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ABSTRACT

In this article, I describe professional encounters with Frank Abrahams, personally and through Abrahams' writing. The paper includes reflection on Abrahams' tireless work in testing and pressing the boundaries of normative, small-c conservative music teaching and learning traditions, in Abrahams' beloved Westminster Choir College and beyond. I recall watching Abrahams teach, both in formal classroom contexts and in other areas of working with students and peers, such as co-authored publications and conference presentations. I recount my role as an unwitting mentee in Abrahams' careful modeling of critical pedagogical approaches within and without the classroom. Drawing on personal anecdotes and several of Abrahams' publications, I illustrate how Abrahams cultivated in me critical pedagogical perspectives in and about music education in the United States. I express gratitude for learning from Abrahams a joyful disgruntlement for embracing the possible and never, ever settling for how things are.

Keywords

critical pedagogy; Frank Abrahams; mentorship; music education

FINDING FRANK

I first met Frank Abrahams in the lobby of a hotel in China while attending the International Society for Music Education (ISME) conference in 2010. I was sitting with Clint Randles and my wife, drinking chrysanthemum tea. (Note to self: I miss drinking hot water with flowers in it.) Frank told me he appreciated the work of Lucy Green, who at the time was in the closing stages of supervising my doctoral dissertation at the University of London. This was the first inkling I think I'd had that Lucy's research on informal music learning was a big deal, especially in the United States. I was also naïve to the size and scale of the music education industry in the

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United States...and to the hegemony in practice here. I still find the notion of methods courses for music teachers quite arresting; this instinctive resistance to following or giving instructions was a point of connection for Frank and me. I think he thought I was progressive or innovative for studying with Lucy Green, but really I was just ignorant of music education beyond my own limited experience, and happy making things up as I went along.

Frank and I met again two years later at the ISME conference in Thessaloniki, Greece. I was astonished he remembered me and hoped it was for positive reasons. We kept bumping into one another at conferences, although I studiously avoided his presentations while I tried to find and explore my own niche in the field; Frank was kinder about attending some of mine. With hindsight, it would have been edifying to look into Frank's research sooner than I did, instead of mostly chatting with him every couple of years about my own. I enjoyed Frank's conversational style. He practiced a kind of fun but provocative and moderately abrasive conversational style. He lacked the veneer of politeness I encountered from most Americans I met; instead, he always went for humorously cutting critique. Over the years, and largely without me realizing this, Frank has carefully and diligently modeled in our professional relationship, "critical pedagogy [a]s a postmodern teaching model that views teaching and learning as a conversation among teachers and their students" (Abrahams, 2007, p. 1). He mentored me as a young academic learning the profession, showing how I might follow in his footsteps.

I moved to the United States in late 2017 and Frank invited me to teach for a week at Westminster Choir College (WCC) the following spring. I was flattered and excited. While working at WCC, I discovered how Frank's energy, cynicism, disgruntlement, and sincere joy infected his students. His critical pedagogy classes were a centerpiece of the junior and senior curriculum for music education majors, and his students were often remarkably adept at debate and critique. I did not realize at the time that this progressive thinking and norm-challenging were quite unusual and derived almost entirely from Frank's efforts over several decades, chipping away at established, complacent teaching approaches, and prompting his students to be critical, culturally responsive teachers in their future classrooms. In this short essay I will describe briefly how Frank Abrahams nurtured critical pedagogical approaches among his students, and how I have benefited from his careful cultivation of such an orientation in me.

A PEDAGOGY OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

From the beginning of this century, Frank Abrahams was among pioneers bringing critical pedagogical perspectives to music education. As such and as Juliet Hess (2019) observes, some of this work in the early 2000s (e.g., Abrahams, 2005a) "seems to focus on critiques of music and music education" (p. 27)—including music teacher education—where Abrahams himself appeared to "take up a Freirean process of reflection, including conscientization and problem-posing education" (p. 25) in

challenging aspects of the profession. In others of his writings such as Abrahams (2005b), he took a more direct approach to describing what classroom practice can look like in applied “critical pedagogy for music education (CPME)” (p. 1), and was keen to underline that “there are no specific teaching techniques or prescribed body of musical repertoire” for critical pedagogues in our field (Abrahams, 2005a, p. 12).

