Rap battles as playful learning pedagogy

Lauren Traczykowski, Manpreet Kaur, Navjot Chauhan*
Aston University, Aston Triangle, Birmingham B4 7ET, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

As with art more generally, rap music helps historically disadvantaged groups articulate opposition to societal oppression and injustice. In this article, we explain how using the rap battle as a form of assessment is uniquely placed to help teachers and students engage with social justice and ethical issues in the real world. To be an academic ally, teachers must offer the opportunity to work outside standard assessment styles which stand as central tenants of the White, Western academic system. This article has two main goals: (a) to demonstrate the value of using rap as a playful pedagogical mechanism and tool for resistance (b) offer rap as a mechanism of playful assessment which may help overcome 'traditional' (i.e., colonial, white, Western) determinants of what an effective assignment looks like.

After a brief history of rap to situate the arguments made, we explore the use of rap battles as a playful pedagogical tool. We reflect on the educational expectations from the academic, including her self-identified biased expectations of why rap battles are appropriate assessments, and the student perspective on engaging with a rap battle assessment, i.e., because rhyming helps with memory, etc. We also outline the development of certain skills made possible by a rap battle as playful pedagogic approach. Finally, we provide guidance for the teacher who uses the rap battle as an assessment. Playful learning, in the form of a rap battle, for social justice is relied upon throughout as pedagogical justification of this approach to learning.

Rap helps many marginalised groups articulate opposition to societal oppression and injustice. In this way, rap is a useful pedagogical tool to promote engagement with social justice and ethical issues in the real world. Adopting rap into the classroom, though, could be seen as cultural appropriation depending on who the user is. In acknowledging an adoption of culturally based art outside one's own culture there is an opportunity for allyship. Additionally, rap music and rap battles are understudied pedagogical tools for creative and critical assessment. With this, there is an opportunity to use rap battles as part of a playful learning approach which accounts for racialised power structures whilst encouraging skills development.

To be an academic ally, a teacher must offer students the opportunity to work outside of the standard assessment styles which stand as central tenants of the White, Western academic system. This article has two main goals: (a) to demonstrate the value of using rap as a playful pedagogical mechanism and tool for resistance (b) offer rap as a mechanism of playful assessment which may help overcome 'traditional' (i.e., colonial, white, Western) determinants of what an effective assignment looks like.

It is important to note that this article is a cooperative effort between a (racialised white, female) module leader and two (South Asian-British, female) students who submitted a rap battle for a recent assessment on an undergraduate, final year module (called Ethics in a Crisis) in a British Higher Education institution. Rap music is very firmly based in the African American community. We (the authors) include our ethnic backgrounds in this article to recognize that we exist outside of that ethnic/cultural background, and we do not intend any cultural appropriation. That said, the 'othering' experienced by the 'Black' communities (Smith, 2021) may be experienced by those who are not racialised white and hence the use of rap may be appropriate. Further, the co-writing of this article is important because it allows for student voice and represents an effort to minimize power dynamics inherent in a teacher-student relationship. Instead, teacher and student are understood to have "different but equally valuable expertise" (Ryan et al., 2023).

The rest of this article will proceed as follows: First, a brief history of rap music and rap battles to situate the argument for rap's use in a pedagogical context, namely an applied ethics assessment. Second, we explore our use of rap battles as a playful pedagogical tool. In the third section, we reflect on the educational expectations from the academic (author of this chapter) including why a teacher may propose such an assessment (including biased expectations of what is appropriate) and student perspective on why students may choose to engage with a rap battle assessment (i.e., rhyming helps with memory, etc.). Next, we outline the development of certain skills made possible by a rap battle as playful pedagogic approach. Finally, we provide guidance for any teacher who uses the rap battle as an assessment. Playful learning, in the form of a rap battle, for social justice is relied upon throughout as pedagogical justification of this approach to learning.

A Brief History

Rap is a genre of music with roots in the hip-hop movement of the 1970s. It is: 'a musical form that makes use of rhyme, rhythmic speech, and street vernacular, which is recited or loosely chanted over a musical soundtrack' (Keyes, 2002) with a political aim (Wood, 1999). It draws from its hip-hop roots which may act as 'a vehicle for sociopolitical resistance, primarily among young men and women of color' (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014). Hip-hop is rooted in resistance, or rather, defiance of that which subjugates community members, traditionally Black people (Gaines, 2022).

Kubrin and Nielson (2014) explain how rap has 'socially conscious' underpinnings which are integrated into its unique form of 'edutainment'. By thinking of rap as socially conscious edutainment, we can link rap music to a form of public pedagogical resistance: 'sites of resistance to dominant culture and oppressive structures sustained by society, politics, economics, policies and practices' (Bushay, 2023). For example, a recent Senegalese hip-hop project has attempted to help students 'un-learn' entrenched, colonial perspectives of African history and inspire political activism (Da Sylva, 2019).

