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Jason D. Vodicka

Westminster Choir College, Rider University

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Jason D. Vodicka

Westminster Choir College, Rider University

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ABSTRACT

Whether by mandate or by personal aspiration, teachers across the United States are compelled to teach in a manner that is culturally relevant to their students. Culturally relevant pedagogy, and its recent iteration, culturally sustaining pedagogy, call for high levels of student achievement, the development of multiple cultural competencies, and the raising of sociopolitical consciousness. Culturally sustaining pedagogy and critical pedagogy share a focus on connecting to students' lived experience, empowering students in the classroom and in the world, and developing students' critical consciousness. As asset-based pedagogies, both approaches focus on what students know first. This essay defines culturally sustaining pedagogy and presents a comprehensive example of the pedagogy in action. Then, through narrative exploration, the author reflects on his own journey from teaching as monologue, to teaching as dialogue, and finally, to teaching as cultural sustainment.

Keywords

culturally relevant pedagogy; culturally sustaining pedagogy; critical pedagogy; cultural competency

Samuel is a white, cis-gendered, male teacher living in the northeast region of the United States. He grew up in a predominantly white suburb, attended public schools, and holds two degrees in music education from a university with a national reputation for excellence in classical music. After seven years of teaching in the suburbs, Samuel decided to take a new teaching position in an urban school district. Hoping to make a difference in the lives of students who did not have the advantages he did, Samuel moved to the city to begin his work as a high school choir teacher.

On the first day of his new job, Samuel attended an all-faculty meeting in the school auditorium. After going over school regulations and expectations for the faculty, the principal gave a brief inspirational speech in which he charged Samuel and his colleagues to teach their students in a culturally relevant manner by including a unit on the

diverse cultural groups represented in the school population. Samuel and the other teachers were then dismissed to their classrooms to begin preparing for the year.

For Samuel, this call to teach relevantly meant programming music that reflected the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of his students. In order to prepare, he went to his district's website to obtain demographic information about his school's student population. He learned that the majority of his students identified as Black, while 25% of his students identified as Hispanic. A small minority of students identified as White, Asian, or "other."

Samuel went back through his college choral music class notes to find pieces by Black composers that he thought his students could perform. He also reached out to teachers in his local music education association to help him identify pieces by Hispanic composers. Samuel settled on three arrangements of African American spirituals and a Venezuelan folk song. Over the course of the next few days, Samuel created seating charts for his classes and assembled the music into choir folders. By Friday afternoon, he was ready for the students' arrival on Monday morning.

On Samuel's first day, he began his choir class with a warm-up consisting of vocalises he sang in his college choir. He then passed out the folders and began to work on one of the spiritual arrangements. He was surprised when he heard some of his students complain about the music. "This sounds like church. This music is stupid"; "When are we going to sing something that I like?"; "I'm not Black, why do I have to sing this?"; "Did you see this, it's in Spanish or something weird like that?"; By the end of the week, Samuel felt completely defeated. He had tried to program music that reflected his students' ethnic backgrounds in an attempt to be culturally responsive. What had he gotten wrong?

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY

Samuel's attempt to connect with his students and their backgrounds is, of course, a worthy endeavor. As demographics across the country continue to shift away from a white majority, culturally relevant pedagogy (also known as culturally responsive teaching) has moved to the forefront of American education. School districts located in all fifty states now require teachers to teach in a culturally relevant manner, but few teachers feel properly trained to do so (Muniz, 2019). In addition, research points to an incomplete understanding of culturally relevant models, leading to incomplete implementation in real world situations (Bond, 2017).

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) was developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings based on her work with Black students in urban schools (1995). CRP is an asset-based pedagogy, meaning that students' cultural assets are celebrated and used as the basis for learning. This is different from deficit models of education that assume that Black, brown, and urban students just aren't up to the standards of predominantly white suburban schools. CRP has three components: student achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Student achievement refers to the high academic

standards to which students are held, as well as the belief that all students can succeed. Cultural competence refers to the development of understanding of one's own culture first, followed by the development of competence in another culture (for minority students, this is often the dominant culture). This approach is constructivist in nature as it begins with what students already know and have experienced (an advantage white students have in most schools) and moves toward the unknown. Finally, sociopolitical consciousness refers to students' ability to identify and solve real world problems. This is what a Freirean educator might call critical consciousness, and it is the component of the CRP model that is most often missing in real world implementation (Bond, 2017).

