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Equity in the Classroom

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Equity in the Classroom

Abstract

When discussing how teachers should pursue equity among, in, and through education in their current educational system, many go straight to discussing the lessons. These are very important, and the planning of these lessons can very much influence students to think more openly about equity, but there is something that must be established first before even thinking about executing a lesson plan, and that is the classroom itself. After all, “a large part of the work of teaching is constructing the laboratory for learning.” (Campbell & Demorest, 2008, p. 87). Postman & Weingartner also say that “the most important impressions made on a human nervous system come from ... the environment itself [which] conveys the critical and dominant messages by controlling the perceptions and attitudes of those who participate in it” (1969, p. 17). This paper focuses on the creation of a classroom that creates an opportunity for every student to contribute to the environment in which they learn.

Keywords

Music Education, Classroom Setup, Classroom, Education, Equity

Disciplines

Disability and Equity in Education | Music Education

Comments

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Equity in the Classroom

When discussing how teachers should pursue equity among, in, and through education in their current educational system, many go straight to discussing the lessons. These are very important, and the planning of these lessons can very much influence students to think more openly about equity, but there is something that must be established first before even thinking about executing a lesson plan, and that is the classroom itself. After all, “a large part of the work of teaching is constructing the laboratory for learning.” (Campbell & Demorest, 2008, p. 87). Postman & Weingartner also say that “the most important impressions made on a human nervous system come from... the environment itself [which] conveys the critical and dominant messages by controlling the perceptions and attitudes of those who participate in it” (1969, p. 17).

So, if the classroom is so important, what should a classroom be? According to Bill Ayers, a classroom “must be sufficiently broad and varied to challenge a range of interests and abilities, and yet focused enough to offer students some coherent rhythms and goals,” (2010, p. 33). This means that the room must be flexible, in order to challenge the range of interests and abilities that come with having a class. Creating a flexible classroom also creates the opportunity to explore any number of areas, which is important, because, as established in the principles of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), students should create the “curriculum,” such as it is, just as the oppressed must create their own revolution. Postman & Weingartner (1969) also agree with this principle, implying that students should determine what problems are worth studying, and what questions should be asked. The best way to facilitate this is through making the room adaptable, so that it can be tailored to each individual class.

The classroom has been designed to be just that - flexible enough to be tailored to each individual class, and yet still specific enough to allow students to focus, allowing for an array of unique and extensive learning experiences. There are computers in the corner with Internet connection, and an iPad cart (denoted by a kitchen cart between the doors). The computers and iPads have GarageBand on them, and the Internet connection gives students access to NoteFlight, a free online compositional tool. While it may not be quite as good as Finale or Sibelius, it is significantly cheaper, and, most importantly, is easily saved online, so students can work on their compositions both in the classroom and at home if they have Internet access there. GarageBand gives students the opportunity either to record songs they have written on NoteFlight, or to skip the notation process altogether, and get right into the creation of the song. GarageBand also obviously facilitates any sorts of covers that students might want to do of songs already written. At the computer stations, there are also high-quality microphones so that students are able to record themselves with good quality if needed. The circle of bean bag chairs allows for discussion within the classroom on any subject - composition, music theory, social justice issues, problems in life generally - truly anything. Discussing in a circle does many things. Firstly, it creates the type of space both I and Bill Ayers would want: “spaces where each person is visible to me and to everyone else” (2010, p. 44). It does not cut anyone out from dialogue: nobody is stuck in the corner, and nobody is hiding in the back row. This effect is also achieved through having projectors and white boards on two opposite sides of the room. Secondly, it makes it significantly more difficult for the teacher to stand in the front and go into “teacher mode” (talking at the students, rather than with them). As Freire says, “education must

begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, ... so that both [the teacher and the students] are simultaneously teachers and students" (1970, p. 72). There is a round table (for the same reasons that the bean-bag chairs are in a circle) in the corner on which students can do projects and hold discussion together, honoring the social nature of learning that Ayers talks about in *To Teach: The Journey in Comics* (2010, p. 44). There is a myriad of instruments (mallet instruments with removable keys, djembes and congas, boom-whackers, mallets for all of these instruments, a bass drum, light-weight colored scarves, tennis balls, and four tom-toms) available both in the cabinet, on the computers, and in the open room for students to learn, play, and create on. The space can be rearranged to create a semi-circle of chairs for a choral rehearsal, or an open space in which to play. There is a mirror for students to watch themselves perform, and stage lights pointing towards an open space in the room to create a makeshift stage on which students may perform.

