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The Application of Critical Pedagogy to Music Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This paper proposes a Critical Pedagogy for Music Education (CPME) and shows how the tenets of CPME enhance music teaching and music learning. Placed in a context whereby the purpose of music education is to empower children to be musicians and in the process transform both the students and their teacher, the paper is in four sections. The first part situates CPME in an historical context linking it to the writings and teachings of Paulo Freire and particularly his concepts of conscientization, connecting word to world and transformation that yields liberation. The next section demonstrates how critical theory, experiential learning and praxis work together to inform curricula in music education. Then, the author explains an eight-step teaching model whereby Critical Pedagogy for Music Education informs the delivery of music instruction. The paper concludes with concrete examples of Critical Pedagogy for Music Education in action inside the music classroom.

Introduction

When critics review concerts, they often provide the reader with background information about the composer and the circumstances surrounding the composing of the piece. Typically, they include a general analysis of the work and comments about the performers and the specific performance. Good critics base their assessment against other performances of the work. They may also refer to recordings of the work, the audience's reaction to the performance, and the relevance of the composition and performance as it connects to the career of the conductor, the composer or to the musical life of the community where the performance occurred. In other words, they place the music, the performers and the performance into a context whereupon they make an educated judgment. Like any connoisseur, they compare the performance to the many other performances that they have experienced and render an "expert" opinion.

I teach at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey, a college located one hour south of New York. Founded 75 years ago, the school enjoys an international reputation for excellence in choral performance, music education, sacred music and vocal performance. Graduates of the college perform in major opera companies throughout the world, teach in schools and colleges throughout the United States and conduct choirs in schools and churches nationally. Music education at Westminster Choir College supports continual research to enhance teaching and learning. Our most recent project responds to issues of education reform that have placed music programs in the schools, and particularly in the urban centers, in jeopardy. Educational initiatives mandated by the Federal government have marginalized music education as priorities shift away from music and the other arts toward the improvement of mathematics and language literacy. While some believe that we teach music for its own sake, at Westminster we envision music education as a subject that enables children to think, act and feel

in the domain of music. To that end, we have adopted the tenets of Critical Pedagogy and developed a praxial model to deliver such instruction in schools where children are not privileged, but rather, where children and their teachers struggle daily to ensure that music retains a place of significance in the school curriculum.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss Critical Pedagogy for Music Education (CPME) and to show how the tenets of CPME enhance music teaching and music learning. The lecture is in four sections. The first part situates CPME in an historical context linking it to the writings and teachings of Paulo Freire and his work in Brazil teaching oppressed adults to “read the world.” The next section demonstrates how critical theory, experiential learning and praxis inform curricula in music education. Finally, I introduce a teaching model whereby Critical Pedagogy for Music Education informs the delivery of music instruction.

The Legacy of Paulo Freire

Critical Pedagogy was developed by Paulo Freire in Brazil in the 1960’s to teach illiterate adults (he calls them the “oppressed”) to read Portuguese. Believing that teaching was a conversation or dialogue between the teacher and the student, Freire posed problems for his students that caused them to take what they already knew and understood from their world outside the classroom and connect it to the goals of literacy, namely the abilities to read and write the language. In other words, his goal was to use that knowledge as a bridge to new learning.

Several key principles define critical pedagogy. They are:

1. Education is a conversation where students and their teachers pose problems and solve problems together.
2. Education broadens the student’s view of reality. For Critical Pedagogy, the goal of

- teaching and learning is to affect a change in the way that both students and their teachers perceive the world.
3. Education is empowering. When students and their teacher “know that they know” the phenomenon of “conscientization” has occurred. Conscientization implies a knowing that has depth and goes beyond the recall of information. Rather, conscientization implies knowing that includes understanding and the ability to act on the learning in such a way as to affect a change.
 4. Education is transformative. For those teaching a critical pedagogy approach, learning takes place when both the teachers and the students can acknowledge a change in perception. It is this change or transformation that teachers can assess.
 5. Education is political. There are issues of power and control inside the classroom, inside the school building, and inside the community. Those in power make decisions about what is taught, how often classes meet, how much money is allocated to each school subject or program and so forth. Those who teach the Critical Pedagogy model resist the constraints that those in power place on them. They do this first in their own classroom by acknowledging that children come to class with knowledge they gain from the outside world and as such, that knowledge needs to be honored and valued. In the United States, applying Freire’s methods have been effective in the teaching of reading particularly in urban school districts.

