How Critical Is Critical Thinking?

Abstract: Recent educational discourse is full of references to the value of critical thinking as a 21st-century skill. In music education, critical thinking has been discussed in relation to problem solving and music listening, and some researchers suggest that training in critical thinking can improve students’ responses to music. But what exactly is meant by “critical thinking”? This article explores how critical thinking, when thought of as an outgrowth of Critical Theory and pedagogy concepts, may look very different than our popular definitions of the concept. This reframing of critical thinking requires that students take an active role in questioning and challenging music, education, and the ways in which they may take critical action to pursue change. Examples of critical thinking questions, activities, and curricula are offered, and resources are included for further reading.

Keywords: concept, critical theory, critical thinking, challenge, higher-order thinking, music education, pedagogy, questioning strategies

My seventh-grade band class is wrapping up, and today’s rehearsal is coming to an end in an unusual manner. Instead of rehearsing up until the bell rings, we’ve stopped early to watch YouTube videos of zydeco and jazz musicians from New Orleans. This school is an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School, and the entire seventh grade is involved in an interdisciplinary unit organized around the study of Hurricane Katrina. Students have watched the documentary Katrina, studied the weather patterns and erosion of the Louisiana Delta in science class, debated the Federal Emergency Management Agency response in social studies, and written Katrina-centered poetry in English language arts class. In addition to our listening/watching examples, the band will perform John Edmondson’s “Jazz Jubilee” and a medley of “When the Saints Go Marching In” and “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” at our concert.

With the seventh graders out the door, I rearrange music stands and check my e-mail. The sixth-grade band students are entering now, papers in hand. Because they will be performing themes from Dvořák’s symphony From the New World in a few weeks, we studied the New York Philharmonic’s 2008 trip to North Korea, during which the orchestra performed the iconic piece. The students have written letters to the White House proposing a goodwill concert for the seventh-grade band in a world “hot spot,” and one student bands me his letter. He asks, “Would Iran be too dangerous for our band to travel to?” I start to run through possible questions for the class: Should the New York Philharmonic have traveled to North Korea to perform? What did it mean for them to play “Arirang” for the audience? Are there other times in our country’s history that music has played a diplomatic role? Ah, yes! An idea—a “light bulb moment” comes. I do an Internet search using the words Berlin Wall Bernstein, and I start planning the class’s next discussion.

Critical thinking is a concept that has taken on multiple meanings and uses. Authors have written about critical thinking in music education, discussing it in the context of both problem solving and music listening. Critical thinking also is cited as an integral...
Theory and critical pedagogy? Should thinking relate to the fields of Critical Theory and critical pedagogy? Should critical thinking spur action? Can critical teaching practices help music education become more relevant and central to students’ lives?

In the vignette above, the teacher has started down a road toward critical teaching by setting up a particular kind of teaching/learning situation. The notes and rhythms may sound the same as in any other middle school band room, but the students’ thinking will be anything but typical. How can the teacher move forward with critical thinking questions? What guiding principles can he draw on to shape his practice?

Some Background

While there are no singular definitions for these three critical arenas, there are some important distinctions and similarities among them. The three areas—theory, pedagogy, and thinking—have separate established literatures and thinkers, but they share the same fundamental concern: that people develop the skills and knowledge necessary to become critical. Teachers’ questioning procedures can be placed along a spectrum ranging from basic recall to higher-order thinking to engage students in critical thinking. Returning to the vignette above, let’s consider how the teacher could start to engage students in critical thinking.

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The question is fairly “neutral” in the sense that it is not concerned with social justice. What dimensions would need to be added to move this kind of question toward critical action? While important, this question in its current form (and similar neutral higher-order thinking questions) clearly falls below the threshold set by critical theorists/pedagogues. This question does not address constraints of ideology, and it does not aim at enlightenment in pursuit of emancipatory action. It is not, however, difficult to imagine the classroom discussion moving further in this direction.

Critical Thinking Defined

As mentioned, while critical thinking is accepted broadly as being educationally important, specific definitions are lacking. What is critical thinking and what are critical thinking questions? Psychologist Robert Sternberg defined critical thinking broadly as “the mental processes, strategies, and representations people use to solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts.” Education professor Michael Scriven and philosopher Richard Paul defined it as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.” Common to these definitions and others is the idea that critical thinking is active rather than passive and is of a higher-order and abstract nature.

With these definitions in mind, it seems clear that not all teacher questioning and student responses are inherently critical. Teachers’ questioning procedures can be placed along a spectrum ranging from basic recall to higher-order thinking. This continuum can be illuminated by Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives, updated recently by Lorin Anderson and David Krathwohl, who studied with Bloom. While there is agreement among most music teachers that asking a lower-level thinking question that requires only the recall of facts does not spur critical thinking (e.g., “What’s the fingering for B-flat?”), the consensus seems to stop here. Many other less-than-critical questions are sometimes passed off as such.

