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Critical Pedagogy: Commitment, Connection, and Communication

ABSTRACT

Commitment, Connection, and Communication: These words summarize a triangle of opportunity and are the foundations of a Critical Pedagogy. In practice, commitment, connection, and communication are key words for music educators in their daily work with students. This article explores the eight steps of applying Critical Pedagogy—as outlined in Abrahams’s (2005a) model of Critical Pedagogy for Music Education—in relation to communication with administrators, and the ways in which it may aid in connecting within a community.

Keywords

critical pedagogy; administrators; communication; Frank Abrahams; community; music education; advocacy

Teaching music “is more than developing lessons around a particular piece of musical literature or theoretical concept. Effective music teaching helps children to form values” (Abrahams & Head 1998, p. 50). As I started to brainstorm topics for this article and gather materials, I stumbled upon a chapter in *Case Studies in Music Education* (1998) by Frank Abrahams and Paul Head. The binding of my book copy was still grooved to one specific chapter—titled “A Sound Decision”—and full of my handwritten notes from my classes at Westminster Choir College. As I read, I was amazed by how much of what I believe, practice, and try to impart as a teacher and leader was encapsulated in this one chapter. Interestingly, I have only a vague recollection of working through this chapter in my undergraduate studies; however, some twenty years later, the material clearly resonated with me and created what I like to think of as core values of an educator. “[M]ethodologies may be eclectic. Teaching approaches may be combined. Musical literature and classroom materials may be selected from varied sources. However, philosophy must be singular” (Abrahams & Head, 1998, p. 57). This

philosophy, or core values, drive us—music educators in our work—and must be developed early in our careers.

My studies at Westminster Choir College, which was the beginning of my journey with Critical Pedagogy, helped form some of the core values that have guided me throughout my career as a conductor-teacher. First and foremost, I hold the value that music should be accessible to everyone without exception. Second, the classroom must foster an environment of dialogue between the teacher and students so that learning is flowing in both directions. Finally, I believe that music education provides an endless number of doors for exploration beyond the basics of performing the content alone. When these doors are not opened and connections to the students' worlds are not made, the full value of what we have to offer in the fundamental education of our children is diminished.

APPLYING CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: PANDEMIC HINDSIGHT

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had many negative effects on our world, it has also given us the gift of time to think, reevaluate, and redefine our personal and professional selves, and our values. In the initial stages of the pandemic, everyone was in a frantic panic mode, trying to find ways to engage people in music making from afar. Often it felt like a never-ending hill to climb. I remember the first “Zoom rehearsal” with my collegiate choir and thinking there is no way an online rehearsal will work. As the weeks continued and some challenges with technology were managed, I realized that some core values—which form the basis of a Critical Pedagogy for Music Education—had been ingrained into the culture of my teaching, and learning experiences were the saving grace. Although much of the technology had a steep learning curve, I found myself taking considerable time in the virtual setting to engage in discussion about my students' worlds and experiences. Engaging in these types of discussions came quite easily to me and my students, and I found it easy to transition to creating dialogue in what seemed a highly impersonal online space. These were skills we had practiced each week and valued long before the pandemic occurred; these values were strong for me, too, as an educator, values which were rooted in a critical pedagogy for music education. I knew there was a path to create new ideas and create change for and with my students.

When we were left with only our ears to listen, speaking voices to respond, and shared experience to connect, I found myself amazed at the transformational moments we could have, and the ways in which the eight steps of Critical Pedagogy aided in facilitating them (Abrahams, 2005a). The eight steps consist of:

1. Honoring Their World
2. Sharing the Experience
3. Connecting Their World to the Classroom
4. Dialoguing Together
5. Practicing the Content

6. Connecting Word to World
7. Assessing Transformation
8. Acknowledging Transformation

Often music education is so focused on “Practicing the Content” that the other steps—and, a result, other possibilities—are either left out or highly marginalized. Having a healthy dose of each step in the culture of teaching and learning is what kept our music making alive during the pandemic.

It was comforting to know that my students and I had laid the foundational blocks to creating sustainable path during this online instruction time. However, I found myself suddenly having conversations with my administration to justify our place in online education. I had to explain in detail the content and execution, and more than ever, defend music’s relevance, something I rarely had to do in my time as a public-school teacher and professor in higher education. It was a scary time for the arts and required action from educators and artists to secure our role amidst so many sweeping changes, but the alternative was to sit back and become obsolete.

