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Teaching with Rhythm and Rap

Rhythm, rhyme, and rap are powerful hooks that spark students' interests and engage them in learning. There are many creative ways to use these art forms to support instruction and deepen learning in all the content areas.

In their compelling book, *Hip-Hop Poetry and the Classics*, Alan Sitomer and Michael Cirelli (2004) argue convincingly that rap lyrics possess the same literary components as classical poems and can be used effectively to teach poetry. Sitomer and Cirelli explain that rap lyrics and traditional poems share the following key literary elements: alliteration, allusion, figurative language, imagery, irony, metaphor, simile, onomatopoeia, rhyme schemes, mood, theme, meaning, and so forth. For example, Sitomer and Cirelli demonstrate how the classic poem “Harlem: A Dream Deferred” by Langston Hughes (1958) and the rap “Juicy” by Notorious B.I.G. (1994) both use powerful imagery and share universal themes. In these two pieces, reaching for your dreams is a shared universal theme. In addition to encouraging students to strive for high goals, lofty ambitions, and personal dreams, both of these literary works explore the devastating outcomes that can result when individuals ignore their own dreams for too long—sadness, stress, inner decay, anger, and self-destruction, to name a few. (Note: “Juicy” includes explicit lyrics and strong content. Please review the lyrics closely to determine whether they are appropriate to use with students, and consider blacking out offensive content. It is not recommended for students younger than high school.)


In keeping with suggestions for instruction in Sitomer and Cirelli's captivating book, teachers can use their own students' fascination with pop culture as a way to draw in *all* types of students and help them appreciate classic poetry as well as rap. By demonstrating literary elements that the two genres share, teachers entice and empower students to recognize the relevance and power of rap as well as classics of the literary canon.

In my own teaching, I have discovered that rap is a great way to meet the goals of state and national standards. One activity that has proven very successful is guiding students to write their own raps based on themes or favorite excerpts or vignettes from a text. This activity inspired my students' enthusiasm and enhanced their ability to read complex texts closely, develop analytical comprehension skills, review content in great detail, and relate a text in a meaningful way to their own lives.


By integrating rap into the regular curriculum, teachers can use students' out-of-school interests as assets to learning academic subjects *in school*. Rap can be used to teach new material as well as to reinforce what students have previously learned. Perhaps most importantly, I have found that when students invent a new rap themselves, they experience the excitement and joy of creation and an authentic sense of accomplishment and pride. What's more, their self-confidence soars!

Create a Rap

One way for teachers to use rap and other art forms is by following step-by-step protocols, such as The Rap Protocol. I have used The Rap Protocol successfully in my own classes and have worked with many teachers who find the steps fun to do and easy to follow. The Rap Protocol can be easily adapted for any content area or grade level.



The gradual release of responsibility model has teachers slowly and gradually relinquish responsibility from themselves to their students.



The Rap Protocol can be used for a whole class, pairs of students, or small groups—especially when teachers use a gradual release of responsibility approach. As students work in pairs or small groups, they learn the step-by-step sequence of The Rap Protocol and become increasingly independent as rap artists. In the process of creating raps, students discuss and master challenging content-area facts and concepts. The concepts and vocabulary of their raps depend on the topic or content area they are studying. Topics of student raps can range from simple routines, such as learning clean-up time routines, to complex science material, such as learning the process of photosynthesis or the scientific method. In my own classes, I have found that all types of raps work well—published raps, teacher-made raps, and student-created raps.

Using The Rap Protocol

After students read an assigned (or self-selected) chapter or book, the teacher can introduce rap as a genre for reviewing and deepening their understanding. The teacher can explain how rap’s use of literary elements such as alliteration, allusion, rhythm, and rhyme is similar to the use of the same literary elements in classic poems by Tennyson, Keats, Frost, Whitman, or Shakespeare. Then, the teacher can select one or two literary elements as a focus for each lesson, depending on the needs of the class.


To begin, the teacher models by reading a rap aloud, such as “The MCAS Rap,” a rap from the appendix of this book, or a rap found on the Internet. Then, the teacher guides students as they follow The Rap Protocol (Figure 1.6), which is designed to help students of all ages create their own original raps about the content they are learning.

