

Hip Hop Intelligences  
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For *Second Hip Hop Education Guidebook* (forthcoming)  
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Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) has gained popularity over the last 26 years, exactly corresponding to the increased number of students in the United States born under the sign of Hip Hop. To give a brief overview of MI: Gardner began his research in the 1970s and published his first MI book in 1983. He proposed seven intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.<sup>1</sup> Gardner stresses that these intelligences do not necessarily “operate in isolation” (2006:8); rather, they are the intersecting strands of the ways in which people perceive and know the world. Each individual has a unique blend of intelligences – what Gardner calls a “repertoire of skills for solving different kinds of problems” (21). This explanation also aptly captures the spirit and origins of Hip Hop culture, and the historical timing of his early work reveals a close relationship to first and second generation Hip Hop youth. Rather than MI theory only being a method of understanding how to engage these young people in the classroom, it seems likely to me that the theory emerged as a result of contact with and the study of Hip Hop generation students.

Taken together, this information suggests that MI theory, itself, reflects Hip Hop culture’s ways of knowing and being in the world. I would also suggest that Hip Hop culture has the elements of a form of its own intelligence.<sup>2</sup> Applications of MI theory in the classroom often translate into using a Hip Hop skill or object of inquiry to stimulate learning. However, the historical, theoretical, and practical synergies between

MI and Hip Hop can help educators understand the value of engaging the greater context of Hip Hop culture in the learning environment.

### MI THEORY AND THE “ELEMENTS”

Gardner defines an intelligence as “a biopsychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture” (1999:34). He suggests that intelligences are a result of both nature and nurture – that some are related to “genetic heritage” (1999:45), while others are directly related to culture and environment. And, in MI theory, intelligences are a “computational capacity” (2006:31) – it is the way a person learns and experiences the world, an inherent way of knowing. Gardner has also explored other possible intelligences since first introducing this theory – spiritual, humor, moral, naturalist, and existential. He has added “naturalist” to his list as an eighth intelligence and “existential,” conservatively, as 8 ½ (21). These key points of MI theory will help further elucidate the relationship between Gardner’s work and Hip Hop.

Returning to the historical overlap between the two, Gardner’s original intelligences clearly reflect Hip Hop generational practices (DJ’ing, MC’ing, B-boying/girling, Writing/Aerosol Art, and Human Beatboxing.)<sup>3</sup> I have begun a list below to show how the intelligences mirror these Hip Hop practices – please feel free to add or use as a class exercise:

➤ Linguistic:

- MCs and spoken word – rap and poetry.

- Within the larger culture, Hip Hop language/Street Language – naming, slang, appropriation and flipping of language. New and repurposed terms for creative forms and practices (i.e., “scratching,” “Uncle Sams,” “bombing”).
- Logical-mathematical:
  - DJs – as relates to beatmatching and backspinning;
  - Beatboxers – creating/matching rhythms, mixing time signatures.
  - B’boys/girls – complicated floor moves that defy gravity and the studied and inventive preparation for complex moves, such as spinning on the head or windmills (an overlap with Spatial).
- Musical:
  - Revealed in almost all practices – DJs, MCs, B’boys/girls, Beatboxers.
- Bodily-kinesthetic:
  - B-boys/girls;
  - DJs – dexterity in spinning and grabbing records. Fancy moves at turntables, such as behind-the-back spinning and scratching.
- Spatial:
  - B-boy/girl – a key intelligence for all dance forms.
  - DJs;
  - Writers – how to use public space and organize a crew for a bomb, a throw-up, or quick tagging.
- Interpersonal:
  - Writing – teambuilding, coordination.

- All the elements – entertainment, stirring up and pleasing a crowd (needed for successful call and response – “throw your hands in the air...”).
  - Also necessary for any kind of crew. Interpersonal intelligence is inherent to winning a battle (perceive opponents’ weakness and exploit it).
- Intrapersonal:
- MCs and Spoken word artists – raps and poetry that describe the human condition (e.g., “Me Against the World,” “My Philosophy,” the multiple raps titled “Where I’m From,” from US to Ghana).
  - The way Hip Hop heads connect to their craft and the culture.

