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Hip Hop in Higher Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

Virginia Tech Digging in the Crates, or Hip-Hop Studies at Virginia Tech, has allowed me to connect to my college community and has even provided my motivation to continue at the institution. VTDITC has provided a high volume of opportunities and a strong sense of community at Virginia Tech. My VTDITC engagements are centered around personal growth and professional development through experiential learning. Currently, I am the Creative Director of VTDITC, and I previously was an Assistant Technical Director. The program, now in its fifth year, is housed in Virginia Tech's Newman Library as a part of the University Libraries Community Engagement group and has facilitated more than one hundred literacy workshops beyond campus for community members.

VTDITC is practitioner-focused, student-led, and culturally responsive community engagement program. To engage and respond, VTDITC advances experiential and critical service-learning programming, using hip-hop pedagogy. VTDITC outreach expands past the physical boundaries of Blacksburg, VA. I have had the privilege of working with community partners such as Boys & Girls Clubs of Southwest Virginia, the Harrison Museum of African American Culture, Roanoke Public Libraries, and The Vinton Public Library (Arthur). The relationships with community partners have opened the door for opportunities such as presentations that outreach to scholars. I had the pleasure of assisting in my first formal presentation at Radford University on hip-hop pedagogy and community engagement to professors at the university.

VTDITC's mission statement is: "Founded in 2016, Digging in the Crates: Hip Hop Studies at Virginia Tech, or #VTDITC, exists to foster community-based learning among hip hop artists, fans, practitioners, and scholars digitally and globally. We aim to model that students, faculty, and staff's personal interests are worthy of academic study and publication as well as further institutionalize hip hop Studies' presence on Virginia Tech's campus". This statement articulates our emphasis on building community and promoting hip hop as a practice worthy of study. Our program heavily relies on community engagement and service-learning and the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly altered our approaches to both of our program's foci.

Community Engagement and VTDITC

VTDITC's foundation of community engagement has been vital to its existence. Anne Goulding defines community engagement as, "making the library space available for community activities, working in partnership with the voluntary and community sector as well as with other public service" (Goulding 37). Before COVID-19 arrived in the US, VTDITC hosted monthly seminar programs and studio sessions in the university's main library, served free food, and welcomed members of the university community and members of the local community.

VTDITC events are inclusive by design. In response to COVID-19, we migrated our programs online to protect the health and safety of our community. In addition to making our programs available to the community virtually, we have also adjusted our community engagement protocols with community partners. We make sure to support our communities' interest in hip hop and facilitate spaces where people can connect safely and access resources. Community engagement is imperative in the academy because it allows for the creation of better teaching methods (Archer 2). The VTDITC team believes it is crucial to continue with our style of community engagement programming on online platforms so that we can continue to serve. COVID-19 emerged across the United States around March 2020 and directly impacted everyone's life in various ways.

My position as Creative Director allowed me to help alter the VTDITC program adapt to COVID-19 protocols. VTDITC has implemented several new practices including an emphasis on open and accessible platforms. The platforms that VTDITC has given special focus to during the pandemic include Instagram, Facebook, and Zoom. When VTDITC uses Zoom to connect with the community, we have been exposed to several new ways of interaction. VTDITC likes to interact with the community on Zoom by using Google Jam Boards or Google Forms. Good Jam Boards are used to visualize information given during our seminar series and Google Forms are used to collect feedback on the seminar. Following universal design principles, another addition to our seminar series is the use of Verbit captions.

The VTDITC team works hard to ensure our programs are accessible to everyone. There are no costs to attend any of our programs in order to break down one barrier of access. We publicize our programs on our social media and send email reminders before each program so that we can share the opportunity to learn with as many community members as possible. Since we have moved the majority of our program online to protect our community, we now make sure the web address to the program is widely circulated and the platform is user-friendly.

