

ADVOCATING CREATIVELY, HIP HOP FUNDAMENTALS

*Hip means to know, it's a form of intelligence;
To be hip is to be updated and relevant;
Hop is a form of movement;
You can't just observe a hop, you gotta hop up and do it.*

-KRS One

Before anything else, we were B-Boys. Breakdancing—known within the community as B-Boying, B-Girling, or Breaking—was at the forefront of our every thought. We craved freshness: new moves to learn, new music to discover, new practice spots to find, new clubs with footwork-appropriate floors, new friends to make, new rivals, new competitions to enter. Breaking is pedestrian. There is a funkiness in day to day movements.; the originators took the every day and made it art. There is a freedom in this art which children can take advantage of in a way we as adults often take for granted: through its simplicity. Our dance form is unique in its appeal to young people. It is current, athletic, and universally cool. My partner Steve and I, while attending college in 2001, unearthed a hobby that grew into a passion; we were unknowingly becoming part of the most powerful force in worldwide youth culture: Hip Hop.

Now, I am by no means an O.G., or a living scholar of the culture; nor do I have the street credibility to call myself a master. But, here are a few things about Hip Hop that I have learned over the years:

It's about having fun.

It's about demanding a voice.

Its aesthetic, traditions, and rules are all driven by its practitioners.

Knowledge is passed down through mentors.

It engages you.

It's challenging.

It's driven.

It's communal.

It's introspective.

It's empowering.

It's about creating an original style and standing out.

It makes space for outside cultural and personal influences; it samples everything.

It's people doing what they want to do.

Everyone can participate.

And I'll say it again - it's FUN.

For these reasons, Hip Hop has endured over the decades and virally spread across the globe. What was, at its inception, considered a passing fad for kids, destined to wallow in the lowest echelon of society, is now unstoppable.

So imagine what our world would look like if education shared this same list. What if learning how to read, write, practice algebra or physics, were all taught through these principles? What if learning became just as unstoppable?

To be clear, our small Philadelphia-based company, *Hip Hop Fundamentals*, is not designed or able to make massive changes in this country's flawed education system. But I also want to be clear about the fact that it is flawed. For the most part, the world teaches our youth on blackboards, through fact memorization, and standardized tests, with one information-

gatekeeper standing at the front of a square room, packed with unchallenged, bored students. It's an out-dated, factory model of schooling, intended to produce better followers than thinkers. Our education system functions as a very fine sieve that supports a select few and lets the rest—everyone who doesn't flourish within its specific, highly controlled learning environment—pour down the drain. This tradition effectively bars millions of young people from learning. In so doing, it disempowers them and perpetuates systems of poverty, bigotry, and oppression that dehumanize the very individuals our education systems are supposed to support.

We all feel this problem perhaps most potently in our own communities, but it is everywhere. In our home city, for example, more than one in five Philadelphians are illiterate. That's a tragedy, but it's shockingly close to the national average. More than one in five Americans are functionally illiterate—they can fill out a deposit slip or find the location of a meeting on a flier, and not much else. So what's the deal? Why is it that so many young people are alienated from even the most basic elements of a quality education? For answers, we thought we'd turn to what we believe to be education's greatest untapped resource: students themselves.

A recent survey interviewed 300,000 American high school students about their studies. And when you ask young people themselves about education, here's what you get: it turns out that students go to school not because they have to, but because they want to be challenged, they want a community that supports them, and they want to succeed. Unfortunately, that's not what they get. Instead, they get bored. Students in school are overwhelmingly bored every day because the content is not interesting or relevant to them, because they do not feel challenged, and because of no interaction with their teachers*.

This is nothing new, and nothing you probably don't already know from your own experiences. And probably, like us, you feel that changing the paradigm of our educational institutions is a task extremely overwhelming and frightening. So our response to this problem—our creative advocacy—is achieved in small, concrete, practical chunks. As a company of B-Boys, *Hip Hop Fundamentals* decided its mission was to infuse our principles of Hip Hop, our list above, into the educational system in as many small ways as we can.

