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Author(s): Tom Liam Lynch
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Illuminating Chaucer through Poetry, Manuscript Illuminations, and a Critical Rap Album

Drawing connections between Chaucer, Eminem, and social issues, New York City high school teacher Tom Liam Lynch helped students become familiar with The Canterbury Tales. Students wrote poems of rhymed couplets about today's social and political issues, created illuminated manuscripts, and recorded a rap CD. A book and album were published for wider distribution.

On "Rap"

My students published a book of original, illuminated texts and a rap album. We started by reading Chaucer, who taught us the importance of using rhyme to critique social and political issues. We also found Chaucer a fantastic resource for studying rap music. What began as a five-week study evolved over the course of nine weeks and turned the classroom into a recording studio.

I use rap rather than hip-hop to describe what my students created in English class because rap conveys more than just music. One musicologist suggests that rap refers to vocal performance and hip-hop refers to the music itself as one component of a larger culture (Schloss 29). It is not unusual, though, for different speakers to have different understandings of the terms.

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How We Published

Initially, this project sought to bring English and art class together. The work with rap music sprouted quickly once we had begun. Our final project ties together the three—a poetic, artistic, and musical publication (both book and CD). Our effort was helped by a group at Teachers College, Columbia University, called the Student Press Initiative.
(SPI). SPI works with classroom teachers to design and implement curriculum that publishes students’ work. The publications are professional and inspiring. (See them online at http://www.publishspi.org and read about the initiative in Erick Gordon’s article in the January 2007 issue of English Journal.) For students, the idea of their work being published and read by others—peers, family, others in the world—is a fantastic motivator. SPI even integrated the rap album CD into the book itself. The result was a publication with students’ manuscript illuminations, texts, and musical recording.

The School and Students, City and Music

The majority of my ninth-grade students would be categorized as white; students of nonwhite ethnicity make up a third of my roster. I hesitate to equate urban with ethnicity, however. My students, ethnicity aside, live in a city where rap music thrives and where the words urban, ethnicity, and music are in constant interplay: Cities bubble with the music of many nations. Imagine riding the subway train when a percussionist in full tribal garb sits in the middle of the train car, playing and singing and kindly asking for money after performing. Imagine it happening in ninety seconds. It does. Music and ethnicity are part of the daily commute to school. They are also deeply entrenched in New York’s identity. Take rap music.

Rap is said to have begun in the Bronx. Many of the best-known rap artists are from New York: Jay-Z, Lil’ Kim, Notorious B.I.G., P. Diddy, and Busta Rhymes all hail from New York. The first three grew up within blocks of each other in Brooklyn. I suspect that students’ New York City status affects their willingness to experiment with rap in the English classroom, but I do not know for sure. I do know that connecting rap music and Chaucer enriched our study of both.

Hook-Resentment

Once it seemed that rap would be an important part of the project, the first curricular decision I made was about sequence. I wanted to avoid something I call hook-resentment. Hook-resentment is when I hook students into a unit with lessons about pop culture, only to abandon the popular for the canonical shortly thereafter. I often felt students resented the switch—as if they had been duped. The order makes a difference. While I have used popular texts to attract students’ attention in the classroom, I never spotlighted “pop texts” as the central texts of study. When students’ work with traditional texts is aimed at better understanding popular texts, they are often more deeply invested. And they enjoy it. The students have been more likely to work through textual analysis even of Chaucer, when it is in the name of something popular and enjoyable, such as rap. For our Canterbury Tales study, I decided to first study Chaucer to prepare for studying rap. Again, the order makes a difference.

Why The Canterbury Tales

I had always imagined Chaucer as a stuffy British writer who wrote to bore me, until I read The Canterbury Tales in college. To my surprise, Chaucer’s writing was many things, but it was not stuffy or boring. Canterbury is rife with human characters that are naughty, crass, and even pious. In fact, their most unbelievable quality is that they speak in rhyme. Each occupies a social, economic, or political position, and each speaks at least partly in allegorical code. Chaucer wrote in the vernacular for the populace. He wrote a sociopolitical critique masked as pop fiction.

When my students first opened The Canterbury Tales, many seemed jarred and disheartened by the rhyme scheme and the language (even the modern translation we used presented many challenges). I wanted students to gain familiarity with Chaucer’s style and confidence in their ability to problem-solve reading challenges. There were three strategies that worked best for me: first, reading sections aloud to the class on a microphone, every day; second, having students read to each other in small groups; and third, having students annotate their readings with sticky notes, paying attention to plot comprehension and difficult vocabulary. After a few classes, some students became more involved in the reading. Others didn’t. I even tried a musical experiment for those who didn’t. I began playing medieval dance songs for students when they came into the room. Their initial resistance and discomfort with the music interested me; I suspected they were resisting another time and culture.
I continued to play the songs, hoping that if their ears opened up, their minds would follow.

