

# SONGS OF THE SELF: HIP HOP IN SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

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## Overview

The goal of this activity is to facilitate a journey of self-expression through the creation of a sacred circle (a cypher), a groove (rhythm), and vocal improvisation (Spoken Word – or pre-written material - and freestyle rap). This culturally relevant activity builds group cohesion and provides a container for unexpressed emotion, to prevent acting out in harmful ways. The spontaneous, present-moment nature of the group musical process also helps improve attention and active listening skills. This activity focuses on *process* rather than product; thus, everything spoken matters, regardless of ability or experience with rapping or singing.

<b>Social/Emotional/Cognitive Goals:</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>SOCIAL</b> - strengthen interpersonal skills through a collaborative writing process, improve impulse control and assist in the creation of boundaries, provide a forum in which students can be heard by peers and teachers</li><li>• <b>EMOTIONAL</b> - encourage emotional self-expression, enhance self-esteem, decrease stress and anxiety, reduce maladaptive behavior by providing a constructive outlet for channeling negative emotions</li><li>• <b>COGNITIVE</b> - increase attention and active listening skills, and improve memory, concentration, spatial intelligence, and thinking skills through rhyme and storytelling</li></ul>		
<b>Time Needed:</b> 30-90 minutes, depending on group size. This activity can be facilitated as a main activity or a warm-up.	<b>Ages:</b> 5-18 and up.	<b>Materials Needed:</b> Djembe drum or other percussive instrument, drum app or drum track.

