monitor and enabler of students’ goals, having both the knowledge of standards for a given age or grade and also having close knowledge of the students’ goals. Guiding the students through the assessment of the assignments that they have chosen to complete, using a combination of ongoing assessment (e.g., assessment for learning) and collaborative assessment, the teacher would be in the best position to provide an objective account of student progress to the student, the parent, and ultimately, the government. In this way, the teacher will continue to be the support person that the student and parent work with in order to best meet the individual needs of the student.

*Learning empowered by technology*

Technology is a tool and when used well, a very powerful one at that. The challenge with inviting technology into the classroom is that as a publicly funded education system, equal access to technology should be provided to every student in every school in every part of the province. Unfortunately, this is not happening and is near impossible to implement, primarily due to the enormous financial cost that the government would have to bear. Add to that the pace at which technology becomes out-of-date and by the time a piece of technology would have reached every student in the province, it would be time to begin replacing it. However, technology is pervasive in our society and it is has changed the way we interact with each other, our government, and ultimately, our schools. The fact that Premier’s Technology Council gave the government advice on how to shape education in the 21st century speaks to how technology will transform the way that education is delivered. There is much excitement and uncertainty about this and both educators and the government are trying to determine the best way to implement technology so as to provide greatest benefit to our students. What is clear from Contemporary English is that the power of technology cannot supplant the importance of face-to-face community. The evidence coming from Contemporary English clearly demonstrates both the need and desire of students to have strong relationships with peers who share similar interests, with content that is relevant to their lives, and with adults and teachers who are committed to their academic and personal growth. In Contemporary English technology was used for research and the sharing of musical interests via iPods and YouTube, as well a communicating with each other outside of the classroom via a Facebook page and, in one case, a student using my phone to text a local hip hop artist to invite them into the classroom. These natural uses of technology were seamlessly integrated into the class. Like everything else, the use of technology needs to be authentic and needs to enhance the opportunity for students to deepen their learning, not just be used a method to conduct classes remotely, thereby diminishing the opportunity...
for face-to-face contact with peers and adults who share their interests.

Change without compromise

*Figure 55 A question from the BCED plan website*

**Question 13: Student interests/passions and learning**

*On March 9, 2012*  
78 COMMENTS

We've heard from you that students' passions and interests can play a part in helping them learn. For example, Nancy told us:

*When students are offered more flexible learning opportunities it opens the doors to their interests and passions in their world, and thus makes their learning more meaningful and relevant.*

How can we allow students to use their interests and strengths in ways that will allow them to learn what they need to learn?

The question above is an example of how the government is inviting the public to join the conversation and help shape the future of the BC public education system. Contemporary English is both an answer to that question and an example of how the ideals put forth by the proponents of 21st century learning can be incorporated into the existing structure of the educational system.

Based on papers written by the superintendents, the BCTF, and the BC government, there is agreement that the ideals of 21st century learning are progressive and worthy of implementation. The deep distrust that exists between the three groups will inhibit the implementation, likely forcing the Ministry of Education into a situation whereby this initiative becomes legislated by the government, rather than co-created with teachers. With the disconnect between the people who want it implemented in the system and the people who will implement it in the classroom, the very initiative could go the way of so many before it, most recently the Year 2000 education reform of 1990, and never get off the ground. Contemporary English provides a way for the ideals of 21st century learning to be implemented by teachers who will have control over how it is implemented. It will promote collaboration amongst a staff while providing students an opportunity to be engaged with content that is meaningful and relevant to their lives. Ultimately, it creates a sense of community between students, students and teachers, and with the larger community as a whole. This class can be the change that everyone feels comfortable without compromising any of the ideals of 21st century learning.
Contemporary English ended at the conclusion of the first semester, in late January 2012. The last two weeks of the class felt contrived as we turned our focus 100% to preparing for the final exams, with most of the energy going toward preparing the grade 12s for the standardized provincial exam for English Language Arts. Students who had taken advantage of flexible deadlines hurried and got their outstanding work completed during these two weeks (I was still getting completed work three weeks into the second semester). The energy of the first four months waned, as it usually does in most classes, at the end of a semester. But finally, on the penultimate day of school, after near two weeks of cajoling, pleading, and some forcing, of students to complete their work, Auto Krat came in to perform for the class. She

Chapter 7: Conclusion
Rapping it up

Figure 56 “If rap gets jealous” by K’naan

In this song, Somali-Canadian K’naan raps about staying true to yourself no matter what other may think.

Figure 57 Lyrics to “If rap gets jealous”

In this song, Somali-Canadian K’naan raps about staying true to yourself no matter what other may think.