Once I felt that most students were reading with some confidence, I began to ask students to make connections with their lives and experiences. I asked, “What forms of poetry do we know today that rely heavily on couplets?” Students began informal conversations about rap music. These conversations suggested to me that the possibility of using Chaucer to rap was strong. I recall one conversation in particular.

Anthony: Chaucer and Eminem have nothing in common!


Anthony: Nah. Eminem does more than that. He rhymes inside the line. Not just at the end. Remember when he raps with 50 Cent? Em goes, “Don’t let me lose you I’m not tryin’ confuse you when I let loose with the uzi and shoot through your Isuzu.” He rhymes like ten times in a line.

While Eminem doesn’t rhyme exactly, exchanges such as the one above helped focus the class on literary devices such as end rhyme, internal rhyme, assonance, consonance, and slant rhyme. Initially, I thought simple rhyming was all that linked The Canterbury Tales and rap. But as students began forging connections, I reflected on reading Chaucer in college. I thought about how offensive Chaucer’s writing might have been in his time. The rhyme, the bawdiness, the cries of social injustice, these too linked Chaucer and rap music. The bridge between the two was there. So we crossed it, slowly.

Responding to Chaucer in His Form:
Poetry and Art

One way for students to continue familiarizing themselves with Chaucer’s writing was to respond to Chaucer in couplets. We discussed the various topics in the work, such as gender and class. I asked students to use Chaucer’s form to address the current state of these issues. We held focus groups for discussion and wrote individual reflections. I recall one conversation while reading “The Wife of Bath’s Tale.”

Mandi: She’s an independent woman! She knows what she wants and gets it.

Mr. Lynch: What does she want, do you think?

Mandi: She wants money. If she doesn’t have money, she has no power. So she’ll do whatever it takes. I admire her.

Shawn: You admire her creeping around. Sleeping with men and killin’ them to steal their money? That’s what you want to do for a living?

Questions such as Shawn’s sparked dialogue, which helped generate ideas for further exploration in writing.

For the better part of a week, each student worked intensively on composing his or her own Chaucerian poem that commented on gender and class issues today. We alternated between working individually, conferencing with peers, and discussing as a whole class one student’s writing. Students’ final poems were then brought to art class and used as the text for creating manuscript illuminations.

Our ninth-grade art teacher, Ellen Wong, and I collaborated on this part of the project. In art, students studied traditional examples of manuscript illuminations: layout, images, font. The results were aesthetically impressive and the texts revealed students’ grappling with difficult social issues, gender in particular, that they face each day. We called this collaborative project Illuminating Chaucer.

In students’ couplets, it becomes clear that they have a sharp awareness of gender bias and other issues of the sexes. They comment in dialogue with Chaucer’s characters.

One student writes,

This woman could have many talents if she
Were not forced to live life as if down on one knee.
Could Simpkin’s wife once for herself stand up
Instead of being seen as some lazy pup?
This portrayal of women is meant to be;
If only others could realize and see
It’s not right for the world to treat women that way
No matter what Chaucer’s tales have to say.

(NYC Lab School, Anna)
The opening line interests me as Anna acknowledges the potential women have to live independently, although they fail to do so in Chaucer's tales. I found some of the rhymes themselves trite—such as up and pap—and learned that I have to help students resist the urge to treat couplets so simply. The student's modern indignation, however, is clearly in dialogue with Chaucer's medieval tale.

Another student wrote in more explicit conversation with Chaucer's words:

In The Wife of Bath it is said against what most wanted to understand
"She the wife rules the husband,
He will be her slave, for she is her own person."
Women must continue fighting against sexism before it will worsen.
(NYC Lab School, Alice)

Although the line lengths need revision, this student does flank Chaucer's words with her own. She is dependent on the Wife of Bath to rhyme her commentary. Her call to fight sexism transcends time—from a fourteenth-century London street to Broadway.

The next time I teach such a project, I would focus more on encouraging deep analysis of social issues and more on quality of rhyme—both end rhyme and internal. I might even require the quoting of characters' voices to be mingled with students' voices. At the same time, the couplets did serve to help students respond to Chaucer in his form. Writing in rhyme also bridged students' lives to lives in medieval England. Most useful, however, was that students pulled ideas and lines from their individual poetry to compose raps in small groups. (While the raps were written in groups, they were usually performed by one or two student-rappers.) I found the illuminations bubbling with possibility, and they especially served as the foundation for extending the study of Chaucer to rap music.

