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Music and Well-Being: Teaching Nontraditional Music Learners With Compassion and Empathy

By

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Abstract

For our music education students who are steeped in the culture of Western school-based music teaching practices, there is a large learning curve when approaching the teaching of music outside the traditional large ensemble paradigm. Several new pedagogy classes were developed to foster an informal, collaborative, participatory approach. Among the goals was to create a Service Learning component for students to put into practice making music with participants who have a diversity of musical interests and abilities. Through these changes they are becoming more aware of the role music can play beyond the preK-12 classroom and across the lifespan.

Keywords: nontraditional, compassion, well-being, music, diversity

Music for All, or Is It?

For many students in the United States, school-based music classes are the only opportunity to learn about music, to learn to play an instrument or sing, and to create music. The school music teacher in many communities is uniquely positioned to pique students' interests in music or not. A music teacher's personal experiences; philosophies of teaching and learning; and willingness to embrace multiple forms of musicking, including digital musicianship, will have an enormous effect on their students' own beliefs in their musicality and their desire to participate. However, in many school-based music programs, the emphasis on learning to read traditional notation and the lack of accommodation for nontraditional learners as well as a lack of emphasis on popular forms of music or nontraditional instrumental and vocal opportunities can be at odds with many students' musical interests. These exclusionary practices can set up a very narrow definition of what it means to be musical, leaving many students either disinterested in studying music or implying they are not musical enough to participate in their school's musical offerings.

The music education students at our institution, as is the case with most preservice music educators in the United States, are steeped in the culture of Western school-based music teaching practices. Practices that have remained fairly constant since the beginning of the last century. Consequently many preservice music educators are predisposed to placing greater value on musicianship skills developed through performing as instrumentalists or vocalists in large ensembles than those developed either through aural experimentation in garage bands and world music practices or through digital beat-making. As a result, many music education students will experience a sizeable learning curve when approaching the teaching of music outside the traditional large ensemble paradigm.

Many would agree that competence and expertise in a specific subject area is one of the attributes of an effective teacher, yet many overlook empathy as a valuable teaching trait. How might we as music teacher educators create a culture that honors both qualities, fostering a more welcoming, inclusive classroom environment? In order to encourage our students to embrace a less restrictive approach to their practice, we looked to the nonformal participatory approaches encountered when working in community settings (Higgins & Bartleet, 2012; Higgins & Willingham, 2017; Koopman, 2007), where there is also a greater emphasis on social engagement as well as on the music making (Turino, 2008).

Over the course of their future careers as music teachers, our students will find themselves working with a substantial percentage of nontraditional music learners, including at-risk learners. They will need to shift their thinking from a more rigid teacher-centered approach toward one that is more flexible. They will need to embrace a more broadly defined idea of who is a musician. In other words, our music education students will need to pivot from the all-knowing ensemble director mindset to that of a welcoming facilitator (Higgins, 2012; Mullen, 2002).

Moving Toward a More Welcoming Culture

Several years ago, as part of a program-wide rethinking of our curriculum, we developed a master of music in music education option in community music. This degree option provides a pedagogical and global focus for musicians who wish to work in community settings and music outreach programs across the lifespan. Through this area of study our students get to explore the interrelationships that exist in the arts, along with the rich cultural and global connections that exist in their communities.

One of the nontraditional ensemble offerings in our community music degree pathway is our Cambodian music ensemble. Due to the large Cambodian population in our city, this ensemble helps us develop a very important link into our local culture. Through this ensemble we can explore the master–apprentice model that informs music teaching and learning throughout many world cultures as well as passing on the aural traditions of Cambodian music. We have the good fortune to be able to hire local culture bearers as master teachers, and we can also link the ensemble’s public performances to various Cambodian celebrations during the year. Through these master teachers, our students not only learn to play non-Western instruments with non-Western tonal systems but also learn about the cultural traditions and rituals associated with the music they are learning. To enhance the ties into the local culture, our students get to perform with other community arts groups such as our Cambodian dance troupe. While we originally proposed this ensemble for graduate students, we have since opened it up to our undergraduate music students. As one of our music education students discussed in her reflective journal regarding her thoughts about being in this ensemble,

The Cambodian Ensemble rehearsals are far different than any other ensemble rehearsal I participate here [*sic*] ... and this was a very difficult transition as I came from a world of completely western [*sic*] training. Transitioning to anything non-western [*sic*], especially in a rehearsal setting was difficult.... Cambodian Ensemble pushes me out of my comfort zone and along with learning the music, I get to learn about the culture, the instruments themselves and so much more.