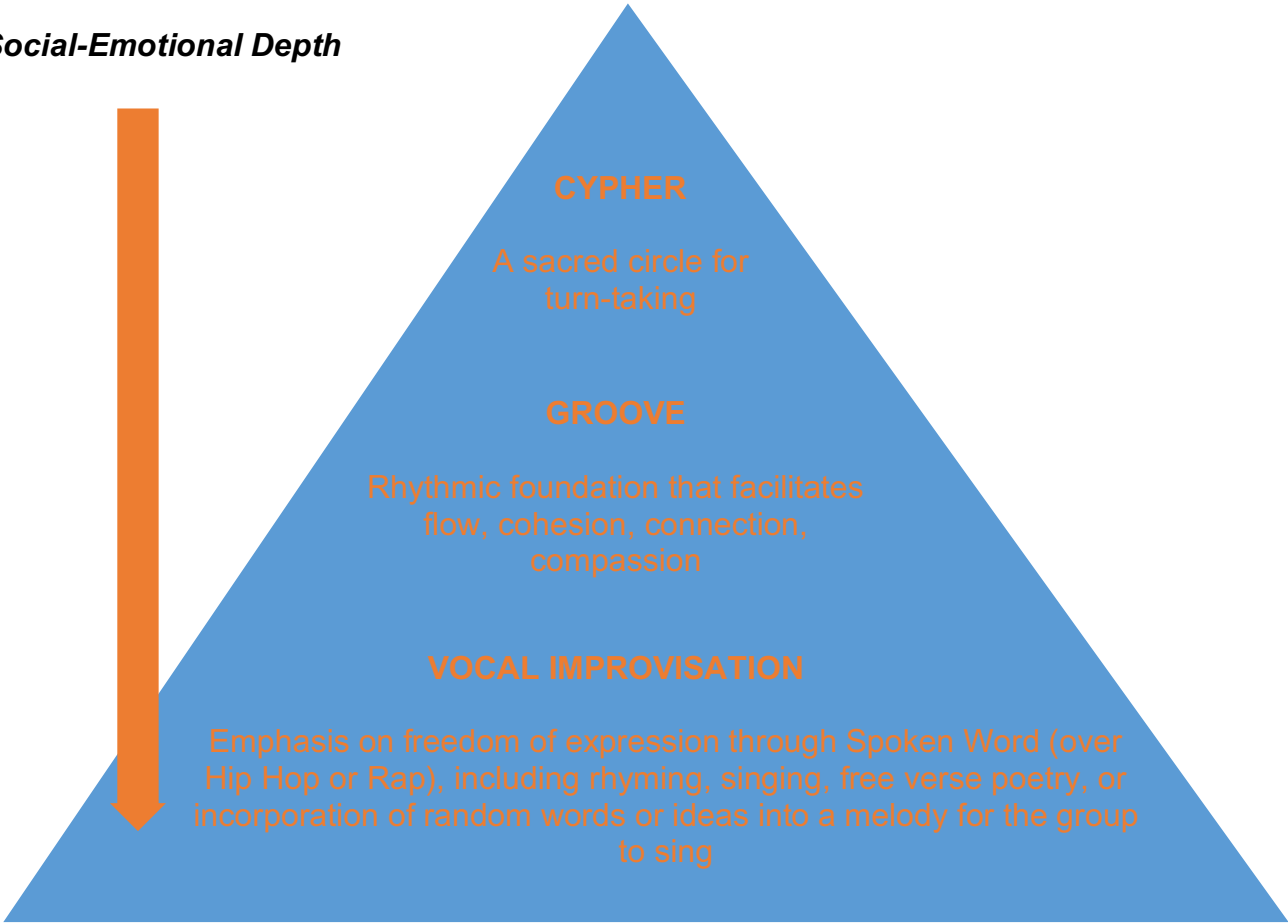
## Warm-up

Allow students to form a circle, either standing or seated in chairs. If in a virtual setting, open the “cypher” and create a sacred space at the start of the activity by hitting a drum, gong, or bell. Invite each student to introduce or share something about themselves. The beating of the drum and the reciting of each participant’s name or personal

statement is the signal that the cypher has begun; in essence, the “sacred time” has begun. You can also implement a warm-up or ice breaker of choice (like a call and response melodic chant) to open the cypher symbolically.

### Social Emotional Value of Hip Hop Components

**Social-Emotional Depth**



## The Hip-Hop “Cypher” in Group Process

Authors Ian Levy, Christopher Emdin & Edmund S. Adjapong note in their article, entitled “Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work”:

*“As rhymes were shared, other members of the cypher called out in support and applauded when each person finished reciting his or her verse. When an individual stumbled over their lyrics, others in the cypher provided verbal validation to encourage the individual to continue. Each time emotions were released into the cypher, they were validated by others. In observing the interactions of the youth in cyphers, it became apparent that the cypher itself acted as a community-generated form of group support.”*

**Activity Description** (time: 10 - 60 minutes, depending on group size and purpose of activity)

- “I invite you to participate in the creation of a few clear ground rules for this activity. Some examples are: we respect each other, we do not interrupt one another, we do not laugh inappropriately at one another, and we treat each other the way we would like to be treated. Can you think of a few guidelines to help us to feel more supported in our circle today?”
- “Let’s begin. Each one of us will be invited to contribute a word, any word that comes to mind. Together, we will create a song out of the words we contribute. I will play the drum (or the track) to keep the groove going. It doesn’t have to be perfect! Just do your best to stay in the rhythm. It helps to keep the rhythm in your body.”
- “Each one of us will pay attention to the person before us who chooses a word, then we will think of a creative way to connect their word to ours to create a flow. For example:
  - If you choose ‘*music*’, you might say “I like *music*”
  - And if the next person chooses ‘*sunshine*’, they might say, ‘in the *sunshine*’
  - Then if the next person chooses ‘*happy*’, they might say, ‘it makes me *happy*’
  - And if the next person chooses ‘*power*’, they might say, ‘and gives me *power*’
  - And if the next person chooses ‘*strong*’, they might say ‘to be *strong*’
  - The whole thing together might sound like this: “I like *music*...in the *sunshine*...it makes me *happy*...and gives me *power*...to be *strong*.”
- “Let’s begin.”
  - Start the rhythm and invite each student to add a word of their choice. Establish a groove. By moving around the circle and connecting the words together to form a story, we activate the cypher. As each person contributes their word, an entire song is performed utilizing each individual’s idea, thought, and/or feeling.