Extending Ladson-Billings's (2014) CRP model, *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (CSP) adds several new facets to culturally relevant pedagogy. First is an understanding of culture as an individualized phenomenon. In other words, each student comes with their own cultural assets which may or may not be related to their ethnic heritage (culture of origin) or their lived experiences (culture of reference). Second, teachers should recognize modern youth culture as a valid form of cultural identity. Third, it is the responsibility of schools not only to reflect or respond to students' culture, but to actively sustain it through direct engagement with cultural practices and communities. In her article "Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0, aka the Remix," Ladson-Billings (2014) herself endorses the idea of a culturally sustaining pedagogy:

The newer concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy is built on the same foundational notion of students as subjects rather than objects...I hope to help those who subscribe to earlier visions of culturally relevant pedagogy make the transition to the remix: culturally sustaining pedagogy. For, if we ever get to a place of complete certainty and assuredness about our practice, we will stop growing. If we stop growing, we will die, and, more importantly, our students will wither and die in our presence. (p. 77)

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY IN MUSIC

Three authors have created models for a culturally responsive music pedagogy. The first, by Lind and McKoy (2016), focuses on building relationships with students, program and curricular choices, and promoting social justice. Shaw's (2012) model provides guidance for choral teachers hoping to induce social change through repertoire choice, rehearsal technique, and a spiral curriculum. And, the Framework for Culturally Relevant and Responsive Music Teaching (FCRRMT) was created by Palmer et. al (2021) based on a literature review of culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining teaching practices in general education and in music education. This framework is anchored to Ladson-Billings's model of student achievement, cultural consciousness, and sociopolitical action, and consists of four quadrants of teacher competencies, informed choice, authenticity, and holistic/comparative lessons. The term teacher competencies refers to the work teachers must do before and during teaching. This includes self-analysis, building cultural competence, decentralizing Western art music, having an open disposition, and acting as a facilitator in the classroom. Informed choice

encompasses repertoire selection, connection to the lived experiences of students, the formation of culture-specific ensembles, and using context to drive instructional choices. Authenticity fosters an honest valuation and appreciation of all forms of music, understanding of performance practices, and performances that are contextual in nature. Finally, holistic-comparative lessons are those lessons that teach music in a multifaceted approach (rather than just through the elements of music) are poly-cultural or poly-musical, facilitating students' ability to compare and contrast musical practices. All of this takes place in cooperation with the local community through the use of culture bearers, co-teaching, and collaborative musical performances.

The Framework for Culturally Relevant and Responsive Music Teaching also takes inspiration from Abrahams's *Critical Pedagogy for Music Education* (2017), an application of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000) to the teaching and learning of music. *Critical Pedagogy for Music Education* and *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy* are both asset-based pedagogies in which students' worlds are honored. In both approaches, students learn about their own lives and cultural assets first before moving on to other cultural practices, particularly those of the dominant culture in which students may eventually find themselves living and working. It is through learning about the dominant culture that students develop a sociopolitical or critical consciousness, that is, the ability to identify real world problems, determine who has the power to create change, and come up with solutions that impact students' own communities. Abrahams also suggested connecting school music to music that students listen to on their own. This is in alignment with CSP's approach of studying multiple cultural practices at the same time through comparative lessons.¹ Finally, both approaches encourage teachers to act as facilitators in the classroom, modeling not only the teaching process, but also the learning process for their students. In both traditions, students are empowered as holders of knowledge and may be called to act as culture bearers.

In Action: Spinifex Gum

An example of culturally sustaining pedagogy in action is the Spinifex Gum project (Spinifex Gum Website, 2022), a multi-arts collaboration between Australian musicians Felix Riebl and Ollie McGill and Marliya, an all-female indigenous choral ensemble conducted by Lyn Williams. Deb Brown is the group's choreographer. The project began as a song cycle commissioned by the choir. The songs address contemporary issues of the Yindjibarndi, an indigenous people located in the Pilbara region of Australia. Riebl made many trips to the region over the course of seven years to speak with local residents, hear the stories of the people, take photographs of the land, and record sounds for electronic playback. Stories from the region include land rights issues such as the destruction of sacred indigenous sites, mass incarceration and death in police

¹ An example of holistic/comparative lessons is Anuja Kamat's Youtube series on different styles of Indian classical music.

custody, and even songs of friendship. The cycle was created ethically with the cooperation of tribal elders and permission of the families of specific people depicted in the songs. The project has evolved into a fully staged, fully choreographed arena show in collaboration with some of Australia's most famous popular music performers, and the group is now working on its second full-length album.

The Marliya ensemble is the core of the Spinifex Gum project. Its singers are ages 12-20 and are pulled from the larger Gondwana Indigenous Children's Choir. Despite their young age, the singers have reached a high level of musical achievement. Singers self-prepare their music using literacy and performance skills learned as part of the Gondwana choir. Their performances are choreographed with each singer holding her own microphone. Performances are fully memorized, and the singers produce a healthy vocal tone that allows them to sing for extended periods of time without fatigue. The shows are vocally, visually, and emotionally engaging.

Representing a wide variety of the more than 500 cultural sub-groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people in Australia, the choral singers develop several forms of cultural competence, both as part of Marliya and as singers in the Gondwana Indigenous Children's Choir (GICC). Through singing, dancing, and playing instruments with Kay and Noel Zaro and members of their family, the singers develop competence in Torres Strait Island culture. For many of the singers, this is their first experience learning about indigenous culture of any kind, and while not all singers see their specific cultural group represented, they nonetheless learn about attributes and traditions shared across indigenous culture groups in Australia.

The singers also develop competence in western art music. GICC and its sister organization the Sydney Children's Choir are part of a children's choir tradition that includes groups like the Toronto Children's Chorus, the Indianapolis Children's Choir, and the Young People's Chorus of New York City; they have also participated in cultural exchanges with the Vienna Boys Choir. Additionally, the Marliya singers have become competent in what might be considered their culture of reference: contemporary youth music. The Spinifex Gum pieces are written in contemporary popular style using spoken word, rap, and electronic instruments, with professional collaborators like Emma Donovan and Biggs acting as culture bearers. In addition to their musical competence, the singers learn how to be part of a professional touring ensemble including how to interact with professionals and how to take care of their bodies and their voices.

The Spinifex Gum project does not shy away from sociopolitical conflict. The songs they sing address contemporary issues facing not only the people of the Pilbara region, but indigenous Australians in general. These issues include systemic racism, police brutality, and the death of indigenous persons at the hands of police. The singers also address land rights issues like the destruction of sacred aboriginal sites by powerful mining companies. The singers engage in deep conversation about these issues with their directors, the song writers, and their choreographer. They met and spoke with the

family of “Ms. Dhu,” the subject of one of their songs, whose death in police custody made national headlines.

The singers’ parents are kept constantly apprised of discussions, and some families have opted out of the ensemble because of the subject matter. They have been invited to sing at Parliament House in Canberra and have met with politicians to talk about indigenous concerns. As performers, they feel that they are bringing these issues to their audience’s attention in a way that cannot be ignored.

While youth culture can be transgressive, it can also reinforce existing power imbalances (Paris & Alim, 2014). In this project, the voices of young, female, indigenous people are amplified. The disarming nature of their sound and the relatively low status they hold in terms of political power create an opening for their voices to be heard. Through relationship building, with the Marliya singers, with the Yindjibarndi people, and with culture bearers, Riebl and Williams seek to empower the voices of others and to build and sustain cultural practices. This work continues in the present day as new songs are written for the artistic collaborative by some of the older Marliya singers in collaboration with Riebl.

CSP, CP, CHORAL PEDAGOGY, AND ME

It is through my own interactions with the Spinifex Gum project (including a site visit to Australia in 2018 and a subsequent research study) that I have become an advocate of culturally sustaining pedagogy. But this latest turn is only a small part of a longer narrative of becoming aware of the world and the role that music might play in it.

In the summer of 1998, as a rising high school senior, I attended the Westminster Choir College Vocal Institute. For two weeks, I was immersed in college-level choral training, delivered in a style that I would now call conservative, highly traditional, and very conductor-centric. As a product of traditional choral training through my early musical experiences at church, school, and in a community boys’ choir, I was in heaven. The experience of working with peers who were as serious about music as I was, and with inspiring faculty who introduced me to musical concepts I had never even heard of before cemented my decision to attend Westminster for my undergraduate degree.

Two weeks later, I attended Westminster’s High School Music Theatre Workshop. There I met Frank Abrahams who was the program’s director and the musical director of our showcase performance. The difference between my two Westminster experiences could not have been more stark. At Vocal Institute, we were carefully led through each piece of music with special attention to vocal technique, audiation skills, diction, and musical intent. At Music Theatre workshop rehearsals, we ran through entire pieces of music, sometimes even 15-minute medleys of music, on first read, without stopping. While wrong notes and imperfect rhythms drove me absolutely crazy, they didn’t seem to bother our conductor who gave us fifteen minutes to work on the music by ourselves before running the whole piece again (seemingly to me without much difference than the first time we sloppily read the piece).