Figure 1.6 The Rap Protocol

1. The teacher tells students to use rhythm and rhyme to create a rap about their chapter or book, explaining that not every line must rhyme. (In addition, the teacher can also encourage students to use alliteration and rhymes within a line.)
2. The teacher explains that students' raps should use language appropriate for performing in school.
3. After writing their rap, students practice reading it aloud expressively and rhythmically, adding gestures, clapping, body movement, or costumes.
4. Students then perform their rap for the class. An additional option is to record the performances and then post them on a classroom website or blog. Students can also perform their raps live for families, school assemblies, or nursing homes.
5. Students display their written raps on bulletin boards in the classroom or school display cases. They can also publish their work in school newsletters or online student newspapers. (Note: Accompanying art work can also be encouraged and displayed.)

Using Student- and Teacher-Created Raps

Student-created raps are a great way for students to consolidate what they've learned. They can be used to review for weekly quizzes, midterms, or other tests and assessments. Raps are also a good way to help students review material to help them meet state and national goals and standards.



In the rap that follows, each student in a third-grade inner-city class in Boston, Massachusetts, created a line in the rap to review good test-taking techniques. This helped them prepare for the state-mandated MCAS test (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System). Creating and chanting “The MCAS Rap” not only helped these third-graders improve their test-taking skills, but also increased their self-confidence. Other sample raps included here are “The First Day Rap” and the “Clean-Up Time Rap.” See Appendix B for additional songs, raps, and poems.

The MCAS Rap

Pseudonyms are used in place of students’ real names.

Chorus

We are here today
To rap about a test
Called the MCAS
So you can do your best.

Verse 1

My name is Kenisha and the first thing that you do
Is to read the directions all the way through.
My name is TJ, and the next step that you take
Is to read the title; don’t take a break.
My name is Savari, and the next thing that you do
Is to read the italics; that is what you do.
My name is Erin, and the fourth thing that you do
Is to read the questions, then go back and review.

Chorus

Verse 2

My name is Bill, and after we review,
You start the story; that is what you do.
My name is Chris, and when we find the answer
We make sure to highlight to get the right answer.
My name is Deidre, and I have a suggestion
After you highlight, read the next question.
My name is Maya, and we’ve shown you the way
To conquer the MCAS, so have a nice day!

This rap is about students' excitement on the first day of school. It's a great conversation starter and a nice way to introduce the school year.

First Day Rap

by Dona Herweck Rice

Look out world,
Here I come,
Ready to learn and have some fun!

Shoes on my feet,
Thoughts in my head,
Pencil's been sharpened and my tummy's been fed.

Desks are ready,
Shiny and clean.
For the most curious kids ever seen.

Teacher at the doors,
Saying hello,
Students lined up, ready to go.

It's a brand new day,
It's a brand new year!
Come on, class, it's time to cheer!

Hip hip hoorah!
Hip hip hooray!
A brand new school year starts today!

This rap was written for teaching classroom routines in grades K–2. It helps give students a heads up about what to expect. Chanting this rap is fun and provides an excellent way to help young students make a smooth transition from one activity to the next. (Note: this is meant as a “call and response” rap. Teacher says, “Ringa-ding-ding! Hear the chime?” and kids respond, “Clean-up time! Clean-up time!” Then teacher asks, “Dirty floor?” and kids answer, “Not any more,” and so on.)

Clean-Up Time Rap

by Dona Herweck Rice

Ringa-ding-ding!

Hear the chime?
Clean-up time!
Clean-up time!
Dirty floor?
Not anymore!
Messy desks?
We won't rest!
Books off rack?
Put them back!
Toys askew?
That won't do!
Come on team!
Let's get clean!

Comparing Rap and Traditional Poetry

Rap and traditional poetry are similar in many ways because they both include many of the same literary features: alliteration, allusion, figurative language, hyperbole, imagery, irony, theme, metaphor, simile, mood creation, onomatopoeia, personification, symbolism, rhythm patterns, rhyme schemes, and so forth. Most raps today are intended to accompany dancing; consequently, rap's distinctive rhythms and beats are typically strong and powerful. However, this is not necessarily the case with classic poetry; the rhythms of classic poems follow patterns that may be subtle compared to the signature rhythms of rap. Rap is written in iambic pentameter, which gives rap music the sensation of being behind the beat. Moreover, the content and ideas of rap and classic poetry typically differ—but not always.

