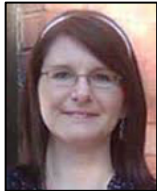# Hip-Hop Hamlet: Hybrid Interpretive Discourse in a Suburban High School English Class

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Abstract

This study investigates the collaborative composing processes of a group of five high school seniors who constructed interpretations of each of the five acts of Shakespeare's Hamlet *through the medium of spoken word performances. The group composing processes were analyzed to identify how the students drew on conventions from the spoken word tradition to phrase and perform their interpretations. Findings indicate that across the five spoken word performances, the retelling of the* Hamlet *narrative involved a set of decisions that were both constrained and afforded by the rap medium. The students' discussion of how to rewrite the story in the condensed poetic form of a rap required them to clarify events from Shakespeare's version and both summarize them and interpret them both in their discussion and in their own text. Their interpretive work involved the incorporation of a variety of rap and other pop culture conventions such that their deliberation regarding word choice and accompanying performative elements necessitated careful consideration of the meaning that they found in Shakespeare's version of the story, itself an adaptation from extant cultural narratives. The study concludes with a consideration of their spoken word interpretations as comprising a hybrid discourse that enabled exploratory interpretive talk that contributed to their understanding of the drama through the collaborative composition of their own representational text.*

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Vygotsky's conflicting beliefs about the role of art in both society and human development reflect positions in a debate that continues to this day. In his earliest scholarly writing—his doctoral dissertation written in his early 20s as a work of literary criticism, with a focus on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—Vygotsky (1971) took an elitist view of true art, whose status he restricted to only the greatest, most provocative work produced by a society. He spoke condescendingly of commonfolk expressions and creations as incapable of producing what he called an intelligent emotional response that may produce a higher level of realization in a reader who is cognizant of the conventions and codes through which the work is produced (see Smagorinsky, 2011).

Toward the end of his brief career, Vygotsky (2004) took a different tack, considering everyday art from a developmental standpoint. Focused on the producer and not the product, as he had earlier, he asserted that the process of composing texts through cultural tools serves an expressive and representational role in a child's development of concepts. From a developmental perspective, the product of this composing process need not meet standards for excellence, as is required in the German tradition of Kultur—which values the greatest products of human creativity and intellect—that Vygotsky (1971) appears previously to have endorsed in outlining the psychology of literary art. Children's drawings, for instance, might be crude in execution yet represent something of importance while simultaneously playing a role in the child's appropriation of communicative symbol systems. Developmentally, process supercedes product; aesthetically, the product has primacy.

Vygotsky's (1971, 2004) contradictory perspectives on the status of artworks provide the template for intertextually-grounded debates in education about what should properly occupy the U.S. English/Language Arts curriculum; that is, the school subject dedicated to literature, writing, and language study. Many (e.g., Alvermann, 2010) have argued that works of popular culture—including such diverse texts as young adult literature, spoken word poetry, comic books, graphic novels, video games, and other media that are accessible to youth—should be central to the curriculum as a way to help adolescents voice their personal worlds in their academic work to the benefit of both. Others (e.g., Stotsky, 2000) assert that only those works that are part of the canonical dialogic stream that has withstood the scrutiny of the ages—particularly those that emerge from classical European traditions—are worthy as the basis for U. S. students' school learning.

This latter group argues that children's education is debased when the curriculum is broadened beyond the traditional canon to include texts emerging from contemporary culture, particularly that which serves youth interests. Rigorous scholarly studies further suffer, assert critics from both the popular press (Malkin, 2004) and the research community (Johnson, Jackson, & Gatto, 1995), when students compose texts in current, popular modes such as rap and anime. Rather, they assert that only the traditional writing forms of narrative, exposition, persuasion, compare-and-contrast, and others historically required in school enable critical thinking and advanced academic work.

In this research, we provide an analysis of five high school seniors enrolled in a suburban AP literature class who collaboratively created spoken word poetry as a means of understanding and interpreting *Hamlet*. To study the processes through which they used the spoken word genre as a means for constructing and expressing their understanding of the canonical drama's complexities, we inquired into the following questions.

1. Which narrative perspective and plot elements did the students foreground in condensing each act's action into a relatively brief spoken word poem?

2. What aspects of the play's meaning potential did the students intend to depict, and through what symbolic means did they represent their interpretation of the play's action?

3. What intertextual references did the students draw on, and how did they use those sources to represent their interpretive choices?

4. Through the process of collaborative interpretation and composition, to what degree were the students' discussions exploratory and generative?

We assume that the classroom provided a hybrid setting in presenting the students the task of using a contemporary U.S. popular culture medium to engage with the language of a British play written in about 1601. This activity provided an occasion for White U.S. teens to revoice Shakespeare's action in a genre appropriated from the discourse practices of Black U.S. cultural expression. Our research questions are designed to direct our analytic attention to the manner in which the students undertook the assignment to engage interpretively with *Hamlet* using the speech, sound, and expressive conventions of contemporary spoken word poetry. Our inquiry takes place in an academic setting, the AP literature class, that has historically required college-level reading and writing of student, rather than interpretations through a medium of popular culture familiar to the students.

Theoretical Framework

We frame this study in terms of the social-cultural-historical theory outlined by Vygotsky (e.g., 1987), which emphasizes the manner in which learning to think follows from immersion in cultural practices mediated by signs and tools, particularly speech. This mediation allows for appropriate ways of communicating to become established in particular settings (cf. Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1991). Within these settings, idiosettings—settings within settings (Fine, 1987)—may emerge in which established norms may be violated and reconstructed to accommodate genres typically excluded in such contexts. Further, meaning emerges through joint social activity in relation to problems presented by the environment (Tulviste, 1991). This activity may take on an exploratory and experimental dimension that enables imaginative projections of possible solutions.

We focus first on youth culture and its classroom potential, then consider hybrid classroom spaces in which youth and popular culture take their place alongside the established "high culture" that since the time of Matthew Arnold (1869) has dominated U.S. college and high school literature curricula, especially that which governs the AP class.

Youth Culture as Mediational Means

"Youth culture" refers to the norms, values, and practices recognized, shared, and acted upon by adolescents (Rice, 1996). Hagood, Alvermann, and Heron-Hruby (2010) are among those who argue that allowing a wider range of textual forms, especially those from youth and popular culture, may provide possibilities for more students to have access to the curriculum than does a curriculum centered on canonical literature. Youth culture incorporates texts from a variety of contemporary sources that appeal to and represent young people's psychological need for differentiation from adults and their world (Bartle-Haring, 1997). These texts have historically been characterized by a rejection or questioning of adult norms and values (Schultze, Anker, Bratt, Romanowski, Worst, & Zuidervaart, 1991; Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005). Those who view adolescent rebellion as part of the normal course of development understand young people's acts of insubordination, such as suburban teenagers' embrace of rap music, as a normative youth experience with strong intertextual roots.

The medium of rap has grown from its origins in the Black community to become standard fare for people of all heritages, in the U.S. and around the world. It has outgrown its roots in the spoken word performances of urban African American artists such as Gil Scott-Heron, Haki Madhubuti, and others in the 1970s to become a genre that has transcended its origins. Hip-hop routines have been appropriated beyond the world of rappers and into such diverse genres as jazz (Herbie Hancock), funk (Maceo Parker), pop (Michael Jackson), country and western (Bubba Sparxxx), fusion (Bela Fleck), Celtic (Manau), rai (Khaled), klezmer (So Called), and even the Aryan supremacist movement, an ironic turn in which performers use hip-hop conventions to spread their message of racial hatred (e.g., the German musicians Fler, Bushido, and Sido).

In the study we are reporting, the students producing raps were not, like the hip-hop-oriented youth studied by Kirkland (2008) and others, urban African Americans. Rather, they were suburban Whites whose immersion in youth culture enabled them to know, understand, and be able to reproduce the conventions of rap music, while having little in common with the urban artists among whom the genre originated and flourished. Their appropriation of these conventions illustrates the manner in which rap has become an important dimension of what young people of diverse backgrounds consider to be their musical heritage (Huq, 2006).

