



## Getting schooled through hip-hop

The provocative and high-powered music genre that turned 50 this year can be used to teach almost anything — if you first embrace its cultural relevance.

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Robin Chenoweth: No matter where in the world you go or what you choose to listen to, you don't have to look far to find hip-hop. Because the music that turned 50 this year is so much more than a genre. It's a culture. Constantly evolving, constantly asserting itself, hip-hop has permeated every niche of American life. So much so, that you might not have recognized it. It's big business.

GloRilla: I can be your fantasy. I can tell you got beat, beat, beat, energy, energy... beat, beat, beat, energy...

Robin Chenoweth: It's fashion.

FSG Rell, *Gucci, Prada and Fendi*: I'm rocking Gucci and Prada and Fendi. I'm rocking Gucci and Prada and Fendi. I'm rocking Gucci and Prada and Fendi. Need them exclusives. Send me exclusives. I need all the exclusives.

Robin Chenoweth: And sports.

Super Bowl halftime: West Coast make some noise! California. Come on, put your hands in the air! Everybody put your hands in the air!

Robin Chenoweth: But most especially, and above all else, it's language that often refuses to be defined.

Naz, *If I Ruled the World*: Open they eyes to the lies. History's told foul. But I'm as wise as the old owl, plus the Gold Child. Seeing things like I was controlling, clique rollin'. Trickin' six digits on kicks and still holdin'. Trips to Paris, I'd civilize every savage. Give one shot, I turn trife life to lavish....

Robin Chenoweth: And because it's all of those things, hip-hop can be a perfect entre into education.

Elaine Richardson: The music, the sound is a powerful sound. The beat is magnetic. ... Hip-hop is not just Africanized or Afrodiasporic, because we pull in everything into our music, so it's not just that. But that, that, uhn, that stank, that's in there.

Jason Rawls: (Laughs.)

Elaine Richardson: It's gonna make you get with it. Right? The music is gonna make you get with it. So, what are you going to say on top of that? Because it's all pedagogical, you know. You're gonna be learning from their music, because it's getting you. ... So what are you going to say with that music? ... How can we use that music? And how can we use the beauty of hip-hop? Because it's a beautiful culture.

Robin Chenoweth: In this episode of the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, we talk to Teaching and Learning Professor Elaine Richardson, Dr. E, a pioneer in the study of discourse analysis especially as it relates to hip-hop literacy, about pushing past the commercialized and often negative messages in hip-hop music, to find a rich cultural well from which students can draw. And, we talk to Jason Rawls, a new assistant professor of hip-hop at Ohio State, talking about how the music genre flings open the doors to education, introducing young learners and college students to everything from history and literature to chemistry and political science. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

Robin Chenoweth: First things first. If you are going bring into your recording studio a maven of hip-hop literacy, who moonlights singing R&B and soul, and if you're going to interview a DJ who travels the world stage and teaches hip-hop at the university level, first, you'd better to get your equipment right, and hit the record button early.

Jason Rawls: Can you turn my headphones down just a tad?

Robin Chenoweth: That's Jason, or J, Rawls. He's taught the Arts and Politics of Hip Hop at Ohio State for four years and was recently named an assistant professor in music and African American Studies. He codirects the new hip-hop studies program with Stevie Johnson, but also has a PhD in educational administration. Once upon a time, was a teacher. As a DJ, he's giving me a lesson in audio setup as Dr. E watches us.

Robin Chenoweth: I don't know how to turn the headphones down. Do you?

Elaine Richardson, singing: Awa, wow! He's the greatest dancer...

Robin Chenoweth: (Laughs.)

Elaine Richardson: that I've ever seen! Yes, this is a studio master. He is the Master Blaster. ... See, by me being a vocalist...these, these headphones ain't right for me.

Jason Rawls: These headphones aren't right, period.

Elaine Richardson: Not for a vocalist at all.

Jason Rawls: If you were in the studio, you would tell somebody, "Can we get a different set of

headphones?”