The multiple intelligences of Gardner’s theory mirror the creative responses of Hip Hop to an oppressive society. They very nearly embody a manifesto of Hip Hop culture.

In Hip Hop, there is an overlap between Intrapersonal and Existential intelligences. Hip Hop’s deep connection to multiple spiritual forms is present in its writings, music, and art, including, but not limited to, ancient Khemet and Yoruban cosmologies, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam (for example, frequent utterances and references to *ashé*, “word!,” “say word!”, “word is bond,” “word becomes flesh”). Gardner, by his own admission, shies away from declaring a Spiritual intelligence. Yet this deeply spiritual side of Hip Hop culture is manifest in Existential intelligence, knowing and understanding the world through, as Gardner writes, “the human proclivity to ponder the most fundamental questions of existence” (2006:20). The birth of Hip Hop, itself, could be explained as a function of a high degree of Existential intelligence, in that it was born out of a need to find possibility in an economic landscape

of impossibility. Whereas critics often write that Hip Hop is “something from nothing,” I prefer to think that Hip Hop celebrated the cultural capital of the residents of the South Bronx and made something from something, flipping dominant power’s notion of “nothing.”<sup>4</sup> This further connection to MI reveals that there is a greater context to Hip Hop culture than the individual virtuosic skills that are captured and explicated by MI theory.

### A HIP HOP CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

In addition to the elements, equally integral to Hip Hop is an understanding of what constitutes a Hip Hop cultural environment and how the ethos of the culture plays out in meeting or gathering spaces. This structural question is, in fact, one of the crucial dynamics that defines Hip Hop as a culture – it has its own discrete ceremonies and rituals. This is just a preliminary list – they are not a recipe but, rather, speak to a cultural intelligence, a way that many people born under the sign of Hip Hop perceive the world and each other:

- Hip Hop culture is essentially a democracy building practice – the cipher as a fundamental site of engagement is evidence of this fact. Hip Hop generation novelist and essayist Adam Mansbach calls Hip Hop a “structural metaphor for democracy” (in Chang 2006:101), which is one reason for the increased interest in Hip Hop by the field of Peacebuilding.<sup>5</sup>
- Hip Hop has at its core a competition of skills. This ethic is embodied by battling, which ranges from friendly to fierce, and is driven by virtuosity. These are skills

that were, originally, only of value within the culture, but that have all since been appropriated in commercial markets. Nevertheless, these art forms are often still questioned, degraded, and criminalized outside the culture (e.g., Writing classified in media and politics as “vandalism,” rap music as “noise,” and the complex history and aesthetics of B’boying/girling reduced to “kids spinning on their heads”).

- Hip Hoppers live in a world of mixture. These mixtures often result in something appearing contradictory to a non-Hip Hop or non-youth observer, but are able to be held and sustained by the members of the culture. This is literally in the DNA of these generations – increasingly Hip Hop gen-ers come from mixed heritage backgrounds or live on the intersections of ethnicity and appearance. That is to say, they are faced with a national language of demography that is arcane and inaccurate and focuses on the pseudo-biology of “race” rather than the ways colonization shaped and continues to shape contemporary identities. Many people of these generations choose not to select one identity, but claim them all, asserting their multiple heritage, backgrounds, and cultural influences. Other seeming Hip Hop contradictions include:

- Hip Hop is revolutionary, but is also commercially entrepreneurial;
- Hip Hop draws from and acknowledges its past cultural connections and influences, but innovates, creating “future aesthetics”;<sup>6</sup>
- None of the elements exist in a vacuum. They were born and developed one in relation to the next: the DJs needed the MCs to help draw crowds

and win popularity; the DJs extended break-beats so the B-boys and girls could dance to them; Writers announced the presence of all heads to the world; Beatboxers draw on DJing techniques, rap, and cultural references to create their soundscapes. Many artists practice more than one element.