What I didn't realize at the time was that Dr. Abrahams was enacting an early iteration of his Critical Pedagogy for Music Education. Frank² has often said to me "I never do something for a student if the student can do it for themselves." Later, as an undergraduate student at Westminster Choir College, I learned about social constructivism and ways to make learning last through social interaction and connecting prior knowledge to new knowledge. In my final semester, I learned about critical pedagogy and its dual teaching techniques of problem-posing and dialogue. My own master's thesis at Westminster focused on the impact of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000) on the high school choir (the thesis was at least partially written in an attempt to show that turning over responsibility to students could never result in a quality choral performance). And, as Associate Director of the Westminster Music Theatre Workshop, I worked under Frank's guidance to hone, expand, and develop my own understanding of "Critical pedagogy as choral pedagogy," often borrowing and adapting techniques I learned from Frank himself, which had, in turn, been adapted from language literacy techniques (Abrahams, 2017).

In the opening chapter of *The Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy*, Abrahams (2017) wrote:

Critical pedagogy is a perspective that informs the ways conductors think about the choral rehearsal and school choral program. To implement the perspective, conductors must be willing to release from their routine practice many of the time-honored and traditional paradigms that have long been associated with the responsibilities of the conductor and the expectations both conductors and singers have for each other. The conductor needs considerable confidence in his or her musicianship and a belief in the potentials of the singers to be able to do this. Research shows, however, that adopting critical pedagogy as a framework for decision making yields positive results. These include the acquisition of a critical consciousness, the ability to create meaningful teaching and learning experiences, and the attainment of agency. (p. 25)

One of the studies Frank points to is my own thesis, which, despite my best efforts, did show that critical pedagogy could engage and empower students, lead them to reconsider their role in the choral rehearsal, and in some cases, even to personal transformation.

As an in-service teacher, I became aware of the waves that Frank's approach to teaching and learning was having in the local professional community, partially through my own use of critical pedagogy techniques, and also through the dozens and dozens of Westminster student teachers who were asking their choirs to think-pair-share, to learn notes and rhythms on their own, to make suggestions on how to improve a performance, and even to recommend repertoire that aligned with the kinds of music they liked and enjoyed listening to outside of school. While few critics could state exactly

² I deliberately change between calling Frank Abrahams "Dr. Abrahams" and "Frank" to reflect the change in relationship with him, referring to him as Dr. Abrahams as a teacher and scholar and Frank as a colleague and friend.

why any of this was bad, there was a definite resistance to Frank's own resistive pedagogy. On more than one occasion, I heard critical pedagogy dismissed as "just good teaching". In my head I often wondered, "if it's good teaching, then what's the problem with doing it?"

Critical pedagogy, Abrahams (2017) furthered,

is sometimes called radical pedagogy and a pedagogy of resistance. When it frames the choral pedagogy, it opens choral experiences to the opportunities of transformative teaching and sensitizes everyone to the negative issues of power, marginalization, hegemonic practice, and political issues that constrain the artistic processes of creating, performing, and responding and inhibit the artistic spirit from reaping the benefits of choral singing at their fullest. (p. 25)

At Westminster, a conservatory built on the master-apprentice model of Western classical music, Frank's advocacy of critical pedagogy has not always been warmly received. Much like my own resistance, hesitation, and reluctance to accept the approach, it has taken several decades for it to permeate into the choral traditions of the Choir College. For a number of years, Frank ran a high school Youth Chorale through Westminster Conservatory, a community music school associated with the college. The Chorale met on Saturday mornings, and was led by Frank in coordination with four student conducting interns who were encouraged to incorporate dialogue and problem-posing into their teaching. The interns met Frank for breakfast every Saturday morning before rehearsal to dialogue about rehearsal techniques, lesson planning, and rehearsal logistics. The use of CP in this ensemble was a "subtle act of subversion," run in the early hours of the weekend, and became both a lab and a platform for Frank's views on choral pedagogy. In addition to choral staples like *Messiah* (performed with student-generated ornamentations in the choral movements), the choir performed an annual Hannukah concert, introducing music to the Westminster community (and to future music educators) a repertoire they would never encounter in a curricular ensemble. The Westminster Jewish Choral Music Series supported the creation of dozens of new compositions, many written by Westminster students and faculty members.