Elaine Richardson: I like stuff that makes my voice sound smoky and sultry (laughs).

Robin Chenoweth: I think your voice does sound....

Jason Rawlins: It does.

Elaine Richardson: Not in these headphones. You have to really overdo it and make my voice sound like I really want it to sound. (Laughs)

Jason Rawls: How do you do that? That's actually good. Really good, actually.

Robin Chenoweth: I got a feeling I'm never gonna get to my questions.

Elaine Richardson: Oh, okay...I'm sorry.

Robin Chenoweth: Because you two are so much fun...

Robin Chenoweth: Okay, Dr. E.

Jason Rawls: Yes.

Robin Chenoweth: I went on a weekend trip with my husband. And we're driving through the mountains, and I'm researching you. And I found this video of you singing, *Let Me Clear My Throat...* And I'm like..."

Elaine Richardson singing *Let Me Clear My Throat*: Hey, wait a minute, baby. I think you forgot your hat and your coat. You think I'm a joking. Wait, wait a minute a minute baby. I think you forgot your hat and your coat. Oh....

Robin Chenoweth: Wait a minute, I heard that she could sing...

Elaine Richardson, *Let Me Clear My Throat*: I just don't know quite how to say this, but let me clear my throat. I've got to hit the right note. Oh, for you to hear me baby and know just who I am...

Robin Chenoweth: I had it going as loud as I could in the car.

Elaine Richardson: I know, your husband's like, are you trying to kill me?

Robin Chenoweth: My husband's like, "She's a teaching and learning professor?" Blew me away. ... Do you write your own music?

Elaine Richardson: I do. I write the songs and then I sing them to my musicians and producers and tell them what I feel. And they put the music to it.

Robin Chenoweth: A hip-hop song by the same title by DJ Kool sounds nothing like Dr. E's music, by the way. Which begs the question: Why did a professor who sings R&B like that, become one of the first

scholars to study hip-hop and its influence on culture, language and education? Her book on the subject, *Hip-Hop Literacies*, first published in 2006.

Elaine Richardson: By training, I'm an applied linguist, so I do critical discourse analysis. So we look at movement. We look at body language. We look at Black language. We look at sound. We look at all of those things to try to understand, you know, the power that is in the music, and also the contradictions that's in the music. ... Hip-hop has permeated American culture, and global culture. But also, American culture is very much a part of hip-hop. You can't get out of it. I mean, especially commercialized and commodified hip-hop.

Kendrick Lamar, *DNA*: I got power, poison, pain and joy inside my DNA  
I got hustle, though, ambition, flow inside my DNA  
I was born like this, since one like this, immaculate conception  
I transform like this, perform like this, was Yeshua's new weapon  
I don't contemplate, I meditate, then off your f\*\*\*\*\* head  
This that put-the-kids-to-bed

Elaine Richardson: Everybody's going for the bag. It's about business. It's about branding. It's about knowledge. It's about just knowing who you are, and trying to be excellent, being dope. And I think all of that is, it's intertwined. ... It also has many aspects of Empire. Commodified hip-hop has a lot of, you know, those aspects to it. That's one way that you can look at these competing discourses within hip-hop. ... And how a lot of that — the Empire part of it, that colonialization part of it — can be fed back to us and be detrimental to our young people.

Jason Rawls: The aspect of hip-hop that most people know, are the vulgar, the most vile, the raunchy. That's the hip-hop that's pushed into the mainstream. ... And so people assume that hip-hop is that, but it's not. Hip-hop can be a number of different things, because it comes out of the individual.

Skepta feat. JME, *That's Not Me*: Nah, that's not me. Act like a wasteman? That's not me!  
Sex any girl? Nah that's not me. Lips any girl? Nah, that's not me.  
Yeah, I used to wear Gucci. Put it all in the bin cause that's not me.  
True, I used to look like you. But dressing like a mess? Nah, nah, that's not me.

