



Teaching Music to Transgress: A Theme and Variations on bell hooks (Music Education as a Practice of Freedom)

Jared Jamias, M.A., Ph.D Student

Attallah College of Educational Studies, Chapman University

Background: Critical Pedagogy

- Critical pedagogy is a teaching philosophy pioneered by Paulo Freire that invites educators to encourage students to critique structures of power and oppression.
- It is rooted in critical theory, which focuses on awareness and questioning the societal status quo.
- Critical pedagogy explores the dialogic relationships between teaching and learning, urging individuals to be reflective and engage in praxis (reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed) -Freire



Dissonance (Issues) in Music Education

- North American music curriculum is 'assimilationist' with how it exhibits exclusive focus for and privileges the Western European 'classical' tradition, (repertoire and notational systems), devaluing the music of other cultures.
- Music Education plays a significant role in fostering the reproduction of dominant, authoritarian ideals: alienating dialogue and critical inquiry, enforcing agendas of cultural identities and gendered discourse, upholding tradition of Western repertoire, and perpetuating unjust and selective power dynamics.

Purpose

- The purpose is to examine how three of bell hooks's themes of critical, engaged pedagogy can exist and effectively function within the U.S. Music Education curriculum.
- I examine specific issues found within the U.S. Music Education curriculum, proposing why bell hooks's themes of critical, engaged pedagogy are solutions.
- I then connect how bell hooks's approach to education can exist and function through current research and applied practices found within the literature of Critical Pedagogy and Music Education.



Variation I: Democratic Education

- Democratic Education aims to practice student-centered learning experiences within a constructive community, breaking the hegemonic dichotomy between students and teacher.
- The Application of Critical Pedagogy to Music Teaching and Learning: Frank Abrahams
 - Elementary lesson related to the theme of "family" - kids are taught that each instrument belongs to a family. The children collaboratively work to think and categorize orchestral instruments into what their appropriate families are. A final activity has students create their own homemade instruments using everyday materials (boxes, rubberbands, tubes), categorizing their created instruments into what family they think they belong to, and then performing together.

bell hooks's Critically Engaged Pedagogy

- bell hooks, pseudonym of Gloria Jean Watkins, is an African-American scholar and activist who examines the connections between race, gender, class, critical consciousness, and awareness of oneself and society.
- hooks urges educators and students to critically engage in a transgressive resistance to co-construct a holistic, ethical, and transformative learning environment which values all voices.
- "When everyone in the classroom, teacher and students, recognizes that they are responsible for creating a learning community together, learning is at its most meaningful and useful (hooks, 2009)."



Theme: Music Education as a Practice of Freedom

- bell hooks's view of education, as stated in her book *Teaching to Transgress*, is the practice of freedom in which anyone can learn, teaching in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of all students (hooks, 1994, p.13).
- Education is a transgressive approach across racial, class, and sexual boundaries that advocates for students to think critically within the learning environment.
- There have been efforts towards achieving social justice and equity within the pedagogical sphere of Music Education. Music educators today are recognizing the power that the forces of music and social awareness exhibit in a more culturally diverse society require culturally responsive teaching methods and pedagogy



Variation II: Multicultural Pedagogy

- Multicultural Pedagogy celebrates and embraces diverse cultures, ethnic identities, and practices within Education, where no dominant culture is hegemonically enforced.
- Equity in Music Education: Juliet Hess
 - Hess seeks to engage students' own music interests and experiences, validating their perspectives and own forms and expression of music. Hess offers imaginative multicultural approaches of teaching music, such as producing hip-hop tracks or performing in mariachi bands. Hess acknowledges the established importance of traditional music education pedagogy, but critically examines the contextual values of these skills outside of the classroom. Students can learn to critically think and reflect about how music exists within society, such as the questioning of whom is absent from repertoire within traditional music classes.



How does Critical Pedagogy apply to Music Education?

- Music educators today are recognizing the power that the forces of music and social awareness exhibit in a more culturally diverse society require culturally responsive teaching methods and pedagogy.
- Music educators are realizing that musical experiences designed and implemented within the classroom can foster social and leadership skills within students, also giving musical opportunities (vocal, instrumental, dance, musical theatre) to express themselves and connect to music from around the world, all in the pursuit of equity and social justice.

Conclusion

- hooks's main theme of "Education as a Practice of Freedom" stands as a central principle for the integration of Critical Pedagogy into Music Education, through which the variations of Democratic Education, Multicultural Pedagogy, and Advocacy for Feminism and Diverse Identities can effectively enact transformational change. Each variation requires non-alienating teaching through a critically conscious discourse, where personal meaning, interpretation, and social-cultural understanding can connect student and teacher experiences (Schmidt, 2005).
- This critically engaged approach can develop students' abilities to distinguish and appreciate the differences and similarities among musical cultures, adopting a stance of "multimusicality" (Elliott, 1989), which can likewise carry over into a transformational experience when the new word, that is music, is created with and within the outside world (Abrahams, 2005b; Schmidt, 2005).
- While multiple examples of Critical approaches to Music Education have been conducted and reported, there are limitations regarding the specific interconnectedness with bell hooks's teachings. The covered literature is able to bridge the main themes together, but the lack of direct synthesis between bell hooks and Music Education can prove to be an area of potential further research towards the progression of Critical Music Education.

Variation III: Advocacy for Feminism & Diverse Identities

- Advocacy for Feminism & Diverse Identities in Education centers on the belief in full social, economic, and political equality for women and LGBTQ persons.
- Block Feminism through Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe Hines
 - Hines offers an intersectional musical approach of promoting Black Feminism through the music of Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe. Intersectionality, which comprehends social paradigms that define unique human experiences, aligns with Black Feminist thought to disrupt the hegemonic and Eurocentric norm of Music Education curriculum. Hines conceptualizes how the music of both Simone and Monáe serve as relevant examples on the lived realities of Black women, past and present.