For a music teacher working in a critical pedagogical mode, decisions about matters such as repertoire and musical styles or genres are necessarily contingent on the specific cultural context of the learning and on the cultures and musics of those in the class. Frank would impress upon his students “the mantra ‘honor their world’, meaning that music teachers have an ethical imperative to acknowledge, appreciate, value, and honor the musics that are important to the students they teach” (2012, p. 71). Frank co-authored an article with two students in 2012, in which those students reflected on a teaching practicum where they put tenets of critical pedagogy into practice in a local prison. One co-author, Miranda, wrote:

My involvement with [the inmates] has shown me that in order to be an effective teacher, I have to work with my students rather than in front of them... I realized that teaching should become more dialogue-based rather than the teacher talking at the students. We can work together in the safe space that we have created and are free for that hour each week to be heard and seen as human and know that what we say matters.” (Abrahams, Rowland, & Kohler, 2012, p. 71-72)

In writing with these students, Kristian and Miranda, Frank positioned them as exemplar practitioners of music teaching steeped in critical pedagogical praxis:

As facilitators, Miranda and Kristian see music not as a subject to be studied but as a powerful agent of change. In addition, they grew as human beings and will enter the music classrooms in conventional schools without the need for power and the desire to control. Rather, they will see themselves as collaborators who have a voice, and can engage in musical experiences in a community where they not only teach their students but learn from them as well. (Abrahams, Rowland, & Kohler, 2012, p. 72)

Frank Abrahams tended to live and teach the practices *of* critical pedagogy, rather than stop at teaching premises and theory *about* CP. This is especially noteworthy, given the elite Western conservatism of the choral music tradition for which WCC was renowned. Students there were among the mostly richly steeped in Western choral traditions nationwide. WCC was a unique and prestigious institution, admitting only young musicians of the highest caliber. These young musicians were thus enculturated in, and raised to perpetuate, a highly exclusive socio-cultural system and musical tradition. That WCC students became open to new approaches engaging with future students in deeply meaningful ways, valuing and honoring those students’ musics and worlds, is testament to the culture curated at Westminster by Frank Abrahams. While WCC seems in some ways like an oddly anti-paradigmatic environment for a critical pedagogical approach to music education, the juxtaposition of so much of and so

specific a musical tradition with tenets and practices of critical pedagogy created potent liminal space.

When I taught for a week at WCC in spring 2018, frankly, I found Frank exhausting. His relentless opining about music education's institutional refusal to change was hard work to hear; could he not just celebrate what it does?! Well, no, he could not. Frank of course very much celebrated excellence and tradition in music education, and he did so with joy and ebullience. But he saw that to do so was insufficient, voicing frustration at the slowness, inability or unwillingness of many in the profession to teach music more meaningfully and responsively with diverse music learners. In his writing, his teaching, and perhaps most vividly in conversation, Frank demonstrated an indefatigability for keeping music teaching and learning up with cultural practices of the times and relevant to students. Abrahams often published prose that fell just short of polemical. Knowing Frank a little now, and also knowing something of the inner workings of small-c conservative print media in our often painfully Mid-West-nice profession, I like to imagine the to-ing and fro-ing that took place between Frank and various journal editors and reviewers, in a process of taming Frank's frank prose.

Watching Frank discuss new musical practices (or those maybe new to him, such as producing hip-hop beats), I was struck by Frank's enthusiasm and excitement about them without positioning himself as the discoverer or as important at all. Frank wanted to understand enough about [whatever the new thing was] to alert his students to it and have them undertake projects that embraced that form of musicking in the classroom on their practicum placements, where it was relevant to students with whom they worked. Frank positioned himself as a learner and his students as his teachers as they all worked towards conscientization, i.e., "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 17). Frank modeled the orientation he sought to nurture in his students—relentless listening for attunement to new cultural practices that could help teachers to engage their students and help them to *write their world*.

