

Exploring the Role of Music in Secondary English and History Classrooms through Personal Practical Theory

Christian Z. Goering: University of Arkansas

Bradley J. Burenheide: Kansas State University

This article explores the development of utilizing music as a Personal Practical Theory (PPT) in the teaching of English and history. Specifically, the authors explore the nature of PPT's, the benefits of utilizing music, and the process through which teachers begin using a new approach in their pedagogy. Unique contributions are the application of PPT to a particular teaching strategy and the framing of such strategy within the theory presentation as noted by Chant (2009) and Cornett (1990). The authors discuss their own processes in beginning to use music in their non-music classrooms and generate several pedagogical strategies.

*A tenth grade English teacher works towards creating relevance and rigor for her students by inviting them to create a soundtrack for *The Great Gatsby*. As each student reads the book, they meet with a small group after each chapter to weigh the musical knowledge they have with the text they just read. Selecting songs to thematically represent the chapter, students discuss, consider, articulate, and argue for which of their connections most accurately represents the section of the book. As the class finishes the novel together, each group presents their Soundtrack of *The Great Gatsby*. The assigned reading and literature discussions, something very much part of a normal English course, do not seem nearly as much like school as they have in the past.*

On the other side of the school building in a social studies classroom, an eleventh grade history teacher provides flavor for an opening lesson on the American Civil War unit by having the students listen to a song from the era entitled

“Goober Peas.” The song details the story of a Confederate unit enjoying peanuts under a tree after a long march. The chorus was a sing-along for those who had just endured a long march and was quickly picked up by the students much to the enjoyment (chagrin) of the two neighboring classrooms. As they learn the words and sing along, they begin to recreate what the experience would have been like some 150 years ago.

*“Peas, peas, peas, peas
Eating goober peas
Goodness, how delicious,
Eating goober peas.”
(Pinder & Nutt, 1866)*

As the brief vignettes describe, two classrooms experienced enticing and exciting strategies while learning history and language arts. There exists in the literature a plethora of support for the use of music (Caswell, 2005; Christenson & Roberts, 1998; Copeland &

Goering, 2003; Dethier, 2003; Formwalt, 2002; Goering, 2004, 2009; Goering, et al., 2009; Lee, 2003; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Sturtevant & Linek, 2003; Weinberger, 1998) in the teaching of language arts/literacy and history. While many have argued for the relevance of lyrics and music in attempts to teach content, relate to students, and generally create affective classroom environments, little understanding has been developed in terms of how teachers ultimately come to this approach, or any unconventional approach, to teaching.

In considering a question we fielded at a recent conference presentation at the National Teachers Hall of Fame imploring how we, as teachers, started teaching our respective disciplines with a musical approach, we first answered by telling our stories, something neither of us had previously considered. Afterwards we initiated an inquiry based conversation about how any teacher comes to a new pedagogical approach like this because, as teacher educators, we are infinitely interested in that very process. Our experiences must surely be true for other teachers, areas, and pedagogical approaches. We decided to base our ideas about teaching music in inquiry and developed a research question around which our self study would revolve. How did we—a former high school English teacher (Author A) and high school history teacher (Author B)—become teachers reliant on music in our non-music classrooms?

In short, our collective search to understand what it was that moved us towards using music to teach our respective contents led to one theory: Chant and Cornett's (2009) Personal Practical Theory (PPT). They have explored and detailed how to best develop one's teaching repertoire of pedagogical strategies through the development of PPT. We believe PPT helped us understand our own move towards the use of music in the classroom and continuing our practices of recommending that to new and experienced teachers alike. It our process of engaging PPT

and the subsequent discussions about how we individually began utilizing music in our respective classrooms that provides the basis of this article.

What are Personal Practical Theories?

The development of Personal Practical Theory involves an intense analytical look at one's own instructional practice and how a teacher can best enhance their instruction so that all students can learn. These Personal Practical Theories are rooted in the concept that a teacher has a set of ideas that she believes are the best way to engage students and through experience, become the best way to reach students and guide her teaching practices (Chant and Cornett, 2009). This model involves the development of pedagogy and understanding of what really works in one's teaching (Chant, 2009).

To best develop a Personal Practical Theory, it is necessary for a teacher who has a repertoire of teaching skills to see what would best fit his own system of beliefs and what is the most effective in actually teaching students. The method studied to best develop the Personal Practical Theory contained three distinct phases:

1. identify what guides one's beliefs and actions
2. analyze how these beliefs can best align to the content being taught, and
3. implement and reflect how this works in the classroom (Cornett, 1990).

PPT is especially important for an experienced teacher to work through, but it can also provide the beginning teacher with a way to explore pragmatic theories of teaching. The end result is a teacher empowered to explore what fully works and respond to the information that is gathered through the process of teaching, self reflection, and inquiry. It encourages a practicing teacher to examine and reflect how her students respond to a specific situation or approach. In a way, it might operate somewhat like a

precursor for an action research project, a way of understanding how practice becomes cemented in a teacher's pedagogical approach.