Jason Rawls: You can also have somebody who's educated, or someone who's about social justice, and they can make hip-hop, too. So, there's many different forms and aspects of hip-hop that the general public never even hears about. I can name hip-hop artists that you would never know about but those are the ones that you should probably be hearing. But because of the machine that pushes, the raunchy, the worst aspects...

Elaine Richardson: The violence.

Jason Rawls: Thank you. The violence — all those things. They push that because that's what sells and they push that to, let's be honest, the Black community.

Robin Chenoweth: And to kids, too, right?

Elaine Richardson: With students, when I ask them, you know, what they are listening to? They'll tell me stuff like... Sexy Red. And so we have to talk about that, because I work with girls eight to 18 years old.

Jason Rawls: That's what's pushed to them, though.

Elaine Richardson: They tell you that this is the clean version that they're playing on the radio stations, and you turn your car on...

Jason Rawls: It's not clean.

Elaine Richardson: It's not clean! It's not clean! have a mentoring program, Empowering Young Voices, mentoring for the arts. And the girls that I work with, these are the kinds of conversations that we have.

Robin Chenoweth: What do you say to them about that music?

Elaine Richardson: Well, we talk about it and I let them come to their realization of what's going on in the music. ... What I'm showing them is that that is adult entertainment that is pushed all through mainstream culture like it's just youth music. ... You can't shield your kids from it, because it's seen as youth music and is on a regular radio station.

Megan Thee Stallion, feat. Nicki Minaj and Ty Dolla \$ign, *Hot Girl Summer*: She a big ol' freak, it's a must that I hit

It's a Hot Girl Summer, so you know she got it lit

Real ass bitch, know she got it lit

Hot Girl Summer so you know she got it lit, yeah

Real ass bitch, know she got it lit

Hot Girl Summer so you know she got it lit, yeah, yeah

Elaine Richardson: But all the time it's normalizing these discourses for our youth. And our young girls need to be having conversations about that. And our young men and our young trans and our young ... our youth period, they need to be having conversations about what this music is saying to you and normalizing for you.

Robin Chenoweth: So, you're helping the youth sort of...

Elaine Richardson: Be critical. Be critical about what you put in, your mind, because it's, it's socialized in your mind.

Jason Rawls: The part that's pushed to the mainstream is not necessarily positive.

Robin Chenoweth: But there are plenty of artists creating affirming messages, these experts say. And those can be very valuable in the classroom.

Jason Rawls: Currently, right now, people are making positive hip-hop, but you have to look for it.

Robin Chenoweth: What are you listening to now?

Jason Rawls: There's Nas and Little Brother. And there's a new young dude that I recently found named Ray Wimley who has a song called *Black Power Time*.

Ray Wimley, *Black Power Time*: I know we have to over the odds but as I look at history, we do this all the time. Sense of perseverance and a colorful mind. It paints a vivid image so our thoughts can design the Land of Milk Honey where we destined to thrive. Where your DNA needed to be revived...

Jason Rawls: And just very educational, talking about the Black Power movement and just talking about some of the things from Black Lives Matter.

Ray Wimley, *Black Power Time*, 2:19: You are the captain of your own soul. You dictate how the story gets told. Looking for the life you want, go and take control. Find determination ....

Robin Chenoweth: Elaine Richardson launched the annual Columbus Women and Girls Fest in 2017, to celebrate female empowerment. Her Hip-hop Literacies Conference — where J Rawls also presents and performs — has for 12 years raised awareness about using hip-hop to address issues facing marginalized youth.

Elaine Richardson: I mean, we bring them here. We have artists like Sa Roc.

Jason Rawls: Sa Roc is a great example.

Sa-Roc, *Options*: My flow limitless from renegades to remnants of cotton. But I feel like I can't reach you, I'm antenna-less and blocked, bwoy. This shouldn't be so hard still. But I guess it could be painful sharing a piece of your heart like a three-course meal. And they think if they throw cash, they deserve to see cartwheels. But I don't bend and I have no tricks, just my beliefs in God's quill....