Level 1: “Neutral” Critical Thinking

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Level 2: Moving toward Critical Action

Imagine the teacher posing a different question to the ensemble: “Why do you think an American orchestra would play Dvořák’s New World Symphony in North Korea?” In the updated version of Bloom’s taxonomy, this question falls somewhere around evaluating and the highest level, creating, since a response demands judgment and synthesis of a number of factors into a new viewpoint. In terms of subject matter, the question is moving away
Selected Resources on Critical Theory, Critical Pedagogy, and Critical Thinking

**Critical Theory**

**Critical Pedagogy**
- Paulo Freire  
- Henry Giroux  
- Michael Apple  
- Edited book  

**Critical Thinking**
- Richard Paul  

**Music Education Resources**
- Book Chapters/Articles  

from “neutrality” and toward worldly significance. In and of itself, however, this question is not inherently critical as defined by authors who are critical theorists/pedagogues.

This kind of question moves toward critical action. By hinting at the foundations of critical theory/pedagogy, it easily leads to reflection on the relationship between music and diplomacy and a search for enlightenment through understanding constraints, motivations, and influences. But to be critical in the tradition of critical theory/pedagogy, the line of inquiry would have to continue until students turned an eye on their own circumstances. In a sense, this is a final step toward critical action.

**Level 3: Down to Earth**
Since critical theorists/pedagogues are concerned with turning an eye on problems in society, critical discussions must connect questioning with students' lives. Music philosopher Thomas A. Regelski noted that in turning critical thinking on students' own circumstances, abstract
From the New World: “What music would you pick to communicate the essence of your life in America? Should you have a say in what you express in school or in music class?” The questions have moved from abstract or distant topics and turned toward students’ experiences. Now the inquiry has become critical in the tradition of critical theory/pedagogy.

If these levels of critical thinking are not understood, all questioning strategies may be haphazardly grouped together as critical. Acknowledging the difference between higher-order questions, divergent questions with more than one right answer, and critical questions helps music teachers examine their practice and avoid “definition confusion.” Acknowledging these differences can also help educators to have productive conversations with one another. When there is a baseline of understanding, discussions can more easily produce meaningful goals and strategies. This understanding has the power to improve teaching.

Full agreement on what is and is not critical thinking may never completely materialize among music educators—and that is okay. By grappling with examples, teachers can make more informed decisions. These examples can effectively help them focus on the questions they really want to ask. For example, teachers may choose to focus questions only on performance, or they may choose to target music’s role in society or its relation to their students’ circumstances in life.

A “Critical Pedagogy Classroom”

Teaching could look noticeably different if music educators embraced critical pedagogy. Depending on the teacher, changes could occur in the mode of interaction, the subject matter, or both. Due to the complex and “messy” discussions that might ensue, ensemble rehearsals perhaps would be less efficient and therefore less effective in pursuing precision and polished performances. Repertoire might be approached differently. Study of popular band compositions, like “Africa: Ceremony, Song, and Ritual” (Robert W. Smith) and “Variations on a Korean Folk Song” (John Barnes Chance), might consider both inherent elements of the sound (e.g., key and form) and contextual elements surrounding the creation and reception of the music (e.g., nationalistic feelings about music, war, and culture). Students performing Percy Grainger’s “Children’s March: ‘Over the Hills and Far Away’” would not only seek to perform with musical expression and exactness but also confront the complexity of Grainger’s views on race, his mother’s troubling struggle with and death from mental illness, and Grainger’s reverence for the music of Duke Ellington. And as mentioned above, they would take the crucial step of relating such important issues to their own lives.

Classroom interactions would change. As Abrahams has suggested, infusing music teaching with critical pedagogy means inviting student voice and encouraging students to be critical. Arguments and votes might take place regarding the role of music in the curriculum and the world. Blogs and online forums might be created to host students’ critical conversations with one another. Students and teachers might come to embrace a shared mission for their music-making. Performances and performance venues might change to reflect new priorities.

Many music educators might argue that time spent on critical thinking would dilute the precision and polish of performances. Critical pedagogy urges the examination of “uncritical acceptance of and obedience to” ideology, which to some may seem at best a waste of time and at worst an invitation to classroom chaos. Open-ended, emergent conversations can take time away from music-making and hurt efficiency, which often is prized in music classrooms. Music teachers may believe that these issues and conversations are best left for other classes. This raises important questions about performance goals and what constitutes a musical performance. If musicality is aided by informed and passionate decision making by students who are deeply engaged with musical materials and the richness of the music’s context, then critical pedagogy may be considered essential. And performance excellence without active student understanding—if that is even possible—would be frowned on by critical pedagogy advocates. Critical pedagogues would argue that teachers and students must confront...
issues “head-on,” because avoidance of serious topics does not make them disappear. Teachers and students cannot avoid challenging issues because they are embedded in all activities and choices, and schools do not exist in vacuums but are instead microcosms of life filled with an array of challenging ethical debates.

