Teaching the Multicultural Learner: A Musical Theory Approach to Pedagogical Practices

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April 24, 2000

Abstract

This article integrates college student development theory, multiculturalism, pedagogy, and student learning style concepts with concepts from music theory to provide a conceptual framework that will assist the instructor and multicultural student in the classroom teaching and learning process. A number of suggestions are offered in an effort to promote the connection of theory to practice for all instructional leaders concerned with addressing the academic and social issues confronted by the traditional college student in general and the multicultural college student in particular.

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"We are your symphony…" – Mr. Holland's Opus

During one of our many lunch breaks, intermittently infused with diminished chords, syncopated rhythms, and melodious lyrics, my colleague and I discovered that certain aspects of the fundamental tenets of music theory closely paralleled the basic components of pedagogical classroom strategy. Although my area of concentration focuses on higher education and college student personnel and my colleague's, K-12 business and vocational education, we both agreed on the similarities of our approaches to student learning and the underpinnings of music theory.

The line from above, advanced by a protegee of the infamous Mr. Holland in the highly acclaimed film *Mr. Holland's Opus*, captures the spirit and essence of our intended pedagogical practices. We view our students as a symphony, a symphony to be played using the rules advanced by the theories governing a musical performance, a symphony composed of diverse instruments and diverse sounds, but each adding to the harmonious tune directed by the musical conductor. This paper integrates concepts of college student development, multiculturalism, pedagogy, and student learning style initiatives we employ in the classroom with a number of the terms and concepts articulated in musical theory to uncover the instructional needs of the multicultural learner. Our musical model serves as a metaphor for the array of classroom instructional strategies we use to touch the hearts, minds, and souls of our students.

The Foundational Elements

Just as the musician composes the musical score, the educator composes the instructional plan to create a successful learning environment. Before the musician can even contemplate engaging in the arduous task of composing a tune, he/she must tackle the fundamentals of music theory; similarly the classroom instructor must tackle the fundamentals of classroom pedagogy. Like the musician, the teacher is guided by fundamental rules. Both must learn to enhance their creativity, seek paradigm shifts, and develop patience with ambiguity in the endeavor to master their respective crafts. To that end, the creation of harmony, both within the classroom and within the concert hall, is an effort requiring the synergistic workings of many constituent parts. We have sought to highlight a number of these parts from both music theory and classroom instructional practice to elucidate our point.

The first constituent components we examine are the grand staff and the human aggregate. The grand staff provides the template for the display of musical notation, while the classroom provides the template for the display of human aggregate characteristics, the human aggregate being the collection of characteristics of members within a particular setting (Moos, 1986).

For example, the inclusion of the bass and treble clef symbols on the grand staff serve as a means to determine musical pitch; likewise, the inclusion of student demographic and psychosocial characteristics in the classroom determine student (human aggregate) behavior. As the grand staff provides a virtual guide for the designation of musical pitch, the human aggregate provides a guide for the

development of an overall classroom ethos. Moos (1986) noted, "The character of an environment is implicitly dependent on the typical characteristics of its members" (p. 286). Without strict adherence to the influence of the grand staff from the perspective of music, and the human aggregate from the perspective of instructional processes, the production of a harmonious outcome will not ensue.

To create effective learning environments, instructors must determine how the human aggregate's collective characteristics influence student behavior. Students bring an impressively large number of diverse background knowledge and prior learning experiences to the classroom environment. The instructor may or may not wish to recognize the influence of these experiences; however, they should recognize that these very experiences ultimately dictate the nature of the environment. Instructors can use these idiographic examples of pluralism to enhance the experiences of all classroom learners.

Additionally, instead of thwarting students' attempts at sharing their individual experiences and perspectives, instructors should use these opportunities to enhance course subject matter and classroom rapport. "We must open ourselves to learn from others with whom we may share little understanding" (Delpit, 1995, p.131). An instructor who embraces this notion creates value for each learner involved.

The second constituent components under investigation include musical time signature and classroom learning style. Time signature indicates the number of beats in a measure of music and informs the musician of note to beat ratios. Beat values vary in time duration just as the student learning process is time dependent. Kolb's (1983)

model of experiential learning functions in a similar yet distinct manner, it provides a structure for determining time and pace of classroom involvement.