Using Music to Teach Social Studies

Music and singing provide an effective medium for students to experience social studies concepts on a deeper and more visceral level (Booth 2009). Not only is it fun and energizing, but music, rhythm, and song provide natural, engaging ways to deepen learning—ways that date far back in history (Seeger 2004; Sitomer and Cirelli 2004). Recent research suggests that using multisensory methods such as music, rhythm, and song improves learning outcomes (Murray 2015; Editorial 2014; Paquette and Rieg 2008; Perret and Fox 2006).

Teachers can use music to help students understand the social and historical contexts of historical periods and experience the emotions of bygone eras more deeply. A single well-chosen song or book that incorporates music can be both informative and inspiring. For example, *When Marian Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson, Voice of a Century* by Pam Muñoz Ryan (2002) tells the moving life story of the great African American opera singer Marian Anderson. This beautifully illustrated biography provides a foundation for lessons about many topics in the curriculum: American history, women’s history, African American history, and music history. It dramatically narrates the gripping journey of Marian Anderson’s life through story, song, and illustration. Song lyrics are interspersed throughout the text, which has the powerful effect of deepening the emotional impact of the dramatic events in Marian Anderson’s life. The book includes the words, chords, and notes to each song, making it easy for teachers and students to sing along and immerse themselves in the narrative. Some of the songs included are:

- “Let My People Go”
- “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child”
- “My Country ’Tis of Thee”
- “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen”
- “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands”

When Marian Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson, Voice of a Century is rich not only in song but in extraordinary word choices that will enrich students' vocabularies while they learn about segregation and Jim Crow laws. This book is excellent for teaching vocabulary in meaningful contexts by discussing and explaining the context clues. Here are examples of important words in their context to teach from this outstanding book:

- When her father died, *tragedy* filled Marian's heart.
- Marian knew about *prejudice* because she had seen the trolley drive past her family as they stood on the corner waiting to ride.
- No matter what *humiliations* she *endured*, Marian sang from her heart with *dignity*.
- Marian was *offered* a *momentous invitation* to sing at the Lincoln Memorial.

Teachers can use other outstanding books as well to integrate songs about American history into the social studies curriculum. For example, *Rise Up Singing: The Group Singing Songbook* edited by Peter Blood and Annie Patterson (2004) is a superb choice. Teachers can use the song "We Shall Overcome" in this book to teach a unit on the 1960s civil rights movement. Prior to singing, engage students in a discussion about how singing this particular song in unison during peaceful demonstrations became a way to rally, unify, and energize a whole generation of Americans, who marched together peacefully in order to demand integrated schools, integrated restaurants, and voter registration access for *all* Americans, regardless of their race. Some specific questions for whole-class discussions are:

- What does it mean to "overcome" something?
- What were the black and white demonstrators of the 1960s civil rights movement trying to "overcome"?
- How do you think singing "We Shall Overcome" in unison helped the demonstrations for equality succeed?

- What was the role of music and song in this political movement?
- What did the civil rights movement of the 1960s achieve?
- What civil rights work remains to be done now and in the future?
- What songs are being sung and what slogans are being used today to rally Americans to improve civil rights for all Americans in the 21st century?

Following these discussions, the teacher can provide the words and melody of “We Shall Overcome,” shown in Figure 4.1. Have students sing in unison, holding hands and swaying left to right to the rhythm, as protesters of the 1960s did and as protesters have also done today. Teachers can encourage students to add relevant new verses about current events and other challenges to civil rights for all people in the 21st century.

.....
: **Figure 4.1 We Shall Overcome Lyrics** :
:-----: :
: We shall overcome, we shall overcome, :
: We shall overcome some day. :
: O deep in my heart, I do believe :
: We shall overcome some day! :
:.....:

Creating and singing new verses shows students that the civil rights movement is not over but continues today. It helps students connect historical movements to the 21st century. It also teaches them to value the power of their right to demonstrate peacefully to make positive changes in order to make our country fair and safe for all people.

The teacher can guide students to write their own lyrics to the same rhythm and melody, individually or in small groups of 2–5 students. Then, they can practice singing their new verses and perform for the class or a school assembly.