The degree to which rap conventions may be easily included in conventional school instruction is a matter of dispute, with many Black scholars and practitioners (e.g., Brown, 2005) concerned that rap may be "raped" by its appropriation by outsiders. On the other side of the cultural divide, traditionalists view rap as having a "retarding effect . . . on young black men through encouraging thuggish violence, misogyny, clownish behavior and crude materialism" (Crouch, 2008). Our interest in this study elides the concern that rap's integrity might be threatened when used educationally in a predominantly White classroom, or that it is inherently vulgar and degrading and thus educationally inappropriate. Rather, we investigate the possibility that rap, as a dimension of popular culture shared across racial and cultural groups, may provide a suitable poetic medium for literary interpretation for youth conversant with its conventions, scrubbed of sex and violence for the school setting – in spite of their centrality in *Hamlet* and other Shakespeare plays – that concern Crouch and those who share his sense of propriety.

Hybrid Classroom Spaces

For many years, educational researchers have criticized schools for operating according to dominant cultural values and practices (e.g., Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989). Amidst these critiques, the dominant culture in the U.S., that of upper and middle class Whites, is reinforced from both scholarly

(Hirsch, 2010) and policy (Duncan, 2013) perspectives. Dominant cultures use schools to impress their values on all learners (Apple, 1996), often with the support of political and economic leaders (e.g., Duncan, 2012). Such policymakers view nondominant speakers and their speech as inferior to those of the dominant culture (see Stotsky, 2000) and in need of continual remediation and testing to elevate them to the academic discursive norm.

Some have argued that hybrid classroom spaces provide one means of foregrounding students' discursive conventions in classrooms so as to flatten power hierarchies and promote student learning (e.g., Dyson, 1999). First author Joanna constructed the hybrid zone in the current study to make the challenge of interpreting *Hamlet* more accessible by assigning a task in which the students represented action in language and discourse forms from their youth culture's musical heritage. This provision enabled interpretive expression in speech genres and social languages (Bakhtin, 1986) with which they were familiar, as opposed to the conventions governing formal literary criticism that are expected on AP exams.

This hybrid space—i.e., one that incorporates elements of more than one genre or community of practice—was designed under the assumption that when youth social and cultural values are encouraged and supported (even when they are not members of the cultural groups responsible for constructing new norms), students are more likely to find meaning in their schoolwork than when they are when confined to traditional academic discourse (cf. Boaler, 1993; Cribbs & Linder, 2013). Barton and Tan (2009), relying on the work of Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992), created a conception of hybrid spaces that relies on two types of funds of knowledge and their related discourses: those drawn from family and those originating in peer groups. The peer, youth, and popular culture conventions available through rap served as the hybridizing discourse employed in this study's focal classroom.

The provision of this hybrid space fell within the tradition of teachers' using popular culture to help students relate to the curriculum (Alvermann, 2010) as a way to broaden the intertextual sources upon which students may draw to inform their thinking. Intertextuality refers to the manner in which texts share characteristics that enable people to understand and use them through recognition of their formal traits and social purposes. Each text serves as part of a chain that enables cognizance of codes and scripts, which in turn contributes to an approach to reading and writing strategically and knowledgeably within the expectations of the genre that the intertextuality provides. In this study, the use of rap conventions in Shakespearean study in an AP literature course involves intertextual connections that are typically unavailable in such settings, thus our consideration of this class as providing a hybrid discursive space.

Popular culture is familiar to students in terms of its formal features and often involves themes that are consistent with those that run through canonical works, yet that are more specifically grounded in contemporary concerns (Smagorinsky, 2008a). Providing hybrid spaces in which adolescents undertake the study of classic texts by engaging them with popular culture forms thus has potential for promoting students' connections with and understanding of both the range of textual forms employed and the social and cultural themes that afford them a meaning potential. The approach taken by Joanna in her instruction was designed to provide access to interpretive possibilities of the conventional school curriculum for teens for whom Shakespearean language and the discourse of literary criticism provided a barrier to understanding. Other studies in this line of inquiry indicate that such deliberate instructional design can allow disaffected students from outside the cultural mainstream to engage with the school curriculum (Smagorinsky, Anglin, & O'Donnell-Allen, 2012) and enable new potential for students who affiliate with school to express their understandings of complex material in accessible forms (Smagorinsky, Cameron, & O'Donnell-Allen, 2007).

If thinking is social in origin and if cognitive development is promoted through engagement with people in conjunction with mediational tools (Cole, 1996; Vygotsky, 1987; Wertsch, 1991), then hybrid spaces may serve as settings in which, through collective engagement with ideas, learners may experience growth by means of collaborative, generative, constructive, experimental, and developmental speech. This growth may be abetted by students' use of exploratory talk (Barnes, 1992); i.e., the emergent thinking afforded by the mediation of speech (Vygotsky, 1987).

Intersubjectivity

However, for collaboration to be beneficial to students, several conditions have to be in place. Tudge (1992) argues that only when the students come to an "intersubjective understanding" is collaboration beneficial (p. 1366; cf. Wertsch, 1985). Intersubjectivity refers to the degree to which different people share a construction of a given setting and an understanding of how the setting is interpreted by others. In school, an intersubjective understanding requires similar conceptions of the goals, rules, and processes by which education is undertaken. For example, simply putting students in groups to work does not necessarily produce a hybrid space characterized by collaboration and its attendant benefits. Rather, successful interactions follow from the development of a relational framework based on mutual understanding of the setting, goals, tasks, and procedures, and a disposition to support other group members (Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000). The success of any particular group activity typically derives from prior socialization to collaborative interpretation and composition in relation to strategic instruction (Smagorinsky & Fly, 1993).

In our study, the task of collaboratively composing an interpretive spoken word performance based on the material provided by Shakespeare in *Hamlet* was framed by many months of preceding collaborative creative and multimodal interpretation. This social continuity characterizes intercontextuality (Floriani, 1993), the succession of social arrangements and practices that, like intertextuality, links one episode to prior episodes such that fluency becomes available. The class activities that preceded the interpretive rap assignment relied on the individual students having a sufficient degree of intersubjectivity for engaging with the task and sharing a collective goal congruence with the teacher, even as other aspects of their knowledge and investment in the activity varied.

The development of a relational framework based on intersubjectivity and requiring collaboration potentially enables students to engage in experimental play that helps them imagine new possibilities (Vygotsky, 1978) for socially-situated discursive expression. Vygotsky viewed play as rule-governed and thus not simply a source of unfettered pleasure or entertainment. Indeed, as a process implicated in human development, he argued, play can be serious business indeed as learners of any age engage with a task imaginatively to envision new possibilities, many of which may not cohere into manageable plans but some of which emerge as durable and worth pursuing. Central to this conception is the mediational role of speech (or, in some cases, other cultural tools) as students use generative exploratory talk. Our goal with the research is to analyze the processes that emerged during one group's composing processes in relation to the assignment to interpret *Hamlet* through spoken word poetic performances.

Context of the Investigation

This study took place in Joanna's first-period senior AP English Literature and Composition class, which met every other day for 90 minutes on a block schedule. The school, one of four high schools in a county near a major Southeastern U.S. metropolitan area, enrolled approximately 1,400 students. The course included the same students in both semesters, with data collection occurring between April 13 and May 13. Enrolling only 14 students, the class, felt Joanna, was more informal and conversational than

would be possible in a larger class. The makeup of the class was typical of the AP classes taught over a five-year period by Joanna in this county: 50 percent White, 43 percent Black, and 7 percent Latin@. Of these students, 71 percent were females and 43 percent were designated as gifted.