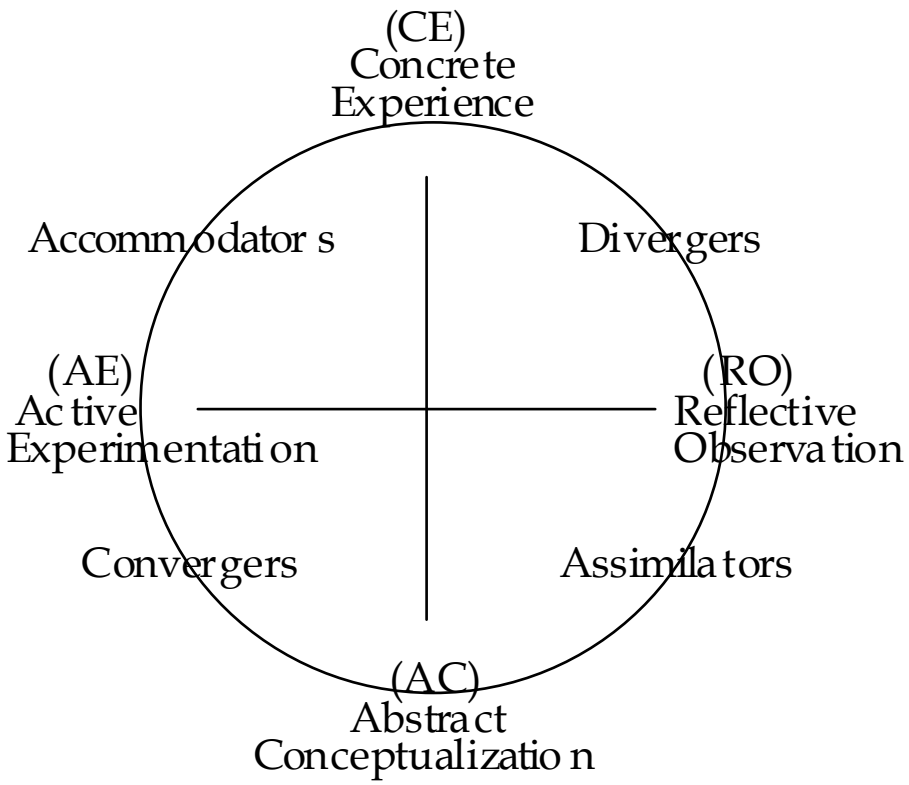

Figure 1:
Kolb Learning Styles

Kolb's model provides a way to adjust instructional practices to coincide with the time required for students to successfully engage in the learning process, a virtual metronome setting the tempo of the pedagogical cycle. "No matter what students' interests are or how they are motivated, if they spend the amount of time they need on the learning task, they will learn to criterion" (Block, 1971, p.32). The time signature informs the cadence and duration of notes within a composition where as the

dimensions of Kolb's learning cycle informs the cadence of the delivery of varied instructional approaches.

Kolb's theory establishes the importance of constantly adjusting instructional elements to meet the various learning style needs exhibited in the classroom (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). To create instruction that addresses the needs of learners within the multicultural classroom environment, it is necessary to use information about individual learning style preferences to design curriculum and experiences that provide support and challenge. Thus, we assert that instructional processes incorporating the four learning styles articulated in Kolb's model (accomodator, diverger, converger, and assimilator) will not only address the needs of all classroom learners but will also increase the instructor's connection with students and provide them with a challenging learning climate (Evans, et al., 1998).

For example, there are few circumstances where lecture is effective as the primary mode to deliver classroom material. Students exhibiting various learning style preferences will digest content presented in lecture format differently—in different contexts, in different modes, at different rates. Therefore, in order to avoid neglecting our students with learning style preferences that may run counter to our teaching style preferences, we have used the four dimensions cited in Kolb's model to offer some suggestions: (a) The accomodators' proclivity for concrete experiences and active experimentation may be addressed through the incorporation of group activities. (b) The divergers' preference for concrete experiences and reflective observation may be addressed through case studies. (c) The convergers' need for abstract conceptualization

and active experimentation may be addressed through problem solving activities. and (d) The assimilators' desire for reflective observation and abstract conceptualization may be addressed through data analysis (Kolb, 1983). Thus, as Kolb's learning model sets the cadence and tempo for the classroom learner, concomitantly the time signature sets the cadence and tempo for the musical composition

The engaged listener would classify a musical piece maintaining a unimodal pitch as dull and uneventful. The same concept applies in the classroom environment. To engage the classroom learner is to engage the classroom learner's individual personality traits, thus leading us to the third component parts of our model, accidentals and student personality traits.

Accidentals, designated by flat and sharp signs, modify musical pitch, while personality traits modify a student's orientation to learning. To that end, we have associated musical accidentals with the six personality types displayed in Holland's (1973) theory of vocational personalities and work environments. Holland's six personality types (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional) provide a means for categorizing student personality traits. According to Holland, an individual's activities, interests, and behaviors are a direct reflection of his/her personality type. Similarly, the pitch assigned to a musical note is a direct reflection of the corresponding accidental.

