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Letters to Mr. Carter

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Abstract

This final project synthesized discussion and learning from four different books: "To Teach: The Journey in Comics" by W. Ayers and R. Alexander-Tanner, "Musician and Teacher: An Orientation to Music Education" by P. S. Campbell, "Teaching as a Subversive Activity" by N. Postman and C. Weingartner, and "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" by P. Freire. Through a series of letters to a teacher, Mr. Carter, the letter writers demonstrate the important ideas presented in each of the books.

Keywords

Music Education, social change, teaching, students

Disciplines

Fiction | Music Education

Comments

Written for MUS CLAS 149: Social Foundations of Music Education.

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Dr. Talbot
MUS_149

Letters to Mr. Carter

Dear Mr. Carter,

I wanted to thank you for wonderful years I spent in your band class. As you may remember, I struggled a lot in school. I definitely wasn't the best student and my shyness made it hard for me to participate. I had a lot of trouble as you may remember and at one point I was considering dropping out. My family was not very accepting of my sexuality or my thoughts of secondary education. In school, I often felt stupid and really scared; I was scared of being beat up or bullied or threatened. In other classes I felt like I knew nothing and was too afraid to share even if I knew something.

The thing about your band class was that it felt like more than just playing my instrument. Don't get me wrong, I liked playing saxophone, (even though I didn't like practicing), but I felt like I learned so much more than just music in your class. I felt like I could find my voice through band. At home and in school I felt like adults didn't care about what I had to say. I was just some stupid, angry "lesbo." The smart kids in school who took all the Honors and AP classes got all the attention because they were "going places" but kids like me got left behind. In band, you didn't care who was "smart" or not. You cared if we showed up and tried. You also liked to talk to us and cared about what we had to say. You took suggestions from us, no matter how ridiculous, like when you arranged a mashup of Taylor Swift songs for us.

The most memorable experience I had in your class was when we had to do projects on music that was important to us. I shared an angsty, teen song that I don't even remember the title of the song anymore. What I do remember is sharing how I felt so angry and scared all the time because of my sexuality. And it was scary to share all that, but I had to or else I was going to explode with all the thoughts that I had kept inside. After I was done the class was really quiet and until someone in the back raised their hand and asked why I wore dresses if I was a lesbian. In any other class the teacher would have shut down the questions and quickly moved to the next presentation. You, however, asked me if I felt comfortable answering it, and if so, asked me to share with the class. I answered that with something along the lines of how my sexuality only determines how I dress. I heard some snickers in the back but more hands went up and I kept answering more and more questions. When some of the questions were particularly harsh or invasive you stepped in to help explain or defend me if I looked to you for it. Finally, you asked for the rest of the questions to be answered after class so we could get to the next presenter, but that didn't bother me. I was so thrilled that I had the opportunity to speak about something that I felt no one wanted to hear about or listen to, and I felt strong and empowered for the first time in my life.

The next class we had the piece "City Trees" on our stand and the dedication projected onto the board. Because of that one class where you let me talk about something that was important to me, even though it was a bit of an uncomfortable thing to talk about. Because of you I found the courage to sit down with my parents and talk about my plans for college and about my sexuality. Because of you I found friends who embraced my sexuality and courage to talk about it. Because of you I graduated from community college and now work in a counseling

center for teenagers.

I don't know if you noticed, but during that band concert when you read the dedication to the Lesbian and Gay Band Association I cried. It meant so much to have my sexuality accepted and validated by an adult. So, I wanted to write to you and thank you for being one of the biggest reasons I am where I am today. You gave me the chance to find my voice and I don't know if I can ever thank you enough for that.

Sincerely,
Lily Castine.

Dear Mr. Carter,

On behalf of my son, Alo, and the rest of my family, I would like to thank you for all that you do in your classroom. Ever since you called me about ways to make Alo more engaged in your music class, he has come home excited to talk about music class and now excited to go to school. In our previous phone call I told about how at home, Alo, loves to dance and sing when we have gatherings with fellow Hopi tribe members. To be quite honest, I was surprised when I got the call from you that Alo is distracted and disengaged in music class because he is so excited about music at home.

The day you began to introduce Hopi and other Native American songs into your class was the first day Alo came home bursting with excitement to tell us about his day. He was so excited to tell us that he was familiar with some of the music in class and could help demonstrate one of the dances to the other students. I remember at the beginning of the year in a social studies class he wanted to share a Hopi dance with the class in their Native American unit, but the teacher did not let him and he said after class many students made fun of him. I noticed that Alo wasn't so excited for school anymore. But now, he is so excited about school. He loves telling us about how he is teaching his friends a new Hopi dance and that he is learning about music that he is familiar with.

Thank you so much for reaching out to us and incorporating Hopi music into your curriculum. It has means the world to Alo and his excitement and learning means the world to us.

