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Extending Invitations, Becoming Messmates

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Extending Invitations, Becoming Messmates

Abstract

As music educators we can model proactive advocacy among community members to prevent individuals' reactive violence in response to intolerance for differences. We can offer music-learning tables as safe spaces in which community members openly and collaboratively learn to know each other as individuals with diverse identities and interests. As messmates around the table, we can identify ways that researching, questioning, and being musical together can eradicate fears and the damaging effects of homophobia.

Keywords

lgbtq, lgbtqgia, music education, diversity, equality, equity, inclusion

Disciplines

Educational Leadership | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies | Music Education



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EXTENDING INVITATIONS, BECOMING MESSMATES



This article contains references to recent events that readers might find upsetting. The references are essential relative to the purpose of this article, which is to encourage and share strategies for creating safe spaces for dialogue among community members in school-based, music-learning settings.

On June 12, 2016, almost a year after celebrating the United States (U.S.) Supreme Court’s legalization of same-sex marriage, 49 persons died and 53 persons were wounded in the deadliest mass shooting in the U.S. by a single shooter to date, and the deadliest terrorist attack in the U.S. since September 11, 2001. That the incident occurred at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, the shooting also became the deadliest incident of violence against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQQIA) people in U.S. history. Particularly awful: the massacre transformed a bar—a musical space to gather, socialize, and dance that gay persons previously deemed to be a safe haven—into a death chamber.

Like the hateful crimes committed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Sandy Hook, Connecticut (December 14, 2012) or in Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina (June 17, 2015), the hateful crime committed at Pulse in Orlando

challenges school-based communities’ responsibilities for creating safe havens for its members. Creating safe havens increasingly reaches beyond now-necessary provisions, such as secure entrances and state-issued (e.g., Harkins, 2016) or district-level policies for carrying firearms or weapons on school, college, and university campuses. Increasingly, communities need to support schools’ prioritization of safe spaces for all members to openly and collaboratively work through matters facing their day-to-day lives.

Relative to matters of gender and sexuality, for example, particularly when aligned with the tragic incident at Pulse, music teachers may be reflecting on the roles their music learning setting plays as a safe haven for students. Music teachers and their students may be wondering how their community views their school’s responsibilities for initiating dialogue about such matters or events. They also may be wondering about which persons and spaces will welcome questioning, dialoguing, researching, and sharing to increase understandings among and advocate for community members. They may be considering ways they can use music to heal, challenge, and change conditions and asking how their school-based music learning spaces can establish models for initiating questions, dialogues, research,



and sharing that transfer to community spaces outside of school. To date, music teachers and music students have few music- and music-education-focused resources to guide them. Compared with the history of gender and sexuality studies in other fields, open dialogue on related topics in music education is in its youth (Lamb, Dolloff, & Howe, 2002).

In 2009, Louis Bergonzi broke the silence surrounding intersectionality between sexuality studies and music education. In 2010, music teachers convened for the first LGBTQ Symposium in the U.S., papers from which were published in a special focus issue of the *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* (Denardo & Legutki, 2011). In 2013, the *Bulletin* published Elizabeth Gould's paper from the second LGBTQ Symposium, in which she asked "What might the 'coming out' of LGBTQ studies in music education mean for the profession? How might we interact with each other, enacting a pedagogy not on a discourse of inclusion situated in terms of identities that necessitate exclusion, but one holding each other in regard, meeting face to face, as companion-able species?" (2013, p. 63).

The tragedy at Pulse occurred 22 days after the third LGBTQ Studies & Music Education Symposium, which convened "to encourage, promote, and disseminate

discourse regarding the intersections of LGBTQ topics and music education. . . . [and] reveal how LGBTQ issues operate within music education in terms of research, curriculum, teacher preparation, and the musical lives and careers of LGBTQ music students and teachers." (LGBTQ Studies and Music Education III, 2016, About). Pennsylvania music educator Edward Holmes and I (Brent) presented "Towards a More Inclusive Music Education: Experiences of LGBTQQIAA Students in Music Edu-

cation Programs Across Pennsylvania." To begin to learn about socio-cultural, environmental, and curricular practices that lend themselves to LGBTQQIAA inclusion and safety among members in school communities, we invited students in music education programs across Pennsylvania to complete an anonymous, online survey, and invited respon-

dents interested in expanding upon their experiences to participate in a follow-up interview. Pre-service music teachers in Pennsylvania reveal they are entering the field feeling underprepared to address and support gender and sexual orientation in the classroom. Though many music education programs across the state employ critical methods and include topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion, only 16.9% of respondents reported they felt their professors made a conscious effort to include topics of

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gender and sexuality in their music teacher education curriculum and an even smaller percentage (13.6%) reported they had engaged in positive dialogue on such topics. Our data indicates much more work is needed, 1) to help all pre-service music teachers feel more accepted in our current music teacher education environments, and 2) to better

prepare pre-service music teachers for creating proactive and supportive environments for LGBTQQIAA students in future classrooms. How might music teacher preparation curricula go about creating proactive and supportive music learning spaces in which all members feel included and accepted?

