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## Report on Information Literacy and the Mic: Teaching Higher Education Students Critical Research Skills Using Hip Hop Lyricism

Dara Walker

*Eastern Michigan University, [dara.walker@emich.edu](mailto:dara.walker@emich.edu)*

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REPORT ON INFORMATION LITERACY  
AND THE MIC: TEACHING HIGHER  
EDUCATION STUDENTS  
CRITICAL RESEARCH  
SKILLS USING HIP  
HOP LYRICISM

*Dara Walker*

*Dr. Melvin Peters, Mentor*

ABSTRACT

Many professors expect undergraduate students to have basic research skills. However, they soon learn that their students are unable to find, sort, and analyze information for research papers and projects. To help students attain these skills, university librarians develop course-related information literacy (IL) sessions for both undergraduate and graduate classes. In this study, I explored the differences and similarities in the objectives, teaching aides, and final assignments of information literacy instruction which uses the thematic content in conscious hip hop lyricism to reinforce skills learned as compared to other methods. Understanding the differences and similarities may encourage librarians to make instruction through hip hop a part of their repertoire. The similarities express hip hop's ability to join the range of other methods while the differences point to the many contributions it can make to the current array of techniques.

INTRODUCTION

As a senior at Eastern Michigan University (EMU), I find that information literacy skills are essential to developing a well researched paper. It is not enough for students to simply find information; they must be able to analyze it in a way that will help them justify a hypothesis or a reason for refuting the claims of other writers. While EMU librarians are helpful in assisting students with research projects, collaboration with

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EMU professors to develop information literacy sessions may encourage students to better understand how to find, sort, and analyze data.

According to the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), there are five standards that university librarians use to determine if students are information literate. Students should be able to:

- Determine the extent of information needed
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
- Evaluate information and its sources critically and incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base and value system
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally.

([www.acrl.org](http://www.acrl.org))

In this study, I explored the differences and similarities in the objectives, teaching aides, and final assignments of information literacy instruction which use rap music to reinforce skills learned as compared to other methods.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

Undergraduate students have become accustomed to automation, reversing the ability to do basic hand work such as understanding the Library of Congress catalogue system and the use of microfiche and microfilm. Some students also find it difficult to work with indexes and databases. However, librarians use this growth in technology to help students develop better use of the internet (Pask and Snow 306). The integration of IL in university curriculum became a fundamental concept at the University of Washington in 1994, where librarians, faculty, and students developed a program that would assist each group in the instruction of library research skills in the undergraduate classroom (315). Here, collaborative efforts helped to establish a different method for (IL) instruction.

In 2005, California State University (CSU) developed an assessment program that explored the need for IL instruction. Both the Communication Studies department and a CSU librarian planned an instructional design and assessment test to determine if students were able to meet the ACRL standards. Their results explained:

that approximately 90% of the students believe that the library's local catalog is the best place to search for journal articles, while

closer to 92% of the respondents do not know how to physically locate the library's print journal collection. [...] The pre-test also indicates that approximately 85% of the respondents are unable to define 'paraphrasing'." (Young and Andres, par 7)

With statistics such as these, librarians and faculty members should explore possible collaboration to help students develop better IL skills.

Studies of IL instruction tend to focus on traditional methods such as the one-hour/one-shot class (Hollister and Coe 50). According to these authors, this strategy is viewed as "counter-productive" and "pedagogically ineffective" (54). Along with one-hour/one-shot sessions, librarians establish "one-on-one research appointments, active learning in the classroom, for-credit courses, free or 'drop-in' workshops and demonstrations, required workbooks or tutorials, and mandatory library orientations or tours" (56). The researchers found that 46% of their respondents believe that the "hands-on" approach is more effective, using media aids to assist in instruction. Coe and Hollister also cite Orr and Wallin's belief that librarians need to adapt their instruction to "meet the needs of a diverse and dispersed client group" (61). Collaborative IL instruction is one solution to this problem.

