Ahimsa Center- K-12 Teacher Institute

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<th>How dialogue and action through art rejuvenate a community: creating the cipher through the chaos.</th>
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**Guiding Questions:**
- How does music, art and dialogue transform a space?
- What role does changing the scene play in changing the individual, and vice versa?
- How does it feel to be creative versus violent?
- How do we foster a progressive community?

**Lesson Abstract:**
This lesson uses interactive strategies to identify how influence, energy and choice shape outcomes. By intentionally using creativity to foster a positive culture, a classroom can develop a cipher (a connected and focused, group of intellectuals) that bolsters nonviolence rather than negative peace, simple tolerance or violence.

**Lesson Content:**

**Cipher**

*n. the completion of a circle consisting of 360 degrees, which is a whole  
v. to think or figure out. refers to mathematical calculations  
n. an Algorithm or method for encrypting a message*

This word is often used in the hip-hop scene to describe a group of people circled around those that are free styling with spoken word lines or dancing to a beat. From a distance, the mob of people could be confused with folks who are fighting; however, this battle is the kind you would find in a revolution, not a war. The gift of gab of those involved often parallels the great speakers of the world, including Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. It may have beats that go with the flow, but the powerful vibe, message and energy is key in how the cipher transforms.

It is up to us as educators to offer new ways for students and youth develop their verbal and social skills. Soon they will be the ones that mold the circle into what they want it to be. They have the historical role models, but many youth need to see it put into practice in their own culture. Community leaders, such as hip-hop historian Afrika Bambaataa and non-violence educator Dr. Bernard LaFayette, offer this to the youth. They tell how they developed from gang lords into community activists by having an output that was healthy, productive and
involved. Once they felt necessary in the world, they were. In the classroom, we must enact this in what we do so that it can transfer to the community at large. Simple activities that develop a cipher can help students connect to one another and feel a sense of belonging.

Stories like LaFayette’s and Bambaata’s depict that individuals have freewill, but depending on whether their circle is violent or progressive, their actions can vary. The system they are in that determines this, and the trick then is for us as a community to use tools of speech, art and music to transform a scene that practices satyagraha, ahimsa and transcendence. We can then actively create a cipher that shows all community members that a holistic approach to well-being enriches the individual.

The Players

Dr. Bernard LaFayette
Starting as a young gang member at the age of 12, LaFayette felt a niche. He had influence and a role. Thankfully for him, another output was in the cards. He moved and ended up having the responsibility of taking care of his grandmother. With the guidance of his grandmother he saw how a positive environment and the work of his own hands proved to be engaging. He no longer need the artificial sense of control over others. Living in her house paved his way to community service: feeling the power of his own work over coercion through fear.

He experienced many events along the way that shaped his understanding of how leadership and power is often just a manner of channeling energy. In a way it can promote chaos and a vicious cycle or repercussion, but through nonviolence training, it can be redirected and bolstered. LaFayette conducts seminars where they are able to reform typically violent communities into ones of unconditional love. He focuses on forgiveness, courage and honor as key components of this. When a teacher can offer techniques, lessons and activities that promote these in the classroom, students can reap the benefits and put them into practice when needed.

One anecdote of his experience in the Nashville Sit-ins epitomizes this philosophy. One evening when he was sitting out at the counters, he was assaulted by an angry cab driver after stepping briefly outside a restaurant. Many other cab drivers gathered round to partake. Rather than retaliate, LaFayette cushioned blows, maintained his calm demeanor, and went back about his business. Once the assailants were exhausted, LaFayette went to return to his business, only to be stopped by a cop who arrested him for fighting. To the cop, the altercation that seemed like a result of high tensions, really was an act of nonviolence. The two can be mistaken for the other if the observer does not look closely enough. Even though LaFayette was physically harmed, everyone in that circle learned a lesson—even the cab driver. When someone is trained to respond in a way that will bring about positive change, it will happen naturally. Later when LaFayette and his companions offered to bail out the man who had beat him up, the man realized that his friends were not there to help him but LaFayette was. This shows how even though a moment can start out negative, one person’s choices can result in something positive.

Afrika Bambatta
After the Cross Bronx Exressway interrupted the life Bronx in the 1970's and triggered
landlords to burn down buildings for insurance reimbursements, people joined gangs for safety reasons. The gangs became the law in the absence of law. Bambaataa, the unique individual that he was, became so well respected in these communities that he not did not fear crossing turfs to forge relationships with other gang members, and he actually was able to do this freely. After Bambaataa won an essay contest that earned him a trip to Africa, his worldview shifted. He witnessed African communities that could stop the violence in their towns, and he decided to take this back to his own neighborhood. He decided to use hip-hop as a positive way to draw youth out of gangs. This in turn encouraged him to form the Universal Zulu Nation. Bambaataa used his innate leadership skills to turn those involved in the gang life into something more positive to the community.