Responding to Rap Music in a Rap Recording

I avoided using rap in the classroom initially. The lyrics often seem offensive, especially in popular rap. My middle-class whiteness makes me uncertain. But I do listen to rap music. I can't deny its catchiness. Nor can I deny its ubiquity in many students' lives. As I have slowly introduced it into my curriculum, and admitted that I was no expert, I have seen students become quickly invested in our class work. Many students seem confident in discussing how Chaucer is or is not similar to rap, whereas discussing Chaucer alone has received blank stares. I continue to work with rap music in my classroom because I have a small hope that every time students hear a rap song, they'll connect it to the lessons of our classroom.

For Illuminating Chaucer, students studied the lyrics and performances of rap artists Kanye West, Eminem, and Lauryn Hill. We engaged in several activities, ranging from annotation to small-group discussion to whole-class "readings" of the songs, in which I started and stopped songs for students' comments and critique. I assigned them to revisit their manuscript illuminations from art class, first individually and then with their partners. Next, students collaborated to pull lines from
each other's poems to create a new rap that addressed gender, class, or politics. They had to pay attention not only to what the poem looked like on paper but also to how it would sound when rapped. We called this "remixing" student work.

As students wrote their raps, which took about three days, I set up a makeshift recording studio in the classroom. I used an iBook computer, a recording program called GarageBand (which comes standard on most Apple computers now), a microphone, headphones, and a little digital gadget called an interface. This last gizmo served as a translator between the sounds picked up by the microphone and the computer.

While the set-up sounds complicated, it is basic and can be created with a little time, equipment, and trial and error. I even set up a screen behind the microphone on which I projected my computer monitor. I wanted students to see what I was doing while their colleagues were performing.

I pushed the desks to the walls and set up the chairs in rows as in a concert hall. As the rappers from each group walked up to the microphone, the class clapped in support—we all felt the nervous energy every time a new recording began. The rappers put on their headphones, in which they heard the beat and their voices. They shared one microphone. I asked them to practice coming in as I counted off:

Mr. Lynch: All right. I'm going to start the track. Just practice coming in.

Ken: Can you count off for us?

Mr. Lynch: No problem. [As I start the beat, several heads start bopping to the beat, including my own.] Here it comes... one, two, ah, um [I emphasize the beat and when to start with my hands]. How did that feel? You got it?

Ken: Yeah. Let's go.

Mr. Lynch: Quiet in the studio. [I start the beat again and mouth the words silently to the rapper.] One, two, ah, um:

Chaucer says the Church is corrupt and strong
It ain't gonna stay that way for long
So what we need to do is fix Bush's lies
It ain't gonna fly
It ain't goin' nowhere we just wasting time
Wastin' innocent lives

Now we stuck in a rut
Cause Bush messed it up

(NYC Lab School, Ken)

Ken begins by referring to Chaucer's political differences with the Church, but then he switches into an extended contemporary critique of the Bush administration. His words are direct. His political position is clear.

In this next excerpt, we hear another student's political application of Chaucer:

The government tells us lies and deceit
So we must rise up on our own two feet
The poets were right
For starting the fight
When these rappers writin' all of their rhymes
Tellin' us about horrible crimes of our times
Like the government fightin' all of their wars
Right across that great big Atlantic
How writers use their words just to plea
Tryin' to bring the government down on its knees
Because the pen and the pad, the pen and the ink
Who knew such simple verses made society think
I speak through my writing
Use my words for fighting
Like this man I knew named Geoffrey Chaucer
He was a fourteenth century author
Implied an equality between class and gender
And mostly was not a church defender...

(NYC Lab School, Tim)

Tim's rap is an unapologetic criticism of the current administration. But he doesn't just complain about foreign policy. Rather, Tim is aware of his actions as a critic-poet. Tim assumes the role that he will eventually attribute to Chaucer as well. Tim weaves together poetry and war, Chaucer and himself. When you read the lyrics while listening to the recording, Tim's intellect and passion are fantastic.

Weeks after the recording, we threw a CD-release party when the album and accompanying book were published. Students performed on stage before an audience of peers and parents. The party, I thought,

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would serve as the formal end of the project. But I hadn’t anticipated one thing.

That night, many students went home and downloaded the album onto their MP3 players. The next morning, students were listening to each other’s songs on their iPods. In fact, I was about to ask one young man to give it to me when he responded, “But Mr. Lynch, it’s Tim.” They were listening and re-listening to each other’s social and political critiques. Later that day, I saw another student share his headphones with a friend. They bobbed their heads in synch, listening to their peer’s work. One looked at the other and proclaimed, “Yo, that’s fire.”

