Rapping Romeo and Juliet:  
Supporting Students’ Understanding of Text Through Their Existing Literacy

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Abstract
With the belief that my class of grade 9 Applied English students possessed a rich literacy, I drew on their existing literacy in the context of studying “Romeo and Juliet”. For the culminating assignment, students produced rap lyrics that demonstrated their understanding of the text and attention to language. Through this I learned that educators should consider activating and building upon students’ existing competencies.

Introduction
In my fourth year of teaching, I was assigned to teach the Grade 9 Applied English course. A few months into the school year, I presented the class with the opportunity to select the next unit of study. My students suggested Romeo and Juliet. In my experience, William Shakespeare’s plays are not easy to access, even for the most advanced students of English literature. The Grade 9 Applied students at my school were actually exempt from studying a Shakespearean text, and so I was very much surprised when students pressed me, asking, “Are we going to learn Romeo and Juliet?” particularly as the question was asked in a tone of eager anticipation, not dread.

When I probed why they wanted to study this difficult text, students responded that it was because all other ninth grade students were studying it. Essentially, they regarded this high-status text as part of the initiation into high school; that is, they knew Romeo and Juliet as the standard Grade 9 English text. Certainly it was on the syllabus for and a core unit of study within English courses at the higher Academic and Gifted/Enriched levels. I believe that by insisting on studying the famous tragedy of the star-crossed lovers, these students were staking a claim to literacy.

To support my students in reading and understanding this text, I considered which classroom experiences and activities would interest my students, activate their existing literacies, and validate their identities. I wanted to grant these students, who are often marginalized in the school setting, opportunities to feel connected with and to shape classroom events by bringing their everyday experiences to the forefront. I resolved to situate our upcoming learning in the (sub)cultural context of hip hop, with which my students were familiar.

My approach was informed by an understanding of New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). NLS is a movement that questions the nature of literacy as the acquisition of skills defined by a dominant approach (Street, 2003). It encourages a view
of literacy as a social practice. NLS recognizes multiple literacies and problematizes “what counts as literacy at any time and place and asks ‘whose literacies’ are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant” (Street, 2003, p 77). As some NLS researchers see it, “the problem for the teaching and learning of literacy, is that students bring with them different life experiences” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000, p. 121). Their solution is to instill in education “an epistemology and a pedagogy of pluralism” (p. 130). To achieve this, they advocate, “starting with a recognition of lifeworld experience and using that experience as a basis for extending what one knows and what one can do” (p. 124). Therefore, in accordance with the principles of NLS, I presented students opportunities to demonstrate and develop literacy skills, broadly defined, through privileging their lived experiences with and skills related to the hip hop movement within our academic study of Romeo and Juliet.

The resulting research question that guided my study was thus: Given the opportunity, how do students apply their existing literacies in demonstrating understanding and making meaning of a new literary text? The purpose of the study was to examine and reflect upon how students took up the opportunities to surface, activate, and build upon their existing literacies.

**Literature Review**

The terms *hip hop* and *rap* have been variously defined. In some literature, and throughout this article, hip hop refers to the overall youth culture movement that began around the late 1970s that is characterized by four interrelated practices: DJing, graffiti, break dancing, and rapping (Newman, 2005; Petchauer, 2009; Weinstein, 2006). Rap can be differentiated into the “conscious” variety (designated as *hip hop*), which carries social critique or commentary, and the mainstream kind, (known as *rap*), which is typically less complex in theme and intent. For clarity’s sake and at the risk of oversimplifying, *rap* is used in this paper to refer generally to the vocal performance or the written text associated with the hip hop movement.

