

SCHOOL'D BY FUNKMODE

You want to become a Hip Hop expert? Learn the info below and you're on your way, yo!

HOW SCHOOL LEARNING APPLIES TO HIP HOP

Everyone knows that school teaches you skills necessary to be successful in the real world. But is it possible that it is actually preparing you for success in the world of Hip Hop? In today's lesson we will look at how we can apply the educational gems of kindergarten through college to life in Hip Hop culture.

One of the very first things we learn in school is how to handle language. Spelling, reading and writing are essential for life in our world today. It is a rapper's job to communicate with the world and language skills make that possible. Something that makes rap different from other types of vocal expression in music is that there are often far more words per line and verse. Also, because rap takes the form of talking, it arguably lends itself more so to storytelling, teaching and social commentary. This creates a situation where you not only need more words to fill each song but more subject matter to draw from. The more you read, the more your brain fills with words that can later be used to add variety and depth to what you write.* Learning to spell and pronounce words correctly is essential because it allows you more creativity and flexibility when you write. In addition, proper pronunciation gives you the ability to not only write better rhymes, but also the foundation to mispronounce words to fit (or not) your rhyme scheme. For example, it is common in our culture to mispronounce the word "interesting" as "inTRESing". However, if you know the proper spelling and pronunciation, you can rhyme "interesting" with "arresting" which would not rhyme as well with "inTRESing". As we progress further in our education into language, we start to learn about famous literature and authors, poetry and poets. Studying skilled writers gives you new stylistic and structural ideas for your writing. Not only that, but studying literature provides you with whole new worlds of thought to inspire your Hip Hop poetry. Understanding what makes an author's or a poet's work powerful gives you the potential to create that kind of power for yourself in the form of a song. Therefore, a mastery of language is essential to the success of any rapper.

It is common to hear people say that history is just a bunch of dates and places and not important for everyday life. While it is true that history might not be very useful if it is only the memorization of details, the actual content of historical learning might make it the most important school subject for Hip Hop success. Think of history as the news. The news tells us about things happening in the world today. What's happening in the world today is the subject of all great art. Whether you write graffiti, choreograph dances, compose music or create new language or fashion, it is based upon our understanding of what is happening in the world right now. History then, is not just the news; it is all of the newspapers, TV/radio broadcasts and internet updates from the past until now. To put this comparison into more concrete terms, consider the following example. A graffiti artist can desire to do a piece to bring awareness to an injustice happening in the world today. But what happens if that artist doesn't know all of the events that precipitated the current situation? At best, the piece may not achieve its full potential, while at worst, the artist might be representing the matter entirely incorrectly. By contrast, imagine if that artist did in fact know the complete history of the situation. In that case, the piece could then include historical elements that would add great depth to the artistry while providing more context and understanding for its audience. Therefore, learning how our world came to be what it is today is essential for any Hip Hop artist.

You might have heard it said jokingly before that dancers only need to learn to count to eight. While that is mostly true for Hip Hop dancers, it doesn't eliminate the need for math in the education of a Hip Hop artist. For starters, math is music. Anyone who has ever closely studied both realizes that the beautiful patterns and symmetry that create music are well illustrated in mathematical formulas and equations.** This mathematical harmony is possibly best represented in Hip Hop music, where repetition and rhythm are the foundation of its creation. For example, as Hip Hop is lyrically and instrumentally very percussive in nature, it often seeks to create beats in the smallest of spaces. Therefore, while heavy beats might happen on every count or every other count, another beat might happen on the 1/2 beat and another on the 1/4 beat and yet another on the 1/8 beat. These fractions can be added together or dissected further to build or alter the foundation of the song. Going a bit deeper, if you are producing music using electrical or computer equipment, you are frequently presented with ratios to calculate, and geometric patterns to manipulate, in order to create your music. We do not have the time to go into detail in this lesson, but musical production tools such as compression, equalization, reverb and delays all rely on complicated mathematical formulas to produce their effects. To the extent that you have some understanding of the math behind the tools, you are able to use them well. Also consider that someone has to first create those tools. If you are someone who loves technology, math will provide you the knowledge necessary to design existing and even new tools for music production. Finally, once you get beyond simple math to applied mathematics like economics and statistics, you realize that math is important if you are ever to get involved with the business side of Hip Hop. Being able to understand sales statistics, demographic studies, pricing models and purchasing trends all require an understanding of both simple and more complex math.

*Recently, a project was done where both famous and underground rappers were compared by the number of unique words they use in their songs. While size of vocabulary doesn't necessarily indicate amount of skill, it does show who is putting their language education to work as well as who might appeal to those word-obsessed people among us. See the results @ <http://mfdaniels.tumblr.com/post/93313634355/updated-rappers-sorted-by-size-of-vocabulary-20-new> (Link functional as of 11/20/2014)

**For a visual lesson, see "Music and math: The genius of Beethoven - Natalya St. Clair" @ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAxT0mRGuoY> (Functional as of 11/20/2014)

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Hip Hop dancers need to know and be able to use their bodies. This is especially true for professional dancers for whom their bodies are their literal livelihood. There are many school subjects that relate to this part of Hip Hop life. Biology is the basis for this area of study. Knowing biology allows you to understand the next level sciences such as anatomy, physiology, kinesiology and nutrition, all of which are essential for dancers. For example, by understanding anatomy and kinesiology (the study of human movement), you know where all of your body parts are located and how they can move. Therefore, you know the capabilities of your joints, bones and muscles which allows you to explore the entire movement potential of your body as you create new dances. And because you know what your body can do, you also know what your body cannot do, thus allowing you to avoid injuries. Exercise is very important to a Hip Hop dancer, which makes physical education, or P.E., also very important. Exercise and nutrition are based upon an understanding of physiology, which is the study of how the body works. By studying these three subjects you learn how to properly train and feed your body, as well as detect when something is wrong. Successful dancers, especially those who have long careers, rely daily on their knowledge of all of the above subjects.

As you progress in school from areas of general study to more specific areas of study, you notice even more crossover between your education and the world of Hip Hop. Law is important for graffiti artists to know where they can rightfully work, for dancers to know what music they can use for choreography and for DJs/MCs to know what they can sample. Knowing computers and technology is essential for the Hip Hop producer as almost all Hip Hop music is made digitally at some point of production. Drama class is important for those dancers, MCs and DJs looking to perform for a crowd. And even something like chemistry can be useful for a rapper.*

All of life is learning and art is the expression of life. It is not incorrect to make the connection then that art is the expression of what we learn. School is where we get our formal education. Therefore, school is a place where we have the ability to build the foundation for what we create as artists. Some say that school is boring but those people are not looking at the experience very creatively. For a true artist, every ounce of learning holds the potential for a new creation. Use and go beyond what you have read here and you will know in a very personal way just how much school learning applies to Hip Hop.

*Listen to "Chemical Calisthenics" by Blackalicious

HIP HOP WORD OF THE WEEK

Throw shade: to insult someone, often in a subtle way, as if you are figuratively casting darkness upon someone.

EX: "I don't like to hang out that guy. All he ever does is throw shade at people who aren't around to stand up to him."

Song reference: "Elements I'm Among" by Queen Latifah: "You throw shade / I throw it too / More than you can chew / I get back at you"

BONUS: NAME ANOTHER SONG/ARTIST THAT HAS USED THIS HHWOTW

EXTRA LEARNING

- 1) Explain how a subject not named in this lesson applies to life in Hip Hop. Or, connect one of the subjects named here to Hip Hop in a way that wasn't explained.
- 2) Reversing the question, how has Hip Hop helped you in school?
- 3) Can you take a college course in Hip Hop? If so, where?