Hip-hop, and rap more specifically, can also embody cultural narratives and a spirit of community which aims to liberate: 'Indigenous projects like rap music and spoken word poetry turn the pedagogies of oppression and colonization into pedagogies of liberation' (Biggs-El, 2012, p. 166). Freire (2017, p. 35) makes the argument that liberation requires 'communion' with the people.Understanding how the other sees and is affected by the world is necessary for emancipating ourselves from the systems of oppression. As an example, DMX, a famous Gangsta rapper of the late 1990s, is reported to have written lyrics and projected his rap in an "abrupt, loud, and even disrespectful" way in order to help the listener empathize with his lived experience (Payne, 2016). This shirking of the status quo way of producing music – by being loud and disrespectful – can be seen as what Freire calls, an 'act of rebellion by the oppressed' (Freire, 2017, p. 30). The 'violence' of the music is intended to imitate the 'violence' of his life and with that proposes a way for the listener to recognize DMX's lived reality – a reality which is grounded in real human experience (Freire, 2017, p. 30).

Wood (1999) explains that rap is a version of folk-poetry stemming from African-American culture (*Understanding Rap as Rhetorical Folk-Poetry,*). There is also some poetry found in Indonesia where individuals working in the same area would 'sing mournful or mocking songs at the expense of their companions in the neighbouring trees' which leads to 'envenomed singing-duels' (Huizinga, 2016). The French even referred to this type of interaction as 'debate' (Huizinga, 2016).

Thus, a rap battle is a form of poetic debate with firm historical roots. The rap battle stems from the hip-

hop scene which evolved around gang culture and with that the 'battles' for cultural and physical territory. Individuals sought 'space' separate to other gangs and away from the police which were known to be cracking down on minority communities whom they saw as violent or lawless (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014).

Pedagogical Tool

Whether poetic, rap-based or any other type, using rap in the classroom must next be explored in order to justify the use of rap battle debates as a specific pedagogic tool. Let us begin, though, with a brief explanation of the module for which this assessment was proposed – Ethics in a Crisis – and the assessment as proposed for context.

The Module

Ethics in a Crisis is an interdisciplinary, optional, undergraduate module within which students learn ethical theories and principles and apply them to crisis and disaster situations from varied professional perspectives. The module covers an array of topics: normative ethical theory, media/journalism, vulnerability, food in a crisis, disaster capitalism + charity and philanthropy, disaster bioethics, financial crises, minority and racial justice, and the climate crisis and climate justice. Each topic compels the students to look at disasters/crises through different professional lenses and apply theory and principles consistent with those professions to the different disasters/crises. Being ethics-focused, this module ensures that students look beyond practical (financial/economic/social) decision making. By challenging students to consider what (ideally) should happen, based on normative ethical theories, students are forced out of their discipline-specific mindsets to examine cross-disciplinary, structural issues that impede ethical action and outcomes in disasters.

For their first assignment on this module, students were required to identify two ethical issues in a recent crisis or disaster scenario and present their analysis via suggested mediums. The options were podcast, graphic novel or rap battle; the latter was chosen by the student co-writers of this article. The total time limit of the rap battle recording was set at 10 minutes. Students were to demonstrate knowledge of key theorists and literature and cite them (verbally) where relevant.

The module leader (first author on this paper) developed the assessment such that play was central to the student experience. A rap battle as designed for this module, in line with the characteristics of play more generally, was intended to be a. 'free' in that students were not required to do the rap battle, b. it was different to 'ordinary' life, and c. it was 'played' within certain boundaries* (Huizinga, 2016). When difficult concepts are played, there is an increased opportunity for repetition and 'learning while doing' (Petridis & Traczykowski, 2021). The debate style of a rap battle would mimic the learning outcomes achieved by a pure debate† but would add an element of creativity and independent creation.

The assignment brief specified that students should apply a relevant normative ethical theory plus relevant principles discussed in class to explain why what happened in the identified crisis/disaster was unethical, what actors did or did not do/missed, and what should have happened, ethically speaking (using theory and principles). By engaging with the material in this way students had the opportunity to identify key aspects of ethical theory and demonstrate that they had achieved the knowledge, understanding and skills of the learning outcomes.

Whilst the rap battle was trialled on this specific module, the argument made herein is that a rap battle is a pedagogically appropriate and useful assessment tool for any module which requires the application of theory to real-world issues. The Ethics in a Crisis module is thereby used here as the test case and example for integration of rap battle assessments more generally.

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* Even when something is 'required', there is a 'whimsy' inherent in any activity intended to be playful (Whitton & Moseley, 2019)

† Philosophical debate is known to enhance an individual's own knowledge on the subject, critical analysis and ability to apply knowledge in varied contexts (Traczykowski, 2022).

