

## Composing Your Meaning

By

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### Abstract

*Using composition as a pedagogical tool provided students a unique approach in learning a music style, in this instance, hip-hop. The students' creation of an original rap (beat and lyrics) provided an opportunity to study, work with, and create within a music style, while also expressing the individuals' meaning. It was the aim of this composition project to educate students through music as opposed to in, about, or for music. To gain a further and unique understanding of students' perceptions of utilizing composition as pedagogy, the process of creating a music composition was the main medium of research inquiry, music as research. This approach provided a unique pathway toward understanding and also a different lens and angle of the research inquiry itself. Responding to a music-based research question through composing music invites, encourages, and presents new, different, and inspiring opportunities for participants in sharing their responses. The unique vehicle of composing music as a response, provided participants the ability to share and express meaning in a way other traditional research methods may not provide, thereby enabling the possibility of arriving at new or different findings.*

**Keywords:** composition, pedagogy, curriculum, music as research, rap, hip-hop, immersion, constructivism, case study, autoethnography

Teaching a music course provides the dangerous potential of merely teaching music *to*, or *at*, students. As such, the concern and consideration for the process, means, and approach in which this education takes place is of vital importance. Broadly speaking, the actions of the educator; the curriculum; and more specific to this discussion, music instruction, has the potential power to humanize or dehumanize (Bowman, 2002, 2012; Best, 1992; Elliott, 1995; Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Noddings, 1984). This raises several questions regarding specific pedagogical approaches, concepts, and circumstances. For example, what music educational processes, means, and approaches are applicable to the course subject while also being encouraging, educational, and having a concern for each student's *personhood*? To address such questions within my own experiences and classroom, I turned to utilizing a compositional project for the semester in my own music course. I largely based the compositional project framework and implementation on the praxial educational theory Elliott and Silverman (2015) posited. The education, development, and growth of a student's musical understanding is concerned with the contextual meaning and values of the personal, social, cultural, historical, geographical, religious, and countless other factors of an individual in connection to a music or piece in which they created, performed, listened to, and experienced. In the instance of my music course, the students created a composition. It is the aim of this composition project to educate students through music rather than teaching them in, about, or for music.

### **Praxial Approach to a Composition Project**

The music course, titled From Blues to Hip-Hop, consisted of 24 undergraduate college-level students ranging in age from 18 to 22 at the sophomore to senior levels. The vast majority of the students were enrolled as music majors within the music industry, music education, or music degree programs. Three students enrolled in the course were not music majors. The

intention of the composition project was to have students learn music elements such as melodies, basslines, harmony, rhythm, and form, gaining an understanding of music by thinking about it, working with it, and working in it. I also aimed for them to learn to conceptualize music ideas and concepts in the form of a composition project specific to the style under study.

### **Background and Purpose**

Being the professor of an undergraduate music course provided me the opportunity to conduct research on the implementation of a composition project as a pedagogical approach. Given the course focus was hip-hop, entitled *From Blues to Hip-Hop*, the composition project focused upon the creation of an original rap (beat and lyrics). For the purposes of this paper, a discussion of the composition project as a pedagogy and experience, from the students' perspective, will form the discussion points. As professor of the students submitting their compositions, I was aware of the possibility of biased, skewed, and researcher-influenced findings as well as my responsibility in addressing such issues. An important concern in conducting qualitative research is that of subjectivity. As researchers, it is imperative we acknowledge that research is a lived experience which involves subjectivity. By identifying our own subjectivity during our research, we may then recognize the many ways our personal experiences influence, and possibly impact, the research process (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Silverman, 2015). Purely objective research is unattainable, but by acknowledging the subjective nature of the researcher during the research process, this may provide a path toward a closer approximation of objectiveness desired in research. As such, my role as the professor relating to the course and assignments likens my position to that in autoethnographic research; therefore, my research perspective and approach was largely informed by this method. Utilizing an autoethnographic approach to undergird the methodology aimed in gaining an understanding