When Frank spoke with my class this past spring, he discussed criticism of critical pedagogy, in which authors such as Gaztambide-Fernández (2008), Hess (2017, 2019) and Kaschub (2009) urge approaches that nurture a more activist artistry among young people, using music "as a means to engage the world" (Hess, 2019, p. 27). Drawing on the work of Ellsworth (1989) and Razack (1998), among others, Hess (2017) noted, furthermore, that often in critical pedagogy, "teachers' positionalities overdetermine the reaction to their work from both the students and the greater community" (p. 172), resulting in a critical pedagogical practice that, through "complicity and reinscription of dominance" (p. 179), often serves to reinscribe hegemony rather than to disrupt it. Frank said that he welcomed this criticism and held it up as an example of the unending nature of critical pedagogy; the character of the work demands that it is never finished. Frank's humility and openness in this instance exemplify a central tenet of critical

pedagogy, whereby, as Abrahams (2008) noted, “teachers learn from their students in addition to teaching them. This affects a transformation in both students and their teachers” (p. 118). Frank’s writing informed Hess’s work, which in turn helped to further develop Abrahams’ thinking and how he helped me teach my class.

Rather than taking offense at criticism from a junior colleague (as a more curmudgeonly elder statesman of the profession might have done), Frank took it in stride. He saw it as a way to evolve and grow, to delight in the work, thinking and ethos of the next generation of scholars taking things further. On multiple occasions in conversation with me and with my students, Frank highlighted this as exactly how critical pedagogy should function—de-centering institutions (such as the reification of decade-old scholarship that he himself had produced), and constantly asking critical questions, especially about one’s own work, even when one could have chosen to spend retirement resting on one’s substantial laurels at a beachfront condo in Florida.

I am not suggesting that Frank is unique or heroic in this regard, as it seems to me that one should always be open to changing one’s mind and accepting critique. Academia, however, can (it seems sometimes to me) require of members of its community an attitude not unlike performances displayed by actors in the national political arena where any hint of gaining new insights or broader perspective is perceived as spineless and weak. So it is refreshing for me as a junior scholar to look up to role models including Frank who acknowledge, read, and celebrate critique of their work and thinking.

FOLLOWING FRANK

When I met Frank, I had yet to discover agency as a teacher of future music teachers. I worked hard in my job at the time to nurture musical and social agency among the undergraduate population with whom I then worked, that is, students preparing for careers in the music and entertainment industries. Writing this paper, I have come to realize how Abrahams, through his actions and interactions with me, helped me to see how I could speak in, speak to, and speak with the music education community in the United States. That job is a daily work in progress for me, but I am seeing now that Abrahams took the time (without ever telling me he was doing so) to help me position myself as a problem poser and problem solver engaged in critical discourse in and about music education in the US.

After Frank brought me to the WCC campus to teach an array of classes for a full week, he asked me to apply for an open position there. I believe that, having curated for me the opportunity to come to conscientization as a music education professional in the US, Frank saw me as a potential candidate for continuing his work at his beloved institution. Other senior colleagues counseled me at the time that such a small college was too parochial for a “serious” scholar since it did not have the prestige or prowess of a major research university, where I should aspire to work. I heeded not these naysayers’ advice, since what WCC *did* offer, and it had this in spades, was a tight

community of highly motivated students with a rich departmental heritage of cutting-edge reflexive practice in critical pedagogy. WCC did not hire me and at the time I wished they had done, but I see now that even asking me to apply for the job was part of Frank's engaging me in critical pedagogical discourse in my orientation to the profession. I am confident that the experiences Frank curated for me, allowing me to orient myself, clumsily and piece-by-piece, to US music education, helped in no small way for me to understand the territory enough and to walk with just enough confidence and humility to earn the job that I have now at Boston University.