Several recent studies have examined the effect of drawing upon students’ connections with the hip-hop culture and the specific genre of rap to engage students with literature and to support their academic literacy development. Much research has focused on integrating raps as texts of study within an English curriculum (e.g., Alexander-Smith, 2004; Kelly, 2013; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Paul, 2000; Sanchez, 2010). Findings include that rap texts can be used successfully to teach literary devices and literary analysis, and that such skills transfer to the reading of “standard academic” literature. For example, the twelfth-grade students in Morrell & Duncan-Andrade’s (2002) study, situated in an urban context, were able to make thoughtful connections between the raps they examined and poetry from the Romantic and Elizabethan eras, as well as connections between the literary works and the social context. Many of these

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1 For further readings on the intersection of hip hop and educational research, including a glossary of hip hop terms, consult Petchauer (2009).
researchers as well as others (e.g., Alexander-Smith, 2004; Kelly, 2013; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Paul, 2000; Stovall, 2006) recognize that beyond validating students’ out-of-school literacies and beyond using rap as a pedagogical tool to “bridge” or “scaffold” (Christianakis, 2011) the understanding of canonical literature, hip hop can be a genre of study in its own right. It can encourage critical literacy and transformation in students’ understandings of issues of power and identity.

Few studies have focused on the effect of having students engage in composing their own raps as a literary practice. Cooks (2004) attempted to teach the writing process through having a class of (predominantly African-American) eighth-grade students write raps, something that the students had personal experiences with. The researcher observed common features between writing raps and writing essays, such as narrative organization. Cooks (2004) concluded that drawing upon the knowledge and skills students possessed that related to alternative forms of writing, can improve students’ writing skills overall.

Similarly, Weinstein (2006) documented the out-of-school writing practices of 10 inner-city youth, the majority of whom had dropped out of school either temporarily or permanently. All of the youth composed lyrics that far exceeded expectations, in terms of their academic performance. Weinstein (2006) found that writing rap was a literacy practice that mattered in the world of these adolescents; it inspired a passion in them. Furthermore, the works of these adolescent writers demonstrated their already-existing range of rhetorical skills. They evidenced “sophisticated understandings of literary features such as figurative language, voice, and rhythm” (p. 271). These findings led Weinstein (2006) to conclude that rap has great potential to engage students in learning about writing and further developing students’ literacy skills.

In contrast to other studies, Christianakis (2011) depicted a case in which the teacher was (initially) staunchly opposed to teaching rap texts. This teacher did not see such texts as a tool for engaging students through a literacy with which they were familiar and have had some success. He resisted allowing his fifth-grade students to read and write raps as part of an open house poetry event. He perceived rap as ‘illegitimate’ compared to canonical poetry. He considered rap to be less school-worthy, in part, because it was presumed to feature profanities, be less serious in subject matter, and lack stylistic and rhetorical considerations. Several students persisted, however, and negotiated permission to write a rap, attesting to the strong connection and depth of engagement students had with the genre. In the end, the raps that students composed demonstrated their “intellectual creativity… “meld[ing] together the analytic language of school poetry with the aesthetics and practices of rap” (Christianakis, 2011, p. 1157).

Among the studies that support having students write rap as a way to validate and build upon their existing literacy, most were based on the students being given a free choice of topic for their writing. Lynch’s (2007) study is one of the only ones that explored the practice of writing raps linked to text, as a means for students to demonstrate understanding of a piece of (complex canonical) literature or to make meaning of it. As part of a larger culminating project, the author-teacher enriched his ninth-grade class’
study of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* by having students write rap lyrics that reflected issues of gender, class, or politics as relevant in the 14th-century poem and in the present day. Lynch scaffolded this assignment by reading and discussing Chaucer’s work as a class, having students write rhyming couplets in which they responded to such issues raised in the poem, and seeding the idea that Chaucer and contemporary rappers have much in common. Results suggested that students were competent at, among other skills, identifying key issues and offering keen critiques that demonstrated an understanding of Chaucer, his work, and social context.

My study sought to contribute to the small body of research that examines the affordances of engaging adolescent students in writing rap as a way of making sense and making meaning of complex literature.

**Methods**

**Context and Participants**

During the year in which this study took place, I was teaching at a public secondary school in southern Ontario. There were 20 students, 15 male and five female, in my Applied 9 English class. Thirteen of the students were of visible minority background. Over half had been identified as learning-disabled, and at least three had chronic attendance or behavioural problems, and had had some counseling or spent time in an alternate learning environment. Moreover, within the class, five were officially labeled as English-as-a-Second-Language students, although the majority was relatively new to Canada. Finally, several students were taking the course for a second time, not having earned the credit previously.