Debate

Debate is a longstanding pedagogical tool. It has its Western roots in Socratic dialogue which has since developed into a socio-political-economic-legal mechanism for societal change. Each party in a formal debate will usually establish their argument; apply the theory which will be used to interpret the issue and then justify why their argument is 'right' (Nebel et al., 2013). Through debate, students learn critical thinking and oral articulation; debates are also a means by which we learn how to participate in society and understand others' viewpoints (Dickson, 2004; Traczykowski, 2022).

Rap & Pedagogy

Playful learning is understood as being creative, joyful, freely chosen, and fun (James, 2021). It has also been suggested that there needs to be an element of the intellectual and to be other-directed for something to qualify as playful (James, *The Value of Play in HE*, 2022). Using rap or rap battles as a form of assessment is a playful pedagogical approach to learning and teaching in that it satisfies these criteria. Rap battles offered students an opportunity to create an assessment which incorporated academic literature (the intellectual aspect of playful learning), song, writing, and their own style and in this way provided students with a chance to make the assessment their own. This form of assessment was one of three offered to students and hence anyone who engaged with the assessment had freely chosen it. Students were required to work in pairs so as to battle each other and engage critically with that which was presented to them by their battle partner in the moment (other-directed). Finally, the rap battles were fun. As is articulated in the student reflection section (below), students chose this assignment because they thought it was something different, something to challenge the way they approach module assessments.

Rap is an appropriate playful pedagogical tool to use in Higher Education (here for applied ethics education in general and ethics in a crisis in particular) because, beyond fulfilling the criteria of playful learning, it provides a mechanism for students to engage with public pedagogical resistance. As an act of public pedagogical resistance, the rap battles described here offered further mechanisms for other-directed learning, requiring students to account for issues of social justice and inequality identified in unethical disaster response operations. Oppressive structures are one social component which creates aspects of social vulnerability which in turn exacerbate the effects of a hazard, thus causing a disaster (Kelman, 2022; Perry, 2017). For someone to be ethical in or ethically prepared for a disaster, they must understand the social determinants of a disaster – not just the hazards or trigger events. Additionally, community organisation support for minority rights are crucial to post-disaster recovery as absence of these connections has proven negative psychological consequences (Norris & Alegria, 2005). Hence using an assessment medium which accounts for oppression and community to critically engage with the subject matter (ethics in a crisis), which tackles oppression and injustice in itself, provides a mechanism for ethical analysis and critical engagement with the disaster operations. From this, students learn how to humanize the individuals affected by a disaster and account for what a dignified response looks like (Johnson & Cureton, 2022; Freire, 2017).

Students on other applied ethics modules (feminist ethics, business ethics, medical ethics, etc.) will likewise learn to humanize individuals and account for dignity through rap as a pedagogical tool. If everyone should be and act ethically, then ethics teachings must evolve to something individuals find interesting and 'pertaining to them'. Indeed, ethics teaching must ensure that the voices of those in less powerful positions are given space so that all individuals can act autonomously.

It has been argued that popular culture should be integrated into all educational settings (beyond ethics) (Browne, 2005). Rap, as a very popular and current form of popular culture, is no different. It, like all popular culture, has the capacity to improve cross-discipline and cross-cultural understanding and positively develop society (Browne, 2005). To that end, if we think about ethics instruction as the inculcation of living ethical lives, then through a rap music assessment, students can better understand the lived experience of those experiencing a disaster/crisis, apply ethical theories and principles in cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural ways (even if we are being ethical purists) and, ultimately, positively develop society.

Many applied ethics textbooks begin with a discussion of normative theory in which the importance of consequences and categorical imperatives are stressed to impress upon students the importance and value of ethical lives and what it means for the creation of a just and fair society (Frey & Wellman, , 2005; Herring, 2017; Cullen, 2022). Likewise, rap music is about being heard and arguing for justice. The rap

battle assignment requires that students consider and argue for what should be done – ethically - in a disaster/crisis situation. Rap is thus an ideal medium for empowering students to take the knowledge they have heard through repetition and recitation, and, by adding some rhyme and rhythm, apply what they have learned to make ethics-based arguments on how to make a more just and fair disaster/crisis response to a specific disaster.

Further, utilizing rap, an offshoot of hip hop, as an 'oppositional culture' (Martinez, 1997) to 'high culture' allows students to engage with models/tools from within (many of their) own environments/cultures. This is relevant to applied ethics teaching because a rap, 'oppositional culture'-based assessment takes 'differences and makes them strengths' (Lorde, 2017). Student commentary and critical engagement with the disproportionate effects of disasters on minority communities or the lack of support given to poor, diasporic, or refugee communities requires the use of one's own 'tools' to 'bring about genuine change' in response and recovery (Lorde, 2017, p. 19).

