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Notes from Mrs. Hadgu's Class: Conceptualizing Music Education Curriculum for a Changing World

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Abstract

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? To answer this question I wrote fictional stories from students about their favorite moments from their 8th grade music class. Each account deals with a specific activity or instance in which the teacher included social change and/or student centered knowledge in the curriculum. The explanation at the end of the accounts details the reasons for creating each activity and the relation of the stories to texts utilized in class.

Keywords

Music Education, Music, Classroom, Social Change, School

Disciplines

Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Fiction | Music Education

Comments

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

Notes from Mrs. Hadgu's Class

8th Grade General Music Section A

By: Logan Santiago

Mrs. Hadgu's Class

8th grade, section A

2015

Please write about your favorite thing that we did in class this year. It doesn't have to be long, I just want to hear what you enjoyed about music class! Each person's response will be put into a book for everyone to have so that we can remember the important things that we did in class this year.

1. One of my favorite discussions in class started on the first day when Mrs. Hadgu asked us “What is music?” At first it seemed like a really simple question, but then I tried to answer it and I didn’t know what to say. I thought maybe music was just sound. But then Mrs. Hadgu asked if it was any type of sound. I remember she asked if a lawnmower was music and I thought *Of course it isn’t*. Then she asked if the breeze rustling the trees was music and I said yes but some people said no. So then we tried to figure out what makes a lawn mower and trees different from a song, which we all agreed was music. We came up with a bunch of different things. Music is organized into different parts, it has different pitches in it, it’s pretty, and some others I can’t remember. But for everything we came up with, someone had a different opinion and then we were right back where we started. I remember feeling so frustrated that we couldn’t even explain what music was. But then the next class, Mrs. Hadgu asked “Why do people write music?” and we agreed that they wanted to express something. We talked about how music has different emotions and the composer is trying to express those emotions. Then I thought that maybe this is what makes music music: the emotion and purpose. When you write a song you do it with some kind of purpose and that makes it music. Otherwise it is just sound. So we came to the conclusion that music is made up of sounds, but the sounds are arranged to fit the purpose of the piece. So then I thought that maybe a lawnmower can be music if it’s used to achieve some sort of purpose. Mrs. Hadgu pondered the topic with us, but she never told us an answer, she found an answer with us. Then we kept talking about that topic for the first week of class as we listened to different types of music and determined their characteristics. We kept revising our definition of music throughout the year and I really liked that. I liked the first few days because I had never

really thought about what music was and it was really fun to figure it out with my class. I also realized that the definition of music can change, like it does in my class, based on what we have learned and seen in music and I think that's an important lesson. We are always changing and learning and as we do, we change how we define things as well.

- Jackie Nolen

2. My favorite thing that we did in class was the music identity projects. I liked coming up with my project because it really made me think about myself and what kind of music I liked. It was hard to narrow it down at first but when I did I felt like the pieces I chose really represented me. I also liked hearing about everyone else's projects and what kind of music they liked. A few times when I was presenting my project I would introduce a song and some people would be like "Yeah I love that song too!" and that made me feel really good, like we had a lot in common. I was able to see who liked the same music that I did and I was also able to learn about music that I had never thought to listen to. I thought this was a really fun project to do to get to know my classmates and to be able to figure out what kind of music I really like.

- Keitaro Cruz

3. My favorite day in class was when we went downtown and played the drums and sang a few of the songs that we had learned in class. It was really cool to be able to play outside for the people in town. Everyone got really excited when they saw us and they wanted to listen to us. Some guy even tried to give us money. It was a lot of fun and the people really seemed to enjoy it. There was one little girl who really wanted to play the drums

and so we let her and it made her so happy. Another man came up to us and said that he very much enjoyed the music and he loved listening to us. Even a few older kids stopped by and danced with the drums. Everyone was happy and they all came together to listen to the music we were making. I think that's what music is for. It's for sharing with others and making people happy.

- Sade Taylor

4. My favorite day in class was when we took a trip to the local retirement home and sang for the people who lived there. We performed some of the songs we learned during our unit on the Big band era and WWII music. We sang songs that reminded the people of when they were younger. All of the people were so happy when we sang for them. They told us stories of when they were young, how they used to dance to this song or how that song was always playing on the TV. It was so cool that just listening to a song could bring back so many memories for them. It felt really nice to know that we had made their day a little better.

- Genesis Rodriguez

5. My favorite day in class was when I got to tell everyone about the music in Venezuela, where I am from. It was so much fun to listen to and play pieces that I hear at home all the time. Everyone in class was really interested in what I had to say and wanted to participate in performing music that was special to me so that was really cool. At first it was a little scary to share my music with everyone because I was afraid they wouldn't like it, but all of my classmates could appreciate and get into the music which was nice to see. I am so glad I was able to share my music with the class.