**Classroom Practices Implemented**

In planning activities for the *Romeo and Juliet* unit that would connect with my students’ experiences as adolescents with social lives, I decided to adapt and implement some activities that I had previously encountered. I focused on two of the activities for this study. First, I began the unit with a fun activity entitled *Shakespearean Insults* (O’Brien, 1993, p. 125). Students were to combine words or phrases selected from columns to form classic insults similar to ones hurled by memorable Shakespearean characters. Then, they transposed the slurs into modern or ‘street’ English, at which point they could playfully practise both versions on a partner. For example, “Thou hideous clay-brained miscreant!” became “You ugly stupid low-life!”

After this introduction, we read and discussed parts of the text together as a class. Students had access to a student version of the play that featured some illustrations and had unfamiliar words glossed and explained on the side of the page (Salani, Ferguson, & Scott, 1997; Shakespeare, 1998). I also brought in related readings and resources (Salani, Ferguson, & Scott, 1997), including a humorous and “twisted” synopsis of the play (Armour, 1957) and a children’s book version of *Romeo and Juliet* written in rhyming
couplets by a primary school educator (Burdett, 1998). In addition, we viewed video excerpts of adaptations of the play (Brabourne, Havelock-Allan, & Zefferelli, 1968; Luhrmann, & Martinelli, 1996). Throughout the unit, students engaged in comprehension and short writing tasks that I designed or adapted from various teaching guides (e.g., O’Brien, 1993; Salani, Ferguson, & Scott, 1997).

The culminating activity of the unit, the main focus for this study, required students, individually or in pairs, to import Romeo and Juliet into their world by transforming iambic pentameter into a rap, lyrics to a pop song, or any other verse style natural to them. A similar activity had been depicted on a segment of Boston Public (Katims & Liston, 2003), a television series that aired from 2000-2004, set in a rough inner-city high school. There, the class of thought-to-be delinquent, outcast, and hopeless students were shown rapping impromptu yet articulately about the play. I viewed the video clip with my class. My students identified immediately with the characters and were drawn to the activity. However, they were not comfortable with improvisation, so we decided to write out drafts first. When I discovered that an old issue of the satirical and admittedly subversive comic book-styled MAD Magazine featured a few pages titled Mad Raps Up Shakespeare (Jacobs & Woodbridge, 1991), I brought it in to share with the students. In particular, we enjoyed The Balcony Rap, which transformed Romeo and Juliet’s famous exchange into lines such as “Juliet baby, you’re chill…you’re…rad! / If we got together, we could make…it…bad!” and “Romeo honey, you’ve a real…smooth…line, / So what’s the story – your place… or… mine?” (p. 12). Such resources, although dated, helped to concretize for students the creative task that lay ahead. Upon completion, students read or performed their original works to the class.

Data Collection

The data included my observations and reflections – both individual and with my special education co-teacher – on the implemented class activities over the course of the Romeo and Juliet unit, which lasted about four weeks. Specifically, the culminating writing activity and performance took about one week, with almost all of the work completed during class time. Data also included the students’ finished pieces (i.e., their rap, song lyric, or poem). All but two students completed the assignment. In total, there were 11 pieces, most of them coauthored. The results presented herein focus on the work of one particular student, R.C., a sixteen year-old male who was attempting to pass the course for a second time.

Data Analysis

The coding scheme developed and applied for this study was informed by the curriculum for the English Applied 9 course (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). For example, I coded for evidence that students used appropriate and effective verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to support their messages in both the Shakespearean Insults and the rap-writing culminating activity. I also coded references
that students made to *Romeo and Juliet*, the text, as indication of their understanding of the play. As well, I coded the students’ use of rhymes and rhythm as evidence of their awareness of form and purpose in writing.

Table 1 displays the list of complete codes alongside the corresponding expectations from the curriculum. Note that as a predominantly oral task, the Shakespearean Insults activity only drew upon expectations from the Oral Communication strand of the curriculum, while the culminating activity involving writing related to both Reading and Writing expectations. Data analysis involved iteratively reading and coding the data, then examining the results of the coding for generalizations and themes across students.