Rap Battle

The rap battle as a form of ethics module assessment is playful, culturally relevant, and appropriate for the teaching and learning of ethics. Traditional assessment methods are becoming outdated when applied to the newer generation of students due to evidence of misleading results and lack of reliability (Williams et al., 2014). Essays and examinations do not purely assess the content that has been learnt, but grades are heavily influenced by quality of written English, organization, and other factors. This results in grades being irreflective of one's actual understanding of content and puts students of different abilities at an advantage/disadvantage. Consider, for example, how traditional assessments are not inclusive for those who may struggle with time pressures or have particular learning disabilities that put them at a disadvantage. Traditional methods are not truly representative of a student's abilities due to generic and restrictive assignments that do not account for individual differences.

Play is an important component of the 'battle' because it allows those participating to suspend reality and with that it gives free space to explore issues of social justice and equality without the 'rules' or limits imposed upon us by the structures of society (Traczykowski, 2021). If '…both conflict and love imply rivalry or competition, and competition implies play' (Huizinga, 2016), then by competing in a 'battle', we are encouraging students to play and explore ethical reasoning free from the dictations of societal norms, cultural expectations, upbringing, etc.

Rap battles are also culturally relevant mediums for assessment beyond the module discussed in this article, particularly when there is high diversity within a cohort. Global majority students at our university represent 76% of the cohort (Inclusive Aston, 2022); this is in comparison to national statistics of 28% of UK university cohorts consisting of global majority students (Race Disparity Unit, 2022). Whilst the global majority students on this module are not necessarily African American (which is consistent with the cultural development of rap music), there is still a need for 'young men and women of color' to resist the status quo of higher education.

Following from the above, rap battles are appropriate pedagogical tools for teaching and learning ethics in a way that helps students challenge the status quo. In 2008, Boris Johnson (then Mayor of London) argued that children should stop being offered pop culture (including hip-hop) and instead be taught the value of 'high culture' – musical instruments, opera, and ballet, for example (Brown, 2008). Johnson's statements suggest that the 'best' art and cultural engagements are those traditionally associated with white, western society. The oppressor, though, cannot be the model by which the oppressed act. 'The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption' (Freire, 2017). It was suggested that Johnson's cultural project would focus on introducing those art forms that working-class and minority individuals may either not be exposed to or which are not of their culture (Brown, 2008). Arguably, though, resisting the traditional mechanisms of culture transmission is necessary for those who feel oppressed by the 'traditional' aspects of a society.

Educational Expectations

We follow this explanation of approach with reflection on the possible bias inherent in using rap battles. There is an element of the teacher's/author's unconscious bias which must be articulated to provide true context for the development of this assessment. Student reflections on completing a rap battle for their assessment are further included here to complete the inclusion of all pre-conceived ideas about a rap battle's use as a medium of assessment.

Teacher Bias

In proposing the rap battle assessment, the module leader recognises her own pre-existing bias as to the role of rap in education. As a white female from a Western country and with European heritage, much of her engagement with global majority culture came through Hollywood films, i.e., *Renaissance Man* and *Quartet.*

These movies suggest that rap may have some value in engaging learners and giving space for expression. However, having been inspired by these movies, using rap battles as a pedagogical tool may suggest that there is a racist undertone to the practice of encouraging rap as a medium of expression, particularly when it is a racialised white teacher (who is therefore in a position of power) encouraging rap from students who are racialised black. By exploring the use of rap as a pedagogical tool, the module leader found practical pedagogical value for a rap battle's use in assessment. However, any pre-existing biases must be noted and accounted for in assessment planning.

Student Reflections

The student co-authors of this piece decided to use the format of a rap battle, as both individuals had a real appreciation for music; the opportunity to integrate it into studies, particularly at this level of study (final year undergraduate), is unusual. This was an opportunity to do something different, out of their comfort zone, and fun, with the potential to have successful outcomes. The module allowed them to steer away from the routine of their main degrees.

Both students agreed to complete the assignment together and chose the rap battle option. They believed that this would make the assignment process more enjoyable and therefore increase motivation to invest in making it the best work possible. Students suggested that they worked harder due to the added pressure to work cohesively and outperform each other. It has been found that 'competing constructively in a conscious manner requires knowledge of how to be able to control the situation in a positive manner' (Williams & Sheridan, 2010) highlighting that their ability to work together in this way requires skill. Competition increases efforts and thus improves performance (Franken & Brown, 1995). Confidence and positive attitudes prior to completion of an assignment increases enjoyment which correlates to increased success (Larsonet al., 1985).