- Hip Hop gen-ers have grown up in an MTV-inflected world – non-linear, episodic, marked by the fragmentation of quick takes. These aesthetics influence and reflect the attention span of a generation of expert multi-taskers. In non-Hip Hop environments, young people are often pathologized as ADD and ADHD, while the information they receive from the world around them, including mainstream media and advertising, has taught them to think and respond in exactly this way.

In terms of Hip Hop Pedagogy, these dynamics suggest that Hip Hop cultural intelligence cannot solely be accessed via the individual intelligences theorized by Gardner, but also needs to be present in the environment where learning happens. It is not enough to create a lesson plan that plays to the individual intelligences of Hip Hop generation students without thinking of restructuring the learning environment to reflect the totality of their cultural intelligence and values. Introducing rap, spoken word, Hip Hop dance, Writing, et al into assignments while employing traditional methods of discipline and assessment and relying on old-school classroom hierarchies is merely a lure. It does not transform the learning environment and positions students as a kind of guinea pig, as if to suggest that an experimental spoonful of Hip Hop sugar will entice students to do their homework. Form is as important as content – the learning environment needs to reflect

and speak to the cultural values of the participant learners, or it embodies a form of structural violence and results in an accumulation of micro-aggressions. This last point explains why some experiments with Hip Hop in the classroom are not as fruitful as others. Hip Hop Pedagogy, at its best, with its roots in Critical Pedagogy, is concerned with catalyzing students to have a voice and responsibility in their own education, thus their own future. It is about encouraging leadership and building community.

### HIP HOP AS PEDAGOGY: A JUMPING OFF POINT

I was interested to discover that, while there are 14,200 Google hits for a search of “Hip Hop” and “multiple intelligences,” there are fewer than 10 journal articles that appear under these search terms in multiple educational and humanities databases. This suggests to me that the notion of a Hip Hop cultural intelligence is widely understood in the community and at a grassroots level, but not yet at an academic or research level.

A few fundamental distinctions and practices that the Hip Hop Theatre Initiative offers educators, activists, and artists attempting to weave Hip Hop into their work:

1. Make the space look and feel like a Hip Hop space. Suggestion: Meet in a circle, even if it means reorganizing the whole space every class – the effort will pay off. If using chairs, only have the number of chairs of participants that are present, so the group feels whole and complete. More can be added as people arrive.

2. Start with a check-in (and feel free to set a limit to the time – such as one word, one sentence, or one minute). This practice builds community and a sense of trust, which results in an ability to focus more clearly on the work at hand.

3. The leader does not need to be the expert on the material. Hip Hop youth are

the experts of their own experiences. In the context of Hip Hop Pedagogy, as in Critical Pedagogy, the teacher's or leader's role is as facilitator – to introduce the project or lesson, and keep it moving, while encouraging ongoing student critique and assessment (see below). Allow a process to happen and for the group work to unfurl. If using Hip Hop related materials, the facilitator can engage the expertise of participant learners to analyze them, explain vernacular content and samples, and suggest further study materials. The non-Hip Hop facilitator, as respectful tourist, needs to be familiar with the core values of the culture, but does not need to feel (nor should present him/herself) as authority. There are many Hip Hops – no one person “owns” its history. As stated above, this approach is as important as the specific lesson content.

4. Teachers from a traditional education background might want to keep an eye on tendencies to talk down to or aggressively discipline the participant learners.<sup>7</sup> If the goal is to have a student-centered learning environment, the facilitator needs to build community together, as a team. The facilitator's interactions will, therefore, be different in the presence of a cohort of experts.

This re-positioning of the teacher's role is a fundamental paradigm shift from other models of education, but one that is necessary to transform the learning environment into one where young minds can thrive. It does not mean forsaking a respectful or ordered learning environment. Rather, this approach builds trust, mutual respect, and collaboration so everyone has “buy-in” and is empowered to take responsibility for the collective experience. Suggestions: Introduce a conversation about time-management. Ask the group to generate certain agreements about classroom decorum. If an exercise is not working, take suggestions from the participants how to flip

or transform it, inviting students to be partners in the educational process. Be transparent while being rigorous, maintaining clear boundaries and expectations that the class helps generate.