Figure 58 Auto Krat freestyling for the class

Auto Krat was a well known underground hip hop artist and one that the class insisted on getting to come and see us, to the point that K took my phone to text Auto Krat and tell her to come in.
brought along DJ Spiro and they performed for us, spoke about their own stories with hip hop, showed us their equipment and how it worked, and then freestyled with us. I got up and spit for the class and that time, it went well. After two weeks of exam prep, the class felt authentic once again.

On the last day of class, Nostic came in to speak with the class. I stood at the back of the class and gave him the last 15 minutes of the semester to do whatever he wanted with the students. First, he shared this with them:

In that clip, showing his own vulnerability, Nostic took on the role of teacher, seeing something in the students that they may not yet have seen in themselves. And after giving into the class’s pestering for him to freestyle, he called upon students in the class to come up and share one last rhyme. After much cajoling, Trinity spat part of a spoken word piece she was working on (and that she would later compete with at Hullabaloo, the BC High School Slam Poetry Championships, where Reynolds placed 2nd as a team and Trinity placed 2nd as an individual poet) as Nostic beatboxed a rhythm for her.

Continuing to take on the role of teacher, Nostic pointed out the positive in Trinity’s flow, noting that she could have given up when she stumbled, but she didn’t and when she relaxed, her flow got smoother. And in the last act of the semester, Yolo Joe went up and shared a spoken word piece/rap that he written in honour of the Lord of the Rings trilogy. At the beginning of the clip, the class helps Nostic get the music of the Lord of the Rings movie in his head as he creates a beat for Yolo Joe to spit to. At its completion, and to raucous cheering, a student shouts out that that was the best thing he had heard this semester. Obeast also mentioned how great that piece was when we spoke during our interviews.

It was this moment of community – the sense of community the students had said was so integral to their positive experience in
Contemporary English – when students shared their writing through performance for no other reason than the class wanted to hear student voices, and where I was standing quietly at the back of the room recording it on my iPhone, that I knew that something special had happened this semester. The bell rang to end the semester, two of the smoke-pit boys got up, walked over to me, gave me a huge bear hug, and then everyone walked out the door.

A month later, after seeing a number of my Contemporary English students in the hallway rather than in class, one of them came up to me and asked if the course was going to happen again in the fall. I told him that if enough people wanted it, it would likely run again. He asked if he would be allowed to take it again. I was dumbfounded. I didn’t know what to say. I said that I think that would be alright, but that I didn’t want him to take a spot of someone who hadn’t taken it yet. When I posed the question to students in the focus group, they said that it would be ok as long as the content changed and the second-timers didn’t complete the assignments in the same way as they had. They told me I needed to make it harder for those taking it a second time.

Contemporary English is running again in the upcoming school year. As of the end of the 2011/2012 school year, there were four students registered to take it a second time. There are 27 students registered demonstrating the same academic diversity as the first year with more ethnic diversity this year. The top academic students enrolled in the course for the 2012/2013 school year are higher achieving than this past year and the lower achieving students enrolled in the 2012/2013 school year are lower. It will once again prove to be a strong cross-section of the school population, but as these students were not involved in the development of the course and they have heard their peers speak about it for a year, it will be interesting to see what preconceived notions they have upon arriving at class on the first day. Nostic has said he will be back as much as his schedule will allow him and it is my hope to continue to grow the course in the wider hip hop community.

As a model for how English classes can be taught using the principles of 21st century and personalized learning, Contemporary English works. It is cost-effective as there is no restructuring of the current school model needed, a restructuring that while ambitious and idealistic, will face strong resistance from both inside and out, from teachers and the aspects of society that are reliant on a 8:30-3:30, September-June school year. However, for this model to work, there needs to be strong support for it from all parts of the school. The reason Contemporary English was so successful was because the administration at Reynolds supported me completely in its implementation. While teachers can have a vision, the support of their leaders is essential for that vision to be successful. My administration left the door to hip hop wide open, giving me the professional freedom to run this class as a pilot study. In trying to
understand why she was so open to hip hop being in the school when so many administrators in the research on hip hop in the classroom are fearful of it, I asked my principal Why did you not oversee Contemporary English more closely? Another way to phrase the question would be this: Why did you accept hip hop into Reynolds?

My principal replied:

I believe these are two different questions. The first is related to my trust and confidence in you as a teacher and my clear understanding and support of the course as described (orally and in writing) by you.

I also believe it identifies a need for a certain cohort of young learners. It also reflects 21st century learning and the implication of making learning including literature/reading and writing more relevant. When students find their voice they can be empowered as individuals and as learners; it was one more way that Reynolds can work for connections and engagement.