Freire (1970) taught that several conditions must result from instruction before one can claim that learning has occurred. The first is the connection of “word to world.” Freire argued that unless the learning facilitates a change in the student’s perception of reality, learning has not occurred. Teachers, according to Freire, facilitate that connection by helping students to draw on

their own realities to create new possibilities. As Weiler (1989) explains, “one of the most important pedagogical tenets for Freire was the need for teachers to respect the consciousness and culture of their students and to create the pedagogical situation in which students can articulate their understanding of the world” (p. 18). At the same time, teachers must be self-reflective and seek to understand their own presuppositions, the ideological prism through which external reality is sorted and understood (Freire, 1973).

Next, is the concern for conscientization. In Freire’s works (1970, 1973), conscientization is the phenomenon that occurs in students with the realization that they “know that they know.” It is a powerful realization that takes them to a more critical level of consciousness and adds a feeling of dimensionality to the learning experience. Freire himself defined conscientization as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 17).

Critical pedagogy is concerned not only with the students and the change that occurs in them as a result of the learning, but also with the change that occurs in the teacher. In critical pedagogy, not only do the teachers teach the students, but also the students, in turn, teach the teacher. This affects a transformation of both students and their teachers. When this occurs, Freire (1970) claimed that true and meaningful learning has occurred. Schmidt (2002a) writes that the issue is a difficult one for music teachers. Those concerned with assessment and accountability wonder how they can measure student transformation.

Music educators interested in empowering students and providing a transformative education need to refuse the unwavering will [of rigid standards] to be who we are. Non- alienating teaching requires conscientization, but also the negation of who the dominant discourse tells us we are. Personal meaning, interpretation, self-social-cultural understanding and expression, as well as a wider knowledge of the world should come first in the conceptualization of music education. (Schmidt, 2002a, p. 9)

What kinds of changes constitute a transformation? Some suggest that teachers are reluctant to consider their own transformation since that would involve critical reflection on their part and a

willingness to open themselves to new realities. What it comes down to is that if any change is to take place, students as well as their teachers must be fully engaged in a process of conscientization, or as Freire states “of becoming critically conscious of the socio-historical world in which one intervenes or pretends to intervene politically” (Macedo, 1994, p. xi- xii.)

Critical pedagogy views teaching such that the teacher, like the music critic, acts as the discriminating musical connoisseur and places information into a context that is familiar to the student. The classroom activities further students’ musicianship and enable them as musicians who think, act and feel at intense levels. Music teachers who teach critically view themselves in a partnership with the students. As a result, they experience outcomes that are personally transformational.

Critical Pedagogy “is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationships among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society and nation state” (McLaren, 1998, p. 45). The focus is on developing the potential of both student and teacher. It is a perspective that looks toward expanding possibilities by acknowledging who the children and their teachers are, and building on their strengths while recognizing and assessing their needs. Critical pedagogy invites teachers to use many different teaching strategies to accomplish the mission, which is to empower children to be musicians. To observe critical pedagogy in the music classroom one might see children playing classroom instruments, using hand-signs and moving or reacting in some physical way to the sounds they hear. One might also see children working cooperatively in groups engaged in group problem solving or problem posing. There will be instances when children and their teachers engage in verbal or musical dialogue through discussion or improvisation to construct meaning in some creative way and

there will also be some “hands on” activities that music teachers are so fond of including. One might see children teaching their teachers as teachers instruct the children. These instances and more are possible in a music program where critical pedagogy is practiced.