Beyond accessibility, VTDITC prioritizes engaging with local youth-focused education programs. One of the programs VTDITC has the pleasure of working with over the pandemic is The Vinton Public Library (VPL). VTDITC had the opportunity to facilitate a rhyme writing workshop with VPL. It is important to build relationships with not only community members but also community organizations as well so that we can have as many opportunities as possible to create meaningful programming. Bhagwan notes that for a higher education community to grow, it is necessary to develop alliances or partnerships with the broader community (Bhagwan 1). VTDITC emphasizes relationships with community programs.

Service Learning and VTDITC

Our community partners help VTDITC provide professional development opportunities for students through service-learning activities. In *Beyond Library Space and Place* by Frances Yates, Yates mentions the 5Cs of service-learning. The 5Cs of service-learning are: connection, continuity, context, coaching, and challenge. Yates' first C is the elimination of "artificial separation between the learning arenas of the campus and the community and helps establish more authentic learning-by-doing" (Yates 53). VTDITC creates an environment where community members can engage in peer-peer learning. The focus on community engagement and experiential learning is accompanied by opportunities to learn as a collective.

Yates second C is continuity. Yates describes continuity as the creation of an understanding that learning is a lifelong process and learning involves our personal experiences. VTDITC facilitates opportunities to tie in our personal connections to learning. Students have an opportunity to create music reflecting their life experiences and learn about music making

processes through our studio hours program. Studio hours are hosted by the VTDITC team every Friday in Newman Library. The VTDITC assists the community with recording music and the music recording process. Through our studio hours program, VTDITC has recently taken the opportunity to begin the creation of our second mixtape. VTDITC has previously produced the Black Cultural Center Mixtape Vol. 1 ([BCC Mixtape Vol. 1](#)). Through the mixtape creating process, students collaborate with others to create art about their lived experiences. The mixtape that we are currently working on connects Virginia Tech alumni to current students in an effort to disseminate scholarship which embodies lifetimes of experiences on campus.

The third C, context, can be understood as the necessity to use the knowledge in adaptive ways. VTDITC has many opportunities for students to use their knowledge and apply it in the real world. Students can receive training and skills on various music creation tools, Title IX, promising practices for working with minors, and can even get certified in numerous software. There are many opportunities to use and enhance the skills gained by being involved in VTDITC. During every program that involves working with youth, I have the opportunity to apply the skills I learned from both Title IX and the working with minors training. Another example of how VTDITC facilitates opportunities to not only learn skills but apply them in the real world is through the development of our mixtape. I help guide the creative process as the Artist & Repertoire (A&R) for our current mixtape; in that role, I get to plan and implement the mixtape project plan.

The fourth C that Yates mentions is coaching. Although our program is student-led, and therefore students make many decisions, we have esteemed faculty members assisting us. We have biweekly leadership board meetings which allow the students to directly work with faculty members across the university. The VTDITC environment allows students to have creative freedom on the direction of the program as well as access to faculty for coaching. I have personally benefited from these connections to faculty and or mentors and they have challenged me to achieve at levels I didn't know I could.

Lastly, Yates' fifth C of service learning is challenge. Yates describes challenge as the opportunity to develop intellectual intelligence, emotional intelligence, and problem solving. VTDITC creates opportunities to develop both intellectual and emotional intelligence. The size of the VTDITC community allows for frequent opportunities for collaboration. Collaboration can help develop both intellectual and emotional intelligence skills (Jordan 96). The diversity of opportunities - from being involved in K-12 workshops to co-authoring journal articles - allows individuals to advance those skills. Furthermore, VTDITC offers opportunities to develop problem solving skills. The ways VTDITC has developed new COVID-19 protocols exemplify how our program embraces challenge and specifically works towards community development solutions.

Connecting with Communities during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic directly challenged our weekly in-person programming. Every week prior to COVID-19, I traveled to several New River Valley schools and community centers to help facilitate VTDITC's hands-on learning programming. Our hands-on community programming consisted of media literacy instruction and discussions of hip-hop's creative practices. The structure of the workshops typically followed a rough template: an introduction to who we are, what hip hop is, and how hip-hop ties into Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM). After a brief discussion with the students about hip-hop culture, we show the students how to use basic music equipment, help the students try the equipment on their own terms, and remove barriers to access creation tools.