While we were not exposed to PPT during our classroom teaching days, we reflected on our answers to the question from the presentation and decided we needed to consider understanding our own development in order to help others through similar processes, regardless of whether or not they are using music. We processed the three steps described above to fully explore how we believe music should be utilized within classrooms and because of this, developed a method to help others begin utilizing music within the English language arts and history classrooms as well as a method for other teachers to systematically explore their practice.

What guides our beliefs and actions?

We believe that teaching has to begin with community and work towards motivation if it is to be successful. While some of our former students were quickly apt to study literature, language, and history without much prompting, many were not. In any case, we tried to immerse our students in the content and felt for that to happen, something above and beyond the typical approaches would have to happen too. By utilizing strategies that allow students to have ownership of the content, we shared a belief that this promoted learning in our classrooms. Through our discussions, we discovered that we, independent of one another, approached our classrooms in a very similar manner, one that focused on enticing the students into the content of the curriculum—it wasn't enough for us to demand attention and rigor from our students. We made concerted efforts to make students welcome and active members of a learning community, thus allowing us to employ an unconventional approach to teaching.

We also agreed that music was one common language our students definitely shared. It was something we were interested in as individuals

and at some point in the early stages of our teaching careers, we reached that point when nothing we tried seemed to work. Living and teaching in separate towns in Kansas at the time, we independently reached the conclusion that music might just be what we needed to break through the barriers our students built between engagement and the content. Fortunately for our young teaching lives and fortunately for our students, it worked. It was that initial activity, a tipping point of motivation, engagement, and content coupled with our students continuously asking to do more with music that cemented this approach in our teaching approaches and beliefs.

Analysis of how these beliefs best align to the content?

While we agree it would be nice to step in front of a room full of students each day enthralled with English or history, for the most part that isn't the reality most teachers face. In thinking about how that initial foray into teaching English and history with music spread to all parts of our content areas, we experienced the idea that there wasn't much in our disciplines that couldn't be introduced, approached, or enhanced with music. And so our classrooms changed from that initial experience using music as it played a larger and larger role in our instruction. Our students remained at the center and existed in a classroom culture where their music, ideas, and opinions were highly valued. Music provides students with an outlet to express themselves as well as the context needed to understand or empathize with a setting or character being studied either in English language arts or social studies. In our collective analysis, we asked, in each discipline, not how our beliefs about using music in the classroom could best align but rather, what elements of English and history couldn't be taught through this approach? We were unable to come up with a single concept, idea, unit, or lesson that couldn't include music. It is also true that we, as classroom teachers, didn't use music every day or every week, nor do we, as teacher educators, believe

music should supplant the curriculum in either discipline.

(Implement) and reflect how this works in the classroom?

Our reflections echo the previous two sections—using music in the classroom worked well for us and helped our students not only engage in but also grapple with difficult concepts in English and history. Music is universal and motivational. Motivation leads to engagement and engagement leads to achievement. We also felt that the use of music helped our overall classroom climate, something that may not necessarily show up on the end of the year state exams. The idea that students wanted to be in our classrooms and wanted to learn made everything we did—those involving music and those not involving music—possible. Independently, we each experienced glares from colleagues and a general suspicion that whatever was going on inside of our classrooms must not be real learning. The idea that this approach to teaching isn't more widely acceptable is something that still puzzles us.

Benefits of Using Music in the Classroom

In our conversations considering the benefits of using music in language arts and history instruction, we discovered that both disciplines pedagogically employ music in similar ways—to enhance the understanding of content, enrich teaching situations, and to connect existing curriculum to the lives of the students in the classrooms. By examining our PPT of using music in the classroom, we posit there are three reasons why this pedagogical approach is valid and beneficial in the teaching of English and social studies.

First, music allows students the opportunity to express their ideas and emotions in a way that they best understand. Sitomer (2009) comments that to “validate a student’s music, you validate the student and conversely, to devalue a student’s

music is to risk devaluing the student” (p. 1). The result of embracing a student’s music is to encourage access of the student’s personal life into the content thus allowing students to possess a personal schema in a constructivist model. This constructivist orientation allows for both the creation of new schema as well as the application of the personal schema illuminated through the utilization of music. In short, music became the vehicle through which we created stimuli to prime student learning.