Critical Pedagogy and Curriculum

Curriculum in music education, like other subjects, is informed by a synthesis of philosophy, psychology or learning theory and praxis. Critical Pedagogy for Music Education emerges from the synthesis of the critical theory as a philosophical framework and the applications of the branch of educational psychology known as “experiential learning.”

Experiential learning, particularly as articulated by Bernice McCarthy (1987, 2000, 2003) in her teaching model that considers student and teacher learning styles provides a framework for lessons that acknowledge the children and their teachers for who they are. Specifically, the model places children and their teachers into a “comfort” zone for at least one quarter of the total learning experience. Focusing on conceptual learning, which is consistent with the tenets of critical pedagogy, McCarthy suggests that learning activities alternate between concrete and abstract or holistic modes of perception and process, which facilitate a whole-brained learning experience. The cycle of learning that she suggests engage children in experiences that facilitate critical action and critical feeling. While students have the opportunity to construct knowledge, they also have the opportunity to act and to reflect on those actions. Teachers are also engaged in the learning as they continually assess the learning experiences in real time. That is, the assessment is on-going allowing for refocusing at multiple points throughout the learning experience.

Critical Pedagogy for Music Education seeks to identify possibilities in the classroom by offering schema to connect word to world and by its unyielding urgency of transformation. It

broadens the tenets of critical theory beyond the realm of critical thinking through problem-posing and dialogue.

Unlike the popular approaches of Orff or Kodály, Critical Pedagogy does not advocate a particular body of repertoire, or specific teaching procedure. Instead, it is a view that provides teacher and student with a flexible pedagogy. For music education, this pedagogy questions, challenges and empowers students to experience *our* (i.e. the teacher's) music, and their teachers to understand *their* (i.e. the student's) music as integral parts of a collective reality. Critical pedagogy suggests that music, as part of our cultural past, present and future, has the power to liberate students and their teachers from present stereotypes about music and musicians, and encourages critical thinking, critical action, and critical feeling. It places music into a social, political and cultural context that results in a connection of what Freire calls "word," which in our case is the music, to "world." In the end, students and their teachers attain a level of "conscientization." In other words, they "know that they know." When this type of transformation happens, and self-knowledge results in a moment of "Aha!" – a feeling of revelation – one may claim that music learning has occurred.

For critical pedagogues, the purpose of music education is to enable students to become more musical and better musicians and in the process effect change in both the students and their teacher. Music lessons informed by this pedagogy engage musical imagination, musical intelligence, musical creativity and musical celebration through performance. Teachers who need to provide multiple and varied experiences for children in their music classes find critical pedagogy attractive.

Toward a Critical Pedagogy for Music Education

When planning instruction, critical pedagogues, like all excellent teachers, ask four

questions. They are: Who am I? Who are my students? What might they become? What might we become together? Clearly, there are no pat answers. In the context of their own teaching situations, teachers will answer them differently. These questions inform and guide teachers and their students and help all to move from the “is” to the “ought.” The following chart presents the learning sequence model.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY	EMPOWERING MUSICIANS	LESSON STEPS	NATIONAL STANDARDS	LESSON FORM
Who We Are	Engaging Musical Imagination	1. Honoring Their World <i>Teacher engages the students in problem solving by creating an experience that presents a need to know.</i>	Experiencing Music (6, 7)	Exposition
		2. Sharing the Experience <i>Students and their teacher process the experience. They share feelings and reflect.</i>		
Who They May Become	Engaging Musical Intellect	3. Connecting Their World to the Concept <i>Teacher connects the experience to the musical concept using comparable concepts from the other arts, culture, or student out of school experiences.</i>	Connecting Music (8, 9)	Development
		4. Dialoguing Together <i>Teacher presents the concept. Students gather the evidence they need to solve the problem.</i>		
		5. Practicing the Concept <i>Teacher provides students with an opportunity to practice the concept. A homework assignment or quiz might be included at this step.</i>		
Who We Might Become Together	Engaging Musical Creativity	6. Connecting Word to World <i>Teacher invites students to find alternative solutions and new ways to use the information presented. Students have the opportunity to create something new.</i>	Creating Music (3, 4, 5, 6, 7)	Improvisation
		7. Assessing Transformation <i>Students and their teacher reflect and evaluate the work completed. The assessment rubric is applied at this step.</i>		
	Engaging Musical Celebration through Performance	8. Acknowledging Transformation <i>Students and their teacher celebrate the new learning through presentation, exhibition or other form of demonstration.</i>	Performing Music (1, 2)	Recapitulation