Elaine Richardson: We have artists like Mama Sol, we have artists like Flau'Jae.

Flau'Jae: *Do you know how many times I wanted to give up and go quit on the floor. I had to grind and go tell myself, go, give it some more. You want to shine and that's your dream you better give it a go. We only got one life to live and we ain't getting no more.*

Elaine Richardson: We have artists like Mumu Fresh.

Mumu Fresh, *Work*: Queen of culture bringing Dis-ease to these vultures  
Watching me like pin-up poster. Copying my steez like a counterfeit sculpture  
But that God frequency is just dripping off her. Alhamdulillah, high priestess of these bars  
I'm a Quadruple threat. Nebular super star. I'm too big to stay in my lane. Murder you all,  
I'm staking my claim. I'm a hurricane avatar.

Elaine Richardson: These are the people that I bring here. Specifically, I bring Black women because that's my work with Black women and girls.

Mumu Fresh, *Work*: *This ain't that knee-bent, kente cloth accent for appeasement. This that chain-shattering, Black, take a moment for bereavement.*

Elaine Richardson: They don't know that those type of artists exist. All they know is the commercial artists that are played on the radio. And not saying that these artists aren't commercial. They can sell a lot but they don't get the exposure because they're talking, you know, like consciousness, Black

consciousness, culture, being empowered with your history. And you know, they're trying to wipe Black history out. They're trying to stop Black history with this “anti-woke” thing that's going on now. They don't want our children to be woke. What's being pushed out there —there's no outrage from the anti-woke folk, you know, saying that, “Hey, we should be making sure that our youth can have Black history and their music, can have it in the classroom so that they can have critical consciousness and not fall prey to so many social traps that are out here.”

Robin Chenoweth: Dr. Rawls, I was going to ask you about the history of hip-hop, because I was really surprised that it just turned 50. I never expected that...

Elaine Richardson: He wa'nt born. (Laughs.)

Jason Rawls: I wasn't born.

Elaine Richardson: I was 13! (Laughs.)

Jason Rawls: You know, the history...we talk about this in the Art and Politics of Hip-Hop. ... Hip-hop really stems from Bronx, New York, with young, marginalized, youth — Black and brown youth, who, you gotta remember, ... It's important to think about the socioeconomic status of the Bronx at that time. ... Around the late 60s, early 70s, loss of jobs, different social economic factors begin to happen. ... You talk about schools where they had taken out...

Elaine Richardson: The arts.

Jason Rawls: Music, the arts. Taking out the arts. So, these are young people who didn't have didn't really have the money to go and have drums or do drum lessons or guitar lessons. So, it's like, what do we have around us? Well, we've got turntables, we've got records. ... DJs that were around at that time, were playing funk records, more so than popular disco at the time. And, so, funk was the backdrop for what was going on.

James Brown, *Clap Your Hands. Stomp Your Feet*: Hey!

Jason Rawls: You've got a DJ making new music by doing this idea of what Kool Herc called the merry go round, where he would take a drum break on a record and play one of them and then bring in the other one, of the drum break from the other turntable...

Grandmaster Funk Mix, *Apache*

Jason Rawls: ... and keep basically creating new music using turntables. And so the B boys at the party, the dancers, the people who were dancing, wait for this part. And when that part came on, they would start doing like different types of moves. And so HERC was start calling those guys, the break boys or the break girls. And that's where this idea of B boy/B girl started to come out. Because they waited for the break.

Grandmaster Funk Mix, *Apache*

Jason Rawls: It was very organic. People were just doing what felt. They were creating. And like I said, creating something from nothing, because this idea of, we can't afford to go into the best dance studios.

We see some old refrigerator cardboard over there. So, let's take that and put it down on the street so we can actually have a place to dance. ... We don't have the money for drums and saxophones and trombones and what have you. But we've got access to our uncle's old records or our mom's records. ... That's the thing that I think is most important about hip-hop. It's this idea — and this is what I talked about my TED Talk — hip-hop mentality. It's this idea of nothing is going to stop us. Right? And that's what you use when you do the Hip-Hop Literacies. Like, you find ways to get it done.