Concurrently, the question of our community and patrons came to the forefront. How will we continue to engage with them? How do we present art that is both educationally sound and acknowledges the current situation of our world? We were all searching for connection, healing, and higher levels of emotion that only music can provide.

As a conductor, I have always viewed the responsibility to facilitate an artistic triangle. One angle is the music/composer; the second is the ensemble; and third is the audience. I believe all three must be cared for while preparing music for public performance. Throughout the pandemic, a similar concept of a triangle related to Critical Pedagogy re-emerged for me. I believe that at its best, Critical Pedagogy has the potential to further connections with three important demographics of people to create a sustainable future. It provides us with a way to demonstrate *commitment* to our students, engage in honest *communication* with our administration/governing bodies, and reminds us to continue fostering a *connection* with our community.

How can these eight principles of Critical Pedagogy be utilized with groups other than our students? For instance, how can we use the foundations of Critical Pedagogy to communicate with our administration and connect with our community? Below are two brief examples of how I utilized the steps of Critical Pedagogy listed above. Throughout the narrative, I pinpoint how the eight steps of Critical Pedagogy for Music Education allowed for larger transformation—and greater communication—within my teaching setting.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: ENGAGING WITH STAKEHOLDERS

The pandemic made many of us realize just how delicate and unstable so many of the systems we have come to rely on in the world can be. Music education and school programs are no exception. “The future of school music programs, depends upon how

successfully we can tie our goals as music educators to the global goals of schools” (Abrahams, F. A., & Head, P. 1998, p.55). I highlighted this sentence in the chapter of Case Studies in Music Education as an undergraduate music education major in 2002; over 20 years later it is still as applicable as it was then. As educators, the focal point of our work is the students, but for the true success of a program or arts organization, more is needed to thrive. Below I highlight ways to engage with administrators and the community and pinpoint how these suggestions connect to the steps of Critical Pedagogy for Music Education.

Engaging with Our Administration

Interactions with administration can often leave music educators feeling undervalued or misunderstood (Bernard & Abramo, 2019; Shaw, 2016). In one school district where I taught at the high school level, there was a very time-consuming evaluation process for teachers. The intentions of the evaluation were good, but I found myself quite frustrated about how to fit what I did as an ensemble director into the mold of what the district required. I had my first formal evaluation, and instead of teaching as I normally would, I did things that were completely inauthentic to satisfy my administrators and check the boxes on the forms (Bernard, 2015). After receiving my written evaluation, I was not surprised that there were points of concern. In order to satisfy the benchmarks of the evaluation, the lesson was contrived and not true to the ensemble experience. Frustrated, I decided to face the issue head on with the assistant principal. I knew that there was quality teaching going on each day, as well as valuable student experience, and I wanted the assistant principal to see that firsthand. Knowing that my principal was an educator and invested in student learning, I explained that she didn’t see an authentic lesson, but rather simply what I thought she wanted to see (*Honoring Their World and Sharing the Experience*).

What happened next was the start of something wonderful. She agreed to come back, sit in the back of the room, and take detailed notes on the rehearsal process (*Connecting Their World to the Classroom*). We then spent the next several days meeting and talking through my teaching techniques as a music educator so that she could understand our strategies, techniques, and processes (*Dialoguing Together*). We then worked backwards to fill in the form, and, low and behold, all the boxes were checked. Most importantly, moving forward she had a better understanding of what I did, and as a result, I could be evaluated authentically (*Practicing the Content*). The administrator even took it one step further and surprised me by doing a formal evaluation at a concert, inserting what she saw and heard into the evaluation based on her new-found knowledge of my world (*Connecting Word to World*). It was a wonderful exchange and foundation of a fruitful relationship; we both felt the transformation (*Assessing and Acknowledging the Transformation*).

I recently discussed this interaction with my administrator at the time, and she describes the transformation she felt in the following way: “From that point on, both

of us felt a greater respect for the work each of us was doing, and we could understand the boxes of the lesson plans from different perspectives. That allowed the evaluator to see how, in the world of music, the pedagogy unfolded to fit the boxes. Learning continued for both of us, and if I remember correctly, there were things in the evaluation cycle that further supported improved pedagogy once we together could unpack the tool to fit your content.”

As music educators, we must not diminish our pedagogy and fall into the trap of just accepting that what we do doesn't fit into the standard mold. In this case, it was vital to honor the assistant principal's expertise and have an honest conversation about our shared experience as educators. Through dialogue and mutual understanding, we were able to tangibly assess the transformation we made as colleagues and carry that into the future.

