Hip Hop Coach – Teacher Notes

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This guidance document has been written and compiled by Charanga’s Hip Hop consultant Max Wheeler.

About Max Wheeler

Max got his first taste of community music teaching rap in California. Accepted as a rapper in predominantly black and Hispanic areas in the home of hip hop, he rapidly realised that he had found his vocation. Max has released two albums as rapper and producer of hip hop duo Dirty Diggers on Zebra Traffic/Tru Thoughts records. The group have had frequent play on Radio 1, 1Xtra, and internet stations worldwide and have supported De La Soul, Lee Scratch Perry, Roll Deep and Aim.

Max runs the peer education music project with the Hangleton and Knoll Project in Hove plus freelance youth music projects for Audioactive2, Creative Partnerships and various schools and projects in the South East and North West. He specialises in rap, lyric writing, performance and production with ages 8 and upward.
Why teach Hip Hop?

Hip hop works. Young people, especially those that are hard to reach, engage with the music in a way that still surprises me all the time. One reason might be hip hop’s ability to absorb and incorporate other sounds, influences and cultural trends. Just look at how it borrows samples from folk, classical, rock & pop, jazz, funk, soul and world music so effortlessly, all in the same breath.

Another element is rap, and its ability to talk in the language that real people use everyday to talk about real life subjects. Maybe it’s the fact that you don’t have to buy expensive equipment to get started, a pad and a pen for rap and even free software for making beats. Maybe it’s the fact that it’s an underground culture without the usual rules and theories that go with most music lessons. For me it was all of these things combined with the fact that I could fit more lyrics in a minute of rap than I could in a whole album of out of tune singing.

In terms of teaching, I’ve never found a better way to discuss issues or get young people to express themselves than writing a rap song. I’ve never found a more compelling way to teach music tech or IT than making a beat. I’ve also never found a better way of building soft skills and core confidence than working in groups on music, specifically the type of music young people are listening to, and whether that’s hip hop, grime, r’n’b or funky house – it usually comes down to a beat and a rap – the fundamentals of hip hop.

Here we hope to help you engage with young people and help them to work on their lyrics, beats knowledge and confidence – hopefully producing writing and performing their own music along the way, as well as learning about the history of hip hop music.

General Tips

- Rap activities typically work incredibly well as enrichment or with smaller groups who don’t engage well in mainstream lessons. E.g. Pupil referral, excluded groups etc.
- Rap also works especially well with years 7/8/9 – and combines especially well with a peer-led approach of a slightly older group teaching younger ones. This tends to mean that the younger students work hard to impress the older ones, and the older ones thrive on the responsibility of teaching. This could work with older pupils using the videos, workshops and activities with younger groups. A typical approach would be Yr 9 or 10 teaching year 7s to run a transition project on their arrival from primary school.
- Many of the “Hip Hop Coach” resources could effectively be used as teacher training resources, for example the ‘How to Make a Beat’ videos using various software could be used by anyone to practise and develop their own beat-making abilities, and then be re-used to work with a class in a media suite with a whiteboard, to develop the whole groups skills.
Ideas for Schools’ Use

Cross curricular

Our basic rap format could be used to write lyrics in History, French or any curriculum subject. For example use our ‘How to Write Raps’ video, followed by ‘Lyric Workshops’ and then tie in curriculum information and subjects with the ‘Rap Guide’ handout to come up with curriculum specific raps.

Sampling can also work in a cross curricular way, for example using our series of videos on ‘Beats’ to sample curriculum relevant sources to make tracks, using for example the ‘Coffee Tune’ or ‘Making Beats’ songs as stimulus.

Whole class activities

Try using a ‘Beat Completer’ activity such as ‘Play snare on 2 and 4’ or ‘Dubstep Kick Completer’ on a white board with students attempting the same challenge one by one or in small groups.

They can be given a task like: make a beat to practise your raps. Who can make the best beat to rap on? Why does it work? They can make a beat in groups at the front of the class e.g.

Student 1- lays down hi hat pattern
Student 2- lays down kick drum
Student 3- lays down snare
Student 4- adds a sample etc…

The ‘Rap Fill’ or ‘Rap Challenge activities such as ‘Rap gap fill 1’ or ‘Rap challenge - basic level’ clearly work well with class size groups, and can be followed by the ‘Writing A Rap - Getting Started’ video, followed by ‘Rhyme Guide’ hand-out. When combined with some work on Hip Hop History using presentations such as ‘Lyrics and Rapping - Rap Origins’, this works as an effective whole class taster into rap & lyric writing.

Gifted and talented

Remix kits are an excellent idea for those who are already excelling and need an extra challenge. The Hip Hop Coach material gives plenty of scope for open ended and involved project work. For example take the song ‘Shower Bray’ and do a remix. (i.e. same beat, new lyrics) or take the a-cappella and make a new beat that fits the original rapping. These types of project can be supported by the videos on beat-making and allow students who attain this level to gain real-world experience of professional hip hop production techniques.

