

Walk a mile in your neighbor's shoes: Diversity in the teaching studio

by Rachel Kramer and Bennyce Hamilton

Music is the universal language. This phrase has been in my vocabulary since I was young enough to understand what it meant. As I have become a performing musician, music educator, and community arts participant, I continue to believe the statement is true. However, as I look at the faces in my studio and consider the studios of my colleagues, I wonder just how “universal” we really are.

Who exactly has a seat in our studio? Are there more seats for students of a certain background? For most of us we set a table of convenience, with seats for those in our immediate community who are interested, educated, and able to pay. While it is not our intention to exclude anyone or refuse students, to diversify means that we must do so with intention.

Take a moment to consider the faces that populate your studio. What percentages are white, Christian, educated, heterosexual, and middle class? Whether you know the number or have not thought about it—the time for an honest, reflective conversation is long overdue. We need to address diversity deliberately and intentionally within our everyday lives and within our studios.

Maya Angelou may be right when she said, “We are more alike than unlike, my friends.” Our understanding and appreciation of diversity remains a crucial step in building and maintaining community. How do we find common ground? How are we being mindful of the differences that exist? How can we change our mindsets to be more inclusive? Our own educational background is heaped in the traditions of Western music. Does this limit our vision or the population of our studios?

Let change begin

Change begins with awareness of ourselves and of our communities. Initiating conversations about diversity may be the first actions we take. Dr. Bennyce Hamilton is the Regional Director of Diversity for Miami University of Ohio. Her work in leading workshops, providing training, and developing “common ground”

understanding helps people recognize different points of view and see what it feels like to walk in another's shoes. Dr. Hamilton's dissertation presents the idea of becoming a *reflexive, culturally-relevant practitioner*. Based on her research and current work we will lay the groundwork for all of us to become more intentionally inclusive in our studios.

—Rachel Kramer

Where to begin

Beginning the work of inclusion and diversity means that we acknowledge that there are students who are from all faiths/beliefs, races, and socioeconomic levels. This could mean that we need to change our registration forms to say “Guardians,” instead of Mom and Dad. This could mean that we need to change or add to our recital themes or holiday breaks.

We must be intentional and purposeful. It is not enough to think or say that you want your business to reflect a diverse population. We must actively seek out those who are not represented. Thinking about our current students: Do they all come from the same neighborhoods and schools? Are they all white? Are they all Christian? Can they all afford music lessons? Do they all have a Mom and Dad?

It is only after we have addressed these kinds of questions that we can begin to operate differently. Intention means that we go above and beyond our usual way of conducting business. Intention means that we are deliberate in how we find students, the materials and methods we use, and how we retain students.

We must acknowledge that we do not have all of the answers and that we can ask for help.

Culturally relevant pedagogy

Culturally relevant or responsive teaching is a pedagogy grounded in teachers displaying cultural competence: skill at teaching in a cross-cultural or multicultural setting. This teaching enables each student to relate course content to his or her cultural context.

Culturally responsive teachers acknowledge that students come to us with their own set of values, beliefs, and ways of understanding the world. The teacher who provides an atmosphere that is welcoming and successful also incorporates *reflexive culturally relevant pedagogy* (RCRP) in everyday teaching.¹

Becoming a *reflexive culturally relevant practitioner* is based on four key components:²

1. Knowing yourself
2. Creating a safe space
3. Listening in order to learn
4. Understanding risk versus reward

What this means for teachers

Knowing ourselves can begin with reflective questions: What influences have shaped and molded your beliefs and ideals? What experiences have harmed and helped you? Who has mentored you? What experiences have shaped us? We will answer these questions differently, but every set of answers is important. Knowing who we are enables us to be authentic in the studio. It is only by addressing these questions that we can feel comfortable welcoming and understanding a more diverse population of students.

Creating a safe space means allowing students to be who they are. Teachers who are genuinely and appropriately open with students model a way of learning that becomes safe for all.³

The teacher who genuinely wants to connect with students must be willing to listen as well as teach. This can sometimes be harder for us than we think, particularly because we spend most of our time talking. If we truly listen, then we will enable our students to feel welcomed to our space.

The juxtaposition of reward and risk exists in doing the work of inclusion and culturally-relevant teaching. We are going to be vulnerable and we will misstep. Doing the work of diversity is not easy, nor is it a linear process with a fixed end point. Those who set out to do the work are often met with resistance and roadblocks. Upsetting the “status quo” can be uncomfortable for us and for others. However, the rewards of including students who feel safe and who finally find a seat in our welcoming studios are immeasurable.

Keep stepping

“Music is Universal.” We say it—we believe it—now let us prove it. Let us begin the conversations and the work. ▲



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¹ Hamilton, B. E. (2008). *The reflexive journey: One teacher’s path to self in the footsteps of her students* (Order No. 3327192). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses A&I. (275759341).

² Ibid., 89, 94.

³ Ibid., 91.



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