Unlike traditional lesson plans, the lessons do not take a specific number of minutes or a specific number of lesson periods. Instead, the model flows like a symphony. It begins with an exposition, then a development section with improvisation and a concluding recapitulation. Individual teachers have the authority to adapt the model to fit their particular situations. Each section of the model takes a different amount of time depending on the age and experience of the children and the situation in which the instruction occurs. The lesson model relies on the teacher as a music education connoisseur who knows from instinct and experience when it is appropriate to go with the flow, or when it is time to move on. The important idea is that the lesson model should provide on significant musical experiences for the student and teacher. The motto is “depth rather than breadth.”

This approach advocates experiential learning. It differentiates instruction by providing a variety of activities that emphasize “doing.” Students explore, listen, describe, analyze and evaluate throughout. As a result, all nine of the content standards for music education are addressed.

Schmidt (2002b) and others (Elliott, 1995; Gates, 1999) posit a conception of music as action when he suggested that music was not only a verb, but also a verb of power and opened new conduits to connect music, i.e., word, to world. This gave critical pedagogues license to engage in music making with children that was not only critically active and mindful, but also critically feelingful. Since music reflects thought and emotion (Langer, 1953; Meyer, 1957) it is as empowering as it is powerful, and as such, music provides the tools of language whereby emotion can be expressed in non-verbal ways. In this manner music connects to the realities of both individuals and communities who search for social change (Schmidt, 2002a).

Critical Pedagogy for Music Education in Action

Applying the research on critical theory and critical pedagogy to music teaching and learning, was the goal of the music teacher at the Middle School in Princeton, New Jersey. Unlike traditional teaching, music lessons did not focus on a set of instructional objectives that were determined by the teacher. Instead, lessons were developed by pre-service music education majors at Westminster Choir College working in collaboration with their professors. Agreeing that the purpose of classroom music instruction was to empower students to be musicians (Abrahams, Jenkins, & Schmidt, 2002), they created experiences that honored the world of the sixth grader and helped these youngsters to expand their sphere of understanding and possibility. For example, a lesson on Gregorian Chant began with students listening to rap. In small groups the children created mind maps or webs that identified the characteristics of the raps they heard. Students discovered that rap music offered a window into a particular stratum of society and reflected the inner thoughts of the rapper. The rap was non-melodic but focused instead on text set to a specific rhyme scheme. The students concluded that there were rules for rap and that raps were meaningful modes of expression for the urban hip-hop culture. After hearing Gregorian Chant, students were able to construe similarities to the rap form, but noted that unlike rap, chant focused on melody to express the meaning of the text. But, like rap, chant had a very specific function for a very specific stratum of society. Like all the lessons presented to the sixth graders, concepts emerged from the musical content and experiences in performing by singing and playing classroom instruments; and, through creating by arranging, improvising and composing. In the case of the rap/chant lesson, children discovered that music has form, and expresses emotion in the context of a particular historical and cultural situation. In other lessons, music indigenous to American folk and contemporary popular culture was coupled with music from the

classical western canon or music of various parts of the world. Students with their teacher were analyzed, evaluated and assessed the music they heard, created and performed. For one particular lesson, children were asked to share the music of their particular cultural heritage by teaching a song to the class that they learned aurally from a relative at home. Always seeking to apply Freire's notion of word and world (Freire, 1970), the experiences children enjoyed in music classes fostered connections to history and culture, to other academic disciplines and to the students' world outside the classroom.