Usually, *Hip Hop Fundamentals* education takes the form of hour-long interactive assemblies. At the beginning of our company's journey—with an initial rallying cry of simply: "Let's just try this Breakdance assembly thing and see if it works"—we were wary about what we could actually *teach* through our dancing and lecturing. We interjected nuggets of education and moral values, like "Breaking requires focus and discipline", or "Time signatures in music are actually fractions" into our shows, which were mostly packaged as morale-boosting entertainment. To our genuine surprise, we saw attentive audiences across all demographics: smiling, eager eyes, and youth who were hungry to scream, laugh, support each other, chant, get out of their seats, and truly participate. Soon, we asked ourselves - What if Breaking wasn't just the 'hook' to capture young people's attention long enough to throw some facts at them? What if the entire show, and the dancing itself was a vehicle through which to understand concepts and information? Our mission suddenly changed, and we now use our art form to empower and teach. We use the traditional movements of Breaking (spinning, flipping, and dynamically dancing) as a method of teaching academic content and social issues, ranging from youth empowerment and the Principles of Hip Hop to the Civil Rights Movement and basic Newtonian Physics. We serve all ages and demographics of students: K-12, special needs, summer camps, community sites, from the most progressive private institutions to the PS-insert-number-here schools of the Bronx or Queens. *Hip Hop Fundamentals* shows are a simple but exciting mash-up of dance performance, interactive lecture, and participatory theater. All of our shows are fast-paced, highly interactive, and involve getting students up on stage to dance with us, both learning from us and also showing off their original moves and interpretations. Breaking becomes more than eye-catching spinning and kicking: breaking becomes a lens to explore

friction and force, a way to discuss racism, a means for youth to understand how Dr. Martin Luther King's non-violent direct action and People Power changed the world.

We also partner with community organizations to teach workshops in which youth use Breaking movement vocabulary to perform student-directed dance theater works on themes they choose and explore. These shows never fail to be surprisingly beautiful and powerful. Student-driven work like this always reminds me of how passionate and dedicated young people can be when they give themselves permission to say what they want to say.

Over our approximately five-year span, we have achieved numerous small milestones and victories, including newspaper articles and a successful Kickstarter fundraiser to tour our Civil Rights show for free to underserved Philadelphia schools. But, at the beginning and end of the day, we're a group of B-boys trying to use our dance to do work, pull some weight, connect with young people, and become another tool they can use to empower themselves.

This is not to say that Breaking or Hip Hop is 'the answer'. This dance just happens to be what we are passionate about and what we do; Steve and I are still looking for those new moves and new practice spots. As creative advocates, we didn't re-invent the wheel, and in fact our uniqueness lies only in the fact that we have chosen Breaking as our interactive method. But the basic principles of what works for us as educators are the same for everyone. In fact, they have always been here, and everyone can, and should, use them. They're so simple that they're almost common sense. These are basic guidelines to creatively advocate for education that can work for everyone, not just teachers. So bear in mind: we're not educational theorists or classroom professors, but here, in a nutshell, is what we've found.

Switch it up

I have vivid memories of learning history in high school. There was only one method my teacher used: she would chalk a paragraph of factual, cursive text onto the blackboard and we would copy it into our notebooks. The memory of that repetition is forever with me, but any facts and concepts didn't survive five minutes. A very stern and stereotypical example, I know, but the fact is, it's extremely difficult to learn in any *one* given way. Therefore, when teaching, keep varying the ways for your students to ingest material. When teaching about the Civil Rights Movement, we use written words on large boards, we dance vignettes about historical segregation, we play Dr. King's speeches set to Hip Hop music, and we read quotes from his letters. Most importantly, youth participate: they dance with us onstage, act in skits, they clap, march, and mime letter-writing to create a unified 'beat' of non-violent direct action. The point is, we don't just stick to one thing; Hip Hop dance is our lens, but our overarching theme, The Civil Rights Movement, shines through in multiple ways. Students should be able to hear (aural learning), see (visual learning), touch (kinesthetic learning), and experience/interpret the theme as a group (social learning). Academics use phrases like 'multiple means of representation' and 'differentiated instruction according to learning profile', but we see it as putting on a good show. Don't give them enough of any one activity so as they get bored. This kind of learning looks each student in the eye, and says "Hey, I'm talking to you. This stuff is important to you." Switch it up, and let every type of learner flourish in his or her ideal method. Einstein famously said it best: "Everybody is a genius. But, if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid."