- Adriana Diaz

6. I really liked the day we got to skype with Adriana's old school in Venezuela. It was so cool to see and talk to the kids there. We even sang a song with them. I liked learning about what school is like for them and talking to them about music. I thought it was awesome that we could all make music together even though we're so far apart. It was also very interesting to hear them talk about where they live and how life is for them. They talked about how there are protesters in the streets right now trying to change the government and it's sometimes not safe to go outside. They said that there were food shortages a little while ago because of the inflation in the economy. I realized that those were things that I never really had to worry about so it really made me think about my own government and how I always feel safe in my home and there's always enough food to eat. It didn't really occur to me that not everyone can feel that way. We talked about what was going on in Venezuela in Social Studies too so it was really fascinating to talk to people who were really there. I hope that the protests in Venezuela end and that they can go on to live peacefully.

- Oliver McHenry

7. My favorite thing that we did in class was the final project where we all picked a popular song as a class and broke it down and performed it with the instruments we had in the classroom. Our class picked "Shake it Off" by Taylor Swift and then we tried to identify all of the things we had been learning in class in that song. We found the bass line, rhythmic ostinato, melody, harmony, determined time signature, countermelody, and form. Then we all worked together to figure out how to play it on the instruments we had in the room. We ended up using the Orff instruments, a tambourine, drums, some pencils to tap on the desks, and our voices. We had a few people sing, some play the bass line on

the Orff instruments, and some play the rhythmic ostinato on drums. Then we made up some other rhythms to do with the pencils. We also created a new harmony to play on Orff instruments. As we figured it all out we started to notate the rhythms and pitches on paper and later Mrs. Hadgu put everything that we had written into the computer so that we could each have a nice copy of our arrangement. I had so much fun putting everything together and performing it at the school assembly. I also enjoyed watching the other 8th grade music classes perform the songs that they picked. It was such a cool experience and I liked connecting all the things we learned in class to music that I actually listen to.

- Ben Scott

8. My favorite unit in class was when we were learning about Indonesian music and we talked about the Balinese Gamelan. I loved learning about the history and culture associated with the instruments. Even though we used Orff instruments to perform on, I liked learning about how the gamelan instruments are tuned differently than our instruments and we listened to recordings to hear how the music pulses. I thought it was interesting that the Balinese people believe that the pulsing is what makes the music alive. I also liked listening to the recordings of gamelan and learning about the interlocking rhythms. I really like rhythms as a percussionist and it was so cool to hear the composite rhythms when the parts interlock. At first I thought the music sounded kind of weird but then when we started to understand the culture behind it and it was actually really interesting. We don't have a lot of traditions and culture like that in the United States so it was cool to see a new perspective of music that comes from such a rich and different culture.

- Maddie Peters

9. My favorite day was learning about music from Venezuela when Adriana was telling us about music from her hometown. It was really cool to listen to her talk about something she was so passionate about and it seemed so natural for her to talk about it. I really liked the music she showed us too. I thought Joropo was really fun and it just made me want to dance. And then Adriana showed us the video of what the dance looked like and it was crazy. I really liked seeing what kind of music is popular in Venezuela and hearing it from Adriana who actually lived there was a new perspective. It wasn't like reading out of a textbook, it was like we had the inside scoop and I appreciated that.

- Brandon Reynolds

10. My favorite thing that we did was when we learned about Irish music and we learned how to do the ceili dance. It was really fun to learn with the class and I felt so accomplished when we finally got it down. It was really cool that we could participate in a culture that was different from our own and connect to it so quickly. We played an arrangement of an Irish fiddle tune in Orchestra this year so it was interesting to learn about where that tune came from and how it relates to other Irish music. I've been listening to a lot of Irish music since then and it's all so cool. I think I really want to learn how to do Irish step dancing because I love the music and it was so much fun when we were introduced to it in class.

- Arianna Henderson

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?

Thesis: We can conceptualize curriculum and school knowledge to fit current issues and advancements by doing student centered activities, listening to music from different cultures, using the media to connect with those cultures, allowing students to share music from their own culture, and bringing music into the local community.

The first story relates to the idea that the teacher should not necessarily be the leader of the class with all of the answers, but rather should create activities in which the students can make meaning for themselves and find that they have knowledge within themselves. This idea is expressed in both Teaching as a Subversive Activity by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner and Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire. In Teaching as a Subversive Activity, Postman and Weingartner write about meaning making where we each make meaning for ourselves. The authors write ““Reality” is a perception, located somewhere behind the eyes.” (Postman & Weingartner, 90), meaning that reality can only be know through the lens of ourselves. Even though the world would exist without us, the only way we can see and interpret the world is using our own brains. That being said, each person has a different perspective, each person makes meaning differently based on their knowledge and experiences. Later the authors go on to say “We see things not as “they” are but as we are.” (Postman & Weingartner, 95) Therefore, each students’ perception effects the meanings that they create, making it impossible to teach just one answer or just one opinion. Students must be able to find meaning within themselves. If each teacher thought of their students as “meaning makers” instead of “empty buckets” they would teach much differently. (Postman & Weingartner, 91) This relates to the first story because the students create meaning themselves, without the teacher giving them the answer to fill their “empty buckets”. Freire also touches this idea in Pedagogy of the Oppressed saying, “They call themselves ignorant and say the “professor” is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen...Almost never do they realize that they, too, “know things.” (Freire, 63) Students are conditioned to believe that the teacher has all of the answers and that they must simply regurgitate the information that the teacher has told them when they are asked a question. However, as Freire points out, students are most certainly not ignorant and they also “know things” and make meaning for themselves. In this story, the students are creating their own

meaning while also learning that meaning often depends on perception as many different viewpoints are brought into the discussion.