There are other studies which explore the use of course-related and collaborative methods. At Concordia College, a Biology professor and librarian developed a collaborative program using hands-on biology experiments to teach undergraduate students IL (Soucek and Meier, par 8). At the University of California Berkley, students developed skills as they studied inequality in Oakland Public Schools (Jacobson and Mackey 14) while Chemistry students learned through a poster assignment (12). In an English course at Kansas State University, students were instructed through a basic writing assignment (Jacobson and Mackey 64) while students at Lock Haven University in the Biology department learned through a poster assignment (150). Chicano and Latino Studies students at California State University-Long Beach developed skills by completing an annotated bibliography assignment (Jacobson and Mackey 102) while Coastal Carolina University First Year Composition students participated in a word study project that taught them about the differences in English-foreign language translation dictionaries, databases, and indexes (77). These collaborations placed IL instruction in a meaningful context.

Students in an American Government course at the University of West Georgia received instruction through a different approach. Students researched various scholarly views on the position that "Democ-

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racy fosters peace” and developed a research proposal. The proposal provided students with feedback of problems and suggestions to provide the appropriate direction for the evolving research process. Students were asked to provide an annotated bibliography explaining how the source was helpful, how it supported and shaped their argument, and how it affected the way they thought about their topic. Students were required to include books, magazines, and websites to introduce them to various types of sources (Jacobson and Mackey 128-132). In the First Year Seminar at Lafayette College, a librarian and adjunct faculty member developed a course that required students to attend two ninety-minute library sessions. Afterwards, students were expected to write a research paper with an annotated bibliography about a historical multicultural figure, defining the person’s message using journal articles, scholarly websites, and books; describe an actual event where the figure was present “using primary sources such as newspaper and other reporting media sources;” and “[describe] what current scholars suggest are the best practices to address the person’s original concerns using peer-reviewed journal articles” (Jacobson and Mackey 197). Both methods of instruction helped students identify political issues while learning how to access and evaluate information.

The unique methods outlined above signify a transformation of traditional methods to engage students in the information literacy process. Hip hop scholar Kevin Powell calls for a new way of teaching: “You can’t apply ‘60s and ‘70s methods to teaching in the new millennium. You can’t apply a jazz aesthetic to hip-hop heads” (Evelyn 29). Why hip hop lyricism? The use of this culturally Afrocentric music expresses the multidisciplinary applications which are possible; it is socially conscious and speaks to the issues of various ethnic communities and issues that are dealt with universally. Hip hop is the product of struggle, and every community’s ability to resist against injustices (Ginwright 30). As a form of popular culture, it allows students and instructors to reverse roles where students feel culturally connected to classroom instruction (Callahan and Low 54). In Callahan and Low’s study of a high school spoken word project that used rap, one student asserts, “Someone was finally paying attention to me – it’s not – people don’t talk about it as much – like you don’t hear a lot of people try to understand you – instead you hear people try to downplay it and like and ignore you” (55). The use of sociocultural and political hip hop music may prove to be a valuable method in teaching IL.

Jeff Rice proposes such a use in “The 1963 Hip-Hop Machine:

Hip-Hop Pedagogy as Composition.” In this essay, Rice “proposes an alternative invention strategy for researched-based argumentative writing” (453). He uses hip hop lyricism to teach the traditional literary canon to his undergraduate students while using its sampling quality to “cut and paste” historical moments in 1963. Sampling is also discussed in Forell’s article as he explains that instructors can use its presence in hip hop as a way to teach rules for citation (32), a practice that is innovative and culturally relevant.

Hip Hop is also useful because students need to feel that their experiences are legitimate and relevant to history in a meaning context (Ladson-Billings 387). If higher education students are expected to learn the full history of America, they must also understand African-American history. According to Pero Dagbovie, “Exposure to African American history can help counter U.S. popular culture’s routine misrepresentations of Blackness, thereby diminishing Whites’ stereotypes and misunderstandings of African Americans” (637). For African American students, Dagbovie believes it will help the hip hop generation question their contributions in relation to youth of the Black Power and Civil Rights movements. For White instructors, rap allows the African-American experience to speak for itself (Dagbovie 640). Instruction of African-American history will help students see themselves as responsible for creating social change.