*Table 1: Coding Scheme and Correspondence to Specific Expectations from English Applied 9 Curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Scheme</th>
<th>Specific Expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral Communication Skills</td>
<td>“By the end of this course, students will…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Understanding of purpose and audience (e.g., appropriate tone, accurate translation of insult)</td>
<td>Oral Communication Strand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Figurative language-literary devices (e.g., simile, metaphor, hyperbole, alliteration)</td>
<td>2.1 communicate effectively for a few different purposes and audiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Vocal strategies (e.g., pitch, pacing, volume)</td>
<td>2.4 use appropriate words, phrases, and terminology, and a few different stylistic devices, to communicate their meaning clearly to their intended audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Non-verbal communication cues (e.g., facial expression, hand gestures, body movement)</td>
<td>2.5 identify a few different vocal strategies and use them selectively…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Literary Text</td>
<td>2.6 identify a few different non-verbal cues and use them…to help convey their meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Understanding of key ideas (e.g., plot, characters, themes) in <em>Romeo and Juliet</em></td>
<td>Reading and Literature Studies Strand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Specific references or quotations from text</td>
<td>1.3 identify the important ideas and supporting details…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Connecting ideas from text to other texts or personal experiences</td>
<td>1.4 make inferences about [texts], using stated and implied ideas…</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.5 extend understanding of [texts] by making basic connections between the ideas in them and personal knowledge, experience, and insights…</td>
</tr>
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Written Communication Skills

1. Sense of audience and purpose (i.e., clear message)
2. Conventions associated with selected writing form (i.e., rhyme and rhythm appropriate for rap or pop song lyrics)
3. Figurative language/literary devices, specific/specialized diction, and expressions that enhance message

Writing Strand

2.1 write for different purposes and audiences using a few different...forms
2.2 establish an identifiable voice in their writing, modifying language and tone to suit the form, audience, and purpose for writing
2.3 use appropriate descriptive words, phrases, and expressions to make their writing clear for their intended audience

Results

On the whole, my students showed evidence of proficiency in their oral communication skills, their ability to understand a complex literary text, and their written communication skills. The results altogether suggest that students who struggle with literacy skills can indeed be successful when given writing and reading assignments and activities that evoke their existing, out-of-school literacies and validate their social lives, interests, and identities.

Oral Communication Skills

The Shakespearean Insults (O’Brien, 1993) activity was effective at bridging the school-based literacy with the literacy that students possessed and used in their social spheres. Students easily understood the purpose of the activity and imagined the audience for their insults because the parallel of students calling each other names in schools (unfortunately) and of rap artists putting down their rivals in rap lyrics was apparent. Instead of being intimidated by antiquated words, my students began experimenting with language, even purposely utilizing alliteration for greater impact. For example, “Thou purpled pinch-spotted pantaloon!” became a favourite as the /p/ sound allowed for a satisfying spray when they hurled the insult at a peer. When students translated the insults into contemporary language, they opted less for a word-for-word translation in standard English, and instead activated their existing literacy and selected equivalent slurs in street language. In fact, the students decided that the original insults in Shakespearean English were more comical than hurtful, while those in street English sincerely affected them.

When delivering their insults, some students activated effective vocal strategies and nonverbal cues. For example, some students experimented with tone, volume, and accents. Most often, insults were delivered in an appropriately stern tone in a powerful voice; however, sometimes students achieved dramatic effect by whispering the insult in a threatening tone. At times, students even made use of physical space, encroaching upon
others’ zone of comfort to deliver their message more effectively. Accordingly, the receiver of the insult acted or sometimes truly felt intimidated or subordinate. Nonverbal expressions and gestures that students applied included nose wrinkling to indicate disgust, finger wagging to show authority, lip curling to reveal a sneer, and chin tilting to indicate superiority.

