



Navigating Tensions: Dominant Traditions and Culturally Sustaining Practices in Music Learning

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Abstract: Culturally sustaining pedagogies offer a complex way of thinking about arts learning. In this single case study, I analyzed an interview with a young musician, exploring his experiences with both dominant and culturally sustaining learning. I found that teachers create culturally sustaining environments and ensembles, and young artists can cross boundaries to author their own culturally sustaining learning practices. Implications for supporting young artists to articulate, navigate, and confront their own cultural and scholarly influences.

Introduction

As young artists engage in learning and making music, they experience tensions in the ways arts practices are prioritized or marginalized in across learning settings. Culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP), (Paris & Alim, 2014), offer a complex way of thinking about arts learning (Dahn et al., 2022). This asset framework helps us understand current conflicts and tensions in academic contexts, and encourages centering nondominant perspectives in teaching artistic theories, artistry, and histories (Pepler et al., 2022). One way adolescent artists learn is through engagement in identity processes (Halverson & Sheridan, 2022), seeing aspects of their cultural identities respected and reflected in their academic arts classes is legitimizing. Culturally sustaining arts practices can be particularly meaningful for those from non-dominant backgrounds who may not feel represented in mainstream academic settings (Pepper et al., 2022), however arts curriculum in academic contexts and cultural institutions is largely rooted in patriarchal, Eurocentric traditions (e.g., Charland, 2010).

The theoretical foundation driving my inquiry for this poster is CSP, specifically through connected arts learning (Pepler et al., 2022). Connected arts learning offers “a framework for how to support learner-centered and equity-oriented creative educational experiences” (Pepler et al., 2022, p. 265), positioning interests, relationships, and opportunities as key to culturally sustained learning. By better understanding how artists learn across contexts, learning scientists and educators might better design and evaluate programs and spaces toward inclusive, CSP. I consider how artists engage in music learning by asking the following questions: *How do young artists experience both dominant arts practices and culturally sustaining arts practices in academic settings? How do they create opportunities for self-driven culturally sustaining arts learning, making, and performing?*

Methods

This poster is based on a pilot study conducted in preparation for my dissertation in which I interviewed five young adults. Four had just graduated from college and one was in his final year; all were either music or theatre majors. For this single case study (Cresswell & Poth, 2018), I focus on one representative case, Miles, a 22 year old Black, male, saxophonist who grew up in a middle class Black neighborhood in greater Los Angeles and attended college in Orange County, California. The interview questions were based on culturally sustaining frameworks (Paris & Alim, 2014) and connected arts learning (Pepler et al., 2022). I analyzed the interview by creating an event history timeline with specific quotations to support each connected arts learning experience. I then interpreted the timeline, looking for learning experiences where Miles identified either culturally sustaining or dominant arts practices, then memoed to interpret each moment (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

Findings: In school, out of school, and authoring CSP

Miles described a range of experiences across in-school and out of school contexts. Similar to prior research (e.g., Charland, 2010), Miles characterizes foundational courses and ensemble experiences in music, in both high school and college, as rooted in western practice. These in-school courses are considered the fundamentals and core to continuing an academic music pathway. In his high school music theory courses, they learned what he calls, “the ‘rules’ or the music theory associated with classical European music, in the common practice era, which is basically about 1600-1900.” This continued into college where he learned musicianship, theory, and history from “almost strictly classical, European” perspectives. When Miles reflected on his academic foundations, he emphasized that he did enjoy learning and playing classical music even though he only engaged with it when at school. He explained that, “as far as seeing myself with the music or relating to the context in which the music was made, I wasn’t really aware of that stuff until late high school.” In his earlier learning experiences he was just happy to learn and play. It wasn’t until around his junior year that he began to question the disconnect between cultural music (heritage/ethnic, pop/youth) and classical music that followed the “rules.”

Not everything happening at school was rooted in western tradition. Miles did encounter learning that came from a culturally sustaining place. The first example of CSP that Miles shares, came from an engaged teacher who moved beyond the traditional curriculum to make learning meaningful for his students. Miles describes an encouraging learning environment, “giving all the props to my band director, because he wasn’t a jazz major. He’s a classical oboe player who just busted his butt to be able to give us the resources to be able to learn for ourselves.” This teacher moved beyond his own experience to make sure his students had access to music and genres to which they could connect. This was meaningful for Miles, and he identified the extra work it took, “to this day I’m baffled about how he did [it].” Additionally, Miles explained that while most ensembles, band and orchestra, at schools play traditional western repertoire, in jazz band, “I was able to play other music because jazz [band] just ends up being ‘not classical.’ They end up playing a lot of pop tunes, funk tunes, basically it just becomes an outlet.” The jazz band became a special context for CSP in school, allowing students to explore a range of repertoire and perform music that they were excited about and related to.

Through his school years, Miles emphasized the ways he and his peers created self-driven opportunities for CSP through organizing their own band, practicing and performing music of their own choice, from jazz to rock and roll. “A couple of cats and I made a band, and that was our vehicle for playing for those three years. We had people in different grades in the band; played in those festivals in different places, driving to Venice and playing at different restaurants and things of that sort.” This band became a space to bring individuals’ culture and pop-culture into one context, where students were self organized and created music together.

When Miles reached college and took his foundational courses, he started to question what he saw as missing cultural contexts. Though a few professors were thinking about CSP, like one who taught a course on only female composers, most were still deeply entrenched in western musical traditions. Miles realized he could make choices about the musicology and history that he learned, that he could value diverse cultural perspectives in his academics. He took an independent study where “The purpose was our curriculum, as is taught in the states, for music. Through that process I read papers and became really really aware of how bound these things are. Then I started noticing how it affects students in the way that they think.” Here Miles made a change from being a consumer of his academic learning, to becoming an author, or what he calls being a “proactive learner.” As an author, he made an intentional effort to decenter dominant, Eurocentric practices, incorporating critical readings and diverse culturally connected perspectives.

In the past, Miles had taken his cultural interests to out of school contexts, like performing with his band. Now, Miles realized that he could compose music, from within his own program, and present it legitimately within the academy. “It was an intermediate composition class where we worked with dancers, and the theme was climate change. So basically, I made a piece that depicted humanity losing their battle to climate change.” Here Miles described how he was able to incorporate an aspect of his generational and political culture into the music that he composed in class, for other students.

Conclusion

This case highlights the ways dominant practices are taught as foundational to learning music theory, history, and through repertoire. While Eurocentric perspectives still dictate the “rules” of music, CSP occupies a special place in schools, especially in high school contexts before students have interrogated their prior learning. As young artists enter adulthood, they are able to reflect on how their learning affected their artistic, academic, and professional choices. Applying culturally sustaining frameworks will help us understand the ways social and scholarly knowledge constructs affect artistic thinking and arts making, so young artists better understand how to articulate, navigate, and confront their own cultural and scholarly influences.

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