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Critical Pedagogy for Music Education:  
A Best Practice to Prepare Future Music Educators

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**Abstract**

This paper describes a best teaching practice called Critical Pedagogy for Music Education as it influences the preparation of future music educators. In a college laboratory school, preservice undergraduate music education majors collaborate with their professor to create music lessons they will teach to sixth-grade students in general music classes that meet once a week for one semester.

Grounded in the social theories of Freire, McLaren, Giroux, and Habermas, the music lessons pose and solve problems that engage children in critical thinking, critical action, and critical feeling. The lessons inspire a dialogue that breaks down power structures and barriers that separate the music students hear in the classroom from the music they prefer to listen to outside of class. Throughout this process, students are empowered as musicians and realize they know that they know, a state identified by Freire as “conscientization.” The result is a transforming experience for students and their teacher.

Four essential questions, gleaned from Habermas, guide the development of each music lesson: Who am I? Who are my students? What might my students become? What might my students and I become together? Instruction is sequenced in an eight-step teaching model that differentiates between left- and right-mode hemispheric processing and alternates teaching strategies accordingly. Contrary to common practice, lessons do not center on a lesson objective. Instead, concepts emerge as students and teachers construct their own meanings from the music being studied. In addition, strategies for teaching language literacy are embedded into each lesson step in such a way as to maintain the integrity of the music lesson.

An assessment was completed after the spring of the second year. Sixth graders were interviewed four months after they completed their music course. Results showed that they were able to discuss the concepts presented, remember the musical content, and had overall positive feelings about their experiences in the general music class. Furthermore, they were able to meet benchmarks for students in grades 5–8 as articulated in the National Standards for Arts Education. Pre-service music education majors who participated in the program expressed confidence that they could replicate the program when they had their own music classes. The

future educators were enthusiastic and had positive attitudes toward teaching classroom music at the middle school level. These students and their professor, the lab school teacher, reported that teaching in the program provided opportunities to renew their own musicianship—an outcome they had not expected when they began the program.

Responding to the success of the program, the Music Education Department developed three courses in Critical Pedagogy as prerequisites for elementary and secondary methods courses. The added courses are Critical Pedagogy I: Foundations and Contexts, Critical Pedagogy II: Praxial Applications, and Critical Pedagogy III: Philosophy and Social Theory. In these courses, pre-service music education majors come to view music education as a pedagogy of resistance and possibility. They acquire a teaching identity that empowers them to contextualize music education and think of how it fits into the greater overall goals of education.

### **Critical Pedagogy for Music Education: A Best Practice to Prepare Future Music Educators**

Westminster Academy is the laboratory school of the Music Education Department at Westminster Choir College of Rider University and Westminster Conservatory—the community music school that serves as the preparatory division on the college campus. Originally intended to service the large home-schooled population in the Greater Princeton area, the school was invited to reside inside John Witherspoon Middle School, a public school located adjacent to the college. Previous to our arrival, the middle school had no general-music program. Instead, choir, orchestra, and band were the only offerings, and were intended to provide a strong feeder program for the ensembles in the senior high school across the street.

Frustrated by the poor quality of many school music programs and resisting mandates that teacher preparation programs be aligned to standards-based rubrics, we wanted a curricular framework to provide dynamic, transformational and meaningful learning experiences in classroom music lessons for children in general education, as well as a curriculum for teacher preparation at our college. To do this, we conceived a music program whereby philosophy, psychology or learning theory, and praxis would intersect in a Venn diagram to yield musical experiences for students at Westminster Academy and pre-service music education majors at the college.

The purpose of this paper is to describe Critical Pedagogy for Music Education (CPME) as a best teaching practice and to show how it provides a framework for the creation of music lessons as a curriculum design for pre-service music teacher education.

### **Critical Pedagogy for Music Education**

Critical Pedagogy is a postmodern teaching model that views teaching and learning as a conversation among teachers and their students. Grounded in the social theories of Freire (1970) McLaren (1997, 1998, 2002; McLaren & Giroux, 1990), Giroux (1983a; 1983b; 1985; 1988a;

1988b; 1988c; 1994; 1997) and Habermas (1982), it advocates a shift in the power structure in classrooms by acknowledging that students come to the class with information gleaned from their own life experiences. The goal of Critical Pedagogy is to use that knowledge as a bridge to new learning. This results in a change of perception for both the students and their teacher. Critical pedagogues claim that when students and their teachers “know that they know,” the phenomenon of “conscientization” has taken place. After this moment of revelation, one may claim that learning has occurred.