of the students (participants), I employed a rigorous, self-reflective, and transparent approach through acknowledgement and accommodation of the researcher within the study (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Furthermore, I extended the concept and definition of *autoethnography* in this research approach while utilizing an Arts Based Research (ABR) component within a qualitative research design. It is the extension, or flipping, of the concept and definition of autoethnography, which provides a unique path toward gaining an individuals' meaning. Participants engage in an autoethnographic approach through the framing and manner of the research question. This encourages and provides participants the opportunity to express their meaning in a self-reflective, rigorous, and transparent manner by engaging in autoethnography. The researcher then presents the data in a manner consistent with autoethnography but from a reversed perspective. This reversed autoethnographic approach employed in the research reflects, or mirrors, participants' autoethnographic experiences. I call this "mirror autoethnography." It is the autoethnographies of the participants which guided this research. Although I did not directly implement an autoethnographic approach, I engaged participants in an autoethnographic approach with the creation of their own composition, in this instance a rap expressing their own perceived meaning.

To further ensure validity of the collected data and its analyses, I employed several strategies. I sought IRB approval and established parameters for the verbal script, informed consent, and overall research. A researcher assistant announced the study to the class and disseminated and collected the informed consents without my presence. The informed consent forms were then stored in a locked cabinet in the music and theatre arts department until final grades were submitted. To further ensure validity, I collected data from required class assignments; the study itself did not guide participants' submissions. I used a secondary data

analysis approach: I distanced myself during the students' creative processes; however, given the responsibility of a professor overseeing a course, when students approached with questions or in need of guidance, I did provide assistance. This assistance was in the form of a conversation in which the aim was to have the students arrive at their own decisions and conclusions. As such, by taking these steps, it is my aim in this research to represent the voices of the participants.

I employed an ABR study within a qualitative case study approach in an undergraduate hip-hop course, *From Blues to Hip-Hop*, during the Fall 2018 semester at a 4-year university in New Jersey. The intention of this study was to illustrate the benefits of utilizing composition as pedagogy through the experiences and perspectives of the students. Participants answered two questions through the writing, recording, and sharing (live or recorded performance) of their rap composition: What does hip-hop mean to you? And how does hip-hop relate to your education? My research had three aims:

1. Illuminating the possible transformative experience and growth process of the students through the utilization of composition as pedagogy;
2. Illustrating the use of an ABR approach, using music creation, as a viable learning methodology as well as a method in gaining an understanding of a topic or individual; and
3. Illuminating any issues, complexities, and complications using this pedagogical approach.

By addressing these three aims within the research, it is my hope to contribute to the larger field of music education.

## Literature Review

The composition project as pedagogy, incorporating an ABR component such as the students' compositions, was largely guided by the Elliott and Silverman's (2015) praxial music educational concept and multicultural and transcultural concepts (Sarath, 2013). This included the basis, development, framework, and implementation of the composition project which included the research question, methodology of the research study, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and presentation of the findings of the research study.

Elliott and Silverman's (2015) praxial concept concerns itself with the education of a student in relation to their *personhood*. Personhood encompasses the racial, social, contextual, cultural, religious, historical, and other aspects of a person (Elliott & Silverman, 2015). A student's personhood is considered within the context of the music and music education, with no one music style presented as superior or as a basis of quality. In a praxial approach, a student's education extends beyond the subject at hand. The utilization of composition as pedagogy provides students a unique approach in learning a particular music style as well as an opportunity to study, work with, and create within a particular music style, while also expressing the individuals' meaning.

Sarath (2013) described his concept of an integral perspective as blurring the boundaries of styles being pitted against one another, or as separate fields, while also considering a critical inquiry approach. Based upon Dewey's perspective of self-thinking and critical reflection, Sarath's application of both concepts is what leads to an integral perspective. As a result, this integral perspective guides the development and implementation of a music education curriculum. Rather than adhering to methods and traditions because they are established, pedagogues develop new and possibly broader methods or "process-structures" (Sarath, 2013),

combined with revitalized older methods. Composition as pedagogy, incorporating an arts based approach of having participants create, record, and play a rap in class to answer a proposed question upon which the rap is based is based on this perspective.