The atmosphere of Joanna's classroom was informal by design. The students were allowed to bring breakfast to class, especially those who arrived late due to transportation issues and participated in the school's free breakfast program. Classroom discussions sometimes addressed real-world issues, such as the presentation of women in the media. Joanna's class represented an idioculture within the school's more traditional interactive structure in that she made different hybrid spaces available for student talk that remained within the bounds of the teacher's academic goals while affording students more vernacular speaking and interpretive opportunities.

Participants

Joanna chose to focus on this particular group of students—Maggie, Laurie, Brianna, Denny, and Cameron (each White; all students' names are pseudonyms)—because each student attended each class session recorded for the research, and because from among groups with perfect attendance, these students exhibited relatively low levels of off-task conflict, even as they frequently disagreed about how to compose their raps. The year of the data collection was the second in which Joanna had taught all of the participants; she had previously taught them as tenth graders, although not all in the same class. Even though the White students in the focal group might not appear diverse on the demographic surface, their experiences with school and in the AP English classroom were various. We next provide Joanna's brief profiles of each of these five students, based on her knowledge and impressions of them over a two-year period.

Maggie. Maggie and Laurie (described next) were binovular twins. Maggie often spoke her mind in class discussions. During group work, she appeared comfortable giving the group her opinion, either about the task at hand or any other of a wide range of topics. Maggie and Laurie occasionally exhibited a sibling rivalry during class, including during the spoken word activity. In general, Maggie was the more outspoken and dominant of the twins.

Laurie. Laurie vacillated between being the quiet twin and trying to be heard. She often clashed with her sister in class about everything from borrowing Maggie's clothes without asking to whether or not she should break up with her boyfriend. To Joanna's surprise, they chose to room together at college the following fall.

Brianna. As the oldest of five children, the rest of whom were boys, Brianna was used to acting as a parental figure, often chauffeuring her brothers from various practices even at the expense of her own education. This maternal stance was evident in her interactions with her group members, whom she often sought to keep on task. Although she was balancing a busy schedule of AP courses and a part-time job, Brianna remained the most focused member of her group. A people-pleaser in Joanna's view, Brianna both attempted to keep the peace in her group and get the task done in a timely manner without being viewed as bossy.

Denny. Denny was an anomaly in this group: he was the only male, he was not a high-performing student, he often skipped classes and did not turn in work, and he socialized primarily with students from outside the AP circle. His best friend, for example, was expelled earlier in the year for coming to school while under the influence of drugs—a behavior not, of course, specific to lower-track students, but one

perhaps more deftly managed by college-bound students within the school setting. Still, Denny offered constructive input to the group performances and took on a leadership role during later raps.

Cameron. Probably the student with the busiest schedule, Cameron seemed the least focused of all of the group members. She was juggling several AP courses during the time of the study, but her main concern was her boyfriend, who had enlisted in the military and was away at boot camp in anticipation of being shipped off to combat duty in Iraq or Afghanistan toward the end of Obama's first presidential term. She often came to class drowsy and seemed to have a difficult time staying awake due to conversing with him late at night.

Instruction prior to Hamlet *Unit*

The unit on identity of which the *Hamlet* study was included contained several works from different genres and time periods that concern a character who struggles to find him or herself in some way. In addition to *Hamlet*, the selections included August Wilson's *Fences*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and a choice from among Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*.

The instruction leading up to the spoken word poetry activity was designed to prepare students for succeeding on the AP exam, a requirement of teaching the course under the AP auspices. This exam requires literary interpretations based on "New Criticism." This approach to literary criticism, claimed to be "scientific," emphasizes explication or "close reading" of the literary work irrespective of matters outside the text. Rather, the goal is to come to an "objective determination" of "how a piece works" through close focus and analysis of the words on the page. The reader's goal is to employ a formal, technical vocabulary (irony, denouement, etc.) to determine how a text's form produces its self-contained meaning (Olson, Metzger, & Ashton-Jones, 1998).

Consistent with her hybrid approach, Joanna tempered her fidelity to the AP curriculum and its values for the spoken word activity. From the beginning of the school year, Joanna drew on the creativity of her students with activities designed to get them to engage with the texts in multiple ways, e.g., acting out excerpts from various plays to help students take on various characters' perspectives (see Smagorinsky, 1999; Wagner, 1998). Students often responded to journal prompts as a way to link their experiences reflexively to themes from the literature.

Additionally, students produced collaborative, creative projects, e.g., a symbolic object project in which they worked in groups to create an object that was both interactive and represented themes, characters, and concepts from the novel they had read. They also created body biographies (O'Donnell-Allen, 2006) of major characters, i.e., full-sized human forms filled with pictures and words that represented a given character's role and point of view in a literary work. Students further created found poems, brought in songs from their own music collections that related to literary themes, created movie trailers for the novels, did journal writing in response to literary themes, and had other opportunities to work in multimodal and constructive ways in making meaning through textual, interpersonal, and intrapersonal engagement.

The idea of interpreting *Hamlet* through spoken word poetry thus represented one iteration of, and served as an intercontextual link in, Joanna's instructional approach of using multimodal and popular culture textual forms in conjunction with canonical texts as a way of enabling students to express their understandings through texts closer to their own experiences, even if the hip-hop world was not central to

their family and community practices but rather one of many mediational means appropriated from the broader youth culture.

The Hamlet Unit

Joanna introduced *Hamlet* as a "play full of questions," framing their reading by asking them to identify the characteristics of a tragic hero, a genre they had experienced in the fall semester through their reading of Othello. Joanna tried to balance strong scaffolding to assist the students' understanding of the most archaic aspects of the text with providing opportunities for students' constructivist engagement with the play. The spoken word poetry activity provided a familiar and accessible genre through which students could make meaning collaboratively in relation to *Hamlet*. To help students understand what was being asked of them, Joanna showed the students a video of one of the raps her students had created the previous year. She asked the students what made this exemplar a good rap and what could have been better. She then had them split into groups and gave them the following directions for creating their own raps:

1. Write a 10-20 line rap. It should have a rhythm and a rhyme scheme.

2. It should summarize Act I.

3. It should include key characters, events, and ideas, and can include quotes from the play or famous songs.

4. The whole group MUST be involved in the performance in some way.

After signing (or having their parents sign) informed consent forms to participate in the research and being issued audio recorders, the students were given roughly 20 minutes to summarize Act I as a group and turn it into a rap, which they then performed for the class. This process was repeated for each of the remaining four acts.

We make no pretense that the students' performance of their interpretive poems came from their own initiative. We recognize that, in responding to an assignment, they might be viewed as simply giving the teacher what she wanted. We are comfortable with the idea that, in school, teachers often design instruction based on their beliefs about students' needs, even if students don't participate in the planning of activities (see Hillocks, 1995, for a defense of reflective practice in the design of writing activities and instruction). We are also not claiming that the students participated in writing interpretive raps as part of their lived experience in a hip-hop community, as might urban African American youth. Rather, we view rap as part of youth musical heritage and thus a cultural resource through which to construct an interpretive text that a reflective practitioner incorporated into a year-long exploration of texts through multiple means.

Method

Data Collection

During the four week unit on *Hamlet*, which came right before the AP English Literature and Composition exam in May, Joanna observed the students while they read, performed, and discussed each act of the play. She recorded her observations both during the class period using an audio recorder and after the class period in expanded field notes. During the composition of the raps, Joanna recorded her observations of the group using the audio recorder and a research journal. She provided recorders by which the students captured the discussions involved in their process of composing, practicing, and performing their raps. Joanna then transcribed these recordings into text files that were loaded in the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. This software enables researchers to organize and analyze

both verbal and nonverbal texts and to analyze data across corpi. Each discussion transcript served as a single document on which to apply a coding scheme of our own construction, which we describe next.