While many see the violence and hate that sometimes infiltrates current hip-hop music, its roots helped those feeling the oppression to rise up over their situation and use one another’s creative spirits to form a community: the essential cipher.

The Options

Now a cipher in its purest form is people listening to the rhythms of one another and adding a beat that is both in sync and harmonious to the entire piece. You are no longer and individual, you are a part of the cipher. The idea here is that you must let go of your self-critic, your fear and your resistance to change. You must let yourself embody the transformation, as you become part of a unit. One can no longer be a soloist in mind, body or heart. (Israel, July 5, 2009, University of Wisconsin Workshop)

The cipher can take many forms, but including any of these in the classroom creates connections amongst the students organically.

Music

Music has traditionally been a way to unite a crew of people. It helps people feel connected, become part of a movement, gather strength, and learn form one another Dr. Janine Riveire explains it as reclaiming space when you use your voice. (Riveire, Lecture, July 22, 2009, Ahmisa Institute). She referenced this in a Bernice Johnson Reagon quote, “You cannot sing unless you change your condition” to illustrate this physicality of the cipher. She continued saying that we literally change our being: we must breathe differently, we must change our conscious state of mind, we release stress and we must let everything go to be able to sing.

This phenomenon can be witnessed in both civil rights activity and the hip-hop movement. Groups of people will physically connect with one another and use their voices, melodies and beats to show their cohesiveness. Dr. Riveire tells a story of a civil rights mass meeting where a sheriff came in and started writing down the names of everybody in the room in an attempt to intimidate. Those in the room initially got real quiet and then from the back came a voice singing: “We are not afraid.” Then another voice joined and then another. The people literally took back the space. (Rievere, Lecture, July 22, 2009, Ahmisa Institute). They took it away from the symbol of oppression and restored it to those who were there to establish equality and civil rights. They could have simply sat there and let the policeman have the power, they could
have lashed out in frustration, but instead they took it as an opportunity to create a cipher.

Bernice Johnson Regan alludes to how important music and song were to the sit-on movement: “Out of the pressures and needs involved in maintaining group unity on the community level, while working under conditions of intense hostility and physical threat, the sit-in movement developed its own culture, and music was its mainstay.” (Reagon 106)

Songs such as “This Little Light of Mine”, “We shall not be moved”, “Go Tell It on the Mountain”, “Freedom” and “Cum Bah Yah” were either made or adapted to be songs of the movement. They established a sense of power, solidified a memory or acted as a tool of passive resistance. Today we see this in songs like “Fight the Power” by Public Enemy”, “More or Less” by Talib Kweli, “Hip Hop Lives” by KRS-One and Marley Marl, “Inkwell” by Blue Scholars” and “Hey Bobby” by Sage Francis. They promote truth and seek to educate and unite.

Art
Part of process is creating art that cannot only deliver an idea but connect with the audience in a refreshing manner. It has the ability to elicit emotion, tell a narrative, set a tone, and relate to the human components of life. Much as can be viewed in, “Long Night’s Journey into the Day”. That piece of art triggers both thought and emotion. Whether it is in sound or visual sensation, much of the process is to connect with both hemispheres of our brain, both the rational and the artistic. Documentaries can do this, slam poetry can do this, and interpretive dance can do this. By creating a cipher, you have a twofold benefit, individual artists are able to express what they view as reality and transformation and the audience through their own lens can interpret the message. This beautiful process develops identity, stimulates thought and provokes us to use analysis as a means of growth.

Graffiti which is one of the four elements of hip-hop is a form of illuminated writing, which historically traces back to hieroglyphics, pictographs and the Book of Kells (Raven, Lecture). Of course it can be simple tagging, but it can also act as history of a culture. There are creative rules too in terms of never interrupting another artist’s work by covering it up. These artists create their own cipher and though it may not be heard aloud or done in a setting where everyone watches the process, it transforms a space literally and figuratively. By using one’s classroom walls or screens as a way to document the history of the classroom, art can become a way to transform the space into one that promotes nonviolent values rather than them being a thing of the past.

Dialogue
During conflict, silent avoidance gets you nowhere. Yelling or throwing a punch encourages a response of much the same. Another part of breaking down violence is finding ways to communicate and address conflict without resorting to negative peace (conflict avoidance or complacency) or violence. It can come in many forms: mediation, listening and learning, or trying a new approach.

This can be taught through the direct instruction of nonviolence training or it can be developed organically in a hip-hop setting. Many chagrin at the rap battle scene seeing it as sometimes just glorified your mama jokes, but at the same time, it is a way to show intelligence and practice
debate through a creative means. Not all of us are able to meditate our problems away. That is
one method. Gandhi himself does not assume that prescribing a solution to others will solve
problems. People must find a lifestyle that helps them practice ahimsa. Today, youth can use
their culture as away to practice nonviolence in verbal terms that make sense to them. Granted
turning them loose to say whatever they want can be destructive or harmful, but teaching a way
to be competitive, uplifting and flavorful can have many benefits. One could do this in
limericks, rhyming couplets or haikus. There are many forms in ways we can express our
unsettled feelings. Muffling them though does not create the culture that allows us to prosper.