It may be the case that working in this way enabled the students/authors to individually excel too, due to the added pressure to work cohesively but also outperform each other. Although it was a rap battle, students guided each other through the opposing sides of the battle, helping with the rhyme and the best wording and ensured that there was enough theory-based terminology and knowledge. They worked together on each line in the primary stages which they believed was a huge contributing factor to having continuity for each verse and the overall success of the rap battle. From doing so, they gained the same understanding on how to rhyme and how the flow should sound, which led them to be able to work individually on their own respective verses and still be able to come together with a cohesive final piece.

When first looking at the assessment, the students decided to purely focus on the content and ensure that the work they were producing was in line with what was expected based on the mark scheme. There was a freedom with this assignment, as well, which needed to be navigated – what is actually 'allowed', what does being creative on this assignment look like, etc. They began by agreeing on a crisis which was chosen prior to choosing to do a rap battle. They watched the example videos on the rap battle provided by the module leader for ideas on how to execute – a complex but effective method of learning (Guo et al., 2012). Then they focused on content and creating the basis of their points (i.e., who would argue what).

Competing ultimately developed the students' higher level skill sets – not just competing to win, but competing to develop authority in a given situation and with that hone their own power and voice. This is also consistent with aspects of the playful learning approach used on the module where traditional power

dynamics were challenged via in-class debate (see the 'For the Teacher' section).

Playful Pedagogy and Skills Development

Engaging with non- 'normal' types of assessment still seem to 'rub academics the wrong way'. Academics do not venture into other forms of assessment for various reasons: fear, 'that's not how I was taught', and complacency. Changing or challenging the status quo requires professional courage which may be present but hampered by a lack of time/excessive workload demands or the changing teaching requirements imposed on teachers in a post-Covid-19 world. All of these reasons, though, contribute to the reinforcement of traditional power dynamics within higher education and society. With this, the echo-chamber of what is an 'acceptable' assessment style seems to keep some of its power. Essays and exam assessments, while on the decline in Higher Education, continue to dominate university assessment portfolios (Williams et al, 2014). The analysis offered in this section provides the basis from which those who are thinking about introducing a rap battle as a playful approach to learning can defend such pedagogy amidst calls for 'traditional' and 'safe' assessment types. The analysis further suggests that approaching difficult topics from a playful pedagogical approach (using rap battles) may provide necessary student skills development opportunities around confidence and memorization. There are further, specific skills available via a rap battle which may be tested in traditional assignments, but which are not necessarily learned by students – things like editing your work, flow of an argument, all leading up to critical analysis/thinking – alongside the module learning outcomes being tested. These are life skills which help students tackle 'real problems' and pursue/interrogate knowledge and yet are often missing from some degree programmes (Page & Mukherjee, A, 2007; Pithers, 2000).

Confidence
Confidence is key attribute of any graduate as it supports improved life opportunities including enhanced employability. Through play and enjoyable assessments, teachers can build student confidence. By building confidence, students feel more capable and have an increased desire to succeed (Stiggins, 1999). This is likely to reflect on their future outlook and increase life opportunities. Confidence increases motivation, capacity and expands life goals (Beaumont et al., 2016).

Confidence as an employability skill is key for many establishments yet something they struggle to find amongst students (Sinclair, 2017). Confidence can be built through life experience and most often increases in young adulthood (Roberts & Mroczek, D, 2008; Beaumont et al., 2016). So, instilling this in students would be advantageous as students with confidence and analytical skills are more attractive to employers (Pithers, 2000). When students have an experience in which they demonstrate crucial educational skills, to a high degree, and are commended for it, they will (as is noted by the students of this article) have a higher level of confidence in their own abilities.

> We exceeded our own expectations and underestimated our potential for what we would produce. As mentioned in the beginning, we wanted to complete this form of assignment for a more enjoyable module experience. For the module leader to have recognised this as a high-quality piece of work, and for student-peers to have been shocked at that fact that our whole rap battle rhymed (something that we didn't even question when preparing it and was essentially a 'given'). (Rap Battle Students)

Students completing the rap battle assessment naturally applied a range of techniques that they did not realize were powerful tools that can be applied to a range of future situations. This diverse, playful and inclusive assessment built confidence and can be viewed as a means of overcoming unjust structures within academia and shunning the reinforcement of expected (white) norms (AdvanceHE, 2020).

Memorization
Rhyme provides form and direction to a rap (Walser, 1995) which may explain why it was an inevitable decision for the students to ensure their rap had a rhyme scheme. The students had not particularly conducted research on using rap or practiced how to create a rap battle; instead, they had inadvertently used their existing knowledge of rap music to start creating each line. This is important. Students had social capital from which to pull from in order to complete an assignment. Students – regardless of cultural or ethnic background – gain equity of learning experience when the work they are doing is contextualized or has echoes in their lived experience (Ryan et al., 2023).