Undoubtedly, some teaching/learning arrangements can more easily incorporate critical pedagogy ideals than others. Teachers who consider their classes to be performance-only ensembles may feel there is no time for critical discussions. But this is a function of teacher perspective more than performance obligations. While some music educators may avoid certain topics and discussions in the pursuit of rehearsal efficiency, they should consider the value of such interactions to students’ responses to and understanding of music. Responding is an integral part of the National Core Arts Standards’ Create/Perform/Respond framework, and some recent researchers have suggested that critical thinking instruction may improve comprehension. Some previous articles on this topic have offered some concrete suggestions for putting these ideas into practice. For example, Abrahams offered an eight-step teaching model, and Woodford suggested the most beneficial thing teachers can do is to model critical thinking for students. Small proposed several strategies for teachers, including that they “plan a specific incident of intellectual dissonance.” In addition to considering these ideas, teachers can purposefully plan for critical teaching by keeping inquiry and curiosity at the center of their lesson preparation process. Two planning formats have inquiry squarely at their core.

Education Oriented toward Action

One can find instances of flourishing educational models that embrace critical ideals. An interesting example of basing curriculum around community engagement and social action exists in Metropolitan Expeditionary Learning School, a public school in New York City. The school was formed in 2010 and follows the “expeditionary learning” model. In this model, curriculum is project based and organized around “learning expeditions.” Students participate in community fieldwork and partner with local leaders and community organizations. During a recent three-month expedition, seventh graders were encouraged to consider how “big changes” occur and how ideas spread in society. By the end of the unit, students had designed a media campaign to advocate for alternative taxicab engines in New York City, collaborating with the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission. In their music classes, music teacher Eric Shieh notes how students turned a critical lens on the “role of blues songs in developing radical consciousness in black Americans.”

One of the hallmarks of music programs oriented toward critical pedagogy and action seems to be an emphasis on interdisciplinary study. Shieh notes that while “for many teachers, ideas of the self and the social are generally perceived as the purview of Social Studies or Humanities classes,” encouraging students to apply ideas “to their own contexts as agents of change” requires interdisciplinary study. One can find the same emphasis in the International Baccalaureate program, popular at many schools around the world. This program cites critical thinking and “habits of mind” as fundamental to learning and asks teachers to design cross-curricular units of study based on “big ideas” (see vignette). Critical pedagogy does not explicitly demand these interdisciplinary approaches, but they do seem to evolve naturally from its emphasis on breaking down walls—walls between teacher and student and between curricular subjects.

A Balance of Activities

A music classroom full of critical thinking certainly is atypical but not impossible. The vignette and the other examples mentioned above present just a few of the possibilities that this orientation toward education can encourage. As with any music teaching and learning arrangement, the balance between time spent on practicing skills versus knowledge construction would need to be considered carefully. And for teachers who value relevance and student engagement, a music classroom focused on critical thinking and critical action could make up in significance what it may lack in efficiency. Some authors point to this as an idealized state for education. Music education philosopher Estelle Jorgensen suggested, “Education cannot afford to be trivial and instrumental. Its purpose is to grapple with the central issues of life.”

It is important to continue a dialogue in music education about the prevalence or lack of critical thinking in the tradition of Critical Theory and critical pedagogy. An emphasis on awareness, questioning of constraints and systems, and enlightenment and emancipation can be challenging for music teachers, as it may change the nature of classroom interaction in ways that may seem uncomfortable. However, because this kind of critical thinking has the power to make music education more relevant and meaningful for students, it must be taken seriously.

Notes


3. Critical Theory can narrowly mean the specific school of thought coming from the Frankfurt School in Germany in the twentieth century, or it can broadly signify a number of critical theories (e.g., critical race theory, feminist theory). I am using Critical Theory in the more narrow sense and capitalizing it accordingly.


5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. It is important to note that critical theorists/educators might say argue nothing is “neutral,” since anything that is not working toward critical aims is by definition part of unexamined ideology.


18. For example, see the band director quoted in Betty Anne Younker and Maud Hickey, “Examining the Profession through the Lens of Social Justice: Two Music Educators’ Stories and Their Stark Realizations,” Music Education Research 9, no. 2 (2007): 215-27. When asked about the National Standards, he says, “I don’t have time. We are a performance organization, and our number one goal is to get these kids performing. I don’t think they are bad,” he continues, “it’s just that they are not part of our program philosophy here.” (p. 219).


As a 2006 Harris Poll showed, schools with music programs have significantly higher graduation and attendance rates than those without music programs. For many students, their role in their band, choir, or orchestra, leading and participating in an ensemble toward a shared goal of producing a high-level performance, motivates students to attend school daily. That sense of responsibility as they collaborate with peers who depend on their presence gets students in schools, gets them excited about education.”