Data Analysis

Following initial informal reading of the data corpus, the transcripts of the composing sessions were collaboratively coded by both authors of this study (see Smagorinsky, 2008b, for a rationale for the reliability available through collaborative and dialogic, rather than independent, coding). Codes were applied to each student's speaking turn. The coding system was based on a prototype developed from prior studies in this line of inquiry on multidimensional composing conducted by Smagorinsky and various colleagues (e.g., Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998a, 1998b; Zoss, Smagorinsky, & O'Donnell-Allen, 2007) and modified for this study during the process of analysis. Each student speaking turn comprised the segment to which codes were applied.

The prototype provided superordinate categories, such as the students' composing processes, social processes, attention to the source text (*Hamlet*), intertextual references, references to the research process, and the student performative text. The current study necessitated a specific set of subcodes developed dialogically and inductively in conjunction with preliminary and formal readings of the data. For instance, in the category of intertextual references, the students made many references to hip-hop conventions (e.g., signifying, call-and-response, sampling), a number of which have deeper roots in African American and West African cultures (Gates, 1988). The codes and frequencies for each are available in Table 1.

Table 1: Codes and Frequencies

CODE	ACT 1	ACT 2	ACT 3	ACT 4	ACT 5
COMPOSING PROCESS					
Prewriting: Content analysis: Character	8	16	17	14	5
Prewriting: Content analysis: Global planning	4	1	4	9	7
Prewriting: Content analysis: Narrative structure	21	28	16	24	79
Prewriting: Word choice	13	15	19	22	27
Prewriting: Word choice: Affirmation	5	1	6	1	2
Prewriting: Word choice: Composing through play	0	19	4	9	7
Prewriting: Word choice: Critique	3	4	6	9	7
Prewriting: Word choice: Evaluation	6	7	1	2	10
Prewriting: Word choice: Repetition	15	11	2	7	8
Prewriting: Word choice: Rhyme	20	18	25	26	22
Revision: Composing through play	1	4	1	1	0
Revision: Word choice	6	12	27	16	1
Writing: Final text	12	0	11	13	2
Writing: Provisional text	26	20	46	39	28
Writing: Repetition	0	9	11	14	8
INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCES					
Canonical literature: Conventions	2	3	0	0	0
Hip-hop culture: Call and response	14	0	0	0	0
Hip-hop culture: Conventions	16	2	32	11	2
Hip-hop culture: Performance convention	10	0	16	7	0
Hip-hop culture: Sampling	11	0	26	1	0
Hip-hop culture: Signifying	2	0	0	1	0
Pop culture	4	2	12	3	0
OFF TASK	28	44	162	117	186
SOCIAL PROCESSES					
Affirmation	7	0	1	2	1
Logistics	2	0	22	14	2
Play	20	8	8	2	6

Play: Play that becomes composition	3	1	0	3	0
Request clarification	6	4	11	6	4
Role assignment: Scribe: Request clarification	4	2	3	6	1
Role: Procedural leader	23	15	39	48	31
Role: Scribe	11	19	12	2	9
Self-assessment	1	3	1	3	3
Self-mockery	2	7	0	2	0
SOURCE TEXT					
Interpretation	16	31	43	31	36
Summary	11	11	33	32	53
STUDENT PERFORMATIVE TEXT					
Rehearsal: Affirmation	11	0	1	0	0
Rehearsal: Beat	0	0	5	13	1
Rehearsal: Choreography	23	0	2	0	0
Rehearsal: Coordination	11	0	6	2	34
Rehearsal: Critique	10	0	1	0	5
Rehearsal: Evaluation	13	0	0	4	0
Rehearsal: Provisional performance	33	5	12	12	13
Rehearsal: Repetition	2	7	9	5	2
Rehearsal: Revision	8	2	2	7	0
Rehearsal: Self-assessment	8	0	0	1	0
Role assignment: Beat	0	0	4	9	4
Role assignment: Character	5	1	0	0	0
Role assignment: Dancer	8	0	1	0	0
Role assignment: Evaluation	3	0	5	0	0
Role assignment: Music	11	0	7	0	0
Role assignment: Rapper	5	3	9	37	30
Role assignment: Role approval	11	1	1	8	4
Role assignment: Role rejection	5	2	4	14	2
Role assignment: Singers	6	0	2	0	0
Role playing	14	0	0	0	0
Teacher-imposed framework	11	3	15	8	0

Findings

The students' collaborative composition of interpretive raps incorporated both formal and procedural knowledge emerging from a variety of sources. They were produced within the constraints of the assignment and related school limitations, both structural and imposed (e.g., the length of class periods) and ethereal and constructed (issues of propriety in what was acceptable to include in the performance). The process of composing the raps enabled the students to generate new knowledge about the play through their efforts to represent it in a popular culture medium, a phenomenon noted in prior work in this line of inquiry (see Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998b, for an account of how the process of collaboratively composing an interpretive text can generate new insights). Hybrid possibilities were afforded within this deliberately constructed environment, enabling the students to engage in exploratory talk that allowed for their vernacular language to work in dialogue with the formal language of Shakespeare and the popular culture conventions of the rap genre.

In order to produce their interpretive raps, the students engaged in dialogic processes in which they explored the play's meaning, considered rap conventions through which to express their interpretation, called on additional cultural knowledge to include in their texts, and jointly composed their poetic texts. These processes were dialogic in both the historical and immediate senses outlined by Bakhtin (1981): historical in that the students drew on a play written between 1599 and 1602 and based on antecedent versions of the *Hamlet* tale, infused with students' own instantiation of prior experiences

and embellished with rap and other popular culture conventions; and immediate in that they distributed their turns and made roughly equal contributions to the group composition during the class session itself.

The students engaged in an extended prewriting discussion that produced provisional lines that the students then reconsidered and revised in light of both the play's action and potential means of expression appropriated from the hip-hop genre. Additionally, they needed to embellish and accessorize the text with performative elements, including sound effects, choral components, role assignments, choreography, music, beat, and related aspects of spoken word poetry (Fisher, 2008). We next detail the processes engaged in by these students across the span of their five interpretive raps.

Narrative Perspective and Plot Focus

The composition of each of the five interpretive raps required two essential decisions: which character should narrate the action, and thus which perspective to adopt in telling and interpret the story; and which story, from among the many possibilities available in each act, upon which to base their rap. In Appendixes 1-5—one appendix dedicated to each of the play's five acts—we provide brief summaries of the overall Shakespearean action, followed by the raps composed by the students.

We illustrate these processes with the group's initial work in interpreting the play's first act. In what follows, they launched their discussion with a set of possibilities that helped them focus on what they considered to be the most important plot elements to retell and the perspective that they felt best represented their understanding of the drama.

Maggie:	I wanted to start with the king in the garden and talk about him getting bit by a snake, and then it wasn't really a snake—psych! It was his brother, and then—
Laurie:	My name is Hamlet, what? My mom's a harlot, what?
Maggie:	My mom's a whore.
Cameron:	Harlot rhymes.
Laurie:	I know. That's pretty much the point.

[The students exchange 5 lines of joking about the topic, then 7 lines about rhyming possibilities.]

Maggie:	You know you're going to be Hamlet, right? *[to Denny]*
Denny:	What?
Maggie:	Yeah, you're the only boy.

[The students exchange 6 lines about serving as backup dancers.]

Brianna:	[singing] Baby, you've got it—uh, huh—
Denny:	Yeah, just bust a move—that's what it is. *[starts snapping]* Just bust a move.
Maggie:	And then, towards the end, when the ghost is talking to him, we can say "bust a move" instead of "go do something."
Laurie:	We need to write, "King Hamlet was a poindexter."
Maggie:	Whoa!
Denny:	He got killed by a serpent brother.
Laurie:	And then the guy went and married my mother.

[The students exchange 4 lines about the lines they have generated.]

Denny:	I'm King Hamlet!
Cameron:	My dad got killed—and then went a married my motha.

[The students exchange 4 lines about the quality of these lines.]

