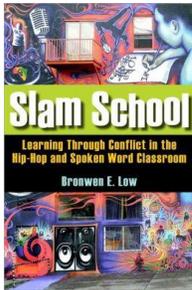


Professional Book Review

Low, B. E. (2011). *Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 189 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8047-6366-0 (pbk). \$20.85

Reviewed by Tiffany Farias-Sokoloski, The University of Texas at San Antonio, U.S.A.



Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom focuses on issues that are spawned from social difference in classrooms, gender, and most notably race. Chapter 1 provides a brief historical background of hip-hop, and Chapter 2 suggests that hip-hop can shape identities and ideologies among the youth. Chapters 3 and 4 begin to build themes of pedagogical value that focus on tensions between Black popular culture and schools by analyzing classroom conversations initiated by discourses of race that influenced and shaped student identities and their poetry. Chapters 5 and 6 then delve into the language used in the hip-hop culture by focusing on the use of “expletives and provocative terms such as the ‘N-word,’ ‘bitches,’ and ‘ho’s” (28).

Ultimately, the book’s chapters come together to suggest that, when teachers team up with community centers, students will be better able to transfer their skills from informal learning settings to the more formal settings found in schools. Teachers and students will benefit from this two-way relationship between informal and formal settings because students’ identity and linguistic repertoire will be acknowledged and built upon and teachers will gain insight to their students’ interests and activities outside of school.

Central to the book’s strength is how Low places Hip-Hop Nation Language at the forefront as she advocates for critical language pedagogies in the classroom. An additional strong point is the fact that Low views language as a tool that can be used for “reworking and expressing cultural and political realities” (156) and “makes multilingual rap lyrics a vital medium for critical language awareness pedagogies” (156). For example, the author explains that hip-hop was first used to grab the attention of students and then to assist in deep and complex conversations about language, culture, and identity. In this and in many other ways, *Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom* complements work done by Pennycook (2007). Low’s book builds upon Pennycook’s notion of the *hybrid language* practices of hip-hop communities by using the notion as a lens through which to observe the language use and change that took place within the classrooms utilized in the study. Like Pennycook, Low recognizes the language practices of hip-hop communities as forms of language awareness and as a means to weave hip-hop’s non-standard linguistic practices into the school curriculum’s standard expectations.

Furthermore, by analyzing student responses to rap lyrics and slam poetry during various classroom discussions, Low expands on Pennycook's notion of the "performative theory of language" (Pennycook 2004, 2007), which argues that identity is performed through the choice of language. Low found that most students explained language as a responsibility because of socially imposed linguistic expectations placed on them by their formal schooling environment. In fact, Low notes that "language emerges as one of the places in which such differences are experienced, enjoyed, suffered through, struggled over, challenged, and renegotiated" (p. 142). Low further expounds upon Pennycook's "performative theory" by concentrating on how "the language of authenticity in creative writing pedagogy complicated discourses of hip-hop authenticity" (p. 53). Therefore, by building upon the previous work of scholars like Pennycook, Low reminds readers that it is the individual's (in this case the student's) language acquisition that labels and positions them in society.

The format of the book is presented through the narrated experience of high school teachers and students. Formatting the book in such a way provides readers with a glimpse of teachers' struggles to connect hip-hop's non-standard linguistic practices to a rigid-standardized school curriculum. Low looks closely at the potential that culture has to validate or perhaps exclude and silence the experiences of students who are socially marginalized. The book can be used as a college textbook as an introduction to culturally responsive teaching methods for pre-service teachers, a valuable tool for all teachers and administrators who aim to bridge the school to the community they serve, and an opportunity for readers to broaden their understanding of the current, innovative pedagogies available.

The book urges teachers to acquire cultural competence so that they can support student learning by drawing and utilizing background knowledge often associated with their informal settings (i.e., cultural, community, and familial). The author believes that teachers should be aware of their positioning, that is, their own power and privilege in relation to others. As teachers gain an awareness of their privilege, they are afforded the opportunity to better understand and compare their own schooling and familial experiences to those of their students. In addition, the book notes the need for educators to maintain a sense of self and cultural awareness.

Slam School: Learning through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom initiates a much needed paradigm shift that not only addresses the hows and whys of particular teaching approaches, but also acknowledges the way these approaches are tailored to meet the needs of diverse student populations. However, while Low gives a snapshot of what worked for her in her particular setting, it would be useful if she had provided a more structured plan that delineates strategies that are immediately classroom-ready so that those interested would have a workable template for seamless implementation of the ideas discussed in the book. This would then help novice and experienced teachers alike, giving them real-world, practical tools to take directly into the classroom.

The book provides readers with a framework to begin the process of re-thinking the linguistic complexities surrounding hip-hop and youth in schools. Low's *Slam School* gives hope to teachers by offering an alternative to standard language forms while also empowering students' identities, cultures, and language (in its many forms) through a student-centered pedagogy based on hip-hop and spoken word. By appealing to the youth culture's love for hip-hop and to teachers' innate desire to connect to students, the book presents a new rhythm to which both can nod their heads.

References

- Pennycook, A. (2004). Performativity and language studies. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies: An International Journal*, 1(1), 1–26.
- Pennycook, A. (2007). *Global Englishes and transcultural flows*. New York, NY: Routledge.

References

Pennycook, A. (2007). *Global Englishes and transcultural flows*. New York: Routledge.

Pennycook, A. (2004). Performativity and language studies. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies: An International Journal*. 1(1), 1-19.