Hip Hop is already an essential teaching tool in the university classroom. Ralph Saunders used rap music to teach students at California State University-Dominguez Hills to show students “the social and cultural importance of rap and would make explicit the tie between specific rap videos and sense of place in their locales” (185). Saunders focused on the politics of segregation and the black migratory patterns. Currently, several universities offer hip hop related courses. At Eastern Michigan University, Hip Hop Lyricism in African American Culture addresses African Diasporic history and American life through the sociopolitical lens of rap. The Hip Hop University lists courses such as: Act Like You Know: Hip Hop Theatre, Desi Rap: South Asians in the United States, Hip Hop and Black Sexual Politics, and Hip Hop, Globalization, and the Politics of Identity ([www.hiphoparchive.org](http://www.hiphoparchive.org)). As hip hop in the academy grows, so will the resources needed for IL instructors interested in using rap.

The political and multidisciplinary nature of hip hop music may contribute to research topics that range from the origins of human life to separate and unequal education. In “Nature of the Threat,” Ras Kass

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provides a space for discussion about the effects of white privilege and the sometimes ignored truth of Africa as an essential part of human civilization (5). This seven minute song could provide critical information for students of Psychology, Sociology, Political Science, Religion, Biology, History, and Cultural Anthropology. Dead Prez's "They Schools" describes the degradation and inequality that black students face in the public school system (3). Here, History, Education, and Political Science students will find a wealth of information distinct to their fields of study. Even Business, Accounting, and Economics students will find hip hop lyricism useful for research. For example, "The Music of Business" by Ras Kass and Xzibit addresses the business of the music industry, describing percentages, royalties, etc. (4). Students are not only presented with history lessons through hip hop, but critical and political analysis of recent events such as Hurricane Katrina as well (Mos Def 8; Public Enemy 7). The inclusion of hip hop music creates a public and academic record of political and social aspects of American life. Although rap emerged in the United States, it is an international phenomenon, alluding to its flexibility and possible academic uses that are available for undergraduate students.

#### THE CASE OF SOUTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

After two months of research, I finally found a university librarian who is developing a program for IL instruction that uses rap. At South Carolina State University (SCSU), Sherman Pyatt, along with other faculty members, has created a pilot program that uses themes and issues in hip hop to teach and reinforce IL instruction. I called Pyatt to learn about the purpose of this program. The objective is to help faculty and students become oriented to information literacy through an unconventional means by introducing a topic in which students would have an interest. He has already established a hip hop bibliography on the SCSU's library website and is currently developing a webliography. Ideally, students would use IL skills to be solution-oriented, and see that they have a voice in their communities. He also wants students to see themselves as creating a new body of literature on hip hop for the next generation.

#### METHODOLOGY

After my conversation with Pyatt, I developed two sets of qualitative interview questions—one for Eastern Michigan University and University of Michigan (UM) librarians and another for Pyatt. Since the

SCSU's program is still in the planning stages, Pyatt's interview questions were a bit different. While interviews with the local librarians were in-person, I conducted a telephone interview with Pyatt. Questions were not geared towards any hypothesis, following Auerbach and Silverstein's assertion that, "Qualitative research begins with a set of texts produced by members of a culture as they talk about, and reflect on, a social phenomenon" (142). Since I conducted hypothesis-generating research, I framed my interview questions in a qualitative format. This allowed me to hear my interviewees' experiences and develop a grounded theory, the practice of "generating hypotheses using theoretical coding."

