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Transforming Classroom Music Instruction with Ideas from Critical Pedagogy

By Frank Abrahams

We often hear the complaint “everyone’s a critic!” However, the music classroom is one place where this is desirable. The method of teaching called critical pedagogy suggests that teachers and students should operate like professional music critics in many ways.

When writing a review, professional music critics often provide background information on a particular piece of music, a featured composer, and the circumstances surrounding a composition. They may mention specific performers, recordings of the work, audience reactions, or the relevance of a performance to the conductor, the composer, or the musical life of the community where the performance occurred. This background information places music, performers, and performances in a context that allows professional critics to make an informed judgment on how well the music was performed.

Professional teachers need to present similar information to students, but ideas from critical pedagogy suggest that students can be seen as amateur music critics (or even amateur music teachers) who also bring informed opinions that can be used and built upon to the classroom. When applied, this method of teaching makes new information more palatable to students and allows the teacher to learn as well.

Paulo Freire developed critical pedagogy in Brazil in the 1960s to teach illiterate adults (or, as Freire calls them, “the oppressed”) to read. Freire believed that teaching was a conversational exchange of information between the teacher and the student. He posed questions and problems to his students that caused them to take what they already knew and understood from their world outside the classroom and connect it to their literacy goals, namely reading and writing Portuguese. In other words, Freire used the knowledge students already possessed as a bridge to new learning.¹

(For more information on critical pedagogy, please see The Five

Key Principles of Critical Pedagogy sidebar.)

Applying this pedagogy to American music education helps connect music teaching to the mainstream goals of improved literacy so important 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.²

From the standpoint of music education, critical pedagogy seeks to break down the barriers that exist between what students enjoy listening to outside the classroom and the music their teachers want them to learn. This approach suggests that when teachers relate school music to the music in students’ personal lives, the students feel empowered by their knowledge and are alerted to the plentiful opportunities for meaningful musical experiences inside and outside the classroom.³ Understanding that children come to the classroom with some prior musical knowledge gleaned from life experiences is an important part of the critical teaching approach. This understanding leads to changes in perception for both the students and the teacher.

Music teachers who teach critically view themselves in a partnership with their students. They confirm Oscar Hammerstein’s lyrics in the song “Getting to Know You,” which state, “if you become a teacher, by your pupils you’ll be taught.”⁴ Teachers, along with their students, can therefore experience outcomes that are personally transformational.

Teachers and students can learn from each other when they use lesson plans that encourage an exchange of knowledge.

Unlike the popular approaches of Orff or Kodály, critical pedagogy does not advocate a particular body of repertoire or specific teaching procedure. It does not require any specialized classroom materials. It does, however, provide teachers and students with a flexible pedagogy.

For music education, this pedagogy questions, challenges, and empowers students to experience school music, and it challenges teachers to understand students' music as integral parts of a collective reality. Critical pedagogy suggests that music has the power to liberate students and teachers from their current, sometimes negative, stereotypes about certain music and musicians. It places music in a social, political, and cultural context that results in informed opinions and something Freire calls "conscientization" (i.e., students' and teachers' realization that they "know what they know"). When this moment of revelation happens, one may claim that music learning has occurred.⁵

Creating a Lesson Plan

Music lessons that incorporate ideas from critical pedagogy engage musical imagination, intelligence, creativity, and celebration through performance. Teachers who wish to provide multiple and varied experiences for children in their music classes find this pedagogy attractive.

When planning instruction, critical pedagogues, like all excellent teachers, ask four questions: 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, different teachers will answer them differently. They are merely intended to guide teachers from what they are doing to what they

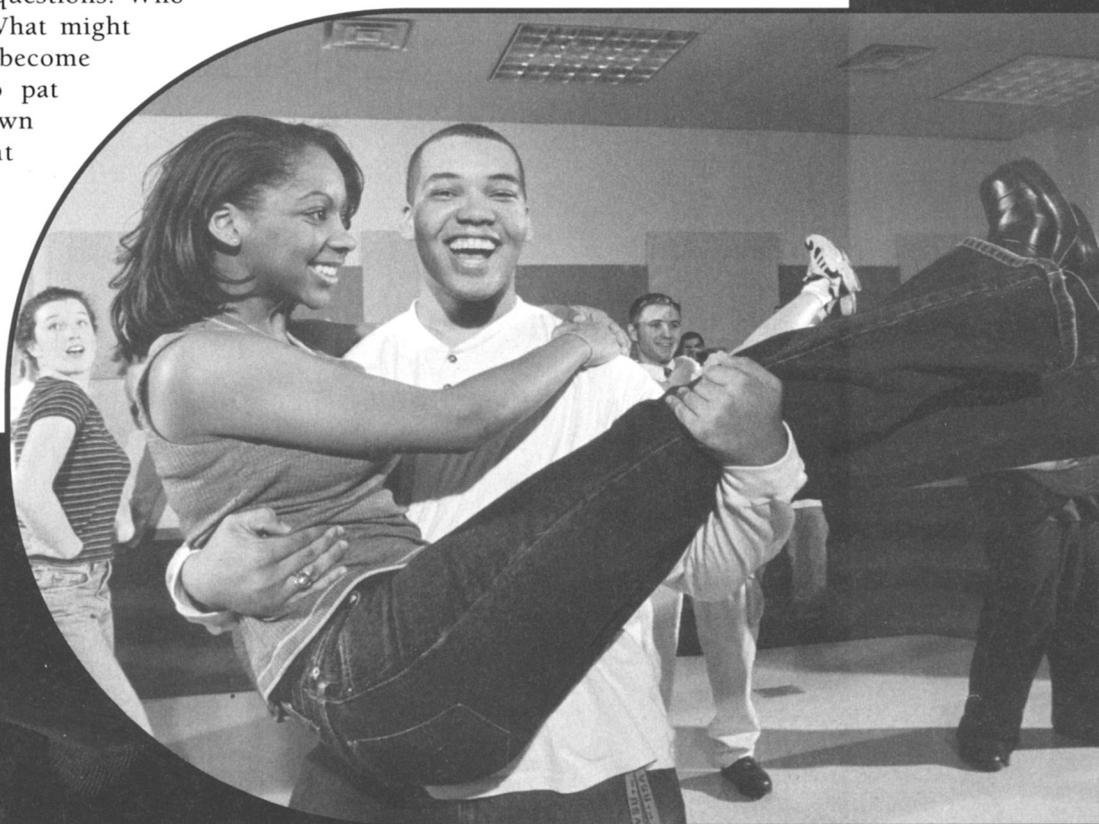


Photo by Mark Regan

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In a classroom that uses critical pedagogy, students work together to answer musical questions and celebrate their learning through performance.

Five Key Principles of Critical Pedagogy

1. Education is a conversation where students and their teachers pose and solve problems together.
2. Education broadens the students' view of reality. The goal of teaching and learning is to bring about a change in the way that both students and teachers perceive the world.
3. Education is empowering. When students and teachers realize they know something with a depth that goes beyond the recall of information, this is "conscientization." This knowledge includes a new understanding and an ability to act on this knowledge in such a way as to effect a change.
4. Education is transformative. A lesson has been learned when both the teachers and students can acknowledge a change in their own perceptions. It is this change or transformation that teachers can assess.
5. Education is political. There are issues of power and control inside the classroom, the school building, and 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 use the critical-pedagogy model are able to transcend these constraints by focusing on the valuable knowledge students bring to the classroom.

and their students ought to be doing. Figure 1 presents a learning sequence model using these four questions.

Unlike traditional lesson plans, these lessons are not designed to take a specific number of minutes or a specific number of lesson periods. Instead, the model flows like a symphony. It has an exposition, a development section with improvisation, and a concluding recapitulation.

teacher to know 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 significant musical experiences for the students and teacher. The motto is "depth rather than breadth."

This approach advocates experiential learning and offers a variety of activities that emphasize learning

gogy. Suppose a teacher decided that teaching about Mozart and experiencing his opera *The Magic Flute* were important. This teacher might take the following steps, using the model in figure 1.

Step 1. Because the teacher is concerned with honoring the world of the children and committed to engaging the musical imagination, he or she might ask the children to suggest a favorite Madonna recording (music generally enjoyed outside of school) to begin the lesson. The teacher might challenge the students to construct a cognitive map showing all of the musical ingredients of the piece. These might include lyrics, instrumentation, rhythm, production values, video features, and so forth.

Step 2. The class might engage in a dialogue to share their reactions, feelings, and ideas relative to Madonna and her music. The teacher could ask the children to explain what they would say to a classroom of children from a non-Western part of the world about Madonna. They would discuss her music making, her musicianship, and her impact on contemporary Western pop culture. They might conclude by generating a list of descriptors for Madonna that they can use later in the lesson.

Development

Step 3. The children listen to the "Queen of the Night" aria from *The Magic Flute*. The teacher suggests that children imagine Madonna as the Queen and, in small cooperative groups, create a skit in which the composer (Mozart), the librettist (Schikaneder), and the conductor would interview and audition Madonna for the part. The students would have to generate appropriate questions and tasks for the interview and audition. Note that in this part of the lesson, children do not need to know about Mozart or Schikaneder (other than that they are composer and librettist) for the activity to be successful.

Step 4. After the students present their skits, the teacher might present what he or she considers important to know about Mozart while

“Students can be seen as amateur music critics”

Individual teachers can adapt the model to fit their particular situations. Each section of the model can take a different amount of time, depending on the age and experience of the children as well as the situation in which the instruction occurs. Some lessons may take one period, while others may evolve into a unit over several music classes. The lesson model relies on the

by doing. Students explore, listen, describe, analyze, and evaluate throughout. As a result all nine of the national content standards for music education are addressed.⁶ (A list of these standards is available in the National Standards sidebar.)

Exposition

Let's consider a teaching scenario that uses ideas from critical peda-

National Standards for Music Education

ensuring that students are hearing significant elements of the “Queen of the Night” aria. Some examples of significant elements include (1) the extreme vocal range used to express fury and anger, (2) how Mozart’s music makes the Queen sound like an evil fairy-tale queen rather than a normal angry woman, and (3) Mozart’s use of coloratura, especially the staccato notes, to express the Queen’s screaming for vengeance. The teacher can discuss Mozart’s music making, musicianship, influence, and how he was viewed by Western culture during his lifetime.

Step 5. Children will be able to start drawing some natural parallels between Madonna and Mozart. For instance, both Mozart and Madonna pushed the envelope and challenged social conventions of their times. Both were offensive to a particular segment of society. Both continually reinvented themselves. Both got

1. Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music
2. Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music
3. Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments
4. Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines
5. Reading and notating music
6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music
7. Evaluating music and music performances
8. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts
9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture

into trouble (Madonna with her lyrics, outrageous stage shows, and offensive photos; Mozart by divulging secrets of the society of Freemasons in *The Magic Flute*).

Improvisation

Step 6. Students can be asked to compose a new aria for the Queen

of the Night to sing, this time with Madonna as the Queen. What would it be like? If students do not have the skills to notate their compositions, that’s okay. Let them sing the arias as they are able. They may work individually, in small cooperative groups, or as a class, depending on what the teacher and students

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY answers these objectives:	WAYS TO EMPOWER MUSICIANS	LESSON STEPS	NATIONAL STANDARDS	LESSON FORM
Who we are	Engage 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
		2. Sharing the experience: Students and their teacher process the experience. They share feelings and reflect.		
Who students may become	Engage musical intelligence	3. Connecting students’ world to the classroom: Teacher connects student experience to a musical concept using comparable concepts from the other arts, cultures, or student experiences outside of school.	Connecting music (National Standards 8 and 9)	Development
		4. Dialoguing together: Teacher presents the musical content. Students gather the evidence they need to solve the problem.		
		5. Practicing the content: Teacher provides students with an opportunity to practice and reinforce the musical content. A homework assignment or quiz might be included at this step.		
Who we might become together	Engage musical creativity	6. Connecting school music to students’ world: Teacher invites students to find alternative solutions and new ways to use the information presented. Students have the opportunity for problem posing and to create something new.	Creating music (National Standards 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7)	Improvisation
		7. Assessing transformation: Students and the teacher reflect and evaluate the work completed. An assessment rubric may be applied at this step.		
	Engage musical celebration through performance	8. Acknowledging transformation: Students and their teacher celebrate the new learning through presentation, exhibition, or demonstration.	Performing music (National Standards 1 and 2)	Recapitulation

Figure 1. The Teaching Model

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY answers these objectives:	WAYS TO EMPOWER MUSICIANS	LESSON STEPS	NATIONAL STANDARDS	LESSON FORM
Who we are	Engage musical imagination	1. Honoring their world: Students select favorite Madonna tune to play in class. Teacher focuses listening by suggesting students map significant parts in the music as it plays.	Experiencing music (National Standards 6 and 7)	Exposition
		2. Sharing the experience: Students and teacher dialogue about Madonna's music making, musicianship and impact on culture. Students are asked how they might present Madonna's music to a classroom in a non-Western country.		
Who students may become	Engage musical intelligence	3. Connecting their world to the classroom: After listening to or viewing Mozart's "Queen of the Night" aria many times, students create skits to audition or interview Madonna for the part of the Queen of the Night.	Connecting music (National Standards 8 and 9)	Development
		4. Dialoguing together: Students and teacher discuss Mozart. They discuss his life, his music, music making, and why Mozart's an important icon in Western musical tradition.		
		5. Practicing the concept: Students create a chart comparing and analyzing Mozart and Madonna as musicians, performers, composers, and influential cultural icons.		
Who we might become together	Engage musical creativity	6. Connecting school music to students' world: Individually, in small groups, or as a class, students re-compose "Queen of the Night" aria for Madonna. They change melody, texture, and style as they deem appropriate.	Creating music (National Standards 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7)	Improvisation
		7. Assessing transformation: New arias performed. Students and teacher reflect and evaluate work completed. An assessment rubric may be applied at this step.		
	Engage musical celebration through performance	8. Acknowledging transformation: Students present their arias in performance or attend a performance of <i>The Magic Flute</i> .	Performing music (National Standards 1 and 2)	Recapitulation

Figure 2. Madonna and Mozart

feel is appropriate to their individual situation.

Step 7. The students can now perform their arias for each other. There is peer critique as well as assessment from the teacher. Teachers may apply criteria from the National Standards at this point. As students perform and are critiqued by their peers, the teacher might reflect on what accomplishments took place. What did the teacher learn about the students? How did the teacher's perception of the students' reality change? How might the teacher reframe the experience the next time? How did the students change the teacher's attitudes toward Madonna? How did the teacher change the students' attitude toward Mozart? If appropriate, teachers and students might share these answers together.

Recapitulation

Step 8. As a grand finale, students may watch a taped performance of *The Magic Flute* or attend a live performance of the opera. They might perform their own arias for the classroom teacher or another class, or in an evening program for parents. Figure 2 shows this complete lesson plan in a condensed table format.

Final Thoughts

Critical pedagogy has much to offer the classroom music instructor. It acknowledges that children come to the music room with the ability to teach as well as learn. Problem posing and dialoguing are principal strategies in the critical pedagogy model. Teachers engage children in meaningful conversa-

tions that encourage children to not only solve problems, but to pose them as well.

In the 1951 musical *The King and I*, the British schoolteacher brought to Siam by the King transforms the lives of her pupils, but she must also question her own values and ideals. Music teachers can learn from their students while opening avenues that connect music education to their students' personal interests and knowledge.

This approach breaks down the barriers between educational school-taught music and the recreational music already present in students' lives. All forms of music become more accessible and enjoyable for students because they acquire a new perspective. An open and shared educational process

inspires and transforms the realities of both students and their teachers.

By using ideas from critical pedagogy, teachers and students can meet the goals set forth by the National Standards for Music Education; however, critical pedagogues and their students will also establish their own benchmarks. Achievement in a critical pedagogy classroom is context bound, and the goals may not be the same for all children in every situation. Goals must reflect not only the ideas and ideals of the teacher, but also those of the students, students' families, their school, and their community.

Lesson plans grounded in critical pedagogy include content that is significant to the students and mindful of their lives beyond the classroom. Building a music program that values students as they are while recognizing what they may become will help secure music's place in the school curriculum and ensure the development of citizens who are musically mindful, musically literate, and committed to lifelong musical enjoyment.

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1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).
2. Joan Wink, *Critical Pedagogy: Notes from the Real World*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000).
3. Ibid.
4. Richard Rodgers and Oscar

Hammerstein II, *The King and I* (New York: Williamson, 1951).

5. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
6. Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, *National Standards for Arts Education: What Every Young American Should Know and Be Able To Do in the Arts* (Reston, VA: MENC, 1994). ■

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MENC Resources

The following publications offer additional insight into critical pedagogy. They can be found in the publications section of the MENC Web site (www.menc.org), or you may order them by calling 1-800-828-0229.

- Consortium of National Arts Education Associations. *National Standards for Arts Education*. Reston, VA: MENC, 1994. Item # 1605.
- Abrahams, Frank. "The Application of Critical Pedagogy to Music Teaching and Learning: A Literature Review." *UPDATE* 23, no. 2 (2005): 12-22.
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