Maggie:	My dad got killed—

| Brianna: | — by his serpent brother *[prompting Maggie, who is writing it down]*. And then he went — |
| Maggie: | I know—and then the guy went and married my motha. |

Their exploration of the play's meaning began with their identification of a starting point for their rap, which suggests their understanding of where the significant action of the play begins. The first possibility provided a metaphorical interpretation of the King's death by his serpentine brother. The group then shifted the speaker's role and narrative perspective to Prince Hamlet, opening his rendition of the story with his lament over his father's death and his view that his mother has betrayed his family by marrying Claudius.

As the transcript indicates, the students attempted to provide their interpretation within the conventions of hip-hop's rhyme structure and linguistic traditions, including several instances of signifying, i.e., a form of repartee originating in African American culture and typically involving ironically phrased insults (Gates, 1988; Lee, 1993); and their sampling of well-known raps, such as Denny's contribution of "Yeah, just bust a move," taken (like many of their rap sources) from a classic rather than contemporary performance, this one a 1989 rap by Young MC. Their attention to these factors involved considerable attention to diction, with 13% of the codes assigned to word choice categories.

The interpretive raps for subsequent acts involved similar sorts of processes, with the narrative perspective shifting for each composition. Their discussion of the second act began with the same central problems: which action to focus on, given Denny's observation that "The first [line is] the hardest," and which character to narrate the action. After the group determined that the act involved, as Maggie said, "Everybody's spying on people" and Laurie's observation that "Everybody thinks Hamlet's crazy," Maggie said, "I can rap it, and I can be Ophelia."

The play's complexities did not call for easy or formulaic interpretive solutions, as evidenced by the fact that for each act, the group went through a unique process of determining the action's speaker and perspective; and in relation to this decision, which action to feature and where that action would begin in their rap. For their composition of their Act III rap, the students began with a discussion of several issues of role and format—the beat they would follow, their individual roles within the performance—in conjunction with key decisions in terms of what action they should depict and which character to employ for the story's narrative perspective. The following excerpt from their discussion illustrates these processes:

Denny:	What's the beat?
Brianna:	I don't know. That's what I'm trying—
Maggie:	We should just start with our usual—"So someone walked into some room—"
Brianna:	Nah, I don't want to do that.
Denny:	"So, Hamlet walked in today." Well, that wasn't bad. Um—something about Hamlet being mad, I don't know.
Cameron:	Like, crazy? Or, like, mad?
Denny:	Like—crazy.

This discussion ultimately led to the group's decision to use Prince Hamlet as the narrator of their Act III rap. Although Shakespeare's original text for Act III focuses mostly on other characters' reactions to what they believe to be Hamlet's madness, the students' rap focused on how those actions might have

affected Hamlet as the rap's narrator, a limited viewpoint in the original play. Additionally, their positioning of Hamlet as the speaker of the rap moved him into an active role, a deviation from conventional interpretations of Shakespeare's tragic hero as one plagued by indecision, a problem typified by the protagonist's "To be or not to be" soliloquy.

The students framed their interpretive rap of Act IV around an initial summary of the action provided by Maggie, which the group drew on in their global planning for their rap. For the construction of their rap for Act IV, the students deviated from the character-focused perspectives for Acts I (Prince Hamlet), II (Ophelia), and III (Prince Hamlet, again) to provide a third-person narrator for Act IV, which produced a more summative rap with less emphasis on how each event affects the individual characters.

Brianna:	Well, what happened in this act?
Maggie:	Polonius got killed.
Denny:	Hamlet got captured by pirates.
Maggie:	Okay, Polonius got killed, so Hamlet got sent away. Laertes found out, so he came back. Now the pirates—are bringing Hamlet back. And they're going to fight. And Laertes is going to kill Hamlet. And Ophelia's dead.
Denny:	It's all about poison tips. Umm—sword and the poison in the wine.
Maggie:	Too much poison.
Denny:	[singing to the tune of the 90s song] Heck of this poison.
[The students exchange 5 lines of discussion about the recording device]	
Brianna:	Okay. Anyway.
Denny:	So, our first line is gonna be—[pause] What?
Maggie:	Yeah, it is. Something about Polonius—
Brianna:	"Hamlet finally snaps—"
Maggie:	"and stabs the rat." [laughs] Just kidding, that doesn't rhyme with "snaps." "Hamlet finally snapped, and he made this rap." No, "and he started to rap." [laughs] I'm gonna be like, "Hamlet finally snapped and he made this rap."
Denny:	We always have a little intro thing.

Their summary was not chronological, instead devoting one couplet to each of a series of key events. Their interpretive performance again departed from producing a literal account of the play and instead reconstructed the action within the conventions of the rap genre.

The students' rap for Act V began with an homage to their rap for Act I, after which they took the perspective of a third-person narrator to tell their story. The students focused on a set of key incidents while omitting others, such as Hamlet's conversation with Horatio about his being sent to England and the arrival of Fortinbras at the end of the play. By ending with a couplet centered on the "two who fought," one of whom was Hamlet, instead of Fortinbras' ascension to the throne of Denmark, the students concentrated their interpretation on Hamlet, the narrator of two of their five raps and the character most central to their attention during the discussion that produced this composition.

Although the students' rap focused on what they considered to be the major plot events of Act V, the order of events in their rap did not correspond to Shakespeare's. The condensed quality of their rap suggests their view of Act V as a rapid-fire series of events, which they combined and edited to produce not just a summary but a new text of their own. The following excerpt follows their process of composition about two-thirds of the way into the session:

Cameron:	So, Hamlet, like he found out in this act that Ophelia died—in the last act. And they had to bury her.
Laurie:	So, "Laertes finds out his, um, father—"
Brianna:	"Laertes' already—" Um, sorry *[for talking over Laurie]*.
Laurie:	"His father and sister are dead. And he swears that he'll harm Hamlet's head."
Maggie:	"That's when he puts a ransom on Hamlet's head."
Laurie:	"And he puts a ransom on Hamlet's head." Yeah.
Cameron:	Okay.
Laurie:	"Laertes finds out his father and—his family is dead."
Maggie:	"And then he puts a ransom on Hamlet's head."
Laurie:	No. "He and the king put a ransom on Hamlet's head."

The actions referenced in this section—Claudius and Laertes plotting together to kill Hamlet—actually occur in Act IV. However, the students chose to highlight the duplicity of these two characters in reiterating their machinations against Hamlet. Although Claudius's role was eventually omitted from their final line, his inclusion in their discussion suggests their understanding of his role in the plot to kill Hamlet.

Intertextual references

Simply the process of interpreting one text (*Hamlet*) through another (the raps) produced a set of intertextual relations. We next more specifically illustrate the intertextual nature of the group's interpretive poems with illustrations from across the five raps they produced, detailing how the process of composing their rap both depicted their understanding of the play's action and simultaneously provided a medium that fostered their engagement with the characters' interactions. In doing so the process contributed to understandings that, we infer, would not otherwise be available, in that they emerged through the process of composition rather than residing whole in their memories.

Specific hip-hop conventions. From the earliest attempt to create the raps, the students included hip-hop culture with the *call-and-response* features of Laurie's line in their Act I interpretation, "My name is Hamlet, what? My mom's a harlot, what?" The group engaged in *sampling* from hip-hop music, not only Denny's "bust a move" contribution but Brianna's "Baby, you've got it, uh huh." Later in the Act I rap, Maggie suggested they "say 'word' at the end" of each line of their rap, which the students decided not to include but which served as part of their exploratory composing process. Other suggestions did not make the final cut, including Brianna's sampling of "wiggety wiggety whak" from the Kriss Kross song "Jump." Although sampling was not part of the requirements for the rap, the students incorporated this convention freely in borrowing archetypal rap phrasings in their construction of their Act 1 poem.