Elaine Richardson: Yes.

Jason Rawls: I've been watching you do that all these years.

Elaine Richardson: Aw.

Jason Rawls: And that's, that's hip-hop. When you are doing something, and you are struggling to get it done. And you're like, nope, not going to stop me, I'm going to get it done. That's a hip-hop mentality. ... And so that's the story of hip-hop. That's what hip-hop is.

Talib Kweli, *Get By*: To get by just to get by, just to get by, just to get by.

We commute to computers. Spirits stay mute while you eagles spread rumors

We survivalists, turned to consumers. Just to get by just to get by. Just to get by, just to get by.

Ask him why some people got to live in a trailer, cuss like a sailor. I paint a picture with the pen like Norman Mailer. Mi abuela raised three daughters all by herself, with no help. I think about her struggle and I find the strength in myself. It's work.

Robin Chenoweth: What are hip-hop literacies?

Elaine Richardson: I define it as all the ways that people who are hip-hop make meaning. All the ways that they live in the world. I mean, because you know, hip-hop comes from the people. So, it's real broad, because it needs to be.

Robin Chenoweth: What are you telling people about hip-hop and the way it can help kids, especially, to learn?

Elaine Richardson: I think it's a way of getting to understand the depth of the people that you're working with and also to learn how to learn from them. Learn from the culture...

Jason Rawls: That's it.

Elaine Richardson: ...learn from the students. Because if you can't really center them, you're marginalizing the relationship where you could be getting the best and helping them be the best and learning that you have to change as the educator. You have to change. He wrote a book on it. He wrote the book. No, no, I mean, our work complements each other. It's different, but it compliments each other.

Robin Chenoweth: What does your book say?

Jason Rawls: My book is called *Youth Culture Power*. You have scholars such as Treva Lindsey, Dr. E, Bettina Love, Chris Emdin, Emery Petchauer. You have the scholars who are speaking about centering



hip-hop in education because it, as she just said, allows you to learn from them. And when you learn from your students, you actually, you do better, right? The whole classroom is better. But we actually expanded it to talk about youth culture. Because what I understood when I was teaching k-12, I started to see that hip-hop culture was my in. But then there were also kids who might have been into maybe skateboarding, or anime. And it was the same thing. So, what I did was I, I leveraged my authentic self. Which I'm hip-hop. I'm hip-hop culture. I am hip-hop. I bleed it. I just am. Everything I do as hip-hop. And so, my students would see that and if I would have a student who would have something like, like, let's say skateboarding, I know absolutely nothing about skateboarding. And so, I would have that student tell me about it. We just have conversations, and I just ask questions and learn from that student, and so that student's opening up to me, and we're building that relationship. And, so, through that relationship that student starts to trust me. We have that connection. And eventually, that student opens up and allows me to teach them.

Robin Chenoweth: What is the power of a song to teach that history and to teach those lessons?

Jason Rawls: Music is culture. When young people are able to interact with culture, I think it becomes more important to them. It's something they can hook on to. Like, for instance, when Chris Emdin uses hip-hop to help teach science, the students can remember it a little better, because it relates to something that they're used to.

Elaine Richardson: His students came here and were rapping the periodic table.

Robin Chenoweth: Here's a sample of that being done by another artist.

C Psylince: Hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen and rhenium. And nickel, neodymium, neptunium, germanium, iron, americium, ruthenium and uranium. Europium, zirconium, lutetium, vanadium and lanthanum.

Elaine Richardson: Blew my mind, you know, blow my mind. His students, man, they're off the chain. Off the chain. And J's students...

Jason Rawls: That's just one example. It's that type of idea.

Robin Chenoweth: Dr. E, in your classes, what do you do to teach young teachers to embrace this?