The pandemic has limited our in-person community engagement, but we have successfully converted almost all of our programs to an entirely online format. We consider it to be of the utmost importance to work with our local community. We wanted to make sure to continue these efforts throughout the pandemic. To protect the community, we are not traveling to community organizations; instead, we currently host virtual workshops with many of the same groups. The students currently lack an opportunity to touch music equipment, but we have shifted our focus to other experiential modes of learning. Just recently, we hosted a workshop on creative writing and rhyming. We were still able to teach the students about hip hop and focused on the MCing element. VTDITC taught the students that MCs are the people in the community that rhyme over music. Additionally, the students were taught the students about common vocabulary, different rhyme schemes, and allowed time for the students to create their own verse based on their lived experiences. COVID-19 has challenged VTDITC to adapt our programming to a virtual environment, and this challenge has inspired us to incorporate new modes for fostering community connections.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, VTDITC would host opportunities for community connections through our seminar series. Our seminar series was hosted in Virginia Tech's Newman Library multipurpose room. The multipurpose room has a capacity of around one hundred people. Through Zoom, VTDITC can overcome the limitation of capacity. Recently, we hosted a seminar series with almost two hundred people. In addition to the increase of seminar series participants, we now have opportunities to work with scholars we normally could not because of physical location. In February of 2021, VTDITC hosted Shaolin Jazz, a program based in Washington, D.C. Zoom allowed the VTDITC community to connect with a program located far away. VTDITC continues its emphasis on outreach to our community even on the online platform. We make sure to include the link to the video conference on all of the promotions and include the link in our social media bio to promote to the larger community that they can still access the knowledge our guests bring to the VTDITC community. I believe that COVID-19 has expanded our community because people can now engage with others in the comfort of their own homes from all over the world. COVID-19 has allowed VTDITC an opportunity to broaden who we can host as well as who can attend our events.

VTDITC applies universal design principles when planning our events. People with disabilities can be excluded from virtual higher education programming that fails to consider accessibility (Bickle 7). Our seminar series are transcribed live so that the benefits of CC can be appreciated by all. In addition to ensuring our seminars are transcribed, we also make sure our accessibility statement is listed on all our event promotions. The statement welcomes those with disabilities who desire an accommodation to contact our program director so that we can better serve them during the event. COVID-19 challenged VTDITC to identify accessibility issues on an online platform and derive solutions to prevent any barrier that could prevent someone from participating in our programs.

In addition to removing barriers of access, we also have taken advantage of several other opportunities that come with using an online platform. During our events, our guests frequently ask questions to everyone at the event using the chat feature of Zoom. Zoom allows for the entire community who is present to respond to community-sourced questions. Throughout the seminar, the VTDITC team also utilizes chat to share additional information on the topics our guests discuss. When presenters are discussing their work, VTDITC chat moderators can provide direct links to resources. Another opportunity that VTDITC utilizes in Zoom, is the capability to record a meeting. Recordings of our programs can be useful for others to reference or for those who

missed the program the day of, to receive the information at a later date. COVID-19 has extremely expanded our access and outreach.

COVID-19 has given VTDITC the opportunity to adapt and reconsider our program and it also inspired us to create new programs. Since the pandemic, we have temporarily stopped our hip hop study hours now housed in the Ujima living learning community, and reallocated resources to programs including our new weekly live DJ mixes via Instagram. I like to listen to the weekly live mixes and occasionally, I take a break from my academic pursuits. The live mixes are curated based on a different theme each week. This is an opportunity for VTDITC to curate our own music archives and further develop our outreach.

Conclusion

VTDITC continues to embody the unique aspect of both community engagement and service learning despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. VTDITC's new approach to programming has been successful. VTDITC continues to be a unique community program that has given me opportunities to develop my existing skills and learn new skills. Students develop expertise working with the broader community and skills that can be applied to real world situations post-college. The opportunity to be involved in this community has taught me so much about working with others, working in a professional environment, and, most importantly, about myself. Leading the VTDITC community through COVID-19, I have the chance to further develop emotional intelligence, intellectual intelligence, problem solving, and other development skills that I will use throughout my career.

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