And an administrator would do well to spend more time with you discussing the course and in the classroom chatting with the students. I will make a commitment to do this in the fall. Has the English department chair done the same? We also need to review and discuss final marks and provincial exam results.......how important is that and are the results what you expected? What is a measure of success?

I don’t think the school has formally embraced the “course” as I don’t think there is an understanding of what it is. How does that change? And do the parents understand it?

The average person does not even understand hip hop.......censorship, filters are all other issues....

My principal raises some salient points, the most pressing being that as teachers, we don’t know what is going on in other classrooms. While I agree with the sentiment of the statement, I would argue that there were quite a few teachers that knew what was going on in Contemporary English, more so than other courses in the school because many of them were in the classroom for Song of the Day and through continued discussion with them about how the course was progressing throughout the semester. However, as English has a lack of ministry defined content, I understand how that can lead to confusion about what was actually occurring in Contemporary English; in History 12, a student and/or a person familiar with the course knows exactly what content will be covered, but the same cannot be said for an English class and Contemporary English, in particular. However, reducing the number of PLOs so that teachers can be more creative and flexible in the curriculum they deliver is the direction that the BC government is moving with their promotion of 21st century learning,
The principal is correct as well that the average Canadian has a very narrow view of hip hop, mostly that of the cliched bikini girl in a music video or a black man swearing and wearing lots of jewelry. However, it would behoove the average Canadian, and for that matter the average teacher, to know more about hip hop, to know more about what kids are listening to, reading, and watching, because when I asked one of my traditional Grade 10 classes how many people listened to hip hop, 80% of the students raised their hands, and not one of them fit the stereotype of hip hop. Obeast said that hip hop is for everyone, and in this case that is true.

In a paper about the use of popular culture in secondary classrooms, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2006) summarized a list of recommendations created by students for teachers to consider when introducing hip hop into the classroom. These recommendations were created by four high school students as part of a research seminar they took part in during the summer heading into their junior and senior years. These students worked alongside a practicing teacher and a researcher, doing a pertinent literature review and presenting the results of their research and survey to university faculty and community activists. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2006) were careful to note:

the student-participants in the summer research seminars are not selected based on superior grades or recommendations. To the contrary, the students who participate often have marginal academic records or are labeled as “at risk” by their respective institutions. Of the student participants in the hip hop group, for instance, none held higher than a 2.3 grade point average and none were enrolled in the Honors or Advanced Placement track at their high school. (p. 3)

The recommendations made by these students made for teachers, administrators, and researchers to follow are:

1. Teachers should listen to the students' opinions on how they want to learn and what they feel should be taught.

2. As much as possible, curriculum should reflect the experiences of the students.

3. Teachers should understand that school structure and curriculum choices help to promote inequality in achievement. It’s not just the fault of “bad” kids who don’t want to learn.

4. Teachers should talk with students about social inequality in school to help them become conscious of their oppression.

5. Teachers should make an effort to understand hip hop culture because it reflects the experiences of their students and has such a tremendous impact on their students’ lives.
6. There should be a forum at Pacific High School for us to share our research with teachers and to discuss more student-focused alternatives for the school curriculum.

7. Some ways that teachers might include hip hop in their curriculum include:

   a. Examining the messages that artists are trying to send through their songs to promote discussions among students.

   b. Looking at the experiences of the artists and having the students relate to their own experiences.

   c. English teachers can examine the use of language in hip hop and how it relates students’ use of language.

   d. Hip Hop music can be taught in comparison to other forms of African American music like Jazz.

   e. Special courses should be offered that reflect student interests. Students in these courses should be allowed to conduct and publish their own research on topics like hip hop and explore such issues as: why artists use certain language, why themes such as poverty and struggle appear often in the lyrics.

   f. Teachers can compare the themes in current rap songs with similar themes in older literary works to help students make the connection between their world and the world of literature. (p. 4)

These insightful recommendations reflect many of tenets of 21st century and personalized learning, while encouraging collaborative dialogue between students and teachers. These recommendations, created by students who want more of say in their own learning, would be a great starting place for any teacher who is looking at incorporating out-of-school literacies into their classroom. Contemporary English, in many ways, fulfilled the recommendations set out by these four students; however, one could substitute any out-of-school literacy for hip hop and these recommendations would still hold true. The common theme of these recommendations is that students are asking adults to get to know and understand them and that is the true starting place for the successful incorporation of out-of-school literacies into the classroom.