- The process of contributing different words and creating a song/mantra that is fluid and coherent exemplifies the cypher as a group process: *Each person is an individual, from different walks of life, and together they come together and become one.*
- Closing: Invite students to hit the drum and close the circle with an affirmative word or emotion that reflects how they feel or would like to feel.

### **Reflection** (time: 10 - 20 min)

- What did you notice about this activity? Did any of the words surprise you?
- How did it feel to improvise or come up with words off the top of your head? What, if any feelings came up for you?
- What was your favorite part of this activity? What did you like about it?
- What was your least favorite part of this activity? What didn't you like about it?

### **Adaptations**

- Drum in center: When in person, consider placing a drum in the center of the circle, providing access to its members. This can be considered the “community drum”, an integral part of the group process that provides object constancy and that represents a sacred space.
- Repetition: Each word and phrase that is introduced can be repeated each time by the whole group. This repetition encourages group members to affirm and memorize each person’s offering. This can create feelings of connectedness and continuity.
- Incorporating themes about the self: This activity can also be facilitated like a fill-in song, utilizing themes such as travel (where do we want to go), likes (what do we like), letting go (what do we want to let go of). Fill-in songs can work most easily with repetitive songs that are already familiar to youth, which allow for easy substitution of lyrics (e.g., Baby Shark or We Don’t Need No Trouble). This activity applies to all ages and may represent an easier format to use with developmentally younger youth.

- Open mic: While maintaining the groove, open up the floor for sharing “open mic style”. This sharing can include singing, rapping, or reciting poetry. This may be more suitable for developmentally older youth.
- Creating melodies: While melodies are not necessary in this activity, a music therapy approach to choosing intervals, keys, and chord progressions in creating melodies is to consider the feelings they elicit in you and in those you are serving. Intervals, keys, and chord progressions have different emotional effects. Participants can help choose the intervals, keys, chord progressions, and associated melodies. According to the *isoprinciple* in music therapy, identified by pioneering music therapist/psychiatrist Ira Altshuler, music can most effectively be used to shift moods by first matching the music to the mood and then gradually shifting the music in the desired direction.

## NOTES

### Censorship

Each school or district may have its own rules regarding the use of offensive language, so it is suggested to refer to those guidelines before facilitating this activity. Generally, it can be a good idea to start by encouraging each student to be mindful of their language, in order for everyone to feel comfortable in the space. Conversely, consider how prohibiting foul language may restrict the free flow of creativity and may conflict with social-emotional goals and objectives.

### References

Kokal I, Engel A, Kirschner S, Keysers C (2011). Synchronized drumming enhances activity in the caudate and facilitates prosocial commitment—if the rhythm comes easily. *PLoS One*, 6(11):e27272, DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0027272.

Leedy, JJ, M.D. (1969). *Poetry Therapy: The use of poetry in the treatment of emotional disorders*. Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Company.

Levy I, Emdin C & Adjapong ES (2017). Hip-Hop cypher in group work, *Social Work with Groups*, DOI: 10.1080/01609513.2016.1275265.

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## Additional Resources

[UCLArts & Healing](#) also offers a variety of resources for the public, including [training programs](#) such as [\*Beat the Odds®: Social and Emotional Skill Building Delivered in a Framework of Drumming\*](#), [\*Social Emotional Arts on a Shoestring: Supportive Art, Movement, Music, and Writing for Individuals and Groups in Any Setting\*](#), and a [\*Certificate Program in Social Emotional Arts\*](#).

In addition, we offer a free monthly [HOPE series](#), aimed at supporting the resilience of our global community. All of our programming, including our trainings, have dual benefits for self-care. We invite you to sign up on our website to receive our [monthly e-newsletter](#), to learn directly of our new programs and opportunities.

Our all-virtual [conference](#), taking place over three long weekends beginning March 24 and ending April 24, features over 100 sessions in “Creativity and the Arts in Healing,”