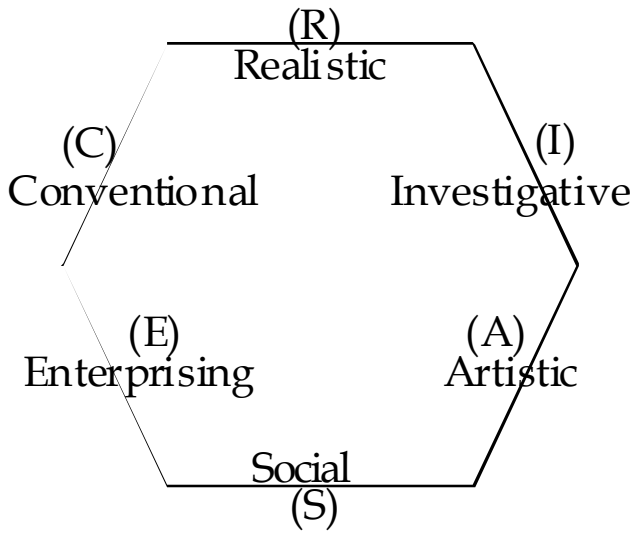

Figure 2
Holland Vocational Interest Types

To address classroom learning from a perspective incorporating student personality types, Holland's (1973) model indicates preferred activities associated with each type: According to the model: *Realistic* personality types exhibit a preference for activities that entail the explicit manipulation of objects; *Investigative* personality types favor activities that require problem-solving skills; *Enterprising* personality types embrace activities that require them to manipulate people or situations for goal attainment; *Social* personality types are inclined to engage in activities that inform, train, or enlighten others; *Artistic* personality types fancy activities that elicit their creative competencies to develop an art form, process, or product; and *Conventional* personality types value activities that require traditional competencies to solve everyday problems.

By recognizing different personality types, we celebrate diversity and promote learning in the multicultural classroom environment. Celebrating diversity calls for

demonstrable behaviors that not only allow for differences but also foster interdependence. It is not simply creating tolerance for diversity, but rather full acceptance of divergent points of view (Smith, Wolf, & Levitan, 1994). To establish successful multicultural learning environments we must reject the notion that students should adjust to the norm of the teacher (Delpit, 1995; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg 1995; Anderson & Adams, 1992). Differences should be viewed as enriching and instructors should provide opportunities that engage and reward diverse displays of academic and social behaviors.

The grand staff, time signature, and accidental all work together to establish clear guidelines for composing music. In a multicultural classroom, human aggregate, learning style, and personality style traits establish guidelines for pedagogical practice. We have incorporated a number of elements from both areas to reveal the parallel nature of these two diverse fields in an effort to show how pedagogical practices can be enhanced to meet the needs of all learners. The incorporation of theory provided us with the necessary scaffolding to construct a system of practical knowledge that will be useful for the researcher as well as the classroom practitioner. Yet, we would be remiss if we did not address perhaps the most salient constituent components of our model. We have elected to treat these components, the musical notes and classroom variables, in a separate section as they serve to tie our previous discussion together.

The Notes

Although the basic elements of music provide the rudimentary elements for composition, it is the musical note that can be freely manipulated to create harmony,

melody and song. Just as the musical note is manipulated on the grand staff, a number of variables are manipulated in the classroom environment to enhance student learning, growth, and development.

The composer constructs the musical piece by placing notes on the lines and in the spaces within the grand staff. Each corresponding position indicates the accompanying pitch the instrument or vocalist will produce. Through the manipulation of note positioning and/or accidental designation, diverse pitches and tones are developed—with the creation of music serving as the outcome. In a similar capacity, instructors engage in the art of manipulation in the classroom. Instead of the musical note, their variables consist of an array of student and classroom based factors that collectively influence the learning environment.

For example, musical notes are identified by alphanumeric characters (A, B, C, D, E, F, and G), each note/character identifying a distinct pitch. To produce a tune, the musician will form chords using note combinations (C, E, G; A, C, E; or B, E, G), sometimes two, three, four or even more notes at one time. By linking note combinations (chords) together in succession, diverse sounds and blends are created to generate music.