Clearly there are exceptional situations where these ideas are impracticable. Moreover, re-framing a traditional learning environment will take more than a few pages of explanation. Paulo Freire's writings, especially *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, are an invaluable resource. And much of this re-structuring of the learning environment will be trial and error, with an interweaving of personal style. Connecting with other colleagues attempting similar work is essential. I hope these suggestions will reveal the productive potential in generating an environment that closely reflects the cultural intelligences of the Hip Hop generations.

#### ASSESSMENT AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Gardner writes about assessment as "simple, natural, and occurring on a reliable schedule." He suggests, "after a while, much assessment would occur naturally on the part of student and teacher with little need for explicit recognition or labeling on anyone's part" (2006:180-1). For readers familiar with Critical Pedagogy, this point will sound familiar; yet it is important to remember that Hip Hop is essentially a self-critical culture and practice. From battles in which artists reference and version each others' performances to raps that critique political and social systems, Hip Hop developed among young people who created their own governance and mentorship systems in an environment where adults were either absent or did not appear to understand or

sympathize with the struggles of the young people in their lives. Therefore, a work or learning environment where there is a pre-agreed structure for ongoing critique and assessment will contribute to the fullest use of Hip Hop intelligences. This practice is another example of how, at its best, Hip Hop proposes to dismantle certain traditional power structures.

To conclude, several practical implications regarding Hip Hop Pedagogy emerge given that Gardner's research was carried out at the exact moment of Hip Hop's birth and early development and that his description of Multiple Intelligences closely resembles Hip Hop culture's ways of knowing and being. On the one hand, the relationship between Gardner's celebrated theory and Hip Hop may be useful in altering the way certain administrations and critics in the educational system relate to Hip Hop culture. Hopefully one day Hip Hop and its canon will not need this kind of vetting; but, in the meantime, it could be useful to show MI's deep connection to Hip Hop. In addition, Gardner's model helps Hip Hop educators understand that it is not enough only to tap into intelligences that speak to practical skills. A specific context needs to be created so the cultural intelligences of Hip Hop generation youth are engaged and students have the opportunity to reveal their creativity and brilliance.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983) and *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons* (2006) for more specific information on each of these intelligences.

<sup>2</sup> Gardner has a set of criteria for what constitutes an intelligence that includes a neurological component. For the purposes of this short essay, I am not going to address this part of his theory and focus on the question of cultural context. This area, however, merits further study.

<sup>3</sup> I discovered while researching this essay that there is also a discussion of Hip Hop Intelligence in relation to MI and the elements on the H2Ed Wiki

(<http://h2edwiki.wetpaint.com/thread/2441135/Hip+Hop+Intelligence>).

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<sup>4</sup> See Chang 2005 for more information about the Bronx. Perhaps a corollary to Gardner's definition of Naturalist intelligence might be Environmental intelligence, when thinking about the Hip Hop practice of Writing and the ability of Hip Hop generation youth to navigate an urban landscape. His definition of Natural intelligence privileges people with access to a nature environment – I would argue that just as many “computational” abilities exist within urban settings.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the upcoming anthology *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict*, a project of Theatre Without Borders, Coexistence International, and The Alan B. Slifka Program in Intercommunal Coexistence at Brandeis University, has two chapters on Hip Hop in conflict zones (one of which I have authored).

<sup>6</sup> A term coined by Roberta Uno, founder and former Artistic Director of New World Theatre at UMass Amherst and current Senior Program Officer for Arts and Culture at the Ford Foundation, a strong supporter of Hip Hop and Hip Hop Theatre.

<sup>7</sup> This point is critical not just to philosophy of practice, but also in terms of efficacy (see Quinn and Kahn 2001).