Later raps in the series included additional sampling. The students considered, for instance, borrowing the tune of Young MC's "Bust a Move" and the theme song from the television show *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* as vehicles for their own composition, without settling on either. The playful sampling later became part of the actual composition of the rap, as when Brianna mirrored Maggie's comment, "Yeah, that's what he had said" with a phrase from hip-hop culture, "So, what had happened was," which they eventually incorporated into their own rap. Maggie followed suit by sampling rapper B.o.B.'s "Nothin' on You," prompting Brianna and Laurie to then rap the song for the group. Such exchanges did not always produce material included in their own rap, but suggest the exploratory, playful character of the hybrid space in which they worked and its potential for generating ideas that might or might not be included in their final text.

The students' rap involved parallel construction and repetition ("I told—") to focus the listener on Hamlet's role in Act III. They achieved this emphasis through hip-hop conventions grounded in older forms of formal African American discourse, in particular the use of *anaphora*, the repetition of words at the beginning of adjacent clauses for amplified rhetorical effect. Their choice of this device highlighted Hamlet's presumed ambivalence toward Ophelia ("I can't figure out why she's complaining, I told her I'd write her a letter") and his continued frustration with his mother's "incestuous" marriage to Claudius.

The rap for Act IV relied on more advanced rapping conventions, such as the notion of "flow" in order to provide their rap with authenticity. Flow refers to the rhythms and rhymes of a rap's lyrics and how they function together along with other elements of delivery such as pitch, timbre, and volume so that the performer stays on beat and amplifies points through the delivery (Krims, 2001). During the co-construction of their rap, the students made references to "flow" during both the prewriting (15 codes) and revision (31 codes) phases. The passage below illustrates their concern about how "flow" might affect the quality of their performance:

Brianna: It's really hard to rap—try rapping that.

Maggie: "Ophelia's gone mad/ 'Cause Hamlet killed her dad. Laertes' back from France/ to kill Hamlet with a lance. Ophelia slipped and fell/ the Queen came to tell."

Denny: That's not hard to rap.

Maggie: Yeah, I know.

Brianna: But it doesn't flow.

Denny: Yeah, it does.

Maggie: The last one didn't either, though. I got up there and it was so hard.

Brianna: *[emphatically]* Yeah, I know.

Later in their composing process, the group returned to the convention of "flow" in an attempt to reconcile the difficulties they were having with these lines:

Maggie: "Ophelia's gone mad"—six. "'Cause Hamlet killed her dad"—six. *[repeats lines faster, as in an actual rap]* "Ophelia's gone mad 'cause Hamlet killed her dad." That's six. Okay. "Laertes' back from France." "Laertes is back from France"— seven. "To kill Hamlet with a lance"—seven.

[The students exchange 4 lines about who will perform the rap.]

Maggie: I'm not rapping again. *[pause]* Well, *[practicing the rap]* "Ophelia's gone mad 'cause Hamlet killed her dad. Laertes is back from France to kill Hamlet with a lance." Those aren't bad at all. Okay.

Denny: Um, that's not going to work.

Maggie: "but got stopped by a pirate ship." *[pause]* "Hamlet was sent on a trip, but he got stopped by a pirate ship." Will that work?

Brianna: I thought it was just "got stopped by a pirate ship" not "but he got stopped by a pirate ship."

Maggie: How about, "but got stopped"? *[writing it down]* "But got stopped by a pirate ship." That's nine.

Denny: Can we just, like, make a new line instead of those? "He got stopped by a pirate ship." *[pauses, offers an alternative line]* "The pirates took him captive, and now he's not very active."

Although Maggie was able to identify for the group what was causing the issue with the "flow" of the lines—the difference in the number of syllables between the individual lines—she was unable to correct the issue and maintain the integrity of the rap. Both Brianna and Maggie offered suggestions, but it was not until Denny suggested an entirely new line—"The pirates took him captive, and now he's not very active"—that the group was able to conquer their issues with flow in these sets of lines. Additionally, the discussion of flow, and the issues surrounding it, led the group into a consideration of one of the most contested motifs in Shakespeare's play, and an interpretive problem around which any reading of the play revolves: Hamlet's psychological paralysis. The group's negotiation of how to interpret Hamlet's orientation to action was a critical dimension of their interpretation.

Composition of an Interpretive Text

Reducing an act from a play of the complexity of *Hamlet* to a short poetic rap requires decisions regarding what is most critical to the drama's action. The play opens with a series of compelling incidents, from the King's sudden death, to his Ghost's appearance, to Hamlet's lament over his mother's hasty remarriage to Claudius. The students quickly zeroed in on their chosen narrator Hamlet's bemoaning his mother's marriage to his uncle and their characterization of Claudius as a "serpent" and Gertrude as a "harlot." These characterizations were interpretive and symbolic and set the stage for their subsequent depictions of these characters and their roles in the drama. They further positioned Hamlet as one victimized and manipulated by nefarious relatives and the endless plotting in which they engage for the remainder of the play and, by extension, in the rap.

The students thus did not simply summarize Act I, but engaged in a collaborative, interpretive composition that produced a new text in relation to Shakespeare's play, which itself was derived by the playwright from extant tales originating in Scandinavia, the Roman Empire, and other ancient sources. Like Shakespeare, the students took an existing story and retold it on their own terms and in a new genre. Their speaker characterized Gertrude as a "whore" or "harlot" for what they saw as her betrayal of King Hamlet and, by implication, Prince Hamlet and Denmark.

We do not bring to bear criteria for evaluating the quality of their rap in terms of hip-hop conventions or other literary values. Our task is to document the social, dialogic, and cognitive work involved in their generation of their spoken word performance in the setting of this suburban classroom. We next detail more specifically the interpretive processes in which the group engaged, drawing on examples from across the five raps they produced in relation to the drama.

Moving from literal reading to figurative interpretation. We coded the students' comments on the text of Act IV almost evenly between summative (32) and interpretive (31). This ratio is not surprising considering the action-focused structure of the group's rap. However, their composition centered on the nature of the action itself, as opposed to how the audience is presented with the action. This subtle difference focused the audience's attention back on Prince Hamlet, even though he is absent from Shakespeare's rendition of the story for a large portion of this act:

Brianna: I thought it was just "got stopped by a pirate ship" not "but he got stopped by a pirate ship."

Maggie: How about, "but got stopped"? [writing it down] "But got stopped by a pirate ship." That's nine [lines].

Denny: Can we just, like, make a new line instead of those? "He got stopped by a pirate ship." [pause] "The pirates took him captive, and now he's not very active."

Maggie:	Oh! "The pirates took him captive, but it doesn't matter 'cause he was never active."
Denny:	Oh, my god.
Maggie:	No, no. Something about—
Denny:	It'll take forever to say that—
Maggie:	Something about him, you know, about how he never acts, like he never does anything. He always says he's going to but he doesn't. You know?
Denny:	Yeah. [pause] "The pirates took him captive—"
Maggie:	[joins in] "captive"
Denny:	It's Act 4.
Maggie:	"The pirates took him for ransom but it sucks 'cause he's really handsome."
Denny:	"He's finally become active"?
Maggie:	"The pirates took him captive, and he's chosen to be active."
Cameron:	Yeah, I think that's a good one.

The students attended to the role of the pirates, who were central to the plot of Act IV in that they provided Hamlet with a means of getting back to Denmark after being sent to England. They used this development to shift their focus to the effect of this "trip" on Hamlet—"he's chosen to be active." Shakespeare's Hamlet does not try to kill Claudius or plot against him. The students' rap, however, infused the role of Hamlet with a new commitment to intentional action. By manipulating the order of events toward the end of their rap, the students drew attention to Hamlet and his change in motivation.

This shift in narrative focus de-emphasized Claudius' manipulation of Laertes, which is the key plot development in Shakespeare's version of the story, and featured instead this fundamental change in the play's titular character's disposition. Their process of discussion took them from their initial reliance on conventional interpretation—"and now he's not very active"—to their ultimate decision that Hamlet has chosen to be active, an affordance available through the structure of the interpretive rap assignment.