I tried to make the classroom as multi-sensory as possible, because, as Jerome Bruner's theory of teaching (Campbell & Demorest, 2008, p. 115-116) explains, there are three main modes through which we "deliver information": enactive, iconic, and symbolic. A good teaching process involves at least all three of these modes, and usually more. To allow that, the teacher's classroom must be able to facilitate all of these different modes. This idea of using multiple senses to interact with students throughout the learning process is a very common theme in the learning and teaching theories discussed in *Musician & Teacher*.

The middle of the room is purposely kept relatively uncluttered. Bean bag chairs may be moved from the middle of the room to create plenty of room for all sorts of movement activities. In the cabinets, there are objects like tennis balls and scarves, among others, which can be incorporated into movement activities. This ensures innumerable movement opportunities for the class to use to learn and explore. The iconic mode of conveying information, using images, is enabled by the whiteboards, the projector (which projects onto the whiteboards on the wall opposite the doors), and the posters and pictures all over the room, which will be explained later in great detail. These all work to give visual examples of anything from the face of a composer and the city they were born in, to musical notation and what it looks like, to the virtually infinite possibilities of examples found on the Internet that can be put onto the whiteboards using the projector. Of course, we can never forget the most traditional mode of iconic passing of information: the board. This, of course, can be used in any number of ways to demonstrate anything the teacher can effectively write out or draw. Symbolic "delivering of information" is very similar to icons, but is a bit more abstract. It involves "constructions that go beyond what is immediately perceptible in the environment," (Campbell & Demorest, 2008, p. 115), things that are not exactly in the physical realm. This is facilitated through the projector, which, when connected to a computer with Internet, has access to, again, virtually infinite sources of examples that range from simple pictures to complex videos showing abstract ideas that are not seen in the physical world (like how sound waves work in a physical space).

To enhance the visual aids within the classroom, as mentioned above, there are numerous paintings, posters, and pictures. In the classroom, there are seven Sound of Music posters above the door. As the program I used to create the classroom has limited pictures, I used these to represent portraits of important composers relevant to whatever subjects the class is talking about (for example, if we were discussing contemporary choral music, these might include names like Eric Whitacre, Morten Lauridsen, Z. Randall Stroope, Ola Gjeilo, John Tavener, Arvo Pärt, and Dan Forrest). These portraits would have the composer's name underneath the portrait. On the landscape-style paintings around the main whiteboards (on the wall opposite the doors), there will be graphics of basic music fundamentals. These would include solfege (showing hand-signs next to each syllable); an example of a C major scale on treble clef (with note names underneath each note); labeled pictures of a whole-, half-, quarter-,

eighth-, and sixteenth-note; and labeled examples of whole-, half-, quarter-, eighth-, and sixteenth-rest. The scale and solfege would be on the two paintings below the whiteboard, and the remaining two would go above, on either side of the clock. Finally, on the pictures around the map on the same wall as the cabinets, there should be pictures of important cities relevant to whatever subjects the class is talking about (for example, the teacher might have pictures of the birthplaces of composers who's songs the choir is doing at the time). The teacher may also use these places to put pictures of cities that have inspired a song the class is studying.

To continue the goal of further learning inside the classroom, file cabinets were included in the room design. In the cabinet closest to the middle of the room, each drawer will be a storage space for binders for each specific choir. This creates a space to safely store binders so they will not lose their music. In the one closest to that corner, the top cabinet will have extra copies of scores currently being studied. The bottom two cabinets will be full of other scores the teacher has collected over the years. These scores allow students looking for more music to explore the opportunity to do so (perhaps they have started their own quartet and would like to find some repertoire).

Another goal of mine in creating this classroom was to create a space that can become the students' - a space they will truly love and enjoy existing in. This is important, because "dialogue cannot exist... in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people." (Freire, 1970, p. 89), and dialogue is critically important to the learning process. Here, the world is the classroom. The classroom should mirror the world in challenge, flexibility, and much more (another principle of Bill Ayers'). This is also why it is as flexible as it is: people's needs change. My 1st period honor choir and my 3rd period music theory class will likely have very different needs and preferences. To accommodate this, the best solution is flexibility in the classroom.

At this point, one might ask how exactly this relates to creating equity in the classroom. Well, all of the principles shown in this classroom all lead up to creating a place in which students can become more human, and perhaps, if needed, regain their humanity - their freedom, their ability to decide what they want to do and learn, and ultimately, their control over their own lives. This room will, when used correctly by the teacher, create a space in which all students are given equal opportunities to act like and become peers with each other, and their "teacher," empowering each and every one of the students. There are choices everywhere in the room - from the type of instrument people want to play to the way they want to create music to how they want to discuss an issue. It empowers not just one or a specific group of students, but all students.

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

- Robby Napoli