After singing, encourage students to create a dance of their own using the rhythm of “We Shall Overcome.” To encourage freedom of movement, the teacher can have students bring in scarves, hold them high up over their heads, and move their arms and scarves from side to side, up and down, and twirl with the scarf. Students can also create costumes with the scarves: head pieces, hats, shawls, or outfits connoting different people.

An additional piece to add to a unit on civil rights is the rap “My President” about Rosa Parks and President Barack Obama “running [for office] so we all can fly,” which was composed by rap artist Jay-Z (2010). Teachers can use the rap lines from this song for historical and rhetorical analyses. A good way to help students meet state and national goals in social studies and literacy is by guiding them to analyze the complex, metaphorical language and rhetorical devices in this rap. Analyzing Jay-Z’s nuanced words helps students understand this rapper’s adept use of language and strong metaphors. In “My President,” Jay-Z portrays the sweep of history from the 1960s civil rights movement to the present and into the future. The phrase “so we all can fly” suggests an unbounded future of a nation in which *all* Americans are free and feel wonderful—as if they are flying.

“Rosa Parks sat so Martin Luther King could walk. Martin Luther King walked so Obama could run. Obama’s running so we all can fly.”
—“My President” by Jay-Z (2010)

In explaining the complex meaning of Jay-Z’s words, teachers can help students meet college and career readiness standards in social studies and literacy by guiding them to analyze, write, and give multimedia presentations about civil rights in America, past, present, and future. The following is a lesson example for middle school.



1. Tell students to read the lines by Jay-Z silently and aloud.
2. Ask: “How does Jay-Z use verbs in this part of the rap? How are the verbs *walk*, *run*, and *fly* used metaphorically to suggest different specific meanings based on what you know about history? Explain your answers by using facts and details you know.”
3. Have students do individual text, video, and Internet research about Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Barack Obama.
4. Guide students to use credible sources with multiple points of view.
5. After students read primary and secondary sources about the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the election of President Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, have them revisit their initial discussion about the specific meanings in Jay-Z’s words: *walk*, *run*, and *fly*.
6. Ask: “What have you learned by reading the primary and secondary sources you used? How has your understanding and knowledge deepened? Explain.”



7. Prompt students to compare and contrast the various contributions of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Barack Obama by selecting from a list of options, such as:
 - drawing pictures
 - creating paintings
 - making sculptures
 - writing songs
8. Guide students to write well-developed expository essays comparing and contrasting the contributions of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Barack Obama.
9. Have students plan oral presentations based on their comparative essays and present what they learned to the class. Encourage the use of multimedia as adjuncts to their oral presentations.
10. Have students in the audience give constructive feedback to each speaker by using the guidelines provided in Figure 4.2. (See Appendix C for a full-size version.)
11. To review what they have learned, have students form small groups of 3–6 to create their own original rap or Reader’s Theater script about Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Barack Obama, or any other individual or group relevant to the struggle for civil rights. These can be historical figures or people in the news who are working to expand civil rights and justice for all people today.

Figure 4.2 Oral Presentation Feedback Guidelines

Figure 4.2 Oral Presentation Feedback Guidelines

Presenter's Name _____
 Responder's Name _____
 Title or Topic of Presentation _____

Directions: Rate the presenter on a scale of 1-5, your rating to the right of the question.
 5 = Excellent 4 = Very Good 3 = Good 2 = Fair 1 = Poor

Criteria					
There was a clear opening statement or introductory section that introduced the speaker and main ideas and gave a brief overview of the whole presentation.					
The thesis or main overarching idea of the presentation was stated clearly. What was it?					
The presentation was organized clearly and in a logical sequence from start to finish.					

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The main points or ideas were supported by sufficient facts, details, and evidence.					
The presenter used clear transitional words and phrases to move smoothly from one main point to the next. What are some examples of transitional words that this presenter used?					
There was a clear concluding section.					
The conclusion used some of the same words from the opening statement, thesis or main idea. Or, the presenter decided to end with a new, thought-provoking question for the audience.					
The speaker maintained good eye contact with the audience.					
The speaker acted poised and used appropriate gestures occasionally for emphasis.					
The presenter spoke in a clear, audible voice that could be heard throughout the room.					
The speaker used appropriate language and clear pronunciation.					
If the speaker used visual aids, they were well-prepared, informative, effective, and not distracting.					