Playing so that learning 'becomes more than mindless habits' (Sicart, 2017) echoes here in the student realisation that learning had become internalized – they could remember content after their assessment was submitted. The rhyming nature of the rap battle, which was catchy and easy to remember, meant that when revising for the final essay, the ethical concepts were easier to remember and apply effectively. 'When it rhymes it sticks in my head' (Rap Battle Students). Rhyme helped the students memorize which ultimately helped them prepare for the next assignment for which they could pull from the learning of theory and principles from the first assignment.

Editing
Whilst other mediums may provide similar pedagogical advantage, a rap battle was a useful method for helping students condense and choose words wisely. Any writer – academic or otherwise – will say that editing is the most important part of writing. Self and peer editing, both exercised by the students during the composition of their rap, dramatically improves writing skills and, through identification and correction of errors, leads to naturally reduced errors in future pieces of writing (Sangeetha, 2020).

However, most undergraduate students have not learned this through engagement with traditional essay writing. Students continue to make mistakes, occasionally ones made previously, due in part to their lack of constructive marker feedback from which they are able to improve and exercise valuable editing skills (Lee, 2019). Editing for the purpose of beat and rhyme, though, forces the student to choose exactly the right word and convey exactly the right meaning in the correct rhythm. Students will know if their editing is not right or appropriate because the rhythm of the line will be off. When 'battling' students must agree to a rhythm and meter; they must hear each other's work and ensure that their rap/response matches that of their battle partner. By knowing what 'good' sounds like, students are empowered to engage (and re-engage wherever necessary) with synthesizing and editing their work.

Then, working to integrate more literature, to convey points and still make the lines rhyme, helped them improve their editing skills as it meant they had to rearrange lyrics to create room for the literature that backed up their already established lyrics. It also meant that they had to reword sections to ensure consistent rhyming within and across each of their responses. The added literature resulted in the rap battle running slightly over the time restraint, meaning more editing was required to bring this down.

Further to this, instead of running through the rap battle as a whole, the students worked closely to ensure each individual verse worked well with the beat and in cohesion with each other. As they were filming the final version, they were still editing and removing/adding to their raps to ensure it was cohesive with the rhythm of the beat.

Flow
Consistent with choosing words wisely, a rap battle also helps students understand flow of an argument. Critical analysis requires engagement with the other side of an argument. 'Battle' required that each rapper gave their critic adequate time and respect to articulate their position. This meant that flow of an argument was negotiated and very carefully organised. Often, academics marking essays try to explain that an argument is choppy or disorganised. Some students struggle to understand this because they do not 'hear' the difference between what they write and what the teacher expects. Examples of these are students for whom English is not their first language (and hence competence/excellence within a second or third language has not developed fully yet) (Mohan & Lo, 1985) and/or whose upbringing has not included academic language skills (i.e., parents have not gone to university, cultural differences (Al-Zubaidi, 2012), etc.). Even if they do 'hear' it, this academic language is not their norm and so they do not know how to adapt their writing/language to that which is expected. Rap provides a known and understandable rhythm and flow to mimic. More importantly, a rap battle opponent will pick apart any discontinuity in the main argument. And so, in order to 'win', the flow of each side must be beyond reproach.

> Ideally, it would've been our preference to have most of it memorised and produced a more creative and effortless recording as we believe it would've been even more memorable and impactful but also more satisfying for us to be proud of what we had produced. Raps should have good flow and work alongside a beat to make it more authentic. There are many cuts within our final assignment video as it was sometimes difficult to naturally perform all of the lyrics and make it a seamless end product however, this is something we aren't too

disappointed by as we are not professionals and I believe it is important to remember that the basis of the assignment was involved in the content and the lyrics as opposed to a completely flawless delivery of a rap and the module leader has highlighted that we executed it successfully. (Rap Battle Students)

The students spent the majority of their time arranging the actual content of the rap as the content mattered more than the 'song'. From conversations with artist friends, the students found that it is unusual to focus on content before rhythm when developing a rap as it makes the task more difficult; finding the correct beat makes it easier to work on the flow of the rap. This may demonstrate that for academic raps, content is more important. This meant it felt natural for the students to work on this aspect of the rap battle first, despite making the task harder overall. As well, it can be argued that rap's dynamism rests in its poetry, not in its 'song' (Pate, 2010); upon their own reflection, the students may have subconsciously understood this. Most important, though, more than the structure of the rap, was gaining an understanding of what their assignment would be about, what ethical issues it would address and how this was an important ethical matter. This would allow the battle to flow.