Second, using music allowed us to set the scene and tone for exploration of a topic. Students could learn by engaging their audio senses and we taught by stimulating active learning (Dunn & Dunn, 1993). Period music allows students to explore the aesthetics and creativity of a period in history. It allows an English teacher a way to help her students understand culture surrounding literary study. This promotion of engagement allows students to be part of the learning and start intense study of a subject while providing a context to student learning through music. In relation to this is how music can provide another sensory input in linking music to imagery. Popular music allows a history teacher to tap the “historical imagination” as proposed by the philosopher R. G. Collingwood (1951). This allows the student to empathize with historical figures. From the constructivist school of thought, it allows students to maximize the schema both created in learning and also existing as prior knowledge in student understanding (Kizlik, 2010). In an English classroom, the very idea of students bringing in their own music provides a platform to encourage analysis and interpretation of texts, a key function in the development of critical thinking. Music can provide the sensation of hearing appropriate music of the time period of a novel or historical period, and allowing students to make their own selections of contemporary music encourages their voice in explaining how they perceive the curricula being studied.

Finally, the utilization of music allows students to experience the sources of a time period. The studying of music serves as an oral history and immersion into the phenomena being studied and allows for the past to speak to the students to fully grasp the situations. By shaping instruction in this manner, the students can fully embrace the study of a period, much like the concept of activating the senses to understand the time period.

Utilizing Music Within the Classroom

Using pedagogical strategies with music in language arts and history instruction is limited only by the teacher's creativity and imagination. However, there are several different means in which to best promote the use of music in the classroom as we have discovered through this collaborative process. Listed below are two specific means for each discipline that have been successfully used in each author's teaching:

The Soundtrack of Your Life (Goering, 2004, 2009) is a strategy that encourages students to tackle personal narrative writing by connecting events from their lives to music. Completed through a process, The Soundtrack starts by having students make a list of the eight to ten events, people, or places having had the largest impact on making them who they are. From this initial list, students next connect these memories to songs. Sometimes, songs are playing during events or specific people or places are directly associated with a song. Other times, students choose songs in more abstract ways, connecting themes and content of a song to something important in their lives. Students explain each connection in narrative form next, providing details which make the connection clear to the reader. Finally, students present a portion of this to their classmates to complete an introspective, challenging, and interesting assignment.

In using theme-based song lyrics as texts for Socratic Circle (Copeland, 2005) discussions,

students have the opportunity to begin practicing analytical reasoning and reading with lyrics, something important and educational that they enjoy. The Socratic Circle method encourages student-centered discussions following the close reading of a text. Students are encouraged to analyze and cooperatively discuss their ideas about what something means while the teacher (or other leader) periodically asks questions guiding the discussion. Song lyrics provide an engaging, interesting, and relevant way of having serious conversations in the secondary English language arts classroom.

Name Why That Tune is a strategy that is especially good for either tapping a student's prior knowledge or introducing students to the concept for a lesson's exploration. The song is played at the beginning of the class period and then students are asked to first predict how the song relates to that day's lesson. Next, students are asked at the end of the hour to explain how the song actually connected (or not) as closure for the lesson. This method serves to focus students' attention and promote a culture of inquiry within the social studies classroom. It is especially interesting to use modern songs which illustrate a concept or period many decades or centuries prior to the time being studied.

Contemporary Soundtrack is a strategy that has been used in history instruction where students are shown images of a historical phenomenon being studied set to period music to help create a sense of the time period being studied. After reflecting on the presentation, students are offered the opportunity to suggest a current music selection, which illustrates the student's opinion as to what the period is being studied. As a bit of extension, much like the "Soundtrack of Your Life" strategy, the teacher can have students create a CD case with a set list of songs, images for a cover, and liner notes to help students internalize the information being studied.

Discussion

We feel fortunate to be asked the question of how we first started using music in our classrooms, a question that challenged our thinking and made us return to our practices and examine them, a question which ultimately led us to an understanding of the value of PPT, each other's disciplines, and the use of music in school. The similarity of beliefs, background, and interests that led us to present together also allowed us to explore our ideas about teaching and ultimately flesh out our approach to this somewhat subversive practice. PPT provided a process to help us understand why, as practitioners we believed what we believed, something we likely would not have undertaken without the question, PPT, or the collaborative discussion as presented here. The process followed brings forth the means by which both pre-service and in-service educators can develop their repertoire of strategies by looking at, articulating, and developing one's personal approach to teaching. The act of then sharing it with others for development and consideration potentially enhances the abilities of everyone involved.

While it is clear that a myriad of support exists in the research and literature for the use of music in school, what is less clear is why this is still, in our experiences and the experiences of the pre-service and in-service teachers with whom we work, relegated to hushed conversations. One reason teachers might be skeptical about this practice is because they have tried it and encountered unanticipated challenges. It is true that there is a large portion of what students listen to that has no place in the classroom, it is also true that many songs exist which can significantly add to the classroom curricula. While we encouraged students to bring their own music into the classroom, we definitely set parameters for the lyrical content of that prior to that act. In short, the music for class had to be lyrically clean, free of profanity, misogyny, and violence. Students,

often citing that none of their music was clean, always came around and were able to find songs that fit those criteria. Whatever the reason for the hesitation and air of suspicion when teachers (and their students) bring music into the classroom, we feel that suspicion is unwarranted. While music shouldn't supplant the curricula in any classroom, it can be one of many ways teachers make the curriculum relevant to their students, many of whom feel as though school has nothing to do with them.