Sincerely,
Kim Honanie

Dear Mr. Carter,

I would like to thank you for letting me observe your class music history class today! I enjoyed the experience and learned a lot from you and the students. I was quite fascinated by some of your methods, as they were very different than a lot of other teacher's I have observed. You told me after class that the students research and present a lot of the information they learn in class and I observed one of the students giving a presentation on swing music in the 1920s. It was cool to see the students interacting with each other and to see how confident they were with

presenting to each other. Even though you added supplemental information if the students missed some point you wanted to cover, it was a mostly student run class which was interesting.

At the end of class, I thought it was great that you told the class what the next topic was going to be and asked the students to brainstorm questions to ask for the next group to research for the topic. I thought that was a good way to include students in their own education. It made them seem more engaged and excited about what they were learning about. I was curious about the “Unit Question” you had on the board. It asked “How can we teach music history in an engaging way?” Could you clarify the importance of it for me?

Thanks again for letting me observe your class. I really enjoyed the class today and would love to come back and observe in the future.

Sincerely,
Sam Dent

Dear Mr. Carter

Thank you for being a great teacher this year. I had a lot of fun singing songs and playing games in music class. It was fun when I got to teach the class just like you. I liked showing the class my favorite song game and telling you frog facts from my song. I also liked it when Mia and Tim told the class about songs and facts too. They had some cool facts. I will miss you as a teacher next year.

Love,
Max

P.S. My mom helped me write this.

P.P.S. I hope you teach your next third graders my frog song. Maybe I can come back and help you since I'm a frog expert.

Through these letters I explore the question, how can we conceptualize curriculum and school knowledge to better address important questions of social change, contingency of knowledge, life in mediated worlds, and inequalities? Throughout the year we have addressed this question in many ways through our readings and class discussions. I have come to believe that teachers conceptualize curriculum and content to address social change, inequality, and contingency of knowledge by creating an environment where students are humanized, students question and explore concepts, and are the teachers themselves.

Dear Mr. Carter—Lily Castine

“Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.” (Freire, 1970, p.92-3).

In Lily's letter to Mr. Carter, she described her experience growing while begin a lesbian. She described a lot of the fear and hurt she felt at school and home from adults who did not truly respect her and her sexuality. She tells Mr. Carter about how his openness to letting her discuss her sexuality and share that with the class enabled her to face her fears and to find her voice.

In Friere's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he talks about humanizing people because much of society oppresses and dehumanizes people. In Chapter 3 of Freire's book, he talks about dialogue as a means of liberation and humanization. What Mr. Carter allowed Lily to do in her presentation to their band class was to create dialogue that began to break down false stereotypes and stigma around LGBTQ people. Lily described how other adults would have stopped dialogue from taking place because it would be uncomfortable, but Mr. Carter encouraged the dialogue and let Lily take charge of it. Instead of silencing her, Mr. Carter gave her voice which allowed her to liberate herself in many aspects of her life, especially with her family. Freire also emphasizes the importance of liberation of the oppressed by the oppressed and Lily could do that through the chance to begin dialogue about what it is like to grow up as a queer teenager.

No revolution is possible without dialogue. Dialogue may not be the fire behind great social change but it the the flint that starts that fire. It creates understanding and empathy between people which fights ignorance and fear that is at the root of many conflicts. I strongly believe in dialogue to begin social change and I believe that part of a teacher's duty is to help create positive social change. Social change also involves talking about things that might make us uncomfortable. Because there is so much hate and misunderstanding towards LGBTQ people it makes for a hard topic to talk about. In my experience, some teachers shy away from uncomfortable topics to avoid controversy but by doing that, they try to pretend that the issue does not exist. If teachers would tackle those difficult issues to talk about at the very least we would have an informed public. And it is my belief that an informed public will tend to be more tolerant and would encourage tolerance and acceptance.

Dear Mr. Carter—Alo and Kim Honanie

“Teachers are working to bridge the cultural gaps between themselves and their students, and they are seeking to understand and integrate the prior knowledge and cultural and linguistic heritage of their students into the content and delivery of their classes and ensembles.”
(Campbell, 2008, p. 219).

Kim Honanie's letter of Mr. Carter describes the change she sees in her son through Mr. Carter's changed curriculum. She is pleased to see her son become interested in school again because of Mr. Carter's incorporation of Hopi and other Native American songs into his curriculum. Mr. Carter noticed Alo's disinterest and reached out to his parents to help make music class engaging for him.