It was fire.

**Pop Culture, Imagination, and the Portable Audience**

Rap is a popular text. As with other pop texts, such as television and movies, English teachers can (and do) debate their place in schools. In *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*, Gerald Graff addresses the use of popular culture in the classroom. While his work is aimed mostly at universities, he spends much time discussing the importance of his ideas for secondary education as well.

Graff writes, “In a sense, the modern American university and American popular culture are estranged twins” (37). He discusses how the mass, systemic education of the populace is the popularizing of culture, or “pop culture.” To separate the two is to create the illusion that schooling and pop culture are unrelated. This belief can then prevent an educator from using a medium such as rap in a serious way in the classroom.

Schooling can, in fact, intellectualize popular media. Instead of “schooling [that] takes students who are perfectly street-smart and exposes them to the life of the mind in ways that make them feel dumb” (Graff 2), incorporating pop-cultural media can reveal the best of students’ intellectual and creative potential, especially when we use the canonical to explore the popular, rather than using the popular to hook students.

Educational philosopher Maxine Greene writes that teachers must allow students to become artists: “Art offers life; it offers hope; it offers the prospect of discovery; it offers light” (153). For students to feel like artists, they must work with a medium that they recognize as artistic. In my class, that meant a microphone, some headphones, and a beat.

Greene’s list of artists includes musicians, dancers, and actors. She’d embrace the manuscript illuminator as well. I imagine. I suggest that we add recording artists to her list of “releasers of imagination.” Students must be galvanized by the chance to create meaningfully. For many students, traditional media—such as canvases, pages, and even wooden stages—are antiquated. Our students live in a digital age, and they move to their own soundtracks. I felt compelled to reconsider their medium as well as my pedagogy. Greene seems to foreshadow this reconsideration when she warns, “Trying to open students to the new and the multiple, we want ourselves to break through some of the crusts of convention, the distortions of fetishism, the sour tastes of narrow faiths” (146). Over the course of *Illuminating Chaucer*, I had to open myself to widening my faith by investigating a medium students knew well, revered, and enjoyed. I found myself moving from teasing imaginations with hooks (and resentment) to releasing imaginations with a rap album.

All of the artists Greene mentions must in some way negotiate audiences. Students are constantly aware of audience, or who is paying attention to them. In a recent article in *Teachers and Writers*, Erick Gordon writes about many English classrooms where students write for a one-person audience: the teacher. He goes on to ask, “[I]f her audience remains the same throughout, what incentive does a student have to truly explore the idea of audience as she develops her writing abilities?” (4). The imperative is to help students imagine their words as farther-reaching—to see each other as “an audience of intellectuals” (Rosenberg 60).

If education is a commitment to teach students “to articulat[e] ideas in public” (Graff 2), few media can match the CD as a public medium for our students’ generation. Publishing on CDs encourages
rigorous composition, well-rehearsed oral presentation, enthusiastic performance with an audience of peers, and the lasting recurrence (or replaying) on portable music players. But it has only been possible in the last several years, as portable computers have come equipped with user-friendly recording programs. English teachers—and teachers in other disciplines as well—might gain much from experimenting with audio recording and publishing in classrooms. Rap lends itself naturally to such endeavors, regardless of content area.

You can rap and record anything.

At the end of the school year, I decided to have students engage in reflective writing to review the year. While reviewing The Canterbury Tales, students asked me to put on our Illuminating Chaucer CD to help them recall the study and come up with ideas. As I put on the first track, I was stunned. So much time had passed since the CD recording, and yet, students were rapping along with their classmates' verses. Some students had memorized entire songs, others the whole album. Maybe the next time I board the 2 train home to Brooklyn, a student's iPod will blare the tinny city sounds of English class.

Works Cited


Tom Liam Lynch teaches secondary English at the New York City Lab School. His professional interests include media literacy, the role of popular culture in the study of English, and the interplay between orality and literacy in the classroom. email: EnglishClass.Lynch@gmail.com.

READWRITE THINK CONNECTION

Lynch used students' prior knowledge of popular music to help them make connections to Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales. "Examining Transcendentalism through Popular Culture" invites students to work with excerpts from the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, comics, and songs from different musical genres to examine the characteristics of transcendentalism. In their exploration, students use multiple genres to interpret social commentaries, make connections among works they've studied in class, and develop their views on individualism, nature, and passive resistance. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_ view.asp?id=320

Tom Liam Lynch  

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT