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Daniel Abrahams

*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

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# Learning to Drive

## ABSTRACT

*Parents serve in many roles, one of which is a mentor. At an early age, I accompanied my father to school and helped sort paperwork, observed choir rehearsals, attended concerts, and watched him mentor undergraduate and graduate students. Unbeknownst to me, I entered into an apprenticeship in the music education community.*

*The present text reflects on how Frank Abrahams transformed my identity as a music educator through mentorship and our collaborative nature outside our father-son relationship. His actions personify not only those of a dad but those of a critical pedagogue. Furthermore, his actions created transformative spaces for me to grow as a person, musician, educator, and scholar.*

## Keywords

mentorship; apprenticeship; collaboration; transformation

While I do not remember it, I spent the summer between my first and second year at Tanglewood, the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in Lenox, Massachusetts. We went as a family that summer so my father could study conducting. While he was in classes and seminars, I played on the great lawn outside the shed where the Boston Symphony rehearsed and performed. While I did not know it at the time nor remember it first-hand, I heard Eugene Ormandy conduct Brahms, and Leonard Bernstein conduct Mahler. That was the summer that Columbia Records, now Sony, released Bernstein's recordings of the complete cycle of Mahler symphonies. There were performances that summer of the 1st, 3rd, fifth, and eighth symphonies—so I am told.

Whether my love for brass instruments, the symphony orchestra, or the music of Mahler can be traced to that summer when I was 18 months old is questionable. However, I know I had a clear advantage just by the experiences I had tagging along with my parents. Growing up, it was not uncommon to have well-known music educators staying in our guest room when they were in Boston to lecture or teach. I had

breakfast with Edwin Gordon, Richard Colwell, Ed Sueta, Bruce Pearson, and Richard Grunow. I played euphonium in an outstanding high school wind ensemble, marched in an award-winning marching band, and played trombone in the jazz ensemble. In eleventh grade, I toured China with the Massachusetts Youth Wind Ensemble and later attended conducting seminars with Frank Battisti and a low brass seminar with Arnold Jacobs. In high school, I returned to Tanglewood as a student, this time as a member of the Empire Brass Seminar and played euphonium at the Summit Brass Festival in Colorado. At Temple University, I was again a player in marching, concert, wind ensemble, and jazz bands. In addition, I was the first to earn a Master of Music degree in wind ensemble conducting at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. However, what is important in my musical journey are not the names and places but the opportunities as an impressionable young musician that shaped me as a musician, educator, and scholar.

From an early age, I observed my father in various teaching situations. Through our many conversations about teaching and learning, it is evident that he believes teachers serve as mentors and role models inside and outside the classroom. In *The Child as Musical Apprentice*, we discussed the concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) within the apprenticeship model where “the child is on the peripheral of the community or culture—looking in as he or she observes the mentor” (Abrahams & Abrahams, 2016, p. 540). One might argue that by accompanying my father to school and helping sort through paperwork on a Saturday, observing his choir rehearsals, attending his concerts, and watching him mentor undergraduate and graduate students, I was entering an apprenticeship into the community of music education. I do not doubt that all these experiences aided in the scaffolding of my becoming the music educator I am today.

True and meaningful development, Freire (1970, 1985) taught, occurs when learning elicits changes in one's perception of reality. While unaware at the time, my musical journey was like that of a passenger in a car slowly moving from the back to the front. In the role of student, described above, my formative years—and later my college years—were much like a passenger sitting in the back seat enjoying the view during the ride. I arrived at my destination based on the expert driver's preparation, knowledge, and driving skills. There was no need for me to plan the route, know driving conditions, plan for traffic congestion, speed, or other vehicles on the road. Abrahams (2017) suggested that teachers facilitate connections “by helping students to draw upon their own realities to create new possibilities” (p. 5). Like the passenger in a car, I was slowly scaffolded, sometimes unknowingly, on the intricacies of driving the car, providing me opportunities to focus on the possibilities that might lie ahead.

## **GETTING BEHIND THE WHEEL**

The ability to drive is a milestone that defines a teenager's sense of self—becoming an adult. There comes that moment when the passenger transitions to the driver. Just as driving transform's one's identity from teen to adult, collaborating with my

father on presentations, research articles, and book chapters helped transform my identity as a music educator and scholar.

As does learning to be scholarly, being able to drive opens a new way of viewing the world, expanding opportunities for rich experiences. However, before one gets behind the wheel of a vehicle, one needs driving lessons facilitated by an expert driver. The novice driver learns how to check the side mirrors and the rear-view mirror and be aware of the car's speed and workings: tire pressure, engine lights, and radio function. In addition, novice drivers must be aware of the other drivers and act defensively to avoid mishaps on the road. In *Becoming Musical*, Abrahams (2017) wrote, "A musical education in schools should focus on children becoming musical by providing significant and 'critical' experiences where children can think, act, and feel as musicians when musicians are making music" (p. 5). He embodied this statement throughout our driving lessons (collaborations). The many presentations, research articles, and book chapters we worked on together provided those significant and critical experiences for me to authentically think, feel, and act as a music educator and scholar.

My father teaches that learning is meaningful when it has broad applications and connects to the world beyond the classroom (Abrahams & John, 2015; Abrahams, 2017, 2020). As a critical pedagogue, he often designs activities that guide his students as they add their individuality, making the material their own. I started to learn how to drive during the 2008-09 school year when we collaborated on examining the impact of reciprocal teaching on musical understanding. My school district administration at the time mandated that reciprocal teaching strategies be applied in all subject areas, including music. Reciprocal teaching seemed applicable to how I envisioned a student-centered approach to teaching in my large instrumental ensembles, and also consistent with my father's work on finding conscientization and transformative learning. Unfortunately, I could not find applications of reciprocal teaching in music teaching to support my claim. So, my father asked me to collaborate on a research study investigating whether predicting, clarifying, questioning, summarizing, and connecting strategies could nurture high school students' musical intellect, imagination, and creativity in large ensembles. I had never participated in educational research, nor did I know how. By teaching me how to design an action research study, he began guiding me through the process of gathering information, reviewing the literature, collecting data, coding data, and sharing results. Our results from our study were published in *Visions of Research in Music Education* (Abrahams & Abrahams, 2010), and later reprinted in *Music Education: Major Themes in Education, Vol. 3* (Abrahams & Abrahams, 2012).

Working together on examining reciprocal teaching helped me develop critical consciousness. Abrahams and John (2015) wrote,

Until students are able to find value in the information they encounter in school and explore ways to use that information in their lives, learning is transient. When students and teachers co-construct knowledge by making information meaningful through a

variety of student-centered activities, learning becomes lasting and transformative” (p. 12).

By collaborating on research papers and presentations at national and international conferences, my father coached and facilitated my ability to view my identity in a new way and better understand my place in the world. I was becoming the driver.

After completing my doctoral studies, we co-authored *The Child as Musical Apprentice* for the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *The Child as Musician* (Abrahams & Abrahams, 2016). In this chapter, we combined our two perspectives of teaching and learning (constructivism and critical pedagogy) to create the notion of sociotransformative apprenticeship - a constructivist approach addressing issues of power and emerging musical identity that are neglected in other apprenticeship models. We again worked together to co-author *Choral Pedagogy and the Construction of Meaning* in the *Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy* (Abrahams & Abrahams, 2017). This chapter explored ways pedagogy contributes to how singers find meaning in the experiences of singing in a choir. F. Abrahams (2005) suggested that, “In critical pedagogy, not only do the teachers teach the students, but also the students, in turn, teach the teacher” (p. 5). Many of the ideas in *The Child as Musical Apprentice* as well as *Choral Pedagogy and the Construction of Meaning* come from writings not included in the final draft of my dissertation. Throughout my life, I have learned lots from my father; however, collaborating on these two chapters, he also appeared to learn from me as I introduced him to some of the constructivist literature he now includes in his most recent writings (Abrahams, 2017, 2020; Abrahams & John, 2015).

Throughout the development of my driving skills, my father also served as a type of GPS, providing guidance, perspective, and support for my ideas about teaching and learning. He recommended me for inclusion in the book *Teaching music in the Urban Classroom* (Abrahams, 2006), where I discussed strategies for choral conductors to differentiate instruction in ensemble rehearsals. In *Planning Instruction in Music* (Abrahams & John, 2015), he published my lesson plan incorporating ideas from informal music instruction. As co-editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy* (Abrahams & Head, 2017), he provided a space for me to share my dissertation research on fostering personal and musical agency (Abrahams, 2017). Most recently, in his text *Aligning Music to STEM* (Abrahams, 2020), he published *Aligning Music to STEM Through CompositionCraft*, where I highlight the use of a modification for the video game *Minecraft* to connect music learning with STEM (Abrahams, 2020).

While these opportunities helped in shaping my identity, they also provided the tools for me to navigate the roads of music education. I had a distinct advantage of proofreading rough drafts of many of my father's writings, course syllabi, and conference PowerPoints—and he read mine. Proofreading each other's work often led to discussions about our ideas. His work in Bernice McCarthy's learning styles and critical pedagogy influenced our collaborations and served as a model for my own teaching and scholarship.

According to Freire (1970), dialogue is indispensable to the act of understanding. Abrahams and John (2015) extend this notion by suggesting that by “fostering a safe, positive, and productive learning environment, students and teachers alike are able to confidently share their understanding, offer opinions, seek clarification, and challenge existing paradigms through dialogue” (p. 10). My father created spaces encouraging free expression, critical analysis, and democratic decision-making. Through dialogue, education becomes a collaborative effort mutually beneficial for both the student and teacher (Abrahams & John, 2015). Only in safety are we truly free to challenge the world around us and have our ideas honored, valued, and even celebrated.

Critical pedagogy advocates a shift in the power structure, acknowledging that we come to situations with information from our own life experiences (Abrahams & John, 2015). As a true practitioner of critical pedagogy, my father removed the “power-over” relationship between us as I acquired a critical consciousness (Freire, 1973). “Critical pedagogues claim that when students and their teachers ‘know that they know,’ they have acquired a critical consciousness, which fosters agency” (Abrahams & John, 2015, p. 21). By minimizing the power imbalance created by the father-son and student-mentor dynamic, he created space for me to hear what was being said and attend to why he chose particular projects for our collaborations. Our conversations around these collaborative projects established trust and “create[d] space for scaffolding of learning experiences” (Abrahams & Abrahams, 2016, p. 544), deepening our professional and personal relationships.

Learning to drive, like music, “has the power to liberate, transform, and effect change” (Abrahams, 2005). When you are the driver, you need to trust your instincts and your own style of driving. You become independent, reflective, and critical by examining your own driving habits. You begin to develop confidence in your own identity. Today, I honor my father, Frank Abrahams. I thank him for teaching me to drive and creating transformative spaces for me to grow as a person, musician, educator, and scholar.

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## About the Author

Daniel Abrahams is an Associate Professor of Music Education at the University of Arkansas. A native of Massachusetts, he earned a Bachelor of Music degree in music education from Temple University, a Master of Music degree in instrumental conducting from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and the Doctor of Philosophy degree in music education from Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan.

As a music educator, Dr. Abrahams is the inaugural recipient of the Jupiter Band Instruments Award for Excellence in Teaching Concert Band presented by NAFME: The National Association for Music Education and the 2010 Nebraska VFW Citizenship Educator of the Year. He has presented seminars at the national meetings of the National Association for Music Education (NAfME); presented a seminar in Critical Pedagogy for Music Education at the Conservatorio Brasileiro de Musica in Rio de Janeiro; presented a seminar on Reciprocal Teaching at the 2nd European Conference on Developmental Psychology of Music, London, England; and presented seminars on Reciprocal Teaching and Informal Learning at the 29th International Society for Music Education World Conference, Beijing, China.

Dr. Abrahams frequently writes about the use of reciprocal teaching, sociotransformative apprenticeship, and learner agency in the music classroom. His article on the impact of reciprocal teaching on the development of musical understanding in high school student members of performing ensembles is published in *Visions of Research on Music Education* and reprinted in Keith Swanwick's *Music Education: Major Themes (Vol. 3)* published by Routledge. His most recent research examines the acquisition of learner agency and the integration of music and STEM education through Minecraft. Before coming to the University of Arkansas, Dr. Abrahams taught middle and high school instrumental music in the Omaha Public Schools.

Abrahams is a contributing author in *Perspectives on Music in Urban Schools*, published by NAFME: The National Association for Music Education, *The Child as Musician*, 2nd edition, the *Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy*, and the *Music Technology Cookbook*, published by Oxford University Press; and, *Aligning Music to STEM*, published by GIA.