In *Musician & Teacher*, the author talks about bringing in culturally relevant material to connect musically with the students. Mr. Carter noticed Alo's disinterest and sought to change that by bringing music that is relevant to him. He found out from Alo's more that Alo loves music and dance but it was never evident in school because most general music classes deal with western “classical” music, which Alo was not familiar or interested in. By engaging Alo with the Hopi music, Mr. Carter was still able to cover all the concepts he needed to cover (I know this because I was able to incorporate a variety of musical concepts into non-western music into my

lesson plans) but was able to engage a student and validate his identity. Kim told Mr. Carter that her son was bullied before for being passionate about Hopi music that he learned at home. By teaching that music in class, Mr. Carter demonstrated to the students how that music is just as viable and valuable as other western music they are used to.

Learning about other's cultures key to tackling ignorance and hate and promoting understanding. In a world, full of racial and cultural biases, learning and listening is vital to destroying those harmful divisions. In my experience, different cultures are often treated a totally different worlds and species of people. But through music education, students can come to see that although people from different cultures may look and dress differently, they still enjoy music, they still have fun nursery rhymes, and they still love to dance and enjoy fellowship. Teaching students early on about different cultures will create a generation of people that will hopefully be more tolerant and caring. Those cultural divisions that divide us shouldn't divide us in a way that we feel disconnected from other people, they should bring us together.

Dear Mr. Carter—Sam Dent

“The inquiry method is not designed to do better what older environments try to do. It works you over in entirely different ways.” (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 27).

In Sam's letter to Mr. Carter the thanks him for the opportunity to observe him and discusses some of the things he noticed about Mr. Carter's teaching. Sam describes Mr. Carter's music appreciation class where it is mostly students run. He notes that students present most of the information and share it with one another. Students are also asked to brainstorm questions to be researched for next week's topic and he is curious about the “Unit Question” on the board.

In *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, the authors talk about an inquiry method of education. It is a completely different way of teaching than any previous styles and is based on student led inquiry. The authors talk about how teachers should encourage more student to student interaction rather than student to teacher interaction, as well as letting the lesson develop from responses of the students. In Mr. Carter's class, he removes himself as much as possible from the learning by letting the students present to each other. Because it is hard to implement a complete inquiry method based curriculum, Mr. Carter does have information prepared to supplement if the students don't touch on certain points. By asking students to brainstorm research questions for the next group to present, Mr. Carter allows students to develop the lesson based on their response (the questions they come up with). What Sam was confused about the “Unit Question.” Postman and Weingartner talk about how lessons should pose a problem for the students to solve. Mr. Carter asks students through their presentations and research to figure out how to teach music history in an engaging way. Through the presentations the students work to solve it while learning and teaching one another.

Although the inquiry method is very radical, it is an educational pedagogy that would promote the most comprehensive learning for students. Realistically, with the systems currently in place, a totally inquiry method would not work, but parts of the inquiry method can easily be incorporated into one's teaching. I believe that the student led exploration that the inquiry method entails empowers students and sets them up to be life-long learners. With the skills and interest in research and exploration, students will continue to actively learn their entire lives, which is what makes an education a life-long gift.

Dr. Mr. Carter—Max

“The intellectual challenge of teaching involves becoming a student of your students, unlocking the wisdom in the room, and joining together on a journey of discovery and surprise.” (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010, p. 113).

In Max’s letter to Mr. Carter he thanks his teacher for the great school and year and the opportunity to teach his peers and to learn from his peers. Max enjoyed class because of how involved he got to be and is enthusiastic about teaching others as well, evident by his P.P.S.

In *To Teach*, the author talks about a number of things but the thing that I think is most important is that the role of students and teacher is interchangeable. The author writes about how as much as the teacher teaches the students, the teacher learns just as much if not more from students. The students have so much to share with the world and usually have a lot of enthusiasm to do so. I think this is one of the most important things about teaching is that a teacher does not teach, merely facilitates the sharing and exploring of content. Oftentimes teachers are held up on a pedestal, far away from students, and are oppressive. Freire warns against this in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and notes that the oppressed have valid information and thoughts to share, as much as the oppressors.

In the case of Lily, Alo, Mr. Carter’s music history class, and Max, they all had the chance to be teachers in their classes. Lily shared her experience as a lesbian and information about her sexuality to help her find her voice but also to create understanding and tolerance. Alo can share his passion for Hopi music and dance within a safe space where the students realize that Alo’s music is just as viable as other music they study. In Mr. Carter’s music history class, the students teach one another about their topics and help each other explore by asking questions and pushing each other to critically think. Max enjoys his chance to teach the class a song he learned and expresses his pleasure in learning from his friends. These letters demonstrate the importance of humanization, inquiry, and switching the roles of student and teacher. Through this, students are empowered and can be a part of social change, as well as helping them continue to be life-long learners.

I believe that it is important to realize that “teaching” is a relative term as the teacher is constantly learning from their students. The teacher’s job is to help facilitate learning and to tackle issues of social change and promote life-long learning so students can continue to grow and thrive in a world that is less divided and more tolerant.

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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. –Jasmin Eddy