**Understanding a Literary Text**

The raps and pop song lyrics that students composed reflected comprehension of Shakespeare’s text. One particularly poignant example is the work of R.C., presented below in full:\(^3\):

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Balcony Rap
Romeo Romeo where art thou.
Juliet standing on her balcony with a big frown,
wondering where her lover is,
wishing he would come and give her a kiss,
me a capulet and him a montegue
why can’t there be just us two,
our two families are both alike,
why do they always have to fight?
Then romeo steps in the light,
And starts rapping for Juliets delight,
Juliet Juliet i am right here,
i just heard all u said and its clear,
its clear that our love is young and new,
like a flower awaiting bloom,
so come with me and you will see,
that our future is waiting for thee,
forget your name and forget your family,
cause you and me is all we need,
if they catch you Romeo they will murder thee,
you know what Juliet let it be,
cause i need to be with you so bad they can come kill me........
PeAcE
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An analysis of R.C.’s rap shows arguably sophisticated features that reflect his understanding of the text. For instance, his lyrics switch from an omniscient narrative perspective in the first four lines to a short soliloquy from Juliet in lines 5-8. Then, after what seems to be a stage direction, “Then Romeo steps in the light …”, Romeo speaks. Without relying on paraphrase, the lines are reminiscent of what Shakespeare’s Romeo expresses in the memorable Act II, scene ii. Then, in the directive “forget your name and

\(^3\) All student writing quoted herein has not been edited. All perceived grammatical, spelling, and usage errors have been retained intentionally.
forget your family,” (2.2.34) that Romeo gives to Juliet, R.C. was reprising the original Juliet’s laments, as in “Deny thy father and refuse thy name” and “‘Tis but thy name that is my enemy… / O be some other name! / What’s in a name?... / Romeo, doff thy name” (2.2.38-47). The nod to Shakespeare’s recurring idea is clear.

Many other students directly referenced text content or features from the original play, even though the assignment did not require them to. For instance, “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” was often quoted; likewise, the archaic pronouns ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ were frequently used, as in R.C.’s verse. As an extension, Juneau even inserted into his rap insults, a remnant of the previous class exercise. He wrote:

Look at you eye ofending Montagues
You look like weman desperet for boos [You look like women desperate for booze.]
Stupid sausy Capulet
You look like your grandma in a corset.

Written Communication Skills

My students consistently demonstrated an acute awareness of the conventions of rap and used it to express their understanding of the text. They inserted slang, for example, to capture the misery that Romeo and Juliet’s love brought to the two houses, and to convey the disdain the Capulets had for Romeo:

Romeo and Juliet in love they fell, / But for there families that was hell.
I guess the nurse really liked Romeo / But to Capulets he wasn’t a homio [homey-yo].

In addition, words like ‘i’ in miniscule, ‘u’, ‘cuz’, and ‘yo’, rather ubiquitous in hip-hop and rap lyrics, appeared in their writing, including R.C.’s Balcony Rap above. R.C. even rounded out his rap with “PeAcE”. More interestingly, students expertly ended lines with pairs of words that they admitted were not usually thought to rhyme, but justified that they do “when you say it right in rap.” Examples included thou/frown, fine/disguise, self/shell, boot/Montague, and legend/heaven.

I must clarify that students were not instructed to use a particular rhythm or rhyme pattern; in fact, I did not teach elements of poetry such as figurative language or stressed-unstressed syllables at all. Instead, for this activity, students drew from the richness of their own literary backgrounds. Indeed, for their poems, many of my students penned metaphors, including:

Our love is young and new, / like a flower awaiting bloom.
Shut your mouth and make a wish / befor I hook you like a fish.
When Romeo heard that Juliet was a Capulet, / His heart blowed up like a rocket.

In all, the learning opportunities connected with my students’ social lives and interests, and importantly, their existing literacies. They convincingly demonstrated an
ability to engage with a rigorous literary text as well as to speak and write with purpose and a nuanced understanding of how to use language.

_Discussion and Conclusion_

Past research has suggested that inviting the hip hop culture in the form of rap texts into English and language arts classrooms has potential for benefiting students through activating their out-of-school literacy practices. Rap compositions can act as a bridge or scaffold for canonical texts (Christianakis, 2011), or they can be studied as texts in their own right, and as such, support adolescent students’ reading comprehension, literary interpretation, and critical analysis skills (Alexander-Smith, 2004; Kelly, 2013; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Paul, 2000; Sanchez, 2010). Less studied is the impact that engaging students in generating rap texts will have on their academic literacy skills (Christianakis, 2011; Cooks, 2004; Weinstein, 2006) and more specifically on their understanding of complex literature (Lynch, 2007). The results of the present study adds to the literature by offering support for rap writing as a viable way for students to express their interpretation of literary texts and for teachers to gauge students’ mastery of a number of literacy skills.