This study was guided by personal experiences and the stories of other students and faculty members. Within the context of this study, I conducted qualitative research according to Marshall and Rossman's definition, "In qualitative inquiry, initial curiosities for research often come from real-world observations, emerging from the interplay of the researcher's direct experience, tacit theories, political commitments, interests in practice, and growing scholarly interests" (25). To get the full stories of each librarian, I conducted interviews in an informal manner, with follow-up questions that were very conversational. The relaxed nature of the interviews allowed interviewees to be open and honest while providing me with information in familiar terminology.

I asked the EMU and UM librarians the following questions:

1. What is the objective for information literacy instruction?
2. Please describe your collaborative efforts with EMU or UM faculty for instruction of undergraduate students. Did you use teaching aides? If so, please describe them. This includes media and human resources.
3. Please describe final assignments that students have been expected to complete to assess their IL skills.
4. Who is most often your core audience?
5. What does a typical instruction session look like? This includes duration of sessions, number of students, professor input, and student response.

I ask Pyatt the following questions:

1. What is the objective and importance of your particular program?
2. Please describe your teaching aides. This includes media and human resources.



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3. Who is your core audience?
4. To assess each student's information skills, what is the final assignment that students are expected to complete?
5. Are there any risks involved with using rap music? If so, please describe these risks and your plans to minimize them.
6. What would an ideal information literacy session that uses rap music look like?

The methodology is similar to the outline presented by Auerbach and Silverstein. After I transcribed the interviews, I moved information that was relevant to my research to a separate word document. I organized this information into repeating ideas. Then I grouped the repeating ideas into themes. Finally, I categorized themes according to their relevance of the topics: objective, teaching aides, and final assignments.

#### DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

I interviewed eight librarians. Two were African American and six were White. There were four men and four women. One librarian is from the University of Michigan, six are from Eastern Michigan University, and one is from South Carolina State University. I recruited the participants through convenience and snowball sampling.

#### RESULTS

##### ANALYSIS RATIONALE

- The numerical result of interviewees' responses comes after a bullet point.
  - A. Each letter is a quote from an interviewee.

##### OBJECTIVES OF IL INSTRUCTION:

Faculty members typically ask me to show students how to use the library's databases and indexes.

- 6 of 7 librarians address the use of databases and indexes in their instruction sessions.
  - A. For each class, I usually explore two to three databases and indexes, depending on time and their assignment requirements.
  - B. In my sessions, I show students how to use black

historical newspaper databases.

C. Professors usually want sessions to focus on using the internet and databases.

D. I use the online Merlin catalogue for instruction.

I try to show students how to find and use primary sources.

- 2 of 7 show students how to use the interlibrary loan (ILL) system.

A. I only go through the ILL process for graduate students.

B. Since I work with history classes, we tend to use primary texts. In some instance, I have to show them how to use ILL to gain access to these sources.

Part of the objective in IL instruction is to show students how to use subject guide searching.

- 3 of 7 say that they show students how to use various terms for keyword searching.

A. I go over subject guide searches to show students the varying keywords for their subjects. For example, the keyword “black” may produce search results such as “African American or Afro-American.”

I show students how to find and evaluate information sources.

- 6 of 7 say they teach students how to find and evaluate information sources, providing a criterion for authoritative sources.

A. Part of instruction sessions deal with using and evaluating information effectively in everyday life.

B. Students learn how to make the proper evaluations in order to distinguish one source from another and use the information appropriately.

C. Through one-shot sessions, students will learn how to access information for resources for specific papers.

Students should become lifelong learners.

- 4 of 7 say the objective of IL instruction is to help students meet the standards of the ACRL and become lifelong learners.

A. The objective for information literacy is to inspire intellectual curiosity while conveying critical thinking skills to help students become more savvy information users.

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- B. I tend to focus on the peer-review process.
- C. The big picture is that students become competent lifelong learners in a complex information environment.

Much of our instruction is course-related.