For music education, a Critical Pedagogy approach seeks to break down the barriers that exist between the music students hear and love outside the classroom, with the music their teachers want them to learn. The teaching model suggests that when teachers connect school music to the child’s own music, the music becomes empowering and offers more plentiful opportunities for meaningful musical experiences inside and outside the classroom (Abrahams & Head, 2005).

Critical Pedagogy was developed by Paulo Freire in Brazil in the 1960s to teach illiterate adults (or, as Freire calls them, the “oppressed”) to read Portuguese. Recognizing that schools are political institutions where the distribution of power and resources affect the quality of learning, Freire advocated interactive teaching through problem posing, problem solving, and dialogue. In the United States, applying Freire’s methods has been effective in the teaching of reading, particularly in urban school districts. Acknowledging that children come to the classroom with some prior knowledge gleaned from life experiences is an important concept. Applying this pedagogy to American music education helps to connect music teaching to the mainstream goals of improved literacy that are so prominent in schools today, and moves music education in schools from the fringe to a more prominent position in the curriculum. It also ensures that any musical knowledge gained, no matter how limited, is meaningful and retained longer in life.

Several key principles define Critical Pedagogy for Music Education (Abrahams, 2005). They are:

1. Music education is a conversation. Students and their teachers pose problems and solve problems together. In music classrooms, this means composing and improvising music in styles consistent with who the students are and the contexts in which they live.
2. Music education broadens the student’s view of reality. For CPME, the goal of music teaching and music learning is to affect a change in the way that both students and their teachers perceive the world. In this model, students and their teachers view the world through the lens of the urban experience and the music that defines that experience.
3. Music education is empowering. When students and their teacher “know that they know,” one can claim that the phenomenon of “conscientization” has occurred. Conscientization (Freire, 1970) implies a knowing that has depth and goes beyond the recall of information and includes understanding and the ability to act on the learning in such a way as to affect a change. In this view, music is conceived as a verb of power (Schmidt, 2002). It evokes critical action (Regelski, 2004) and critical feeling by engaging students in musical activities that are both significant and consistent with what musicians do when they are making music.
4. Music education is transformative. For those teaching a CPME approach, music 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. Music education is political. There are issues of power and control inside the music 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 CPME 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 from the outside world and, as such, that their knowledge needs to be honored and valued.

Just as Critical Pedagogy for Music Education is concerned with connecting to the students and their realities, a critical perspective allows teachers to view their role inside the context of their own realities. Like their students, such realities include previous experiences, and their own conception of the political, cultural, and economic components of schooling. They can connect what they know with what their students bring to the classroom and as a result, together they move from what Ouchi and Jaeger (1978) call the “is” to the “ought.”

### **The Critical Pedagogy for Music Education Framework**

Four essential questions, gleaned from Habermas (1982), guide the development of the music lessons in the CPME model are: Who am I? Who are my students? What might they become? What might we become together? Believing that music education can be empowering and liberating, the approach extends Elliott’s (1995) conception of music as a verb, to that of a verb of power (Schmidt, 2002). Music, by its very nature, has the power to liberate, transform, and effect change.

This model enables students and their teachers to connect the music of the classroom to the music in their lives (Abrahams & Head, 2005). As a result, students come to better understand who they are, and embrace the possibilities of who or what they might become. Music learning occurs when students and their teachers understand the making of meaning and musical understanding occurs during the process of transformation.

Experiential learning (McCarthy, 1987, 2000) that honors the diversity of learning styles children present in the classroom, individual teaching styles and constructivist theories (Wink & Putney, 2001) provide the learning theory which grounds the CPME view. As a result, lessons written in the CPME model engage children in musical thinking. They begin with an exposition that introduces the main themes of the lesson. This is followed by a development section in which different ideas are explored and nurtured. Students are then encouraged to compose or to improvise. The lesson ends with a recapitulation, where the themes are brought to a satisfying conclusion. In this lesson model, the teacher’s role changes shifts from motivator to informer, to facilitator, and then to assessor (McCarthy, 1987). The students meet National Standards for Music Education (MENC, 1994) and engage their musical intelligence or aptitude in four ways—using imagination, intellect, creativity and the celebration of musical performance. Reading strategies used by teachers in general classrooms to help children meet standards of literacy are infused at appropriate points without compromising the integrity of the music lesson. Themes for all lessons come from social issues that are familiar to the students. Rather than focusing a lesson on an objective or a musical topic, such as theme and variation or ostinato, the lessons connect to the way children experience music in their lives outside of schooling. Lesson titles include “Music Builds Bridges and Defines Who We Are” (Abrahams & Head, 2005), or “Madonna, Mozart, Music, and Me,” and “Rap the Chant, Chant the Rap.” We teach the “Bohemian Rhapsody” popularized by Queen as a metaphor for the Vietnam War.

