Personal Theoretical Approaches to Music Education

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Throughout the Master of Music Education program at Northern State University I have studied the evolution of music education in the United States, several theories about how students learn, and various philosophical and ethical beliefs surrounding music education in general. My biggest epiphany throughout all of the reading and discussions has been the fact that I actually incorporate several theories and methods in my teaching and I have never realized it before. The goal now is to be intentional rather than accidental in my teaching, applying these theories and practices to everything I do each day through an active, intentional, and evolving philosophy and mission statement. It is my mission as a musician and as a music teacher to help all people, regardless of age or musical background, experience the positive and powerful effect music has in the lives of all individuals, cultures, nations and the world. The mission of the Ipswich Choral Music Department is to provide all students a personalized learning environment to foster meaningful experiences in the performance, understanding, and appreciation of the discipline and art of music.

Explaining how people know what they know is basic constructivism (Lamon 2017).  Problem solving is at the center of learning.  Reflecting on experiences and the consequences of experiences grows understanding.  Change must occur in the person in order for learning to take place.  Learning is transformative rather than cumulative. Deep understanding comes from what the learner has constructed.  Constructivism is an alternative to objectivism.  In objectivism, knowledge is a passive reflection of the eternal, objective reality.  Through this we can assume that there must be some degree of instruction to be certain the learner is receiving the correct information.  In my own learning, constructivism has been a key to my development. I am a learner who learns through actual experiences more than cognitive methods. I am, for the most part, a big picture thinker. I have an understanding of the importance details have. The beginning of my musical experiences was centered on objectivism. Now I focus on the overall goal and result of experiences and how they apply to my world. I take those experiences, discern their outcomes, and apply them to new experiences. I scaffold all experiences so I am able to continue personal growth and create more meaningful experiences.

My music teaching relies heavily on various forms of constructivism. Jean Piaget, proponent of cognitive constructivism, believes that learning is transformative rather than cumulative in process and that learning takes place when there is understanding (Lamon 2017). Understanding changes or transforms as new knowledge is gained, especially knowledge that challenges what the learner already knows. Throughout all of the classes I teach - preschool through high school choir - students learn note names, rhythm, basic musical forms, and composition. Students learn basic music reading skills and how to apply that to music making. They apply these basic skills to sight reading exercises and increasing their overall understanding of music creation. Even though this is cumulative in process, this accumulation of knowledge is applied to understanding music as a greater whole. Students are able to internalize the music they create and are able to increase their awareness of music in their lives and in the world.

While teaching, I am continually assessing what my students know and can do on their own and what they do not know. This assessment is called the Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD (Marsh & Ketterer 2005). Introduced by Lev Vygotsky, when we identify the ZPD the learner can draw from past experiences to promote learning in the future while receiving assistance on occasion. This encourages the student to seek new opportunities for learning. The teacher scaffolds learning so that in time the learner can teach themselves. Learning occurs through student exploration and social interaction. I have never viewed my own learning in this way nor have I ever thought of intentionally measuring what I know or do not know; however, I analyze the ZPD all the time with my own students. Their ZPD is measured through various ways. I can see if my students understand notes and rhythm, for example, by how well they answer questions, perform, and compose. I can measure their understanding through in-class conversations about several topics that are left open ended for application of prior knowledge and understanding, current learning, and future implications. Another great way to assess ZPD through class discussion is when students are comfortable with having differing opinions on a given topic, communicate those opinions freely with their peers, and share discussion about why they feel the way they do. In addition to class discussions, self-evaluation is a great way for me to measure my students’ ZPD. Following every performance my students are expected to complete a performance evaluation. Questions relate to overall performance, effectiveness of the performance, the process of learning the music, and their individual performance and growth. As students answer these questions independently, I am able to not only see how they view their performance but I am also able to see if there is growth in what they look for to determine success and personal growth.

I incorporate Gestalt’s Theory of whole-part-whole in my teaching. The whole is greater than all the parts together and learning is beyond simple mechanical responses from the learner (Davey 2015). The whole is broken down into individual elements and then reassembled to form the whole in order to understand how the whole functions. In my personal practice as well as in rehearsing with my older choirs, I use whole-part-whole all the time. Currently the first ‘whole’ involves listening and sight reading. The ‘part’ is studying the music in sections. The second ‘whole’ is putting it together again, usually for a performance. I would like to expand this in my teaching to be more intentional in the planning process. In doing so, I want to include more study about historical implications relevant to the music; form; analysis; and interpretation. I believe by expanding the ‘part’, the final ‘whole’ will be more meaningful for the students.

There is one theory I have always tried to incorporate in my planning and teaching. That is Bloom’s Taxonomy. Dr. Benjamin Bloom’s idea of cognitive development is most commonly seen diagrammed in a pyramid (Armstrong 2017). Knowledge is the base and is defined as remembering previously learned material.  It is the recalling of learned things.  Comprehension is the second level and is the ability to understand the meaning of what is known.  Application is the third level and is the ability to use or apply what's learned to real situations.  The analysis level is next and is the ability to break down learned material into its components in order to understand its organization.  Synthesis is next and is the ability to form a new whole with the parts of what was previously known.  Evaluation is the final level and is centered in the ability to determine the value of material in relation to a specific purpose.  It has seemed through the years that I have never been able to go past the application level in my teaching. It has felt like a struggle just helping students to remember basic things in the knowledge level due to time constraints. Even though I have used Bloom’s Taxonomy as a foundation for how I lay out my lesson plans, short term goals, and long term goals, I plan to be more detailed and intentional in the future.

Nearly every semester of study in the graduate program I have had the opportunity to study Edward Gordon’s Music Learning Theory (MLT). His theory describes how students learn and how they progress in understanding of what they learn through all stages of music learning development (Gordon 2012). At the heart of MLT is audiation and students taking an active role in their own learning. I view MLT as an incredible theory that takes all of the other theories and somehow unifies them into one theory and expands upon them so that the learner is always active and eventually independent in the learning process. I have incorporated listening activities into my daily classes daily and at all levels. I used to incorporate listening before but never consistently. I have already started to notice some benefits in all my classes. My upper elementary students and middle school students are listening to children’s choirs and young boy soloists with unchanged voices. We have been able to discuss that the unchanged voice is not boy or girl, but rather is a child’s voice. There is so much stigma for young boys to sing high. They are told they sound like girls. My high school choir is listening to a variety of ensembles and are better able to determine good choral sound by hearing it. I believe this will help them to produce a better choral sound in time. All of my classes are experiencing a variety of genres and having discussions about them. Students are beginning to identify through words and sound what the root or tonic is. This will help us with many things including improvisation, composition, sight reading, and overall performance of literature. We have been incorporating bits of silent audiation, so they hear the music silently and then sing it.

All of these theories lend to my personal and professional mission statements. . It is my mission as a musician and as a music teacher to help all people experience the positive and powerful effect music has in the lives of all individuals, cultures, nations and the world. The mission of the Ipswich Choral Music Department is to provide all students a personalized learning environment to foster meaningful experiences in the performance, understanding, and appreciation of the discipline and art of music.

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