- 7 of 7 say they teach lessons that are relative to the class and the wishes of the faculty member.
  - A. My sessions are typically geared towards an assignment that faculty give.
  - B. I collaborate with faculty before sessions to understand what the learning objectives of the classes are and to gain an understanding of the details of any research assignment(s) the students are expected to produce.
  - C. Most of my sessions are course-related.

Faculty typically wants us to help students with specific papers and projects. So we normally do one-shot/one-hour sessions.

- 5 of 7 only do the one-shot sessions.
  - A. I use the one-hour/one-shot session.
  - B. I emphasize hands-on work during one-shot sessions.
- 7 of 7 allow student walk-ins.
- 1 of 7 sees his role as the research assistant, with multiple sessions for some classes.
- 1 of 7 follows a three-session model.
  - A. In session one, I focus on an introduction to the library, how to locate basic information on a topic of interest, and examine a model for the research process. In session two, I show students how to narrow their topic and how to find magazine, journal, and newspaper articles. Session three focuses on understanding the scholarly literature and enhancing your search with library databases.

#### OBJECTIVES OF SOUTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY (SCSU) PILOT PROGRAM

We want to use an unconventional means for IL instruction where students and faculty become solution-oriented as they see their moral obligation in this society.

- A. We are trying to get students and faculty and staff oriented to

information literacy through an unconventional means by introducing a topic that students would have an interest in, through dialogue and presentations.

B. Teachers should involve students in a process that will engage their moral obligation.

C. We want to cover the entire spectrum of hip hop; not just gangsta and not just conscious, but to help students engage in debates and think critically.

D. Students would use these skills to be solution-oriented, and look at themselves as responsible for having a voice in their community. I want students to see themselves as creating a new body of literature for the next generation.

#### TEACHING AIDES

Youtube is a way to find general information on a topic.

- 2 of 7 use [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) for IL instruction.

A. I show a youtube clip called, "Building a plane while flying." I use this video to explain some of the issues with the research process. I try to explain that the process is as important as the end result.

B. At the beginning of my sessions, I show a partial youtube clip of the Stephen Colbert Report about Wikipedia. The clip is called "Wikiality."

- 2 of 7 never use youtube.

I find the internet to be useful for instruction.

- 7 of 7 use the internet in some way to teach basic skills.

A. An interesting teaching moment was when I did a google search for Mike Tyson. The first site in the results was a sex video.

B. Awhile back, I created an artificial webpage to teach students about evaluating sources.

C. Students are usually engaged when I show the [www.malepregnancy.com](http://www.malepregnancy.com) website. It looks so official; they believe that it is an authoritative source.

D. I use [www.emich.edu/halle](http://www.emich.edu/halle) as a source.

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#### TEACHING AIDES OF SOUTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY (SCSU) PILOT PROGRAM

We will definitely use online resources.

A. We have an extensive bibliography on the library website and are establishing a webliography, since most students are computer literate.

B. We will establish an account through [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) so that the general public will have access to lyrics and videos for candid discussions.

We want the community to be apart of this effort.

A. We will bring the community in for panels.

B. We will also include a regional call papers.

#### FINAL ASSIGNMENTS

Professors have students write research papers on any topic of their choice that is relevant to the course.

- 7 of 7 say students receive IL instruction for final research papers.

A. For Social Work students, a research paper on an issue is their final assignment.

B. Some assignments focus on a research paper of a person in Social Work history.

C. In a Women and Gender Studies course, students were asked to write a seven page research paper based on their service learning project at Safe House.

D. For one of the multicultural classes, students were asked to write a paper about the Black Migration. Students had to include historical facts and the stories of everyday African Americans.

E. Some students have to write research papers on a controversial issue while addressing all perspectives of that issue.

Students are asked to complete an annotated bibliography.

- 3 of 7 find that faculty asked students to submit an annotated bibliography with their research paper.

A. Students were asked to write a library source report and annotated bibliography describing how the information they found was relevant to their topic.

B. Professors usually assign an annotated bibliography of some

sort.