Critical Analysis

Unlike with essays, exams or even poetry, a rap battle will have a winner and loser. This aspect of the medium is useful for the assignment because it helps students internalise critical analysis. Critical thinking can be understood as the articulation of a problem/issue and searching for related knowledge; one then engages (critically analyses) that issue based on logic, inference and personal judgement, along with the identified related knowledge. (Pithers, 2000). Critical thinking and the associated analysis broaden the mind and help individuals work through issues as they occur in day-to-day life (Dickson, 2004). Critical analysis is therefore the skill that students use to show their critical thinking. On a very basic level, critical analysis is important because it helps with employability – employers value critical thinking and having employees solve 'real problems' (Pithers, 2000; Snyder & Snyder, 2008).

In summary, a rap battle provides an opportunity for students to apply their reading and knowledge and 'think' through how to construct an argument, editing as they go. 'Battling' in this way provides students with the chance to see the 'other side' of an argument and, because they understand how rap battles work, they are able to flow with their own argument, engage with their opponent's argument, undermine that opposing view, and defend their own argument.

For the Teacher

In this section we explore the social justice related benefits of incorporating such an assessment in teaching. We then outline 'extra work' a teacher/instructor may have to do to prepare students for a rap battle assessment. By including this extra work, we are proposing possible difficulties in using a rap battle assessment.

Play and Social Justice

Traditional module assignments – essays, presentations, even group work – can be boring for the student to complete as well as for the module leader to mark. Instead, playful approaches to learning should be utilized. As Sicart (2017, p. 17) notes: "Play is creative in that it affords players different degrees of expression inherent in the play activity itself". Beyond being boring, though, traditional assessments do not account for student identity. There is an increased number of neurodiverse students (which suggests a growing need to foster distinct forms of inclusive practice) (Gibbs et al., 2021). Additionally, there is an increase in the number of individuals attending university from working class / first in family households (Bolton, 2010) who may lack the social capital to navigate the 'art' of academic language. Further, and with the growing diversification of the workplace environment, it cannot be taken as given that traditional assignments will contribute to overall learning and skills development.

Rap is a method of expression which (consistent with student reflections) not only allows students to enjoy their assignment but also uses a medium with justice at its heart to talk about what ethically should happen in a crisis/disaster scenario (i.e., in response to a tsunami or the Grenfell Tower disaster). The medium of a rap battle, by its very nature, requires that, in challenging each other, students challenge accepted ideas and norms. For those academics teaching aspects of justice, rap may provide a much-needed mechanism for student engagement with the concept.

It may be suggested that students could just as easily write poetry for their assignment. Poetry, like rap, has rhyme and rhythm at its core and 'lies beyond seriousness' and is hence a mechanism for engaging with playful learning (Huizinga, 2016). Further like rap, poetry maintains a 'restricted circle of readers who understand or are at least acquainted with their special language, they are a closed cultural group of very ancient descent. It is questionable, however, whether the civilization that surrounds them can appreciate their purpose sufficiently to nurture an art whose raison d'etre is yet the fulfilment of a vital function' (Huizinga, 2016). Hence, it often sits within an outsider/insider dynamic all while aiming at some 'good'.

Considering this, though, even poetry might seem antiquated or tone deaf to the needs and interests of modern students. In addition to flipping the culturally expected norms about communication (correct English, no swearing, etc.), a rap battle gives voice and power to marginalised groups within HE (Smith, 2021). A rap battle should be performed by students instead of read by an assessor. In this way students who struggle with writing (lack of practice, dyslexia, second language) are given an opportunity to get their ideas across without having to write anything down as standard assessment techniques are proven to put these students at a disadvantage (Williams et al., 2014).

Work for a Module Leader

Any racialised white academic may be concerned about cultural appropriation as well as 'misinterpretation of meanings and intentions'. These were not intended when the rap battle was originally developed as a pedagogical tool for this module but may very well have influenced or undermined the goal of this assignment (Smith, 2021). To work through these possible issues in what is hopefully a non-invasive way, it is suggested that a module leader work with students in class to develop the skills necessary to complete the assignment with only brief mention of how rap could have pedagogical advantages for learning in higher education. Debating skills (including confidence to debate), ethical theory and, where relevant, mention of how this learning would enhance a rap assignment may be appropriate.

In-class ethics training, for this module leader at least, is carried out through a Socratic method-process of question and answer. However, the Socratic method comes from a white, Western world view and puts power firmly in the hands of the teacher. British students, for example, do not consistently fit that white, Western mould. Additionally, because of the classroom power dynamics and a lack of critical thinking done before the final year of an undergraduate degree, students are not prepared to be put on the spot and questioned over and over as this pedagogical method requires. Doing so reinforces the power dynamics of the classroom and often renders students speechless – exactly the type of voice minimizing activity the rap battle aims to avoid.