Engaging with Our Community

Utilizing these steps of Critical Pedagogy with our audience and community might seem less transferable, but many opportunities can arise both in traditional and unique settings. Abrahams and Head reminded his readers that “What we [music educators] have not done well is to instill in the general public the importance of music throughout life” (p.55). To address this issue, I often hold open rehearsals for our community and patrons (*Honoring Their World*). This provides the opportunity for the conductor, students, and community to share stories and experiences about the music, text, their listening, and so much more (*Sharing the Experience*). It can provide a window into the rehearsal process, how we shape sound, and help the community feel more empowered as listeners and concert goers (*Dialoguing Together and Practicing the Content*). Interactions with our community such as these, offer an opportunity to dialogue about what patrons would like to hear at concerts and provides time to discuss future projects in hopes of bringing them to life with their support (*Acknowledging Transformation*).

During the pandemic, connecting with the community directly was a significant challenge since in-person concerts were canceled. Engaging through online forms of music presentation became a means of repairing a broken triangle between us and our community. I asked my students how they thought we could engage with our community (*Honoring Their World*). We shared our ideas on how to connect and make our efforts meaningful (*Sharing the Experience*). One of the shared interests during the pandemic was to acknowledge our front-line medical workers (*Connecting Their World to the Classroom*). I had recently set the *Prayer of St. Francis* to music. The lyrics discuss being an instrument of peace, healing, and hope, and performing the piece seemed like an opportunity to bring this concept to life (*Dialoguing Together*). The students and I practiced and put together a virtual choir that could be posted on our online platforms (*Practicing the Content*). After further discussion, students proposed including personal dedications to their family members who were in the medical field. We were able to partner with a regional medical association to have the virtual performance sent to all

their employees (*Connecting Word to World*). We received wonderful feedback from our community on this project from family, friends, patrons, and the medical community. It extended our reach, which was an unintended bonus (*Assessing Transformation*). While acknowledging the impact of this project, we realized that this program was an opportunity to create an online music series for those who cannot see our performances, an opportunity to make music readily available to all people and not just those able to attend concerts (*Acknowledging Transformation*). Today we are back to in person concerts, but the online Vocal Arts Series is continuing as an outreach program within our community.

FINAL THOUGHTS

While the concept of implementing principles of Critical Pedagogy beyond the classroom exists, it is perhaps underutilized. Critical pedagogy, McLaren (1998) illustrated, “is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationships among classroom teaching, the producing of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school and the social and material relations of the wider community, society and nation state” (p. 45). If the pandemic has shown us anything as music educators, it is that we must go further than merely practicing the content. Our future depends on the reach of our teaching going beyond simply preparing literature in the classroom. It must ultimately spread to those who may not consider music education to hold intrinsic value. Critical Pedagogy offers clear steps to engage with administrators and educate them regarding our pedagogy and value within our culture. It also provides a framework to engage with our community and build critical listeners and lifelong music lovers without whom we cannot complete our triangle of *commitment, connection, and communication*.

As teachers, we know that once an academic year begins, a lesson plan is made, or a concert is in progress, there are always twists, turns, and unexpected surprises. We must take pride in our pedagogy, and forward planning is always a huge marker of a teacher’s success. Over the years, I have noticed that the most authentic teaching takes place in those moments when you choose to be flexible rather than push forward with the lesson plan. Critical Pedagogy typically shines a light into our classrooms in those moments that require us to think on our feet or pivot to a conversation, concept, or activity that was not in the original lesson plan. That is why it is so important to be grounded in your core values as an educator. It is so much easier to adapt during a lesson, in conversations with administrators, or even during a global pandemic when you know your own guiding principles. The pedagogy will fall into place around those pillars.

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About the Author

Anthony Bernarducci is an Associate Professor of Music at Clemson University and serves as the Director of Choral and Vocal Studies. Anthony conducts the Men's Choir, Cantorei, and Clemson University Singers. He also teaches courses in music theory and

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Dr. Bernarducci is an active composer and has works published with GIA Publications, Gentry Publications, Hinshaw Music, and ECS Publishing Group. He has received commissions and performances from leading ensembles and organizations such as The Westminster Williamson Voices, The St. Olaf Choir, and The United States Soldiers Chorus. His compositions have been performed around the world by choral ensembles in Korea, Slovenia, Italy, and South Africa and on such notable stages as Carnegie Hall, Severance Hall, Mechanics Hall, and Heinz Hall. He holds a PhD in music education from Florida State University, a Master of Music in conducting from the University of Arizona, and a Bachelor of music education from Westminster Choir College.