The children composed a new "Queen of the Night" aria for Madonna, when informed that she was cast in a "re-make" of *The Magic Flute*. In another lesson, children wrestled with the order of the sections in the final movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony. Their problem was to defend Beethoven's choices against imaginary music critics who argued that the fugue should come at the very end. Using technology, it was easy to re-order the sections so that they could hear various options. While they did conclude that Beethoven made the best choices, the discussion, or dialogue, in class was stimulating and revealing. Experiences in visual art, drama and dance provided integration with other art forms and nurtured students' abilities to relate concepts among various artistic disciplines. Lessons followed an expanded sonata form that was freely adapted from McCarthy's 4MAT System (1987). Lessons began with an exposition where children called upon their own "life" experiences to wrestle with a particular musical problem or circumstance. Through dialogue (Freire, 1970; Schmidt, 2001), children with their teacher processed this experience. Next, in the development section, the teacher presented information children needed to improvise upon the lesson theme. The lessons often included a formal presentation by the teacher followed by an activity where children became composers or improvisers or engaged in some other kind of creative challenge. In the recapitulation, children

and their teacher assessed together. Again, they dialogued to discover how the new musical learning connected to their world and the world beyond the classroom. They explored possibilities. The teacher also had an opportunity for reflection at this point. It was at this point in the lesson that transformation, if it occurred, would evidence itself. Lessons concluded with a musical performance or other activity to provide closure.

Through the development of a curriculum based on the principles of Critical Pedagogy for Music Education, music teachers and their students are able to meet the benchmarks of traditional outcomes through a flexible curriculum, developed cooperatively by teacher and student, and a curriculum that was more interesting to the students. The commitment to CPME supported a curriculum where the making of music was freeing (i.e., liberating) and transforming because the curriculum was individualized. It provided opportunities where the sixth graders were able to record their own sequence of “Aha, now I understand” experiences. Classroom teachers reported that their students looked forward to music classes with enthusiasm. The music teacher reported similar feelings. When presented with the opportunities, students and their teacher were excited to share their music with each other. Students said they felt valued when their music was acknowledged as important by the music teacher. The teacher confessed that he learned much about his students and about music that was new to him. In short, while it is hard to claim “transformation,” both students and their teacher believed that CPME changed and enriched their interactions with each other. Because lessons included making music, students acted as real musicians. This was a significant change from previous years where students learned “about” music and performed the music of others often to the exclusion of music they created themselves.

Critical Pedagogy for Music Education provides opportunities for individual aptitudes

and potentials to be identified and for individual learning styles and teaching styles to be honored in diverse ways. Students enjoy working cooperatively to solve problems and were able to rise to the occasion when challenged to think feel and act in a sophisticated, critical manner. At our laboratory school in Princeton, students showed the teacher that they are capable of learning on their own and that they retained knowledge when their learning was grounded in personal experience. The lessons provided the sixth grade students and their teacher opportunities to engage in significant and meaningful conversation, verbally and musically, confirming the success of dialogue as a teaching strategy.

Conclusions

Critical Pedagogy for Music Education acknowledges that teaching and learning music is socially and politically constructed. It advocates a shift in the power relationships within the music classroom by suggesting that teachers and students teach each other. CPME not only engages children in critical thinking through problem posing, problem solving and dialoguing, it also engages children and their teachers in critical action by a mindful (Gates, 1999) production of culture (Apple, 1982; Giroux, 1985) when students compose original musical compositions.

CPME nurtures critical feeling in the act of reproducing culture (Bourdieu, 1977) by expressing music through composition, improvisation, and performance and also in analyzing and evaluating music and music performances. Most importantly, Critical Pedagogy for Music Education yields transformative experiences for both students and their teacher. The strategies encourage the posing and solving of problems through dialogue that is musical and conversational. In all, the strategies suggest possibilities and break down the walls between “our” music and “their” music moving everyone from what is to what ought to be.

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