Elaine Richardson: Most of the people that take my classes are going to be in the urban environment. So, if you're going to be in the urban environment, you need to know something about our language, our history, our culture, our music. I expose them to different literature, different ways of thinking about teaching. Like, that you're actually a learner. ... Sometimes we say the wrong thing. Sometimes we don't give the young people a chance to be wrong. They can be wrong without us critiquing them sometimes. And just let them figure some things out and then come back to us. Instead of foisting on them something or some way of learning or some way of being that we've been taught is a good student, or that we've been taught is education, or that we've been taught is learning. It's really about taking an inventory on yourself, and also being humble, and learning from and with your students. That's the kind of work that I like to do.

Robin Chenoweth: You know trick that was all the rage — flipping half-filled water bottles so that they landed upright? J Rawls co-wrote the first hip-hop based curriculum for pre-service teachers with his

friend, John Robinson, a teacher in Brooklyn at the time, after they both realized that their students were flipping bottles in classes — 500 miles apart.

Jason Rawls: He was like, “Yeah, we're doing it, too!” I'm like, wait a minute, something's going on here. And we started to realize that these young people are connected through culture. And of course, one of the biggest aspects of culture is hip-hop. And it's this idea of that young people, they, they ooze youth culture. They just are that, and it's everywhere. And then social media makes this world a small place. Because they all know what's going on at the same time. ... So we start using that. When the fidget spinners were there, I didn't disallow it in my classroom. But the school banned it. I brought it in. Like, show me what you're doing and why. So, we could use different things. The water bottle flip: “Okay, whoever gets it on, you answer the next question.” Like, I bring in the culture. Don't exclude it out. Because what you're doing is, you're telling them not to be who they are.

Elaine Richardson: That they don't belong.

Jason Rawls: And that they don't belong. And so that's what my classes were about.

Robin Chenoweth: Dr. E, same thing for you? Are we teaching them how to bring a hip-hop song in instead of maybe, Lord Byron? Or something like that?

Elaine Richardson: (Laughs.) Ooo, I used to do that. ... I was trained in structural analysis of language. ... And what I did was had my students bring in what they listened to. We were going to look at it for Black language structures, right? And they refused it.

Robin Chenoweth: They refused?

Elaine Richardson: They refused. And it was a few goody-two-shoes students that were trying to do it. ... We don't want to be tied down to the copula and the syntax and the phonology. That comes later. What I found out is that stuff comes last. What comes first is the power in the language.

Jason Rawls: It's not about the song. It's the cultural aesthetic. How do you bring the culture into the classroom? How do you let students be who they are? Center your classroom on who those students are. And once you do that, then it's not just about the song and the lyrics, and then you get past the dirty language or whatever. ... You start to hone in on the cultural relevance of the hip-hop. No so... not just the song or not just the music, you got to go deeper.

Elaine Richardson: Because people are looking for teaching formulas. That's not it. It's not the way to go. Of course, you're going to have your curriculum, the readings that you want people to read. But you still got to find a way into that material with your students. ... I told them to bring in lyrics and we were going to do these syntactical and phonological analyses. And my students got me into critical discourse analysis. Even though they didn't know that that's what they were doing. That's what made me start teaching critical discourse analysis. Because it's bigger than; it's bigger than hip-hop. It's bigger than syntax and structure. Let's talk about the correspondence between structure and language and the structural racism. You see what I'm saying? You get, you get to thinking, bigger, and from intersectional perspectives, you know, based on who you have in your classroom, and their interest. You got to engage their interests. And also teach them, for example, the research process, and how to read closely, and how to read critically, and be able to express that. And they can express it in different ways.

Robin Chenoweth: I love that you're both so into knowing your students so thoroughly.

Elaine Richardson: You have to, to get the best out of them.

Jason Rawls: For me, is that's all teaching is. It's about caring; it's about building relationships. I can teach you anything if we can connect.

Robin Chenoweth: To access playlists of the hip-hop songs featured here, see our episode notes.

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