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Dissecting Dialogue: The Value of Music Education in ESL/ELL Programs

Abstract

Among educators and philosophers alike, critical dialogue is widely regarded as one of the most effective ways to communicate and educate in the classroom. In his quintessential work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire reflects upon the importance of dialogue stating, “Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.” This point is reinforced in other notable texts such as *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, which describes the “new education” as not only student and question centered, but “language-centered” as well. From a theoretical point of view, these approaches to learning bear merit and, in many cases, are effective when successfully applied in the field. However, with the dawn of the twenty-first century and the continued growth and complexity of globalization, these theories are in need of constant revisions as educators attempt to apply dated practices in an ever-changing society. Particularly in the United States of America, which since its inception, has maintained its reputation of a “melting pot” of peoples and cultures, it is vital that educators incorporate progressive interpretations of these principles in order to best enlighten, and therefore educate, an increasingly diverse population of students. Accompanied with a wide range of cultural beliefs that span numerous languages, educators currently face this paradox: How does one use dialogical tools to nurture what Freire deems “critical thinking” in classrooms where linguistic differences inhibit the implementation of these same tools? In response to this dilemma, the responsibility falls on music educators and administrators to develop policies that address the educational inequalities produced by the cultural and linguistic differences found in classrooms to provide an egalitarian and accessible education to all students that simultaneously encourages and utilizes dialogue and praxis.

Keywords

ESL, Music Education, ELL, dialogue, Paulo Freire

Disciplines

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Comments

Written for MUS CLAS 149: Social Foundations of Music.

DISSECTING DIALOGUE:

The value of music education in ESL/ELL programs



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MUS 149 – Social Foundations of Music Education

Among educators and philosophers alike, critical dialogue is widely regarded as one of the most effective ways to communicate and educate in the classroom. In his quintessential work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire reflects upon the importance of dialogue stating, “Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.”¹ This point is reinforced in other notable texts such as *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, which describes the “new education” as not only student and question centered, but “language-centered” as well.² From a theoretical point of view, these approaches to learning bear merit and, in many cases, are effective when successfully applied in the field. However, with the dawn of the twenty-first century and the continued growth and complexity of globalization, these theories are in need of constant revisions as educators attempt to apply dated practices in an ever-changing society. Particularly in the United States of America, which since its inception, has maintained its reputation of a “melting pot” of peoples and cultures, it is vital that educators incorporate progressive interpretations of these principles in order to best enlighten, and therefore educate, an increasingly diverse population of students. Accompanied with a wide range of cultural beliefs that span numerous languages, educators currently face this paradox: How does one use dialogical tools to nurture what Freire deems “critical thinking” in classrooms where linguistic differences inhibit the implementation of these same tools? In response to this dilemma, the responsibility falls on music educators and administrators to develop policies that address the educational inequalities produced by the cultural and linguistic differences found in classrooms to provide an egalitarian and accessible education to all students that simultaneously encourages and utilizes dialogue and praxis.

¹ Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. p. 92.

² Postman, N., & Weingartner, C. *Teaching as a subversive activity*. p. 102.

In many current models, educational systems function in oppressive, mechanical manners that generalize the diverse and unique learning needs of individual students in order to accomplish highly focused and, at times, narrow-minded goals. While the fundamental goal of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Language Learner (ELL) programs is the acquisition of the English language, policymakers should consider other implied goals of these programs that could suggest a variety of harmful ideas. Foremost among these potentially venomous implications is one of nationalistic pride. It can hardly be debated that for students in the United States to succeed as American citizens, they must possess a working understanding of English. However, this reality in no means demerits or lessens the value or importance of any other language, heritage, or culture. For instance, in some music classrooms, this issue could manifest itself in the repeated performance of “American” standards and classics that support the political and cultural dominance of the United States at the expense of other nations. By Freirean standards, this attitude of cultural superiority fails to properly respect the opinions and cultures of those individuals impacted by these programs, and as such, “constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding.”³ By contrast, these policies should be designed in a way that facilitates dialogue and cultural understanding through critical thinking, regardless of linguistic limitations. This point is explored in Campbell’s work, *Musician & Teacher*, through a scenario in which a teacher begins conceptualizing ways in which a student taking ESL courses can better engage in the music classroom in spite of the language barrier by possibly teaching the class a song in her native language from her homeland country.⁴ In this way, Campbell underscores a point found in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in that true education is not a unidirectional flow, but

³ Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. p. 95.

⁴ Campbell, P. S. *Musician & teacher: an orientation to music education*. p. 221.

rather a dynamic process reliant on the cooperation of numerous parties.⁵ This process is generally comprised of two parties, namely the teacher and the student, in which the student does not work for the teacher or vice-versa, but rather the teacher and student work together in order to form a meaningful connection to the educational experience they share. Through this method of co-construction, neither party assumes their own culture's superiority, and through this mutual cultural respect, authentic learning can successfully ensue.

In addition to the dangers associated with promoting a sense of rampant nationalism through ESL/ELL courses, one must also ensure that the method of instruction corresponds with the curricular goal. While language acquisition is, indeed, highly valued and sought after through ESL/ELL programs, one could argue that general skills in communicating effectively are more important advancements due to these programs than mastery of vocabulary words without the knowledge to apply them in conversation. This curricular goal reflects an educational system that depends on and draws heavily from two incredibly similar concepts, the inquiry method and the problem-posing method, as described by Postman and Freire, respectively. In both of these texts, the concept of the "banking" method of education is explored and quickly deplored as a source of poor, unfocused, and unusable education.⁶ Instead, teachers and students should engage in the inquiry method and/or the problem-posing method. Through these similar methods, students and teachers work together without hierarchical notions as, according, to Freire, teachers become "teacher-students" and students become "students-teachers," a feature also noted by Ayers in his description of teaching as a journey rather than a specific event.^{7, 8} By reformulating the curriculum in ways that embrace problem-posing as a core tool used in pedagogy, educators

⁵ Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. p. 93.