Additionally, Sarath's (2013) multicultural and transcultural theory within music education informed this composition as pedagogy approach. Music education is based upon the engagement of diverse epistemologies to study and incorporate differing music domains. The composition project provides students the opportunity to incorporate their unique and individual influences contextually and musically and individualize their approaches within their compositions. Sharing the creation process and composition provides fellow classmates the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the individualized contextual factors which make up each student. Through the sharing of each student's own composition and experience, this allows for a transcultural experience to take place.

Silverman's (2013) concept of a democratic class community, or transactional music classroom, is what I intended to achieve with the composition project. A democratic class community is the concept of students and teacher constructing a classroom learning experience together. Although I created the project, it was the students' experiences, including the successes and challenges, shared with me during the creative process and fellow classmates during the presentation of the rap, that lent themselves to a transactional music classroom. By doing so, we abandoned a strict adherence to the teacher as maintaining all power and knowledge, and a collective learning experience developed with all participants, as the listening, sharing, and teaching occurred.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserted that in addition to objective reality, we must consider an individual's perception, construction, and experience of their own environment equally.

It is imperative that researchers not assume a knowledge or understanding of a given topic or experience being studied, as their assumptions may not reflect the reality that participants perceive and experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Way, 1998). Essentially, consideration of the context of the participant aids the researcher in gaining a more accurate and well-rounded understanding. I extracted and applied Bronfenbrenner's concept of developmental theory by asking two open-ended questions regarding hip-hop. Furthermore, the response method, creating an original rap composition, encouraged and allowed participants to not only interpret the questions unique to the individual but also to express themselves as openly and freely as they desired. I gained insight into the lives, experiences, and contexts of the participants by asking participants to create a response through music.

An argument that further illustrated the viability of the methodological approach taken in this research study of the creation of a composition, is Allett's (2010) qualitative research into the potential benefits of music's elicitation capabilities. "Like photos, certain pieces of music may have particular attached stories and represent aspects of the respondents' identities" (Allett, 2010, p. 4). Allett's argument regarding music's elicitation capabilities was based upon the practice of listening; however, I apply this elicitation concept and capability to the act of composing music. Composing music provides a medium to express inner thoughts, feelings, and perspectives, while also encouraging self-reflection. When fully engaged, music has the power to express and provide insight words sometimes fail to achieve.

Gouzouasis's (2008) argument for a viewpoint of artist–researcher–teacher as opposed to separate entities, highlighted my overall approach within this qualitative study using an ABR component. Gouzouasis (2008) argued for a perspective in which all aspects work and inform one another through encompassing the many aspects of one's life and career: performer,



researcher, and educator. In this instance, music may inform research and research may inform music. Gouzouasis's (2008) *autoethnography* approach is one of many arts-based research concepts that constitutes the ABR paradigm. Leavy (2018) stated, "Epistemologically, ABR assumes the arts can create and convey meaning (Barone & Eisner, 2012)" (p. 5). This concept informed the construction of the research questions and approaches; the creating, recording, and performing aspects of the study for the participants; and the framing of the research within the classroom setting.

*A music as research* approach proves to be a strong method of choice when seeking a further understanding of the meaning of music and its impact upon an individual. And when looking to music as research specifically, Gouzouasis (2008) stated, "Patterns of relationship and forms of understanding exist in both research and music" (p. 55). It is with the understanding of music as research within the ABR paradigm as a capable medium in eliciting (Allett, 2010), analyzing, and sharing the arrived at meaning through rigor as developed from autoethnography and a qualitative research paradigm that this study fully embraces a music as research methodological approach. Several researchers have argued for the benefits of an ABR inquiry approach (e.g., Ellis et al., 2011; Gouzouasis, 2008; Leavy, 2018; McNiff, 2013). I did not choose the music as research methodological approach to simply align music with music inquiry, but to create methods of music designed to obtain music responses to gain a better understanding of and within music inquiry.