Keep it real

Don't fake the funk. I genuinely am excited every single time we perform. It has to be exciting for me if I'm going to convince anyone that it's worth learning. Sheer enthusiasm and

passion - real enthusiasm, not the motivational speaker kind that's only jazzed on itself - never fails to inspire. The main reason why Breaking works for our company is that it truly is our passion, and when we teach using it, that passion speaks for itself. A major pitfall in any integrated education is to try and 'hide' any learning, to 'trick people into learning something'. When we are teaching physics, we are direct in explaining that we are using the same equations and processes that take place in a physics lab. Physics isn't 'hidden' inside the breakdancing - it's a front and center component. No element of what we're doing (either the Breaking or the Physics) can be watered down or sugar coated. Of course, you must keep everything appropriate for your learners, but don't fake the funk - we can all smell it a mile away. If you're a math teacher, partner with a painter to design a unit. If you're a basketball player, teach an after school program that teaches history through the lens of basketball. Get creative, but stay true.

Let them have it

We were adamant when deciding to grow our company to make our new shows extremely interactive. We wanted to create more opportunities for youth to jump up, get excited, and get involved. We create spaces on stage and in class where it's safe for students to be leaders, quiet followers, jesters, or show-offs. Put a loosely structured physical activity (I think getting students moving is a sure-fire way to solidify neural pathways) onto a group of youth and let them have at it. If there are folks who are very uncomfortable moving, have them critique, co-direct, design, write a script, or support. Find a way for everyone to get up and get involved in a challenging (but not terrifying) way. Personally, I also feel that anything artistic and creative is the perfect vehicle for students to drive down the road of education. As Pearl Schaeffer (my Arts Integration professor and C.E.O. of Philadelphia Arts in Education Partnership) put it, "Art lets you be challenged without ever being wrong."

We also wanted to structure our company itself with the same kind of energy around youth empowerment. We call our framework 'youth teaching youth', but it's really just a way for us to pay young, up-and-coming dancers in our local community to do what they love. We subcontract and mentor young B-boys in the Philadelphia Hip Hop scene, teaching them to perform, lecture, and conduct business. They give valuable ideas, lead sections of the performances, and participate in company meetings. We pay them equitable fees for their talent. And, as always is the case with youth, they are surprising, amazing, and constantly able to step up to a challenge. We've seen our subcontracted dancers graduate from high school, enroll in college, present school reports based on Dr. King's speeches that inspired them while learning our show, become world-class competitive dancers, and some are even on the path to become formal educators themselves.

We aim, both with our company structure and with our teaching/performance style, to put youth in the driver's seat and in the spotlight, scaffolding for success, even if only for a brief few minutes. Try it. Doing so says to students: "You are a person of value. I'm not *giving* you anything, rather I'm trusting you to do it with me and on your own."

Bring it back home

Brains love patterns. Reiterate ideas in multiple ways, many times. Our show structure generally follows a simple pattern: call and response, talking, then performance, then participation. Humans love to expect things, to know what's coming next, and to put together pieces of a puzzle. In a teaching session, maybe make a ritual for before you begin and after you end each section. Play an improv game or a name game. Showing a pattern that expresses a concept practices making connections that aid in *all* learning. Ultimately, if you're switching up

modes of presentation within a structure of consistency, you can keep students engaged and excited but still on task.