Frank Abrahams has been one of a handful of important mentors to me in the music teaching and learning community in higher education. Following Frank, I try to nurture in the students whom I teach at Boston University a kind of joyful Abrahamsian disgruntlement, whereby I trust they will always critique their own and others' assumptions and lead their future learners to overturn inevitable power imbalances and oppressive structures in schools, schooling and society. As Frank wrote:

Critical Pedagogy, Freirean pedagogy, views teaching and learning that privileges problem-posing and problem-solving through discourse and dialogue. The goal... is to empower learners and help them acquire personal agency and be comfortable speaking in their voice, even if that voice is counter to conventional practice or widespread norms. (Abrahams, in press)

Frank modeled how this work will always be ongoing; democracy and a sufficiently just society are always just out of our grasp (Giroux, 2020).

Frank's example has encouraged and emboldened me to work with my own students—current and future music teachers—in ways that seek to honor students' music and help them in “becoming musical” (Abrahams 2015, p. 98). For instance, in my psychology and sociology class this spring semester just past, the students and I spent a portion of the lesson time each week engaged in freely improvised music making. While the idea to curate this type of music making experience was mine, the music the group made belonged to us all. As we became increasingly comfortable with one another in the space, we made some profoundly beautiful music. For several students in the group this was the first time they had improvised. For others it was the most comfortable they had ever felt approaching improvisation or creating new music. Our collective creative practice embraced a critical pedagogical ethos and modeled ways in which my students might facilitate making among their own students. To quote anonymously from one student's reflection on the course, our improvisatory practice pointed them to fruitful new possibilities in the classroom:

[Free improvisation] allowed me to be completely free from the pressure of theoretical knowledge, and I could create whatever I wanted to create, and no one would say I was wrong. I questioned this form of improvisation in my mind during the first lesson, but when I heard the first piece, I was shocked that it was so amazing that it worked, leading me to love it more and more as a totally stress-free composition.

Frank retired in summer of 2021 and handed over the keys to this journal, so when I invited him to speak via Zoom to my psychology and sociology class the following spring I expected him to ignore my email or tell me that, if I might recall, he had *retired*. But Frank did neither of these things. He prepared voluminous slides for my students and talked with them for over an hour. He was, by turns, energetic, delightful, humorous, excited, and cross. He could have talked all evening and the class would have lapped him up. He crammed in so much, from Freire to instilling reflexive practice to implications for antiracist teaching, running maker workshops and never settling for how things are. He was inspiring. I am hopeful Frank would be happy and maybe even a little bit proud (ideally, also joyously disgruntled) to see me carrying out work inspired by his own. I will forever be grateful to have learned so much from Frank Abrahams.

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About the Author

Gareth Dylan Smith is active nationally and internationally as a teacher, speaker, researcher and drummer. Overarching themes in his research are eudaimonia, popular music education, and sociology of music education. Gareth has a keen interest in social justice in and through music learning, and enjoys exploring intersections of musicking within and without schooling contexts. Gareth's work has been published in journals including *Research Studies in Music Education*; *Psychology of Music*; *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*; *Music + Practice*; *Punk & Post-Punk*; *Journal of Music, Technology and Education*; *British Journal of Music Education*; and *Artivate*. He has written dozens of articles for encyclopedias including several pieces about drummers in the *Grove dictionary of American music*. Gareth's books include *I drum, therefore I am: Being and becoming a drummer*; *Sociology for music teachers: Practical applications* (with Hildegard Froehlich); *Punk pedagogies: Music, culture and learning* (with Mike Dines and Tom Parkinson); *The Routledge research companion to popular music education* (with Zack Moir, Matt Brennan, Shara Rambarran and Phil Kirkman); *Sound advice for drummers*; and *Eudaimonia: Perspectives for music learning* (with Marissa Silverman). He is working on two monographs about phenomenology and philosophy of drumming.

Prior to his position at Boston University, Gareth worked for music education nonprofit Little Kids Rock in New Jersey, USA and the Institute of Contemporary Music Performance in London, England. Gareth served as external examiner for the Royal Northern College of Music, University of Sussex, and University of Wolverhampton, which included stints at the International College of Music in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Westford School of Management in Kochi, India. Before working in higher education, Gareth taught drum kit peripatetically in south Wales for Cardiff and Vale Music Service, and served as a music teacher in elementary and high schools in north London. Gareth has served as a board member of the International Society for Music Education and as President and Vice President of the Association for

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