Plot reconfiguration. We coded the group's Act II rap as more interpretive (31 codes) than summative (11 codes). The group's interpretive work was evident as they discussed Claudius's reaction to both Hamlet's behavior and Polonius's news that Hamlet's response followed from his love for Ophelia:

Laurie:	Say, "My dad thinks he's in love—"
Brianna:	"My dad thinks he's in love."
Laurie:	"And the king takes push to shove."
Maggie:	That doesn't make any sense. I don't even know what that means.
Laurie:	It does, too.
Denny:	What does "push to shove" mean?
Maggie:	Yeah, I don't know.
Cameron:	When push comes to shove—like, that's the thing she's playing off of.
Denny:	I still don't know what that means, though.
Brianna:	It's hard to find—
Cameron:	Like, people would say, when push comes to shove, like, it's what's going to happen because it's a last resort.
Denny:	When push comes to shove.

The opportunity to argue about rhymes and word choice enabled the students to decipher and interpret the finer points of the play. Laurie's suggestion for a closing line, "So, now he's gonna go kill the king but won't until he hears the actors sing," deviated from the plot—the actors do not sing in Shakespeare's version—while holding true to the intent of Hamlet's plot to catch Claudius. By this point in the creation of the rap, the students seemed to feel comfortable enough with both Shakespeare's text and their own to take such creative and interpretive license.

As argued by Smagorinsky and Coppock (1995a), such reconfiguring of plots does not indicate a misunderstanding of the literal storyline. Rather, it suggests attention to the emotional qualities of the action and how they may be depicted in new *transmediational* texts. We borrow this term from Suhor's (1984) conception of a semiotic curriculum to describe the use of a new medium in which to inscribe whatever meaning is understood in a source text. For Suhor, this process involves transforming what is available from one textual form into a distinctly different sign system, such as interpreting a poem by means of a sculpture. In this group the students took one stage drama's spoken action and retold it in a spoken word performance, working within the same symbol system, but reducing the text to a condensed poetic form and adding music, beat, and dance to supplement the words' meaning. This process suggests that transmediation is not necessarily a strict mode-to-mode transformation but may involve more subtle manipulations within and around sign systems.

Discussion

Through this series of activities, the students collaborated to create five distinct yet interrelated raps that, while interpreting Shakespeare's play, also were unique texts themselves. Just as Shakespeare drew on existing stories to create *Hamlet*, the students used *Hamlet* as a vehicle for their own version of the story, at times manipulating such elements as the plot sequence to highlight particular developments that they found worthy of emphasis. Their decisions required the identification of which point of view to take on the events, which plot elements to feature, which language through which to represent their understanding most precisely, which aspects of popular culture to include, and ultimately which story to tell. Their raps thus served as interpretive mediums through which the students were able to take one of literature's most challenging and compelling stories and retell it in a way that required them both to engage with Shakespeare's version of the *Hamlet* story in order to agree on its meaning and to reconstruct their understanding in a new form.

The hybrid space afforded by the activity enabled the students to integrate ideas, characters, and plot from *Hamlet* with lyrics and conventions from popular culture, primarily rap. This incorporation of pop culture allowed them to draw on their personal experiences with youth culture to inform their school composing. Other authors (Alvermann, 2008; Hagood et al., 2010; Hill, 2009; Low, 2011) have argued for the inclusion of popular culture texts within the official classroom space. Simply incorporating these elements, however, would not be sufficient if they did not contribute to the students' process of meaning construction.

As the transcripts suggest, the requirement to work within the conventions of hip-hop performances in service of interpreting *Hamlet* forced the students to compose poetically and thus use language economically so as to afford the greatest possible meaning for each term included in their rap. The requirement to cryptify a long and complex play into a series of relatively short raps produced discussions in which the students carefully considered each word choice so that it retained fidelity to the original, albeit with reconstructions of the plot line to foreground particular emphases that they felt overshadowed other plot developments. Simultaneously, they needed to work within more contemporary

expressive conventions with which they were familiar. This process appeared to contribute to the meaning that they ultimately found in the play.

Perhaps simply requiring a poetic interpretation, one not attentive to rap conventions, would have provided the same opportunity to compose a meaningful text. In the absence of an available poetic contrast, we can only speculate that the rap requirement introduced an element that allowed for considerable playful discussion through which the students determined which conventions to employ. This quality is evidenced by our coding for occasions when the students engaged in *composing process/prewriting/word choice/composing through play* and *social process/play/play that becomes composition*. These playful processes served to enable experimental discussions that, while potentially veering off task, on occasions helped to shape the ultimate content of each rap.

The availability of popular culture references appeared to help shape the parameters of the hybrid space as one that accommodated the students' familiar youth worlds and attendant interests and means of expression. This playful setting appeared to provide students with the opportunity to experiment with interpretive possibilities, some of which they discarded and some of which they retained in their final versions of the poems. This process appears to be substantiate other arguments for including possibilities for exploratory talk in classrooms as a way of working through the meaning potential of different ideas and ways of expressing them (e.g., Barnes, 1992).

We see this study serving several purposes. First, it introduces a pedagogy for engaging with *Hamlet* and other difficult works of literature that, at least in the setting of one AP course, appeared to enable students to advance their understanding of the drama. Attempting the activity in less rarified settings would enable greater understanding of the manner in which such opportunities benefit students across the broader range of cultural heritage, investment, engagement, and academic achievement that typical school populations include.

Theoretically, this study contributes to work in various social-cultural-historical and dialogic epistemologies that consider the role of discourse in human development. This perspective has emphasized the potential of exploratory speech for trying out ideas during a process of talking and experimentation without concern for judgment regarding the form or content of the initial expression of a possibility. Such affordances provide alternative idiosettings within the formal confines of school that enable students to bypass the restrictive, formal, official modes of speech that constrain the possibilities for learners to engage with ideas in social languages familiar to them. School is designed to promote learning opportunities, yet often limits learning by circumscribing the language through which ideas may be considered and explored. This problem becomes compounded when teachers assume authoritarian stances in relation to students, given their greater conversance with academic discourse and more formal understanding of canonical literature.

Our study demonstrates the possibilities available to White, college-bound suburban students when hybrid spaces are made available to advance their interpretive work, albeit in language that some might consider inferior due to its origins in popular culture (e.g., Stotsky, 2000). The presence of conservative perspectives regarding which speech genres are appropriate for academic inquiry complicates any recommendation for wider use. Indeed, the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) recently imposed on U.S. schools specifically endorse the New Critical value on reading like a detective in order to "focus on what lies within the four corners of the text" (Coleman & Pimental, n. d.). This emphasis undoubtedly works against the sort of constructivist possibilities available through the interpretive rap

activity, particularly when teachers' work status becomes a function of how well students perform on assessments aligned with the CCSS.

Our analysis, however, is designed to identify the socio-cognitive work undertaken in this setting, not to judge hip-hop conventions and references in relation to classic academic discourse. If anything, we conclude that the speech conventions of this popular culture medium enabled, rather than suppressed, intellectual work in the classroom for these students, suggesting that the narrow definition of "close reading" required by the CCSS is woefully insufficient for tapping students' prior knowledge and the intertextual, dialogic potential it affords. The students in this study engaged in a close reading that was informed by elements from outside the text, suggesting that knowledge of literary technique that is limited in application to the four corners of the text may well stultify students' interpretive possibilities in the ambiguous world of literary analysis.

The availability of phrasings and other expressive conventions from popular culture in colloquial and familiar speech appeared to contribute to the experimental, relaxed setting in which the students composed their interpretive raps. The results of their deliberations produced texts that, through the process of employing rap conventions, represented a serious interpretive effort and series of texts that, without the teacher's direct guidance, appear to have helped the students arrive at a viable and defensible meaning for the drama. Such possibilities, we believe, are at the heart of reading literature for meaningful engagement and could become accessible in more classrooms where hybrid spaces are made available for students in which to merge their own worlds of understanding with canonical school traditions to produce learning that is satisfying for them on personal, social, and academic levels.