Through this process we explored what we believe about the role of music in the analysis of our teaching and found it as a means to develop student learning through both constructivist teaching and student's intrapersonal understandings. There are similarities to the use of music in the two disciplines and while there are specific uses of music that favor one of the disciplines over the other, these two disciplines can and should work together when there is such a powerful approach in common as music—the universal language. In our classrooms, this was not about using music for the sake of using music; it was about connecting students' worlds to content they perceive to be outside of their worlds. For the future teachers and in-service teachers who haven't tried this yet, we hope that music will add to the harmony of the curriculum and become more widely acceptable as a tool for instruction.

References

- Caswell, R. (2005). A musical journey through John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*: Emotion, engagement, and comprehension. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 49(1), 62-67.
- Chant, R. H. (2009). Developing involved and active citizens: The role of personal practical theories and action research in a standards-based social studies classroom. *Teacher Education Quarterly* 36(4), 181-191.
- Chant, R. H., & Cornett, J. W. (2009, February). Social studies professors' theorizing: Insights

- from two decades of deliberation and collaboration. Paper presented at the annual conference of International Society of the Social Studies, Orlando, FL.
- Collingwood, R. G. (1951). *The idea of history*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Copeland, M. (2005). Socratic circles: Fostering critical and creative thinking in middle and high school. [Portland, ME: Stenhouse.]
- Copeland, M., & Goering, C. Z. (2003). Blues you can use: Teaching the Faust theme through music, literature, and film. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 46(5), 436-441.
- Cornett, J. W. (1990). Utilizing action research in graduate curriculum courses. *Theory Into Practice*, 29(3), 185-195.
- Dethier, B. (2003). *From Dylan to Donne: Bridging English and music*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Dunn, K., & Dunn, R. (1993). *Teaching secondary students through their individual learning styles*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Formwalt, L. W. (2002). Seven rules for effective history teaching or bringing life to the history class. *OAH Magazine of History*, 17(1), Retrieved from <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/ww1/formwalt.html>
- Goering, C. Z. (2004). Music and the personal narrative: The dual track to meaningful writing. *The NWP [National Writing Project] Quarterly*, 26(4), 11-17.
- Goering, C. Z. (2009). Open Books, Open Ears, and Open Minds: The Grapes of Wrath, the "Broken Plow," and the LitTunes Approach. In Michael J. Meyer (Ed.) *Dialogue: Reflections on Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Rodopi.
- Goering, C. Z., & Burenheide, B. J. (2009). Do you believe in rock and roll: How music enhances student learning of English and history. Paper presented at the 2009 Early Career Teaching Conference sponsored by the National Teacher Hall of Fame, Overland Park, Kansas.
- Goering, C. Z., Collier, K., Koenig, S., O'berski, J. O., Pierce, S., & Riley, K. (2009). Musical intertextuality in action: A directed reading of *Of Mice and Men*. In Michael J. Meyer (Ed.), *Essential Criticism of Of Mice and Men*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow.
- Goering, C. Z., & Williams, C. (2010). A soundtrack approach to teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In Michael J. Meyer (Ed.) *Essential Criticism of To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow.
- Kizlik, B. (2010). "Ideas about becoming a good social studies teacher." Retrieved online January 25, 2010, from ADPRIMA website. <http://www.adprima.com/socialteach.htm>
- Lee, C. D. (1993). Signifying as a scaffold for literacy interpretation: The pedagogical implications of an African American discourse genre. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Morrell, E., & Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R. (2002). Promoting academic literacy with urban youth through engaging Hip hop culture. *English Journal*, (91)6, 88-92.
- Pinder, A., & Nutt, P. (1866). *Goober peas (sheet music)*. New Orleans: A. E. Blackmar.
- Sitomer, A. (2009, November). Making the classroom pop: Teaching literature and literacy skills through music. Paper presented at the meeting of the Annual Convention of the [National Council of Teachers of English, Philadelphia, PA.
- Sturtevant, E. G., & Linek, W. M. (2003). The instructional beliefs and decisions of middle and secondary teachers who successfully blend literacy and content. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 41, 74-89.
- Weinberger, N. M. (1998). The music in our minds. *Educational Leadership*, 56(3), 36-40.

Author's Note

Christian Z. Goering is an Assistant Professor of English Education at the University of Arkansas where he studies the practical and

theoretical applications of popular music in English language arts settings.

Bradley J. Burenheide is an Assistant Professor of History Education at Kansas State University where he studies educational gaming and motivational strategies related to teaching secondary social studies.