So, before anything else, it is important to build rapport. Interpersonal relationship building that occurs with the development of student-teacher rapport may reduce anxiety and create a "positive classroom environment" (Frisby & Martin, 2010). Building a relationship with students can be done via use of certain activities and language.

As for relationship building activities, practice debates are useful. They also help teach critical thinking ahead of the assignments. To teach debating (or teach critical analysis verbally), a supportive environment in which students would want to participate must be created (Frisby & Martin, 2010). As an example of how to do this, the module leader/teacher purposely made false or unethical assertions and asked, "why am I wrong?". The students were automatically put in a position of power such that they had the existing knowledge (whether they had prepared for class or not) to oppose the teacher's claim and were empowered to tell the teacher she was wrong.

Having students speak 'truth' to 'power' in a classroom is a powerful pedagogical tool. In-class debates in this way encourage critical thinking because students do not necessarily have the facts at hand or available to look up (Hafford-Letchfield, 2010). Students must interpret what they have learned and decide how best to apply it. Debates also help to create trust between the teacher and student so that students feel comfortable challenging norms and what they think the module leader wanted to hear.

As relationship-building relied on language, swearing was acceptable in this class. Disasters are a heavy subject and sometimes swears capture a response better than 'accepted language'. This is consistent with pedagogies of resistance (Freire, 2017; Smith, 2021). Accounting for the type of language that students

might want to use in class or in their assignments means that students are able to use their own means of addressing the injustices, structural inequalities or elements of oppression which would be called into question when being ethically analysed.

Students will likely take inspiration from their favourite rappers, the likes of J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar, or TV shows which showcase rap battles, i.e., *The Rap Game UK*. Lyrics and 'clashes' of those battling provide a rap battle context for students. Personal 'digs', for example, serve the greater purpose of helping to 'win' the 'battle', even if not directly linked to the content.

When considering the 'personal digs' and developing the competitive nature within the battle and authentic rap, students found it relevant (and should be encouraged) to have a verbal conflict with each other. For example:

> That not true, your point is shit
> Do you not care about human life, one little bit?

These lines fit the rhyme of the rap and the parameters of authentic rap as well as reflect the general expectations of rap battle culture which usually involves specific or generic insults (Edwards, 2009, pp. 10-13). Authenticity matters. Inclusion of such language should be permitted as it contributes to the genre of rap. What is seen as 'proper' behaviour in a University-environment (not swearing) should be questioned and put to one side in favour of an authentic rap lyric. This simple adaptation opens the possibility of ensuring the authenticity of the students' voice and articulation of their personal experiences, as rap is known to do (Biggs-El, 2012) and is necessary for encouraging deep engagement with module content.

Further, forceful language matters as rap requires the performer to be able to criticize that which is unjust. Swearing may come across as not being 'respectful' but forceful language matters to the medium and, in this way, it is not disrespectful. Additionally, Huizinga shows us how the sacred or profane is still 'rooted in a form of play' (Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture, 2016). 'The rhythmical or symmetrical arrangement of language, the hitting of the mark by rhyme or assonance, the deliberate disguising of the sense, the artificial and artful construction of phrases – all might be so many utterances of the play spirit' (Huizinga, 2016). Hence the play spirit must be prioritized over 'respectful' language if we are to overcome colonial determinants of what an effective assignment looks like.

Conclusion

In this article we have demonstrated the value of using a rap battle assessment for learning. This form of playful pedagogy helps to incorporate social justice into the applied ethics classroom and beyond. Politicians often ignore the ethical aspects of decision making in disasters and otherwise, usually until it is too late. A rap battle helps students align the seeking of justice and human welfare with an appropriate mechanism of articulation and hence prepare them for engagement with society.

A 'rap-battle' assessment provides several traditional pedagogical advantages in line with other experiential learning assessments as well – students are authentic (McArthur, 2023), learn for learning (not just the assessment) (Vince, 2022), engage with playful learning, manage the flow of an argument, edit one's work and engage in critical analysis. This promotes creativity of individuals and encourages use of alternative skills, more relevant to the working world, to be put into practice. We have further demonstrated the value of using rap as a pedagogical mechanism and tool for resistance. Likewise, this type of assessment may help overcome colonial determinants of what an effective assignment looks like and hint toward more socially just mechanisms for the situation of power in a classroom environment. In modern society, students hold different traits (Twenge, 2009) creating different expectations from a teacher/learning environment than previously. Alterations in the assessment method to suit this would promote more interactions and engagement with the education system.

Whilst beyond the bounds of this article and assessment development, it may be the case that Critical Race Theory (CRT) would be an effective lens through which to analyse and argue for the use of rap battles as a teaching tool. CRT was not considered in the development stage of this assessment and was not used during teacher/student reflection for this article. Hence, applying it after the fact feels inauthentic. That said, future research into rap battles as assessment would likely benefit from this type of analysis.

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