⁶ Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. p. 72.

⁷ Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. p. 80.

⁸ Ayers, W., & Alexander-Tanner, R. *To teach the journey, in comics*. p. 2-3.

acknowledge the fact that more than one correct answer may exist, which in effect casts away the harmful shadow left by the “banking” method. Furthermore, through the acceptance of this method of education, educators open up the possibility to engage in critical dialogue with their students.⁹ In classrooms where linguistic differences slow smooth communication and therefore dialogue, problem-posing education remains invaluable, for it recognizes the individual’s worth as a student while simultaneously providing an avenue for students to actively engage their learning with concrete issues related to the world around them.¹⁰ It is, then, through this inquiry method, that the roles of teacher and student blur, students are better equipped to identify connections between diverse topics, and the students are able to take greater ownership over their education to better apply it towards their interests and to the social issues present in their lives.¹¹

An application of the problem-posing method lies in the incorporation of ESL/ELL policies through courses that explore themes common across numerous cultures. For example, while numerous studies have found linguistic benefits for students enrolled in both ESL/ELL and music classes, the true value of music education in this context extends beyond language acquisition.¹² Relying on a range of verbal and nonverbal cues, “culturally competent” music teacher have the distinct opportunity to connect with these students as they co-investigate an incredibly expressive medium universal across cultures: music.¹³ Although music is far from being warranted its acclaimed title as a “universal language,” the sentiments that music is able to express and its ability to define even the most intangible of concepts make it unique yet relatable to the majority of peoples around the world. With this in mind, one must consider the possibility

⁹ Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. p. 81.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Postman, N., & Weingartner, C. *Teaching as a subversive activity*. p. 37.

¹² Schunk, H. A. The effect of singing paired with signing on receptive vocabulary skills. p. 110.

¹³ Campbell, P. S. *Musician & teacher: an orientation to music education*. p. 220.

presented in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* that “the key to understanding a ‘subject’ is to understand its language” and apply this theory to ESL/ELL students in this setting.¹⁴ While the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis likely holds in this scenario, in that each student’s linguistic background in essence primes that student’s beliefs, opinion, and interpretations of concepts and events, since the lexicon for music is already relatively specific and, in many ways, dependent on expression more than precision, linguistic differences between students of different cultural backgrounds may not be as profound or observable in music classrooms than others.¹⁵ With these conditions established in a supportive and welcoming learning environment, music classrooms and educators are unparalleled in their ability to meaningfully teach a diverse array of students through the cooperatively expressive medium of music.

At this point, one can begin to consider and better comprehend the significance of music education with respect to its impact on ESL/ELL students. Through its innately expressive nature, music begs to be taught through the inquiry method as it cannot be defined nor explained in a simple statement, its interpretation cannot be forced upon the listener, and discourse is explored most often in the form of an interrogative.¹⁶ Furthermore, if these traits of music education do not immediately lead to the reflection of the students and teachers, then the structure of music classes and music pedagogical tools certainly do as they emphasize repetition on previously completed tasks to improve them in search of greater or more precise expressive meaning and/or musically technical performances. Through this search for meaning, students regardless of linguistic background consider what type of message is implied through the music, thus reflecting on its significance. If at any given point the performance of a piece does not

¹⁴ Postman, N., & Weingartner, C. *Teaching as a subversive activity*. p. 102.

¹⁵ Postman, N., & Weingartner, C. *Teaching as a subversive activity*. p. 101.

¹⁶ Postman, N., & Weingartner, C. *Teaching as a subversive activity*. p. 34.

correlate with that student's personal interpretation of that given piece, an accepting classroom environment, as explained in depth by Ayers, facilitates a community where change and improvement are highly valued and encouraged.¹⁷ In this way, the rehearsal process is, in part, a simplified interpretation of praxis. Applied to a larger scale, again supported in the structure and design of the music classroom through the problem-posing method that fosters dialogue and the co-construction of knowledge, music teachers can engage and aid students in connecting musical concepts introduced to them in class to larger concepts and issues impacting these diverse students' lives in the world.¹⁸ Therefore, by connecting the expressive content found in music to how these sentiments are experienced in practice around the world, music education acts as an impetus for praxis and remains relevant and essential in the education of all students regardless of linguistic and cultural background.

As classrooms in the United States become increasingly more multicultural, linguistic differences between social groups threaten to create inequalities in the educational system. As often cited by Paulo Freire, dialogue is a key pedagogical tool used to both maintain healthy and successful pedagogical strategies and encourage the synthesis of new ideas into the system. While language barriers will indeed be obstacles in this transition, ESL and ELL programs can be best tailored to meet the individual needs of the students that the educational system serves by utilizing concepts such as the problem-posing method, the co-construction of knowledge, and critical dialogue. Through the effective implementation of these methods to encourage a supportive and mutually respectful educational environment, music educators can help their students of diverse backgrounds develop a praxis to understand, interpret, and adapt in the ever-changing world around them.

¹⁷ Ayers, W., & Alexander-Tanner, R. *To teach the journey, in comics*. p. 34.

¹⁸ Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. p. 84.

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