Comments:
 I liked _____
 To make future presentations even better, I suggest _____

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There are many ways to link historical research with songs. Some additional activities that involve singing and research are as follows:



- Students studying colonial times and the founding of the United States can sing “America the Beautiful” and “This Land Is Your Land.” They can then do grade-appropriate text and Internet research about topics relevant to themes in these songs.
- Students studying the Civil War or the civil rights movement can sing and then do text and Internet research projects that tie in with the following songs: “Harriet Tubman,” “Black and White,” “Birmingham Sunday,” and “We Shall Overcome.”



- After conducting research and writing their research papers, students can share what they learned by presenting their projects orally to a partner, the whole class, or the whole school in a school-wide assembly to which families and friends are invited. In addition to sharing their research projects, the class as a whole can perform a few of the songs for the assembly.

Using Multisensory Approaches

Recent research shows that learning is greatly enhanced when all of the senses are involved (Murray 2015). One way to involve the senses is to use drama to enhance instruction. Acting out stories and discussing them, followed by research and writing activities, helps students deepen their comprehension and remember what they've read (Rinne et al. 2011). The multisensory nature of these activities includes speaking, listening, moving, gesturing, and reflecting, all of which help form strong representations of information in the brain. This promotes deep comprehension and enhances memory and overall learning (Murray 2015; Rinne et al. 2011). To capitalize on the benefits of multisensory learning, teachers can use a variety of extension activities, including Reader's Theater, Freeze Frames, research writing, and oral presentations. The following are some examples:



Multisensory Lesson Ideas

- Have students write, and then perform, a Reader's Theater script based on the text. (See Chapter 2 for Reader's Theater instructions.)
- Give students a choice of creating Reader's Theater scripts that reflect what actually happened or creating Reader's Theater scripts that change a key turning point in the actual story so that the result differs from the original text.
- Have students do a Freeze Frame enactment. (See the next section, Using Freeze Frames to Re-enact History, for specifics.)
- Have students conduct a comparison/contrast research project about a topic relevant to the text and present their findings to the class as an oral presentation that employs multimodal texts.

Using Freeze Frames to Re-enact History

Freeze Frames are a highly motivating form of drama in which students act out significant historical events while the audience plays guessing games about the unfolding drama. Evidence from neuroscientists and cognitive scientists reveals that Freeze Frames and other dramatic enactments are not only motivating and fun but have positive learning outcomes (Craig and Watkins 1973; Defeyter, Russo, and McPartlin 2009; Murray 2015; Rinne et al. 2011).

Luke Rinne and his colleagues have shown that translating text material into dramatic actions results in improved recall of information (Rinne et al. 2011). Since acting entails motor encoding, verbal encoding, and physical movement, the combined use of these multisensory inputs provides deeper processing, resulting in stronger memory in the brain. Rinne explains that the “unusualness” of the actions during drama also makes the information easier to remember (Rinne et al. 2011).

Freeze Frames are an effective technique to improve students’ retention and deepen their understanding of complex historical events (Rasinski and Samuels 2011; Rinne et al. 2011; Wilhelm 2002). This dramatic approach depends on movement to help students deepen their understanding of complex social studies texts. Freeze Frames can be created by students in small groups and then shared with the whole class. Some good topics for using Freeze Frames are:

- the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock
- the first Thanksgiving
- the Boston Tea Party
- the signing of the Declaration of Independence
- immigrants arriving at Ellis Island
- the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln
- passage of the 19th Amendment
- the building of the Great Wall of China
- the collapse of the Berlin Wall
- the burial of King Tut

The following are steps to implement Freeze Frames:

Freeze Frames

1. Form small groups of 3–6 students each.
2. Each group chooses a significant historical event from the text.
3. Each group plans how it will represent this event as a Freeze Frame action.
4. Each group chooses a role for each student in representing the historical event.
5. Each group presents its Freeze Frame to the class.
6. The teacher says, “One, two, freeze,” at which time students hold their places and expressions and do not move.
7. The audience attempts to guess what historical episode or scene is being portrayed.
8. If necessary, members of the audience may say, “We need hints.” Then, the teacher taps one student in the performing group. That student utters a line or makes a gesture that is characteristic of the historical figure.
9. The audience guesses who the historical figure is and what event the group on stage is representing.