Connecting the Circle

Recently I saw two different circles: one was a cipher, one was a fight. From a distance they
established the same visual appearance, had the same volume and seemed to be the same
demographic of youth. One felt good to witness in the end, the other left me feeling at a loss.

The first provided a collaborative environment in the cipher that had playful language, deep
insights and wicked awesome lines. The other escalated to throwing trashcans in a lake, awful
harmful words and police showing up on the scene. If only the second group had been offered
the resources, the knowledge and the means to express themselves. Or perhaps if someone had
the confidence to interject and provide an alternative.

Regardless, we as educators have the duty to create the cipher rather than to leave individuals
stranded and unable to find nonviolent means to solve a problem. There is hope, and it is
through a hip-hop environment. By creating it in the classroom through music, art and dialogue,
there is hope that it can spread into the larger global community. LaFayette and Bambaataa
have demonstrated its possibilities. Now students and teachers must aim to create their own
ciphers.

Oregon State Content Standards:
CCG: Analysis:
Evaluate the significance and accuracy of information and ideas presented in oral, visual, and
multi-media communications across the subject areas.

- EL.HS.SL.12 Evaluate the clarity, quality, and effectiveness of a speaker's
  important points, arguments, evidence, organization of ideas, delivery, diction,
  and syntax.
- EL.HS.SL.13 Identify and analyze the types of arguments used by the speaker,
  including argument by causation, analogy, authority, emotion, and logic.
- EL.HS.SL.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation, and evaluate
  the techniques used to create them.
- EL.HS.SL.15 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g.,
televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the
same event.
- EL.HS.SL.16 Analyze historically significant speeches (e.g., Abraham Lincoln's
"Gettysburg Address," Martin Luther King, Jr.’s "I Have a Dream") to find the
rhetorical devices and features that make them memorable.
• EL.HS.SL.17 Analyze how language and delivery affect the mood and tone of the oral communication and make an impact on the audience.

Suggested Teaching Activities:

Fast write: (courtesy of Dr. Tara Sethia)
Show them a comic strip of two men fighting with their brains beside them. Have them respond to what they see, then have a group discussion.

Create a song (courtesy of Dr. Jeneine Riveire):
Sing the lyrics of This Little Light of Mine. Talk about it in its context. Mini-lecture on why it was written. We learn the lines through line-ing, then we sing several verses only in the end to make up our own.

Show Nashville Sit-ins
Let the students watch a historical example of how this happens. Hold a discussion after.

Reflect on subway ciphers
Show a couple Youtube examples of ciphers. They can make observations about how everyone is part of the vibe and contributes. Another concept that students will be able to witness would be the content of the pieces. What are the different members of the cipher saying, how are they speaking the truth or solving issues in their words.

Team battle (courtesy of Piper Anderson)
There are teams of five. Each one has to pick a leader. The teams line up across from each other. One team goes first. Their leader starts a beat, line, movement, anything really. Their teammates replicate and show it off to the other team, then the other team responds. Their leader starts something, and they all loop it over together until the facilitator tells them to stop. They throw it back and forth several times, and the audience responds accordingly to what they see that they like. This models a safe way to battle.

Create a cipher (courtesy of Baba Israel)
Take groups of eight at a time. They will be in a circle with eyes closed. The rest of the class can witness the transformation. One person makes a beat and repeats it. (This beat can be a rhythm, a melody, a line of words…whatever feels right). After the first person maintains the beat, the person to their right chimes in, then the next person joins after those two are in sync. The group continues in this pattern until the last person adds their own layer. Then that last persons keeps their beat until they feel it is time to stop. They drop out, and then the circle goes backwards in terms of stopping until they arrive back at the last person. They end it when it feels right.

Debriefing questions:
What did the experience feel like?
How did you know what to do?
Did the piece sound different when you added your part?
**Reverse graffiti**
Watch the Youtube clip of the artist who went into a tunnel and created graffiti by washing the pollution off of the walls. He made quite a mural of skulls and the police almost arrested him for creating this art but they had no grounds too being that he was simply doing a public service. Once he finished his project, he had made quite a statement, but in the end the impact was even larger. The next day they came to wash away his graffiti and in the process they had to clean the entire tunnel. The last shot is of all the dirt washing down the drain and a pan to the bright, clean structure. Quite a change.

We shall watch the video and then develop projects we could do in our community to see if it would actually work to provoke as much change or thought in our own neighborhood.

**Materials Needed:**
- Documentaries
- Computer, Projector, Internet connections, Bookmarks of music and lyrics on Youtube.
- Comic slide
- Guitar or someone who can carry a tune.

**Bibliography:**


Reagon, Bernice Johnson. “Let the Church Sing ‘Freedom’”. *BMR Journal*