### **Critical Pedagogy for Music Education in the Sixth-Grade General-Music Classroom**

At Westminster Academy, we deliver music instruction to the sixth grade one day per week for a semester. Half of the students (five classes) have music during the fall term, and the remaining five classes have music in the spring. At the lab school, we teach CPME lessons that are written by the pre-service music education majors in their methods classes at Westminster Choir College. The college students have the opportunity to watch their professors teach the lessons and to assist or teach themselves when appropriate. After each lab lesson, the students meet with their professor to process the experience, to revise and refocus the lesson plan, and to share feelings and impressions.

An assessment of the laboratory program was completed after the second year (Abrahams, 2004). Students were interviewed, musical compositions along with other student work were examined, and classes were observed. The student interviews were completed during the last week of school, but were limited to students who had the music instruction during the first semester. That meant that it had been five months since the students being interviewed had been in a music class. Nonetheless, students were able to recall and discuss the experiences, concepts, and content of the music lessons with depth and understanding.

### **Critical Pedagogy for Music Education and the Pre-service College Curriculum**

Adding three foundational courses in Critical Pedagogy for Music Education to the pre-service music education curriculum provided flexibility to meet a new state licensure code and our own objectives. In the first course, students explored the question “Who am I?” To address dispositions and teacher identity, students analyzed case studies where the stakeholders are presented with a moral dilemma inside a music education issue. Students discussed, brainstormed, and suggested solutions to the problems, wrestling with the questions that the situations in the cases posed. They wrote a first-year philosophy of music education and began to develop a digital portfolio. In the second course, students focused on the learning theories that are the basis for CPME. Experiential learning (McCarthy, 1987, 2000), constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978; Wink & Putney, 2001) and reading strategies (Billmeyer, 2003) are introduced and students develop lesson plans and discuss the kinds of learning experiences appropriate for CPME. For this course, students are required to write a teaching philosophy and a personal ethical code. Before the third course, students take elementary and secondary methods classes where the principles of CPME are addressed in the context of music in the elementary, middle, and senior high schools. Students participated in an extended off-campus field experience and continued to develop their digital portfolios. Then students took the final CPME course, where the philosophical foundations of Critical Pedagogy for Music Education were explored. Students revised their first-year philosophy and developed it into a document of significance. Then, students did their senior student teaching.

### **Critical Pedagogy for Music Education as an Instructional Design**

An eight-step lesson planning model that differentiates instruction, integrates language literacy strategies when appropriate, and alternates left- and right-mode hemispheric processing frames classroom music instruction (Abrahams, 2005; Abrahams & Head, 2005) appears as figure 1. Several key features distinguish the model. Contrary to common practice, lessons do not center on a lesson objective. Instead, concepts, topics, and experiences emerge as students and their teachers construct their own meaning from the music itself.

The model is aligned to the learning styles research of Bernice McCarthy (1987, 2000). The activities alternate right- and left-brain processing modes and a pattern of right, left, right, left, left, right, left, right. Steps 1 and 2 are structured to answer the question “Why?” and appeal to those students who learn by listening and sharing ideas. These are student interested in people and culture, and believe in their own experience. They rely on their feelings and enjoy group work and discussion. Steps 3 and 4 are designated to appeal to the analytic learners. These students learn by thinking through ideas in more traditional classrooms. These students learn by watching and enjoy formal lecture presentations. The needs of the common sense learners are addressed in lesson steps 5 and 6. This is the place in the lesson where students compose and improvise. These students need to know how things work. They enjoy participatory activities. The lesson ends in steps 7 and 8 with the learners who love performance.