Today, however, it is not unusual to see sectional rehearsals led by students, student-led extension projects about history, context, and personal connection, and even talking between singers during rehearsals. There's even a good amount of "let's run it again; see what you can do better this time" as opposed to constant conductor-centric micromanaging of the rehearsal process. I like to think that my own work as a current Westminster faculty member has helped bring Frank's ideas about music education into the very fabric of what we do at Westminster. Through choral methods classes, summer session teaching opportunities, and my own work with high school students during the summer, I have also played a role in the deconstruction of oppressive techniques in the choral rehearsal paradigm.

One of the goals of Frank's pedagogy is to expand on and blur the lines between the roles of teacher and student. It is not lost on me that Frank has cultivated our own

relationship in this manner. Engaging in dialogue is constant with Frank, and his resistance to anything that even whiffs of mainstream is in my perspective one of his most endearing qualities. During the summer of 2020, I had several conversations over FaceTime and text message with Frank about culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy. As is typical of our friendship, Frank barraged me with a seemingly endless list of questions intended to provoke my thinking, to help him in his own search for meaning, and likely also just to provoke me (a tactic familiar to many of Frank's students, colleagues, and friends). Rather than engage in a fight, I simply told Frank that I thought these "new" ways of teaching (with roots that can be traced back at least as far as the early 1980s) had a lot in common with critical pedagogy. Within a week, Frank told me he had begun to write about the ways in which culturally relevant and responsive approaches intersect with critical pedagogy, and while I haven't yet had an opportunity to view this work, I can assume several connections. First is an understanding of the world. For critical pedagogues, this involves learning about oneself and one's students and basing educational experiences on their lived experience. Abrahams advocates asking the questions "Who am I?" and "Who are my students?" before (and presumably during) planning instruction. In culturally relevant pedagogy, students are led to learn about their world through the lens of culture, first exploring their own culture (in order to connect education to their world), and then another culture. It is through comparative lessons that expose students to multiple musical practices that students learn to make connections between cultures.

One of the lesson plans I remember best from Frank's repertoire is an activity in which students compare and contrast the practices of rap and Gregorian chant (both derive rhythms from the expression of text, and use limited pitch content and repetitive structures). In another of Frank's comparative lessons, students consider what song Madonna or Lady Gaga might sing if she were cast in Mozart's *Magic Flute* instead of the Queen of the Night aria.

For marginalized students, learning about another culture is most often learning about the dominant culture. This is so that students may have every opportunity to succeed as members of society without losing a sense of their own cultural identity (through a process known as code switching). This connects with critical pedagogy's aim of identifying and combating power structures in the educational system and in the world. Critical pedagogues may recognize this bifurcated approach as honoring the student's world, connecting word to world, and the development of critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is a deep understanding of the world and awareness of the social and political structures located therein. With consciousness comes the potential to act upon one's own situation to one's own benefit. This is not unlike socio-political awareness or socio-political action, which is one of the pillars of culturally relevant pedagogy most strongly displayed in the Spinifex Gum project.

The first pillar of culturally relevant pedagogy is student achievement. Ladson-Billings (1995) cautions against comparing the achievement of urban African-American

urban students to their white suburban counterparts, instead encouraging educators and students to define achievement on their own terms and in their own contexts. Whether or not this type of achievement can be considered transformative, it nonetheless asks the open-ended question, “What might my students become?,” and through deep interactions with the local community, “what might we” as a community, “become together?”

CONCLUSION

Teaching music in a critical, responsive, relevant, and sustaining way involves more than just choosing music that represents students’ ethnic heritages or personal tastes. It requires a constant and ongoing investment in learning, both about musical practices and about who our students are as people, as musicians, and as community members. It requires the deep exploration of multiple musical practices during which the teacher may act variously as expert, facilitator, learner, or provoker. It involves teaching students how to recognize issues of power or struggle in their own lives, and gives them the tools to solve problems in the real world. A critical and sustaining pedagogy employs music educators to not only teach about culture, but to sustain, change, and empower the cultural practices of all students.

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About the Author

Jason Vodicka is Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and Associate Professor of Music Education at Westminster Choir College of Rider University. Dr. Vodicka is also artistic director of the New Jersey MasterChorale. He holds both undergraduate and graduate degrees from Westminster Choir College and a doctorate in conducting from the University of Georgia.