### **Research Design and Methods**

To gain a further and unique understanding of students' perceptions of utilizing composition as pedagogy, the process of creating a music composition (i.e., a rap containing both original lyrics and an original beat) as the main medium of research inquiry, music as research,

guided this study. This approach not only provided a unique pathway toward understanding, but also provided a different lens and angle of the research inquiry itself. The unique pathway or different lens of research inquiry through music as research was the creation of a music composition. “Music compositions may enable some researchers to reveal new perspectives of research models (i.e., through patterns and forms) and research processes” (Gouzouasis, 2008, p. 55). Responding to music-based research questions through composing music invited, encouraged, and presented new, different, and inspiring opportunities for participants in sharing their responses. The unique vehicle of composing a rap as a response provided participants the ability to share and express meaning in a way that other traditional research methods may not provide, thereby enabling the possibility of arriving at new or different findings.

Prior to students beginning work on their composition project, I gave a prequestionnaire of roughly seven open-ended questions to gain insight into the students’ perceptions and views of using music, and more specifically hip-hop, in expressing meaning and addressing questions or topics.

One-on-one semistructured interviews were a component of the composition project, which lasted a minimum of 30 minutes. Midway through the semester, students met with me to discuss their general views of music, their general views of hip-hop, their experiences and process of writing their rap, and any difficulties they wished to discuss as well as the two research questions to brainstorm and work ideas. I sent recordings of the students’ interviews to the respective students for self-reflection to guide their creation process and for comparison once the rap was completed.

After the completion of the rap project, I gave a postquestionnaire of roughly seven open-ended questions to gain insight into the students’ perceptions of using music, specifically hip-

hop, in expressing meaning. The postquestionnaire served as a self-reflective process, as it contained variations of the questions from the prequestionnaire to see if any changes were evident.

### **Sample and Recruitment**

With the exception of three students, participants were students ranging from 18 to 22 years of age in the music and theatre arts department enrolled in the music industry, music education, or music degree programs at a private 4-year university. Participants were enrolled in an undergraduate music course titled From Blues to Hip-Hop, and I recruited them for the study through a combination of convenience, purposeful, and criterion sampling (Creswell, 2018). Of the 24 participants, 11 were White, seven were black, five were Latinx, and one was Asian.

### **Data Collection**

There were no limitations, requirements, or parameters for the beat creation or actual recording of the rap. I accepted and encouraged the participants' preferred methods so as to have the least impact upon their creative processes. Participants provided lyrics, included in the recorded rap, separately as Microsoft Word document files. The only requirement for the composition was a minimum of two verses. All data were from required class assignments, transcribed interviews, and pre- and postquestionnaires.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed the four text-based facets of the composition project (i.e., prequestionnaire, postquestionnaire, interview, and lyrics) and generated codes within each facet and then across each facet, both within individual submissions and across student submissions. Since the focus of the course project, and study, was the response and the elements which constructed it, I did not judge or critique the quality of the raps or recordings. I read the lyrics, interview transcripts, and

both questionnaires for recurring and overlapping ideas that I then organized into codes. Coding concepts, as posited by Creswell (2018) and Saldana (2016), guided the coding process and included *in vivo*, *open*, *axial*, *process*, and *emotion* coding during data analysis. This led to the emergence and identification of themes generated from these codes.

### **Findings**

The four themes to emerge from across the student submissions were (a) have a message; (b) personal development and growth through self-reflection; (c) perceptions, feelings, and emotions elicited in creating rap; and (d) universal/community. The students' expressions during the composition project throughout the semester provided a glimpse into their experiences and thoughts during their composition process.