- 1 of 7 doesn't see the end result.
- 1 of 7 say faculty doesn't ask for an annotated bibliography.

Sometimes, faculty members do not emphasize the research process, but stress the end result—the research paper.

- 4 of 7 believe that faculty does not stress the research process enough.

A. Instructors do not always emphasize the quality of the sources.

B. I am not convinced that faculty actually emphasizes the process as much as they stress the final paper.

Sometimes, I switch roles with students. I learn from them as much as they learn from me.

- 6 of 7 agree that they reverse roles with students during IL instruction.

A. I definitely switch roles with students, especially when they are working on research deals with popular culture.

B. Although I am a subject specialist, I learn more about my field from students who may look at a particular question in an untraditional way.

#### FINAL ASSIGNMENT OF SOUTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

A final research paper is required

A. Teachers will assign students a 3-5 page paper on topics and themes in hip hop.

Sometimes, I switch roles with students. I learn from them as much as they learn from me.

B. Hip hop is an essential part of the program. I believe students will sometimes play the role of the instructor.

#### RESULTS

Each interview is categorized under two groupings: EMU and UM librarians are labeled “locals” and Pyatt is labeled “SCSU”.

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## SIMILARITIES

### Objective

1. Both groups share the objective of helping students become lifelong learners with the ability to use and evaluate information in their daily lives.

### Teaching Aides

2. Both groups find the internet to be a useful source for IL instruction, in particular [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

### Final Assignments

3. Both groups find that final assignments will typically be a research paper relative to the class receiving instruction.

## DIFFERENCES

### Objective

1. Locals help students become information literate by the standards of the ACRL. However, the SCSU program wants to help students address social and political issues while learning how to evaluate sources, write well-researched papers and contribute to a new body of literature on hip hop.

### Teaching Aides

2. Locals use [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) and artificial websites to teach source evaluation and the research process. SCSU wants to use the regional community as a teaching aide for panels and call for papers on Hip Hop. While locals use [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) to teach components of the ACRL standards, SCSU wants to use the site for discussion of paper topics.

### Final Assignments

3. There were no differences in the final assignments. Librarians find that faculty usually assigns research papers.

## DISCUSSION

My results suggest that faculty and librarian collaborative efforts that use hip hop lyricism to reinforce skills is similar to other methods as it uses a form of popular culture, helps the librarian and student switch roles, and shares the objective of helping students become lifelong learners. For points of divergence, the use of hip hop music is counter hegemonic, an aspect of Black culture, and a practice that allows the

experience of oppressed people to speak for itself. I encourage librarians and faculty members to establish collaborative efforts. They may find that students are motivated to become lifelong learners who are not only able to acknowledge, but also think critically about their role in changing this society.

#### LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Since I began my research during the summer semester, I had access to a limited number of librarians. I e-mailed nine EMU librarians who are working during the summer semester and six replied. The ethnicities of my interviewees' were limited to African American and White. A much wider sample could have included members of other ethnicities. I only explored methods of librarians in Michigan and one in South Carolina. Librarians at institutions with a focus of African Diasporic culture, such as historically black colleges and universities, are actually more likely to use hip hop than my current sample. Therefore, I would encourage further research of such schools.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research may look at the attitudes of students who receive instruction of various methods for IL instruction. Researchers may also include the experiences of students in K-12 as compared to their university counterparts. Any variation of these will contribute to the growing body of literature on hip hop.

#### CONCLUSION

Our society is growing into a multicultural world everyday. We must see this growth as an opportunity to create greater access to information. We can understand the politics of knowledge by looking at whose information is valued, overlooked, or distorted. Students should not be conditioned to regurgitate facts that discredit the contributions and struggles of people different from themselves, but think critically about their role and status in this society. Hip hop does all of this and much more. In its sociopolitical context, hip hop lyricism is the counter perspective of lessons learned in Eurocentric history classes. Joined with information literacy, students are equipped to learn history in a meaningful and socially relevant way.



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