The classroom instructor engages in the same process. In the classroom, students are identified by certain demographic characteristics; in addition, students are impacted by various instructional elements. These characteristics and elements essentially serve as the notes the teacher manipulates in the instructional setting. Student demographic variables, representing the notes placed in the spaces of the grand staff include (a)

culture/ethnicity, (b) gender, (c) disability, and (d) age. Instructional elements, representing the notes placed on the lines of the grand staff include (a) content, (b) instruction, (c) assessment and evaluation, (d) classroom dynamics, and (e) student-instructor rapport.

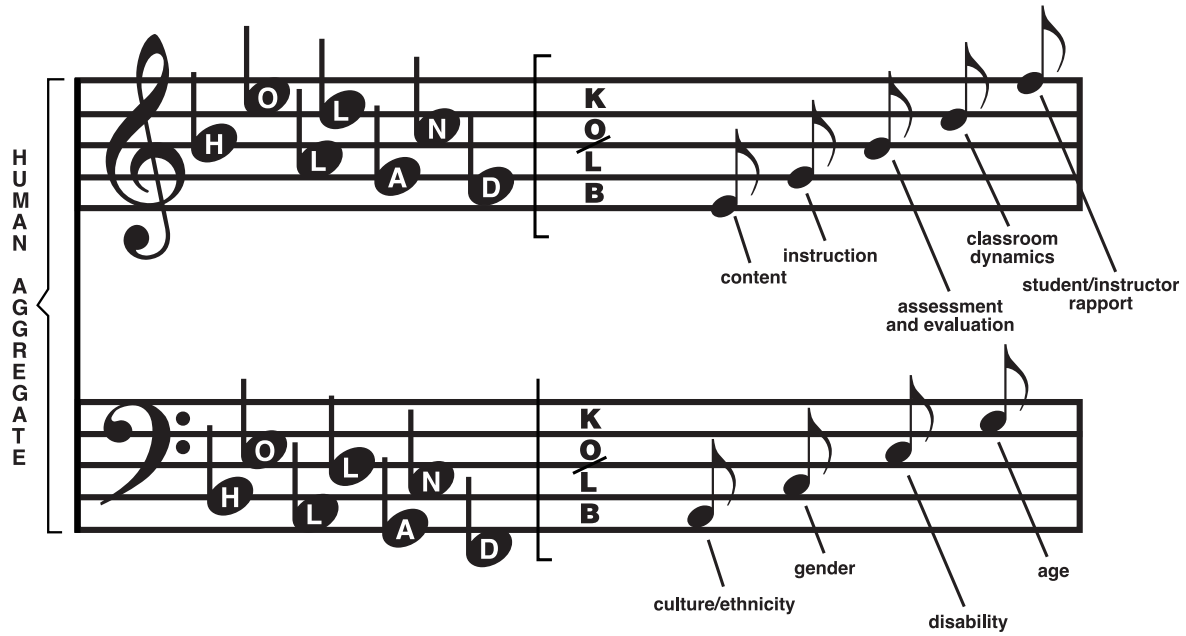

Figure 3
Bonner and Hairston
Musical Model

Like note combinations and chord formations in music, the classroom teacher engages in the teaching and learning process in a similar vein. An A, C, E, or D, F, A, combination of musical notes mirrors an age, content, and instruction, or a gender, disability, rapport combination in the classroom. The lesson to be gleaned from this comparison is that the musician and classroom teacher share similar strategies in their

progression toward outcomes, the major difference being one in the concert hall and the other in the classroom.

Conclusion

The key to creating effective musical compositions as well as effective classroom learning environments lies in the adherence to the foundational elements previously identified in this investigation. The manipulation of basic musical elements, like the manipulation of classroom instructional elements serves to create harmony. Although adjustments are sometimes necessary, accomplished musicians, like skilled instructors possess the power to re-invent their respective environments to elicit intended outcomes—whether a melodious interlude or collaborative instructional setting. Both the musician and classroom instructor engage in intricate and complicated processes that require an acute sense of theoretical and practical knowledge to function.

Our musical model, which includes college student development, multiculturalism, pedagogical and student learning style data, in conjunction with music theory influences provide the classroom instructor with a unique perspective on creating a classroom environment conducive to student learning, growth, and development. We have presented a number of theories both from a musical and educational perspective, but the overarching premise of this study is to reveal how these two broad paradigmatic areas can be integrated. A willingness on our part as classroom instructors to meet the needs of all our learners will not only open our eyes to new ways of teaching and new ways of knowing, but will also move us beyond the classic "banking concept" of the teaching and learning process we often engage in with

our students (Freire, 1993). As classroom instructors and the proponents of this model we say, "Let the music play as a background sound and as a partnership between the composer and the performer, and let teaching resound as a composition of precepts and experiences shared between the teacher and the student."

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