Prior to beginning their composition project, students expressed a range of feelings from excitement to apprehension in their perception of undertaking such a project. One participant said, "This project idea is much more interesting than writing a paper and I very much look forward to it." While the prospect of a final project not incorporating a paper may be exciting to some, other students expressed their concern for such a different approach. This included the act of writing music ("I will *struggle* since I've never written a rap before") as well as the overall conception of expressing an idea in a nontraditional manner ("I feel that I may not get what I'm trying to get across easily or in a certain span").

At the conclusion of the composition project, the students' general perceptions of their compositional experience varied. However, unlike their perceptions prior to undertaking their compositional project, which exhibited apprehension and doubt, the experiences the students discussed after completing their compositions exhibited a generally positive experience with self-reflection and self-growth. One student said, "I enjoyed writing the rap as stressed as I was

in the process, I'm happy with what I came up with." Another said, "Starting the rap was a struggle, but I think that's how it is with anything. Once you get over that first hill [and] get rolling it starts to flow." This positive experience also proved true for students who had no experience or had never written a rap before. One student shared, "I had difficulties writing this at first because it was out of my comfort zone. But as I started to do it, it started to get easier." Although challenging, the student was not only able to successfully complete the course project, but more importantly, felt encouraged during and after the compositional process.

The personal development and growth through the self-reflection of the students was evident through the changing perceptions and feelings elicited from creating their compositions. Within the lyrics and during the interviews, students shared the importance of having a message in their composition (e.g., "I wrote this song to send a message; cause I'm tired of the pain I see"). While students focused upon having a message, having an audience for that message was also important. Students not only reflected upon family and community, but also reflected upon how to help, aid, and support family and others ("And that's when I knew hip-hop meant family").

Compositions that focused upon the party aspect of hip-hop also shared a self-reflective message. Referencing a break from stress, life, and other challenges, students' lyrics discussed hip-hop as an outlet or place of refuge (e.g., "Hip-hop therapy, audio courage to soothe away my anxiety, brought on by the pressures of society, meditating off of that lyrical energy, don't forget about the beat that shifts synergy").

Through the varied compositions and reflections of the students, the presence of the four themes within the four facets of the composition project is central to the students' compositional experience.

### **Future Implications**

Based on student interviews and various informal conversations I had with the students throughout the semester, I plan to use the word *composition* instead of *creation*, in future iterations of this pedagogical approach. From these discussions, students expressed that the word *composition* implies traditional Western notation practices and formal training and understanding of music within a Western background, thereby resulting in the perception of the project as a daunting task. This is not to imply that music which does not utilize traditional Western notational practices does not qualify as a composition, nor does imply music created by people not trained in a Western is not music; rather it is a consideration of the use of the word *composition* and how students with differing backgrounds, musically and culturally, perceive this word. It is imperative in this pedagogy to not privilege a specific approach, perspective, practice, or culture. Adapting the project to use the word *creation* came about because it was the most commonly used word by the students during interviews and conversations.

Furthermore, the addition of a student group discussion component, comprised of two to three meetings scheduled during the class, could provide the students an opportunity to discuss and work with peers. Multiple meetings will provide an opportunity to follow-up on discussed ideas, concerns, and difficulties during their composing process, thereby providing another means of support.

Broader implications for this compositional educational approach include the utilization of this pedagogy in other music classes. For example, having students create a piece of music within the style under study within a specific course. The pedagogical approach discussed in this paper was used in a course studying blues to hip-hop. However, adapting this approach to a course surveying other music styles, such as jazz, orchestral, and popular, could be useful in

immersing the students in the style, practices, and practitioners of the style in which they are learning. While an adaptation of the pedagogy may be needed to fit a particular music style, it is the overall concept of using composition as pedagogy through the four general steps I have outlined that this pedagogical approach exhibits the potential to be an effective teaching method.

### **Conclusion**

While no pedagogy is perfect, and continual revisions and adaptations are necessary to address the needs of differing students, it was my aim in providing this discussion of my experiences in utilizing a composition as pedagogy to form a general framework. In doing so, I aimed not only to illustrate the potential of such an approach, but also to demonstrate the continual development and adaptation this approach allows in serving music students and educators.

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