The second and fifth stories are about students sharing their knowledge. Sometimes the line can become blurred between who is the teacher and who is the student. This is completely acceptable because everyone is both a teacher and a learner. The Music Identity projects are a good way to begin the year because the students start with the mindset that they have something important to share, something that only they know and only they can explain, and they can also learn about their classmates in the process. In turn, the teacher is learning about the students and with the students and the presenter speaks about songs they may have never heard of. In the fifth story, a student is sharing her culture with the rest of the class. The class is student led at this time, the teacher learning just as much as the rest of the students. Ayers talks about the idea of being a teacher-learner when he says “Must the teacher always be the master and commander of the ship, poised with complete confidence, in charge and in control? I began to wonder if I might more honestly and more joyfully think of myself as an explorer on a journey with my students, a voyage of discovery and surprise.” (Ayers, 3) Freire expresses this idea, saying “People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are “owned” by the teacher.” (Freire, 80) Banking method is exactly the opposite of what is shown by these stories.

The third and fourth stories go together to represent the importance of bringing music from the schools into the community. The relationship between the schools and the community must be strong in order to understand how to better relate to the students. Teachers must first understand what kind of environment their students live in. Are they from the suburbs, the city, the country? One way to do this is summer home visits as mentioned by Ayers. “The relationship between the school and neighborhoods is nourished and valued. Every summer, teachers do home visits to break down the idea that we live in entirely separate and impenetrable worlds.” (Ayers, 105). However, in these stories, the class goes as a group out into their own community to share what they have learned in an environment that has meaning to them. This helps not only the people who get to watch and listen to the music, but also the students who are having fun and learning something that feels relevant to them, as well as the school who is gaining publicity and support from the community. Postman and Weingartner toy with the ideas of the relationship between the students and their community. They talk about how learning

should be relevant to the students' lives "...Unless an inquiry is perceived as relevant by the learner, no significant learning will take place." (Postman & Weingartner, 52) Learning is significant when it can be applied to the students' daily lives and taking "school work" into the community is one way to do that.

The sixth story was partially inspired by Dr. Pignota from SUNY Oneonta. Since there was a student in the class who had just moved from Venezuela a year or so ago, the class skyped with one of the music classes at her old school. I thought the idea of skyping and putting together music to perform with students who are far away was amazing so I wanted to add that to this project, but the main relation of this story to the books that we read in class is the importance of understanding current events and the context of certain music. Freire suggests that "World and human beings do not exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction." (Freire, 50) Because human beings are connected to the world, it is important to know what is going on in that world. Freire also said "Students as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obligated to respond to that challenge." (Freire, 81) Students must begin to understand how they fit into the world and how they will deal with the problems that the world presents to them. Generally, this is a Social Studies topic, however as many of us already know, all subjects are intertwined somehow. Teaching as a Subversive Activity touches this, sarcastically calling the prospect that each subject is separate from another and after you have taken one subject you do not need to take it again the "vaccination method of education". It is easy to connect music and history or music and current events as shown in this story. It is also important that students understand what is happening outside of their small community bubble in order to become more informed and active citizens of not just their country but the world as a whole.

The seventh story shows an example of making music relevant to the students. Taking a song that the students already know and love and applying the musical concepts that they learned in class to that song is one way to connect "school knowledge" to everyday life. Students can really connect to this music because it is something they actively participate in each day. This connects to Musician and Teacher where the teachers make classes based on the kind of music their students want to learn. I wanted to bring part of this idea into an 8th grade general music class by giving the students freedom to pick the song they want to study. It's also important to remember that all music is connected, we might learn about some classical music in class but the

concepts we use to explain characteristics of classical music can also be used in pop music. It is crucial that students understand that the music they love is the same as what we do in school and what people do in other countries so that they can have a lifelong appreciation for music.

The eighth, ninth, and tenth stories are about learning music from other cultures. This is something that has been very apparent to me in Social Foundations and Gamelan. I, like the student who wrote about Gamelan, loved learning about Balinese culture. It was so fascinating to me. I was never exposed to anything like that in High school and especially not in middle school. I thought I wouldn't like music like that because it was so different and it was "out of tune". However, I found that I love Gamelan and I love learning about what other people believe, how they interact within their community, and how they use music to do that. It is important to me as someone who hopes to teach music someday that students are exposed to all different countries and cultures through music because it causes them to be much more open minded individuals. Students can become so much more open to people and ideas who are different from them when they figure out that just because something is different doesn't mean that they don't like it. I also think it is important for students to study other cultures because they live in extremely diverse world and sometimes we can get stuck in our own little community bubble. A global perspective is something that is very important to me, especially coming from the IB program, and I believe that by having students that are internationally minded we can change the world. And we can become internationally minded through studying music from all over the whole.

Each of these stories represents a way in which music can be conceptualized and added to the curriculum to create a way of learning that better addresses the questions of social change, contingency of knowledge, life in mediated worlds, and inequalities.