This student discussed the focus on learning the music aurally while simultaneously learning to play a non-Western instrument. She discussed the anxiety and frustrations she often experienced but also commented positively on the need to rely on her peers for support and help,

along with the idea that she could have fun. In fact, before going on stage for their end of semester performance, her instructor told the group, “Go out there, look up once in a while and have fun.” Her experiences mirror my own during the semester when I was the instructor of record for this ensemble. I too was thrown into the mix and understand both her frustrations as well as the fun aspect. Since I am a violinist, the master teacher put a *tro* in my hands. A *tro* is a two-stringed bowed instrument, played standing upright on one’s lap. Even for a seasoned string player this was a challenge. I was learning a new tonal system by ear and figuring out how to get a pleasant sound from a very different approach to fingering and bowing than I was used to. My students and I were learning side by side, and I was learning as much from my students as I was from the master teacher. It was a humbling experience that underscored the importance of immersing oneself in another culture’s musical practices. After my own involvement with this ensemble it was not surprising to read this student’s reflection on her experiences performing with our local Cambodian dance troupe:

We were far from perfect, but for the first time in a long time, I did not feel like this was about the technique or the level of perfection, this was about making music and bringing this amazing community we have here together. I am so lucky and glad to have been a part of it.

It is evident from our students’ reactions to participating in this ensemble over several semesters, along with their developing sensitivities to the music of this rich culture, that we were on to something. Among the many positive benefits to this participatory, nonformal, aural approach to learning music is the interaction with community members in meaningful rituals and performances. Most of all this ensemble serves as a model of how they might embrace and honor the many musical traditions of the students they will eventually teach.

Immersive Learning Through Service Learning

As we became more invested in the practices and approaches embraced in community settings for facilitating a variety of music making experiences for our graduate students, we believed a class focused on nonformal and participatory approaches would be equally beneficial for our undergraduate music education majors to experience. We created Progressive Performance and Production Pedagogy (ProgPed) to foster this more exploratory, nonformal, flexible, collaborative, and participatory approach. One of the key aspects of this class is the service learning component, which allows our students to put into practice what they are learning and experiencing with participants who have a diversity of musical interests and abilities.

Among the many components of a traditional well-rounded music teacher education program are the pre-practicum field experiences where music education students go into local schools, to observe, assist, and be mentored by classroom music teachers. This practice helps enculturate future music teachers into the workings and methods employed by these seasoned professionals, while they experience school culture from the perspective of a teacher, rather than a student. In many of these local classrooms, music education students are given opportunities to apply what they are learning in their pedagogy and methods classes. Using the pre-practicum school-based field experiences as a model for providing opportunities for students to apply what they are learning, we added a service learning component for the Prog Ped class. The goal is to provide multiple opportunities to work and learn in community settings that foster non-formal and participatory music-making experiences.

To that end our students get to work with students at local Music Clubhouses on facilitating drumming, keyboard playing, and making beats with young aspiring songwriters and musicians. In other community settings they are working with some of our psychology

colleagues to bring music making experiences to students with special needs or assisting a music therapist at a local state hospital's traumatic brain injury unit. We are providing multiple sing-alongs and drum circles with folks at a local senior center along with on-campus pop-up drum circle events for students, faculty and staff. However, before our students go out into the community to create these music-making experiences they first have to alter their thinking about the role of the teacher and student.

Developing Empathy: From Theory Into Practice

Our Prog Ped class is based on the model practiced in our local music clubhouses, which are loosely based on the Computer Clubhouses developed through MIT's Lifelong Kindergarten Group (Brennan, Monrroy-Hernández, & Resnick, 2011; Peppler, 2017; Resnick, 2017). The clubhouse approach permeates how this class is run, including observing and assisting at several of our local area music clubhouse sites. These clubhouse sites place a heavy emphasis on developing musical thinking through technology and they have full complements of music technology workstations in addition to guitars, drums and keyboards. In this class students are asked to step out of their comfort zones to explore, play and perform on instruments they may be unfamiliar with. They develop basic performance technique on instruments such as electric guitar, bass, drum set, keyboard and even tablet devices. A singer may be at the drum set. A trumpet player may be performing on electric bass. A violinist may be at the keyboards. A percussionist might be performing vocals. At some point they all go through a rotation of playing, performing, and teaching for their peers on all the instruments.

