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The Trials of a New Teacher

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The Trials of a New Teacher

Abstract

Tim, a new teacher, faces challenges as he works towards changing the environment in a high school music program.

Keywords

Music, education, pedagogy, teaching, school

Disciplines

Fiction | Music Education | Secondary Education and Teaching

Comments

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

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Diego Rocha

Social Foundations of Music Education

Dr. Brent Talbot

The Trials of a New Teacher

What are the major models of music education in the past? How were those models developed and for what purposes? What implications can the implementation of those models in the past give to music educators today?

Timothy Smith was excited as he drove to Pine Creek High School; it was three weeks before classes and the first day of band camp for the marching band, the Marching Pinecones. He had graduated earlier that year and was thrilled to be able to go into the grade and focus that he wanted to immediately after college. The school's previous band director, Mr. Fritzes, had taught there for about 40 years, but had been fired the previous year due to complaints from parents and other teachers. Tim knew that Fritzes had run a very "tight ship" at the school and was partial to a more militaristic approach to band. Tim, meanwhile, had learned instead to follow a method of teaching that was a much more cooperative venture between student and teacher as demonstrated by the book *To Teach: The Journey in Comics* (2010). He knew that it would be tough to implement this style of teaching at a school so rooted in the teaching styles of the past, but he was confident that students would open up to them and grow as a result.

As the students began to shuffle in, water bottles and instruments in hand, he stood in the back. On the board he had written a message asking students to set their instruments and water against the wall and to sit in a large circle. The students are a bit apprehensive, but eventually all

end up in the circle. Eventually Tim came forward, joined the circle, and told students that this first day of band camp won't be spent on the show, and that instead it will be spent meeting and learning about each other, and then addressing how the year will go moving forward. There were a few groans from the students, and some annoyed remarks about how they'll never learn the show before school starts if they "waste" a day on "stupid team-building stuff." This reminded Tim of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) where Freire talks about the oppressed not knowing they are oppressed, and even promoting their further oppression. Tim waited for the students to settle some and then said that they will be going around the circle introducing each other, answering the questions "What's your name? What's your instrument? What year are you in? What song/piece did you listen to most recently? And what's one interesting fact about yourself?" After the students answer the questions, Tim engaged them with a number of other activities meant to build cohesion and unity within the ensemble through the rest of the day. Over the next two weeks the marching band grew and learnt the show together and were able to perform it on their last day of band camp.

The real issues start to rise as classes begin and ensembles go into full swing; there are four major ensembles at the school: the Concert Band, Symphonic Band, Wind Ensemble, and Jazz Ensemble. Mr. Fritzles had implemented a very "results" focused method of ensemble teaching that emphasized perfection in performance above almost anything else. This approach mirrored the idea of standardized testing as addressed in *To Teach: The Journey in Comics* (2010), wherein students are all graded on a single scale in one important test (performance), often producing great ratings at festival and assessment, but at the expense of students not in the "top" ensembles. While the Wind Ensemble and Jazz Ensemble would rehearse with him every day in class and also had twice weekly after-school rehearsals, the Concert and Symphonic Band

would many times just have “days-off” where they wouldn’t rehearse in class and only had an after-school rehearsal once per concert. These ensembles had sparse instrumentation and heavy turn-over as students in them would be discouraged by the middle-school level literature they were forced to play and the lack of attention from Mr. Fritzes. The Jazz Ensemble had its own problems as well; despite the large amount of students involved in the music program, there was only one Jazz Ensemble in the school, and as a result, many students who wanted to play jazz in an ensemble setting never had a chance due to the very limited instrumentation.

Tim made the controversial choice to combine the Concert and Symphonic Bands so that instrumentation could be more filled out and so that he could properly devote himself to making these ensembles a real part of the program at the high school because, as Patricia Shehan Campbell and Steven J. Morrison write in *Musician and Teacher* (2008), “it is the task of the music educator to give each ensemble complete attention and enthusiasm” (p. 168). Tim also expands the jazz program to two ensembles (with the second being open to any instruments) so that any students who wish have the opportunity to play music that they want to play. Tim also became aware that there was a large constituent of students who were interested in theory and composition, but didn’t have access to any formal teaching in the subject due to Mr. Fritzes’ decision to not have a class of that sort, and decided to start a theory/composition class, and a Music Technology class both of which would be open to all students at the school regardless of their involvement in ensembles. He was especially excited about the Music Technology class where students would be able to more freely explore any music of their choosing to better understand what goes into its creation regardless of genre.

Along with this Tim wanted to more deeply address the literature that students played in ensembles. Mr. Fritzes had been very fond of transcriptions, specifically from the Classical and

Romantic era, and had barely addressed any non-western art music, or music written after 1930. Knowing this, Tim decided to approach his programming with the intention to make more diverse programs, featuring composers of various countries, eras, perspectives, and genders in order to approach music making from a wider and more holistic perspective, utilizing parts of a number of the systems of music education outlined in *Musician and Teacher* (2008). In doing this Tim was also conscious of the way he approached introducing and rehearsing the literature. He remembered reading Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), especially in regards to the idea of the banking method of teaching as opposed to the problem-posing method. He decided that he wouldn't just "tell" students what the piece was about, but would instead encourage students to do research about the composer and piece themselves, and then have in-class discussions twice per week about the composers, pieces, contexts, and meanings of the music they were making in class that would help to inform their performance. By doing this Tim believed that students would better be able to, as Postman and Weingartner (*Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, 1969) would put it, "create meaning" in their performances by establishing cultural and historical contexts for the music and then synthesizing and applying them to the performance of that music.

Tim, though, was aware that many students would likely be apprehensive to this approach to music making based on their experiences in the past. While this system would allow for greater freedom of expression and encourage individual opinions to shape the ensemble performance, it would also put more responsibility onto the students and would likely feel quite unusual to them after being in a system where decisions were made by the director and then dictated to students. Because of this drastic change in approach, Tim decided that he wouldn't immediately move completely to this separate approach, but that he would instead, as Bill Ayers

suggests, act as a partner to the students, helping to guide them in their journey towards this musical autonomy. Overall, Tim works to, and starts to accomplish, his goal of making his music education program as inclusive and wide-ranging as possible so that he can heal the wounds made by past forms of music education that discriminated and discouraged.

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honor and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the honor code.