Music education as a profession in the U.S., like other professions, continues to grapple with its needs to reframe messages of inclusion of all peoples. Although the term inclusive arguably encourages an alternative to retaining the status quo, rejecting change, or ignoring marginalization, for LGBTQQIAA matters, Gould (2013) offers an alternative. She favors a process deeper than inclusion during which community members become “messmates at a table, the terms of which do not exist a priori, but which we co-create—a table at which all are guests and no one is host.” (p. 63). Events like the tragedy at Pulse offer parents, administrators, school counselors, and music teachers opportunities for being messmates and co-creating dialogue. Using Gould’s messmate perspective, heterosexuals and people who identify as LGBTQQIA jointly share the job of making the world a safer place. Similarly, people of diverse ethnicities and races, and of any gender, religion, socioeconomic status, ability, and citizenship jointly share the jobs of learning to listen to, understand, and live in respect of others’ feelings, life experiences, current realities, and aspirations.

As music educators we can model proactive advocacy among community members to prevent individuals’ reactive violence in response to intolerance for differences. We can offer music-learning tables as safe spaces in which community members openly and collaboratively learn to know each other as individuals with diverse identities and interests. As messmates around the table, we can identify ways that researching, questioning, and being musical together can eradicate fears and the damaging effects of homophobia.

As the authors of this article, we are two messmates encouraging music teachers and teacher educators to initiate and increase dialogue within music education about matters of social equity. Here we acknowledge music teachers who have already accepted the challenges and join with them in offering a couple of encouragements for becoming a messmate. Like at the beginning of any social gathering, initial conversations can feel awkward. As such, messmates always leave extra seats for new- or late-comers to sit alongside them. Messmates demonstrate patience as some may express feelings in ways that result, for example, in anti-LGBTQQIA slurs or excuses for one’s or others’ homophobia. Messmates invite one another

to view the music-learning setting as a continually safe place for each person to express and understand multiple sides of complex matters, such as societal privileging of heterosexual orientation or personal origins of individuals’ beliefs about sexual orientations. Messmates renew dialogue with the acknowledgement that discriminatory and derogatory language from any vantage point hurts everyone. We encourage use of language that mirrors contemporary, accepted language for diverse people and topics. Beyond using language to be politically correct, we encourage language use that communicates civility, respect for differences, and desire for socially equitable conditions.

Messmates don’t call people out; instead we call each other in, into the conversation—acknowledging ways in which we all have made or can make mistakes. For example, we help each other identify when we are being silent and when we are

making excuses for others’ discriminatory and derogatory statements (e.g., “I know that’s what they said, but they didn’t really mean that.”). When we act in such ways, we help one another acknowledge that being silent, not intervening, or excusing others’ language use sends clear messages of approval and acceptance. Messmates, through conversation and music, work to eliminate such oppression affecting our students, colleagues, and community.

Music teachers are in ideal positions to establish models of music-learning settings in which members openly, responsively, and collaboratively engage in questions, dialogue, and research on all matters to do with daily living. By posting a safe zone sticker in the classroom, providing a statement of diversity in course syllabi, and asking people to introduce

their name and preferred pronouns on the first day of class, music teachers can initiate the expectation that members of the community act collaboratively as messmates and advocates in providing a safe environment for students and colleagues to be “out.” Within safe zones, together, music teachers and students model being strong, resilient messmates who advocate daily on diverse matters, especially on behalf of persons who often are silenced or find themselves unable to speak. As messmates, music teachers and students can powerfully acknowledge, show interest in, and understand community members’ diverse identities; break the silence on a variety of topics; and learn to know of and eradicate situations resulting in abuse or assault, or cause community members to feel invisible, vulnerable, bullied, harassed, or threatened (Carter, 2011). Then, messmates can model possibilities for transferring and advocating at ever-larger tables, inviting other messmates beyond a single music learning setting to join the conversation.

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As professionals, we cannot afford to allow matters such as gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, or ability to incite choices of firing a weapon rather than working collaboratively to understand others' humanness. By learning to listen to, debate with, and know each through face-to-face rational meetings, and holding each other in regard as companion-able species, music education communities can support individuals' differences and healthful needs—physically, intellectually, emotionally, and mentally. Music making offers powerful intersections for unifying those goals. Then, teachers and students working collaboratively as researchers can systematically document and disseminate what they learn individually and in community. As messmates, each person responsibly engages in advocacy to name and decode how power and knowledge operates within systems of oppression, identify how those systems operate on each of us, reflect how to participate in dismantling oppressive systems, and act and resist in ways both small and large to transform our world. In this way, we could live, as Freire (1997) would say, as “transformative beings and not beings for accommodations.” (p. 36). To those ends, the research committee welcomes research submissions that work to expand knowledge on topics of equity in music education. Please visit <http://www.pmea.net/specialty-areas/research/> for details about submitting proposals for research for the 2017 PMEA In-Service Conference in Erie.

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Additional Reading

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