In line with students in other studies (Alexander-Smith, 2004; Christianakis, 2011; Cooks, 2004; Kelly, 2013; Lynch, 2007; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Paul, 2000; Sanchez, 2010; Weinstein, 2006), my ninth-grade students clearly held a specialized literacy that was rarely elicited in school settings. As other teachers have done, in offering students the opportunity to activate this hidden literacy, I helped foster student engagement in the unit of study. Indeed, all students participated fully in the _Shakespearean Insults_ activity, and almost all students (18 of the 20) composed a rap or song lyrics. Among them was R.C., who had truancy and work habit issues, and had failed the course once before. Even Sam, who had contributed next to nothing all semester, finished his poem. He was also eager to provide the background beat for other students’ rap performances. In all, I believe that the activities in this unit helped these and other students gain a sense of identity of themselves as contributors to the learning process.

As expected, given past research (Christianakis, 2011; Cooks, 2004; Weinstein, 2006), through the raps they produced, my students demonstrated a nuanced understanding of literary form and language use, including the application of stylistic and rhetorical devices. This was evident through the coding scheme I applied that aligned with the curriculum standards. In addition, I humbly learned to make such evaluations not solely through a ‘normative’ lens. Indeed, the form of rap itself necessitates particular linguistic and paralinguistic features, on the basis of which quality might be judged. I remember trying to piece together R.C.’s rap from his messy draft, and not being impressed or even sure that he had understood the assignment. He took his work from me and defended himself, saying, “Miss, it works, trust me. You can’t read it in your head. You have to hear it.” So he rapped, and it became astoundingly clear how skillfully he
had manipulated the language through techniques such as unexpected rhymes and contrasting rhythms.

My students were not merely good technical writers of rap. They were able to compose works that captured the essence of a challenging literary text, and in so doing, offered their interpretations of it. In addition, they readily incorporated references to the source text. These findings, together with that of Lynch (2007), suggest that, just as published rap texts have been advocated as literature deserving of study in and of themselves, student works of rap might be considered worthwhile writing products in their own right, alongside personal reflection papers and literary analysis essays.

Eliciting adolescent students’ out-of-school literacies may expose a vulnerability that teachers would rather not face. Certainly, I recognized that the discourse, which my students had a deeply embodied knowledge of, was one in which I would be considered illiterate. However, in exchange for a little vulnerability, I gained insight into students’ true competencies and potentials and, perhaps more importantly, allowed them to be agents and experts within their own classroom, a role they were more than capable of assuming. During the class performances of their works, my students unanimously agreed on which rap texts were the best. They were the ones that achieved and maintained a recognizable beat, albeit not iambic pentameter, the ones that applied clever rhymes and figurative language, albeit not in Elizabethan English, and the ones that captured the conflicts and heated emotions in *Romeo and Juliet*, albeit through the lens of my students’ social practices. I realized that rap is a literacy, and my students possessed it profoundly.

The present study was motivated by a realization that I needed to “notic[e] the resources that students bring to school” (Hull & Schultz, 2001, p. 581). As a result, through the *Romeo and Juliet* unit, I sought to validate the interests, life experiences, and existing literacy skills of my students. By bringing rap into the classroom, giving voice to it, and making meaning with it, I sought to accord legitimacy to my students’ existing literacy as I supported them in the reading of a challenging text. Through the activities implemented, specifically through the rap/verse-writing activity, I acknowledged and built upon the competent and exciting ways in which my adolescent students used language. In the end, I learned that students’ out-of-school skills and experiences can and ought to be reconciled with those that are currently privileged in the standard curriculum. Doing so could contribute to perceptible gains in student engagement as well as provide evidence of students’ meaning-making and learning about literature.
References


**Author Biography**

Elaine Wang is currently a graduate student in the Learning Sciences and Policy Ph.D. program at the University of Pittsburgh. She conducts research in instructional quality in English language arts and literacy. Elaine earned her M.A. in Education from OISE/UT and was a high school English teacher for nine years.