Break loose

This is the most important element. You *must* have fun. Students should have fun learning it, and you should have fun teaching it. I don't mean that you simply enjoy it, or that students get some satisfaction out of doing homework. I mean, have *fun*. Laugh, make jokes, play, and make an idiot of yourself. Encourage your learners to be silly, experiment, or make a mess. Hip Hop at its core is purely about having a good time, breaking free, and 'bugging out'; this youthful energy is vital to the way we educate. If, while teaching a workshop, I see youth playing with dance movement as I'm talking, I don't see them as poor listeners or inattentive. Rather, they are *on task*, experimenting and exploring the material. As it turns out, human brains respond to excitement and pleasure by releasing powerful chemicals that can, for lack of a better term, become addictive. Wouldn't it be fantastic if students were addicted to learning? I can't tell you exactly how to have fun; you know it when you're in it, but I can't stress it enough.

That's our basic advice for how anyone can creatively advocate for learning. Of course, our society already knows about all this. And actually, the gap between what research has proven and how our schools choose to function is alarmingly counterintuitive. There's a plethora of studies and theory explaining exactly how these processes work, breaking down the science of neural pathways in the brain, encouraging the rewarding releases of dopamine, and building self-efficacy. But we're here to tell you that as a regular person - a classroom teacher, an artist, a parent, a community member - you don't really need all that. You don't need permission to creatively teach people how to remember facts, think for themselves, and work with others. I'm not challenging you to build a new school (but if you do, bring us in for an assembly!). This is all we're saying: if you get people excited and engaged, then you will create lasting change, and it works. Teach your children the physics of cooking an egg. Start an after-school piano club that teaches kids how to write their own music. Support a partnership between a local sculptor and your high school's anatomy class. Join the PTA or PTO and advocate for more creative activities. Throw a block party and invite your neighborhood kids to create and perform a dance piece.

We don't, and you shouldn't, go it alone. We're always looking to partner with new people, spark new collaborations and generate new ideas. High school teacher Aaron Troisi, our Education Director, became vital to our creation of our Physics and Civil Rights shows. He often performs as our narrator, 'Professor Peabody', our knowledgeable guide through history and academic content, providing a perfect foil for myself and Steve's on-stage arguments and antics. Arts organizations, non-profits, parents, and corporate sponsors all support us and act as champions for our work and growth. So take it from us: surround yourself with good people, collaborate, and make an army of advocates.

Our experience has truly just begun, and I sometimes wish we had the energy and resources to do more, to provide more than just an hour of fun, or a summer dance workshop. Applause, letters from schools, high-fives, and excited grins let us know that at the least, we're creating a temporary space for positivity. We're going to keep doing our thing, but in truth, the growth, evolution, and endurance of this kind of education depends on you. Demand and become an advocate for diversity, arts integration, and a return to teaching the student rather than teaching the lesson. Hip Hop's aesthetics, movements, traditions, principles, and pedagogies are not taught in schools; there is no lesson plan to follow or standards to meet. It's an inclusive subculture that is passed on by passionate individuals to anyone who wants it. It's

spread to every corner of the globe, and it's here to stay. There is absolutely no reason why creative and interactive education cannot work in the same way. Peace, Love, Unity, and Having Fun are the principles of Hip Hop defined by the word's creator, the 1980's teenage DJ Afrika Bambaataa. We embrace them and use them with no permission required, and we feel you should do the same.

Mark Wong (a.k.a. *Metal*, Repstyles Crew/olive Dance Theatre/Hip Hop Fundamentals)

with contributions by Mandy Wong, Aaron Troisi (Philadelphia Coalition Advocating for Public Schools/Hip Hop Fundamentals) and Stephen Lunger (a.k.a. *Steve Believe*, Repstyles Crew/Concrete All-Stars/Hip Hop Fundamentals)

For more information on our company, visit hiphopfundamentals.com

Pictures by J.R. Blackwell, *Philadelphia Weekly*

*Ethan Yazzie-Mintz, "Charting the Path from Engagement to Achievement: A Report on the 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement", *University of Indiana at Bloomington's Center for Evaluation and Education Policy*,
<http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/images/HSSSE_2010_Report.pdf>