Figure 62 Audio - Using other topics in Contemporary English

Yolo Joe speaks about his idea that Contemporary English should expand beyond hip hop.
The exciting part aspect of Contemporary English is that it doesn’t need to be focused around hip hop. This course could run just as well around any out-of-school literacy that students are engaged in.

It is my intention to encourage other teachers in the school to take up Contemporary English: Screenwriting or, as Yolo Joe suggested, Contemporary English: Travel, or Contemporary English: Food. It is in this way that we can begin to reshape the experience students have at school, starting inside the classroom. And, Trinity will have the last word, because she expresses the core idea of the incorporation of out-of-school literacies into the classroom better than I can.

**Figure 63 Audio - Trinity speaking about power of common interest**

Trinity shares her thoughts on why Contemporary English needs to exist.
In this song, Somali-Canadian rapper K’naan speaks about holding on even when things are stacked against the youth and ends with a call to remain strong.

**Figure 64 “In the beginning” by K’naan**

Tap on the lyrics to see them full sized while listening to the song. Swipe left to see the next page.


Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Questions

Opening

What were the Highs and Lows of the class? Your favourite moments and times you were frustrated or didn’t enjoy?
A friend approaches you and asks if he/she should take the course - what is your response? They ask what it’s like, what you learned? What is your response?
Tell me about the physical space.
Do you think that everyone shared a similar feeling about the class?

Out-of-School Literacies

What do you like to do in your spare time?
What media do you watch/participate in? What do you listen to? Favourite bands/shows/music/books, etc.
How often do you find the content of school relevant to you? Do you enjoy school? What are your thoughts about school in general? Do you think this school different than other schools? Why or why not?
Do you listen to hip hop? How long? Do you like it? Has the class influenced your view on hip hop? How has that changed as a result of the class?
It can be difficult to bring something that someone is passionate about into the classroom without making it too academic or boring. Do you feel that hip hop was honoured in the
classroom? That is to say, that we treated hip hop with respect and kept true to its roots? In what ways do you think that was or was not accomplished?

Sense of Community

Did you feel a sense of community? Can you remember a time when that community was felt? How did it affect you? In what ways do you feel community was developed? Is this something that you feel in your other classes? Was this class the only place that you felt that sense of community in academics? What about elsewhere in the school? Do you feel that the number of people we had coming into the classroom was a benefit to the class? People like former students like Nostic, Max, Felicia and Sasha, other teachers for Song of the Day, Nostic’s friend, AutoKrat and Spiro, Najjah Calibur, Jeremy Loveday and Moe Clark, Brendan McLeod and Zaccheus Jackson? Who have I missed? What role does the teacher have in creating a sense of community? Former students, ones who are no longer at the school, seemed to show up from time to time - why do you think that was?

Engagement

Did you feel engaged in the class? Which is to say that you wanted to come to class, participate in the sharing and learning, and and had a desire to complete the assignments? Why or why were you engaged? Can you describe your engagement levels in other classes? Are there classes where you feel more or less engaged? Is this a matter of content or instruction?
Can you describe your attendance patterns in general? Was it different for this class? Why do you believe that is the case?

Motivation

Did the experience in this class influence your academic motivation? Which is to say, did you find yourself attending and participating in your other classes any more or less as a result of being part of Contemporary English? Did you feel any more or less motivation to “work hard” or spend time on the assignments in this class? Did marks matter to you in this course? Why or why not?

21C Learning

There is a lot of talk in the teaching profession about 21st Century Learning, about personalized learning. Have you heard about this? What have you heard? What does personalized learning mean to you? Do you feel this was personalized for your learning? What affect did that have on your learning? Do you feel we used technology effectively in the class? How could we have improved our use of technology? What ways would you like to have seen it used? What is your experience in online courses? Do you see this course as being a successful online course? Can you envision ways in which using online functions could enhance the course? What about the use of our Facebook page? What role did you see the Facebook page fulfilling? Was it effective for you?
Assessment

Did you learn anything in this course? What did you learn?
I was concerned that there wasn’t enough “writing” and “traditional” assessment? What are your thoughts? Would you have liked to have seen more?
What did you think about the assessments?

Music in schools
Identity Piece
Audiobiography
Civil Rights Presentation
Improve
Showcase
Choice in how show what you know/ Do you miss tests? What about essays?
How did you feel about the idea of choosing your own grade? Did you like the assessment practice in this class? Why or why not?

Overall

What recommendations would you have for me as I begin to plan for teaching this course next year?
What recommendations would you have for students next year?
What other topics do you think could be explored in this way in an English classroom?
What other topics would interest you?
What else have I not covered that you would like to share?