The lesson engages four types of musical intelligence: musical imagination, musical intellect, musical creativity, and musical celebration through performance. Because musicians often think in terms of musical forms, the lesson flows in a modified sonata form with an exposition, development, improvisation, and recapitulation. The lesson integrates the nine national content standards (MENC, 1994). The lesson steps are aligned to the Marzano (2000) taxonomy and may be easily aligned to Bloom (1954). There is a research base for each step (Apple, 1982; Bourdieu, 1986, 1987a, 1987b; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Gardner, 1983, 2000; Habermas, 1982; Hooks, 1994; McNeil, 2000; Sarason, 1996; Shor, 1992).

### **Conclusions**

Needless to say, cooperating teachers are baffled when students from Westminster Choir College teach in their music classrooms. They are curious why students have never been taught to write a lesson objective, and are playing rap, hip-hop, and grunge, instead of focusing on skill development. These confused teachers often cannot comprehend the benefits of students teaching the teacher while the teacher teaches the students. They are not interested in changing in their ways or transforming themselves, let alone discovering the rewards of conscientization. Resisting such hegemony, researchers and advocates of the pedagogy forge ahead.

Critical Pedagogy for Music Education is an appropriate framework for music education. Its mission is to use knowledge to affect a change of perception for both the students and their teacher. For music education, a Critical Pedagogy approach to lesson planning and curriculum for pre-service teacher education empowers a teaching identity that resists the hegemonic practices of music education in schools and of schooling itself. Finally, Critical Pedagogy for Music Education as a best teaching practice fosters transformational experiences that will move

music education in the schools from the peripheral to a more worthy place in the center of all learning experiences.

**Figure 1. Lesson Planning Model**

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY	EMPOWERING MUSICIANS	LESSON STEPS	NATIONAL STANDARDS	LESSON FORM	TAXONOMY	RESEARCH BASE
Who we are	Engaging musical imagination	1. Honoring their world: Teacher engages the students in problem solving by creating an experience that presents a need to know.	Experiencing music (National Standards 6 and 7)	Exposition	Marzano: Cognitive Systems Level 1; Bloom: Levels 1, 2, 3, and 4	Freire (1970); Gardner (1983, 2000); McLaren (2003); Shor (1985)
		2. Sharing the experience: Students and their teacher process the experience. They share feelings and reflect.			Marzano: Cognitive System Levels 1, 2, and 3; Bloom: Levels 1, 2, 3, and 4	Vygotsky (1978); Hooks (1994); Darling-Hammond (1997)
Who students may become	Engaging musical intellect	3. Connecting their world to the classroom: Teacher connects the experience using comparable concepts from the other arts, culture, or student out of school experiences.	Connecting music (National Standards 8, and 9)	Development	Marzano: Cognitive System Levels 3 and 4; Bloom Levels 1, 2, and 3	Gardner (1983; 2000); Freire (1970); Giroux (1997); Bourdieu (1986; 1987)
		4. Dialoguing together: Teacher presents the lesson content. Students gather the evidence they need to solve the problem.			Marzano: Cognitive System Level 1; Bloom: Level 1	Freire (1970); Saranson (1996); McNeill (2000)
		5. Practicing the content: Teacher provides students with an opportunity to practice the content. A homework assignment or quiz might be included at this step.			Marzano: Cognitive System Levels 3 and 4; Bloom: Level 5	McNeill (2000); Freire (1970); Giroux (1997); McLaren (2003)
Who we might become together	Engaging musical creativity	6. Connecting School music to the students' world: Teacher invites students to find alternative solutions and new ways to use the information presented. Students have the opportunity to create something new.	Creating music (National Standards 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7)	Improvisation	Marzano: Metacognition Levels 5 and 6; Bloom: Levels 3, 4, and 6	Freire (1970); Habermas (1982); Bourdieu (1986; 1987); Vygotsky (1978); Apple (1982)
		7. Assessing transformation: Students and their teacher reflect and evaluate the work completed. An assessment rubric may be applied at this step.			Marzano: Metacognition Level 5 and Self-System Level 6; Bloom: Level 6	Darling-Hammond (1997); Saranson (1996); Orfield (2001);
	Engaging musical celebration through performance	8. Acknowledging transformation: Students and their teacher celebrate the new learning through presentation, exhibition or other form of demonstration.	Performing music (National Standards 1 and 2)	Recapitulation	Marzano: Self-System Level 6; Bloom: Levels 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6	Freire (1970); Saranson (1996); McLaren (2003); Giroux (1997)



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