

Lessons for Teachers

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IN THE CLASSROOM, the proven lesson plan is unproven, the best curriculum works once. I say this because the most reasonable technique for teachers to engage their students is through the ongoing practice of research. In my experience, the best educators are dedicated researchers, constantly examining themselves and their pedagogy, and open to what they can learn from studying the changing needs and challenges of their students.

Lesson #1 (for teachers): Make a mandala, or visual representation of who you are and where you're from. Who you are consists of the people-places-things-ideas-beliefs that create the universe of you.

The best teachers “keep it real” with their students, and even more importantly, with themselves. These teachers know what they bring to the table, and by being active listeners, are able to identify the interests, needs, joys, and pains of their students. The research investment you make as a teacher will help you discover the intersection between you and your students. If you're a Bob Dylan fan, and your students love Tupac, then find the place where they meet. You will be doing a huge disservice to yourself and your students if you bring in the Tupac without being schooled in him.

Lesson #2 (for teachers): Becoming More Human: Share a poem or a song that is indicative of your experience as a young person or adult. This exercise in sharing something about yourself, is also an exercise in trusting your students.

Each year, along with the thousands of students I teach, I am honored to work with hundreds of teachers. They come to me either by way of Urban Word NYC, or through the weeklong Institute On Spoken Word And Hip-Hop Education (in Wisconsin) that I direct each summer, or because of the award-winning curriculum I authored, *Hip-Hop Poetry & the Classics* (Milk Mug 2004). If I'm meeting them in these contexts, then they most likely are on the path of believing in the likelihood that spoken word and hip-hop can be useful tools in the classroom. I always trump this notion by adding that these artistic media are also legitimate areas of study and discourse in their own right, as well.

Lesson #3 (for teachers): What do you want? Write it all down—a list of all that you want for yourself as a teacher, and for your students, as our future.

Nine times out of ten, teachers want the “best” or “proven” lesson plans, exercises and curriculum. They want to drop some Tupac, and be down, when for all intents and purposes they will never be “down.” What they fail to realize is that being “down” is not the key to engaging their students. The “dopest” lesson plan is also not the answer. Don't get me wrong, I can drop hundreds of exercises on these teachers, but to me, having them use these lesson plans in the absence of any familiarity with the lexicon, the culture, and the politics of the work would be doing their students a disservice. Furthermore, if you don't believe Tupac is articulate, then you probably don't believe your students are articulate. Not only will you lose the trust of the

students, but you will also be perpetuating the power dynamics that alienate your students in school and in society at large. It's one thing to use Tupac to meet the students where they're at, and another thing to champion the experiences of the youth who greatly admire these hip-hop icons. The goal of Urban Word NYC is to work precisely in these modes of meeting and championing, challenging and validating.

Lesson #4 (for teachers): Bridging the teacher-student gap: Draw a bridge and on one side describe how can you relate to your students experiences. On the other side describe how are they different. The bridge is the research...

But how do we meet a student where they're at if we don't acknowledge where we're at? The issues that we aim to address revolve around power dynamics (male/female, white/people of color, stu-

dent/teacher). Even the "downest" teacher needs to acknowledge the inherent power dynamic between student and teacher. I've seen countless teachers give up because they take things personally, or feel alienated by their students (even when they reflect their students demographics). So really, the best lesson planner finds the intersection between themselves and their students, accounting for all of the privileges, challenges, and ignorance that s/he may have. To do this takes constant research, an awareness of your students, an awareness of your power/privilege. Breaking down these hierarchies, and creating educational experiences that address these experiences, not only ignites a dedication to learning from in students, but also provides the platform for us as teachers to become more human.

Lesson #5 (for teachers): Read poem by Urban Word NYC student Jamila Lyiscott:

Broken English

JAMILA LYISCOTT

Today a baffled lady observed the shell where my soul dwells
and announced that I'm "articulate"

Which means that, when it comes to enunciation and diction
I don't even think of it
'Cause I'm "articulate"

So when my professor asks a question
And my answer is tainted with a connotation of urbanized suggestion
There's no misdirected intention
Pay attention
'Cause I'm "articulate"

So when my father asks "Wha' kinda ting is dis?"
My "articulate" answer never goes amiss
I say "father, this is the impending problem at hand"
And when I'm on the block I switch it up just because I can
So when my boy says "What's good with you son?"
I say, "I jus' fall out wit dem people but I done!"

And sometimes in class
I might pause the intellectual sounding flow to ask

“Yo! Why dese books neva be about my peoples”
 Yes, I have decided to treat all three of my languages as equals
 Because I’m “articulate”

But who controls articulation?
 Because the English language is a multifaceted oration
 Subject to indefinite transformation
 Now you may think that it is ignorant to speak broken English
 But I’m here to tell you that even “articulate” Americans sound foolish to the British
 So when my Professor comes on the block and says, “Hello”
 I stop him and say “Nooooo....
 You’re being inarticulate... The proper way is to say ‘what’s good’”
 Now you may think that’s too hood, that’s not cool
 But I’m here to tell you that even our language has rules

So when Mommy mocks me and says “ya’ll-be-madd-going-to-the-store”
 I say “Mommy, that sentence is not following the law
 Never does the ‘madd’ go before a present participle
 That’s simply the principle of broken English”

If I had the vocal capacity I would sing this from every mountaintop,
 From every suburbia, and every hood
 ‘Cause the only God of language is the one recorded in the genesis
 of this world saying “it is good”
 So I may not always come before you with excellency of speech
 But do not judge me by my language and assume
 that I’m too ignorant to teach
 ‘Cause I speak three tongues
 One for each:
 Home, school, and friends

I’m a tri-lingual orator
 Sometimes I’m consistent with my language now
 then switch it up so I don’t bore later
 Sometimes I fight back two tongues
 while I use the other one in the classroom
 And when I mistakenly mix them up
 it feels retarded like... I’m cooking in the bathroom

I know that I had to borrow your language because mine was stolen
 But you can’t expect me to speak your history wholly while mines is broken
 These words are spoken
 By someone who is simply fed up with the Eurocentric ideas of this season
 And the reason I speak a composite version of your language
 is because mines was raped away along with my history

I speak broken English so the profusing gashes can remind us
that our current state is not a mystery
I'm so tired of the negative images that are driving our people mad
So unless you've seen it rob a bank stop calling my hair bad
I'm so sick of this nonsensical racial disparity
So don't call it good unless your hair is known for donating to charity
As much as has been raped away from my people
How can you expect me to treat their imprint on your language
as anything less than equal

Let there be no confusion
Let there be no hesitation
This is not a promotion of ignorance
This is a linguistic celebration
That's why I put 'tri-lingual' on my last job application
I can help to diversify your consumer market is all I wanted them to know
And when they call me for the interview I'll be more than happy to show that
I can say:
"What's good"
"Whatagwan"
And of course... "Hello"
Because I'm "articulate"