Our Prog Ped class puts the onus of learning directly on the students through these non-formal approaches of peer-to-peer learning, learning music by ear rather than from sheet music, and fostering an environment where our students can feel safe when trying something new. They

set their own goals, choose the music they will perform, teach each other how to play these “new” to them instruments, and create their own arrangements. They are coached in creating a welcoming drum circle so anyone at any level of music knowledge can participate. This class helps our students move their thinking towards a culture of inclusion with the understanding that *anyone* at *any* level is capable of making music. Hopefully they are becoming a bit more aware of the role music can play beyond the pre-K–12 classroom and across the lifespan. Through these changes in their approaches to musicking our students are learning the importance of creating transformative musical experiences beyond the large ensemble model.

Student comments about these service learning experiences have shown that these opportunities have opened their eyes to the fact that becoming a teacher is more than knowing one’s subject. In one student’s journal after a workshop from a guest lecturer he reflects on one of the comments made by this lecturer: “Students care more if you are invested in them rather than what you are teaching.” I completely agree with this statement, and it resonates with past teachers whose main objective was to simply get through the material, and became completely absorbed by it, and almost created a divide between the material and the students, which of course hinders their ability to learn and grow. This student later stated he learned “teaching is not all about the subject, but the byproduct of being a role model, and learning how to be a good person overall.”

Another student learned first-hand the importance of flexibility when she was facilitating a drum circle with a group of young children on the autism spectrum. She noted,

Seeing their excitement, I had to change my plan to get some of their energy out right away.... One child wanted to sit on my lap and play my drum because my sweater was

red and it is his favorite color. I asked him if he would be a good friend and help demonstrate what I needed all his friends to do and he was more than willing to help out! She went on to discuss all the ideas she had planned out for their drum circle session that evening based around songs for the upcoming holidays, but the children's enthusiasm with the instruments won out over her plans. She commented that, "At this point, I had given up on my lesson plan and ideas for the night and let the group take charge of what they wanted since they were enjoying doing what they were doing."

Over the course of the semester many of these students commented on their experiences at our local music clubhouses. It was noted that there was a great sense of familiarity between the students and the volunteer music teachers and what a great job the teachers did in engaging the students in music making. One aspect of the interactions that stood out to one of our music education students was the social aspect that is fostered, underscoring Turino's (2008) perspective on participatory musicking. As this student noted,

There is a really interesting dynamic in the clubhouse in general. The teachers perfectly walk the line between friends but also teachers. Some students definitely prefer the social aspect of the clubhouse as they are so excited about talking about their lives with their friends and teachers that they don't see every day. Then on the other hand there are students [*sic*] that walk in the room, say hello and immediately jump into playing on their own.

The key here is letting the students set their own agenda based on their interests and priorities. What is also apparent is the personal interactions that indicated the importance of knowing who each student was so a teacher/facilitator could tailor their instruction for each student at the clubhouse. As this student also noted

Every student that came through the door was engaged in music for a majority of the time. It is almost an immersive experience where students are given just enough freedom along with the tools they need to be creative and feel supported.

What is becoming obvious from these service learning experiences is that our students are learning that in addition to teaching students about the subject of music, teaching is also about building caring relationships. As one student commented in one of her journals, “What we know and what we teach them is all secondary information. The students do not care about what you know or your credentials, they simply care that you care about them.” These hands-on experiences provide our music education students opportunities to safely navigate the tensions inherent when shifting one’s practice from a focus of teacher directed instruction towards one of student centered learning, which is often a difficult transition to make. Assisting in these community settings is helping students realize that the compassion, empathy, and flexibility they are observing from their community mentors can strengthen their students’ learning experiences when applied in school based settings. An added benefit is knowing they are helping bring the joy of making music to members of the community.

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