Similarly Sample Packs can be used to work on their own compositions, with the support and reference of our other resources.
Hard to engage groups & common challenges

As mentioned, rap and beat-making often prove very effective at engaging hard to reach groups, in many instances by allowing them to express themselves and the realities of their lives lyrically. One good idea here is an emphasis on producing a track for “radio” with clean content and positive themes, often trying to get them to talk about what they are good at and generally big themselves up.

One important thing to emphasise is that whilst describing their lives, sensitive themes often emerge such as drink, crime, drugs violence etc. My approach is usually that discussion of these themes is okay e.g. ‘on my estate there are drug dealers’, but involving themselves or condoning things is not e.g. ‘I deal drugs on my estate’. This generally leads to a more rational discussion of local issues and prevents them from implicating themselves legally.

One real challenge can be a group containing different abilities or different levels of engagement. Typically this might mean most of the group are really into rap but a few are quiet and sit out from rap activities. My approach to this is usually to try to involve the less confident members of the group in other activities such as the production of the beat, the recording of the rap, designing a flyer for the performance, setting up an online presence for the group and getting the music out into the world. This often works really well in getting everyone onboard with the overall project.

Suggested resources to use with this type of group would be the basic Beat-making videos such as ‘Making a Hip Hop Beat’, along with ‘Writing A Rap - Getting Started’, the ‘Rhyme Guide’ handout and some of the presentations and stimulus tracks to find an area of interest to start from.
Technology Tips for Beat-making

Basic Beat-making checklist:

- Turn on loop in whatever software you’re using
- Turn on ‘count in’ and the metronome – this means when you press play you’ll hear a click to play along with.

For a Hip Hop beat:

- Set your tempo to about 90 BPM
- Put a Hi Hat sound on beats 1 2 3 4
- Put a Bass drum sound on beats 1 & 3
- Put a Snare/Clap sound on beats 2 & 4
- Keep the drums loud

For an example try looking at the ‘Structure Song’ or ‘2022’ tracks included with Hip Hop Coach

For House/Dance Music

- Set your tempo to 120-130 BPM
- Put a Bass drum sound on beats 1,2,3,4
- Put a Snare/Clap sound on beats 2 & 4
- Keep the bass drum loud

For an example of this type of beat look at the ‘Grime/house/garage beatmixer’

For a Dubstep or Grime beat

- Set your tempo to about 140 BPM
- Put a Hi Hat sound on beats 1,2,3,4, or swung before kick, clap
- Put a Bass drum sound on beat 1
- Put a Snare/Clap sound on beat 3
- A lot of dubstep is in a Minor key, uses synthesizer sub bass and is quite sparse and spacious, with an emphasis on bass lines as a lead element.
Another key feature is the Drop where elements are taken away and then brought back again. Try taking all of the sounds out of your beat for a bar or so and then reintroducing them with a new sound as well.

Dub step also has links to dub and reggae music, often borrowing samples from them. This can link to reggae as it is often featured on the music curriculum. For an example of these types of beat look at the Dubstep Beat Completers such as ‘Dubstep - counting 8-beat cycles’ or the track ‘Shower Bray’

A few general Beat making tips:

- In most software, to select lots of things at once, click on space next to the items then drag across them all
- In terms of arrangement- if you’re making a beat for a rapper, try to strip beats down a bit for the verses, and try to bring in and more complex melodies for chorus
- Encourage students to save their work with their name, mood and genre in the title e.g. Jack P Menacing Grime - so tracks don’t all have the same names – eg Piano Song.
F.A.Qs

Q: What do I do about young people who do not engage?
A: Give them other roles, e.g. promotion, art, engineering, DJing, dance. Not everyone has to be a rapper.

Q: How do I keep the attention of the whole class when they are not performing?
A: Get them all to join in with counting-in whoever’s rapping (1,2,3,4) This helps their timing and focuses them on the performer.

Q: How do I involve girls?
A: Girls usually seem to excel at lyric writing and performance. The main thing is not to make a deal of gender and roles, even if people have an expectation that boys will rap and girls will sing. (rap/singing)

Q: What do I do about swearing, violence, sexism, etc.
A: Use a radio edit approach – write something that could be played on radio 1 in the daytime. Also explain that if you talk about violence and crime in lyrics, the police can use it as evidence. If any of what you put in your lyrics about violence and crime was true you’d be stupid to put it in, and if it’s not true then why are you lying? Basically don’t dob yourself in, don’t lie

Q: I don’t like rap!
A: Writing rap lyrics use the same approach as song writing for other genres, so if you don’t like rap, write a rock lyric, a poem, a folk song, a synth house pop song – they all use the same approach to lyric writing. Failing that, write a rap about why you don’t like rap- that quite often works.

Q: What should I write about?
A: What subject are you into? Write about that. It can be anything, family, friends, sport, music. A lot of the time, writing about your day-to-day life and the local area is a good place to start.

Q: Can we work in pairs?
A: Yes, small groups are fine too as long as you all have some input and all get involved with performing it.

Q: Do I have to perform it?
A: No, no one should be forced. It’s supposed to be fun. Usually when the first few groups get a big round of applause, everyone will want to read theirs out or perform it.