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Appendix 1: Act I Summary and Rap

Summary

The play is set in Denmark and opens with the news that King Hamlet has died, leading to the anticipation that Fortinbras of Norway will invade the country. King Hamlet's ghost appears in the castle to Horatio and the sentinel Marcellus, who are terrified at the sight. King Hamlet's brother Claudius has promptly assumed the throne, and King Hamlet's wife, Gertrude, immediately marries him and remains the Queen. Claudius sends ambassadors to Norway to urge Fortinbras to refrain from attacking Denmark. Young Prince Hamlet mourns his father's death and resents his mother's quick remarriage to his uncle, whom he distrusts. Claudius's chief counselor, Polonius, and Polonius's son Laertes advise Polonius's daughter Ophelia not to fall in love with Prince Hamlet, fearing that he is manipulating her emotionally and politically. Prince Hamlet meets his father's ghost, who tells him that Claudius poisoned him. King Hamlet's ghost urges Prince Hamlet to kill Claudius but not Gertrude, who he believes will be judged by Heaven. Prince Hamlet swears Horatio (who emerges as his only trustworthy friend) and Marcellus to secrecy over the encounter with King Hamlet's ghost.

Interpretive Rap

My name is Hamlet, what?

My mom is a harlot, what?

My dad got killed by his serpent brother

Then that guy went and married my mother!

His ghost walked into the castle one day

He spooked my friends and they ran away.

They came and told me this disturbing news.

My talk with this ghost sure gave me the blues.

My friends took an oath to play their part.

Tomorrow's when the plan against Claudius starts.

Appendix 2: Act II Summary and Rap

Summary

Polonius sends his servant Reynaldo to France to spy on his son Laertes, setting the stage for a similar deployment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by Claudius later in this act to spy on Hamlet. Polonius's daughter Ophelia tells Polonius that Hamlet has met her in a disheveled state and departed abruptly. Polonius tells Claudius that he believes that Hamlet's erratic behavior is a function of Ophelia's rejection of him. Claudius then tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to learn the reason for Hamlet's transformation, which Gertrude attributes to King Hamlet's death and her own remarriage to Claudius. Fortinbras continues to deploy his troops in Norway. Hamlet bewails the condition of humanity and recruits a troupe of traveling actors to perform a play that will reveal if Claudius indeed murdered his father.

Interpretive Rap

So the Prince walked in to my chambers today

His clothes were messed up like he wanted to play.

My dad keeps saying he's smitten with me

But past his illusions I cannot see.

Poor Hamlet, all his friends are spying on him.

All he wanted was to go back to school again.

But now he's stuck—in this court

He wants revenge to make the story short

He invited actors for a play.

Is this a way to make Claudius pay?

Appendix 3: Act III Summary and Rap

Summary

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report back to Claudius on their meeting with Hamlet. Hamlet contrives the production of a play to which he has added lines that will betray Claudius as the murderer of his father. Claudius and Polonius eavesdrop on a conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia. Hamlet tells Ophelia that he believes she is spying on him, and he grows agitated and hostile to her. Claudius and Polonius then decide to eavesdrop on Hamlet's talk with his mother Gertrude following the play in the hopes of understanding the cause of his tormented condition. That evening the play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, is performed, with a mime acting out the Ghost's version of King Hamlet's death as a prelude. Claudius's reaction to the play confirms to Hamlet that his uncle was indeed his father's murderer. Hamlet feigns ignorance over Claudius's offense at the performance, and plans to speak with his mother. Concerned that Hamlet is becoming a threat, Claudius decides to send Hamlet to England. He reveals in a soliloquy that he has poisoned his brother King Hamlet and will face divine justice. Hamlet chooses not to kill Claudius at this moment because he thinks Claudius is praying for forgiveness, but he is not. Gertrude and Hamlet quarrel over their differences and when Polonius, hiding behind a curtain, cries out inadvertently, Hamlet stabs him to death through the curtain. The Ghost appears to instruct Hamlet to treat Gertrude with kindness, and she agrees to terminate her relationship with Claudius.

Interpretive Rap

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern don't know why I'm mad

Ophelia's confused after that talk we had.

I don't know why she's so upset, there'd really be none better.

I can't figure out why she's complaining, I told her I'd write her a letter.

Evidently I ain't crazy, but I gotta be watched?

After watching that play, our friendship was botched.

That night I told my mom what the ghost had said.

And then I killed Polonius dead.

I told my mom not to go back to Claudius's bed

'Cause the two of them are already incestuously wed.

Appendix 4: Act IV Summary and Rap

Summary

Claudius learns of Polonius's death from Gertrude, expressing shock that he himself could easily have been killed had he too eavesdropped behind the partition. Gertrude prevaricates, telling him that Hamlet has become mad, which leads Claudius to banish Hamlet immediately to England and dispatch Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to learn from Hamlet where he has hidden Polonius's body so that it can be taken to the chapel. Hamlet refuses to comply and confronts the two spies regarding their fidelity, ultimately agreeing to meet with Claudius. In a hostile confrontation, Hamlet reveals to Claudius the location of Polonius's body, and Claudius orders Hamlet to England, ostensibly as a safety precaution. Hamlet departs, and Claudius plans to have him murdered in England. Meanwhile, Fortinbras marches on Poland, and Hamlet regrets not having Fortinbras's fortitude in conducting a pointless if honorable war when Hamlet cannot muster the courage to avenge his father's death or confront what he considers to be his mother's infidelity. Ophelia goes mad in her grief over her father Polonius's death and ultimately drowns, and her brother Laertes goes to the castle to confront Claudius, who acknowledges his own grief over Polonius's murder. Sailors deliver news of Hamlet to Horatio, and Claudius informs Laertes that Hamlet is Polonius's killer, leading them to plot Hamlet's death in a fencing match.

Interpretive Rap

Ophelia's gone mad

'Cause Hamlet killed her dad

Laertes is back from France

to kill Hamlet with a lance

Ophelia slipped and fell

The Queen came to tell

Hamlet on a trip

got stopped by a pirate ship

The pirates took him captive

And now he's choosing to be active

This is act four

We ain't rappin' anymore.

Appendix 5: Act V Summary and Rap

Summary

Hamlet and Horatio converse with a gravedigger, and Hamlet holds the exhumed skull of deceased jester Yorick and speaks of the transience, insignificance, and impotence of humanity in controlling its fate. At Ophelia's funeral the priest declares her death a suicide, which angers her brother Laertes and leads to a fight between Hamlet and Laertes over Laertes's embellished response and Hamlet's belief in his own greater love for her. Hamlet tells Horatio how he escaped the plot against his life and had Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed instead, and expresses a desire to kill his uncle King Claudius. Hamlet and Laertes meet in the castle and engage in a sword fight. During their fight Gertrude drinks from a poisoned cup intended for Hamlet and, while dying, tells the assembly that she has been poisoned. Amidst much hostile repartee, Hamlet and Laertes fight three rounds with their swords, at the end of which Laertes fatally stabs Hamlet with a poisoned sword tip. Hamlet in turn stabs Laertes with Laertes's sword following an exchange of weapons during the fight. Hamlet then stabs and kills Claudius. As he expires, Hamlet instructs Horatio to name Fortinbras as the next King of Denmark. Fortinbras assumes the crown, and Horatio, as requested by Hamlet, tells the story portrayed in the drama.

Interpretive Rap

So we said we weren't going to rap anymore

But we came back cause we heard you wanted more.

So Hamlet walked up to bones being thrown

And Laertes' true feelings were finally shown.

Laertes finds out his family is dead

So he put a ransom on Hamlet's head.

Hamlet found out his friends weren't true

So he traded the letters to tell what to do.

The king sent a man to play on Hamlet's pride.

And during that duel the innocent died.

The Queen and the King drank from the cup

nor will the two who fought ever get up.