

Using Music to Analyze American Culture, Helping Students form Community and Empathy

Students Tell Their American Story through American Music

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Context

My name is Mitch Askew. I'm a father of two wonderful people who attend Flagstaff's public elementary and middle schools. My kids are being raised in this community, which is filled with so many wonderful people. The community in northern Arizona is full of love and diversity. From all the students studying child development in my kids' preschool classrooms to the student aides who walked by kids across the parking lot to school to the elders that helped me discover real community at the June 2023 Institute for Native-serving Educators (INE). Indigenous People play a central role in my family's culture. They've helped me raise my own children, while I taught theirs, American History. Sometimes I worry about the future of my kids, but not because of my community, but because of historic and global events. Sometimes I'm concerned because I feel like I can't influence systemic socio-economic forces influencing my community. Forces that seem immovable and impending. However, as I teach the future, our kids, I find incredible inspiration from my community. Inspiration centered around leaning into our children and their families. Culturally responsive teaching practices shape this curriculum unit, as students identify perspectives as diverse as they are and introduce each other to aspects of their own cultures, communities and families. This gives me hope as young people build relationships and empathy with one another.

I taught at Flagstaff High School when I started this curriculum unit. I taught dual enrollment American History for twelve years there. In May, I applied to teach in the First Year Seminar Department at Northern Arizona University. I found myself with a new job at the end of July. Instead of teaching six sections of American History at one of two public schools in Flagstaff, I now support first year university students through an inquiry course centered on the question: What is America? Many of my students are first generation college students. They've registered for the course to fulfill an Arts and Humanities requirement or have been placed in one of the first-year seminar courses by the university. Some students struggle with time management, haven't developed useful study habits, and/or could have financial, social, physical or developmental issues. Regardless, my job is to support students through the course, while helping students develop critical thinking skills and expression of personal perspectives using oral and written discourse. I strive to encourage students to challenge what they've been taught about American history, to ask questions about their upbringing, reflect on their privilege and intersectionality, and then begin the lifelong journey of figuring out who they are.

In the course we challenge traditional historic narratives that justify colonialism and emphasize progress at the expense of people who have been exploited and forgotten. In the course we reflect on various aspects of American culture (particularly from Indigenous People's perspectives). For example, we examine American holidays (often used as cultural justification for colonialism), "America" as a paradox of unfulfilled promises to resources and freedom, American music and how it reflects and informs our understanding of American culture, and

more. This can be a heavy lift given the diverse nature of my classrooms. Many students in their first year of college find themselves clinging to what they “know,” to narratives that seem comfortable. They often put up figurative blinders. Or they haven’t experienced courses that push beyond and question traditional narratives. Either way education must encourage students to find empathy for all living things, especially as students face a world struggling with climate change, war, poverty, discrimination and exploitation. Allison Skerrett and Peter Smagorinsky believe that developing empathy in students can disrupt power inequities. They argue, “To disrupt power, empathy needs to provide a bridge between people who have little in common, especially when there are status or power differences between the two groups” (Skerrett, 2023, p.114). Students enter my courses with a variety of intersectionalities and privileges. I have my own, as well. While I want my classroom environment to be a safe place where students can express themselves and be challenged to think for themselves, the texts and the art forms used are never neutral. As a class, I encourage students to unpack their own positions related to a topic, as well as the positions and narratives in a given text or art form. After all, if you agree with a text, it’s hard to read it critically. If you disagree or find a text offensive, it can be hard to engage with. We try to recognize this and try to do both, anyway. We have to recognize that our identities shape how we consume texts and our responses. We often engage with historic texts and forms that address colonialism. This allows students to produce their own responses, written texts or artistic pieces, that might argue for decolonization. This can be a frustrating task for students and instructors. Finding sources that are relevant and accessible to students is a continual struggle.

Rationale

Nothing speaks to students like music. They find relevance in music. For lots of reasons music, like other forms of art, often forces complex issues to resonate personally with a student. In a course designed to challenge what they “know” about American culture, music can be a familiar entity that adds a relatable connection to individual students’ lives and a source of comfort because they find familiarity with it. Not only do we give music personal significance, but it can provide insight into arenas (cultural, historic or distant) that are otherwise unknown. For instance, in the early twentieth century, Blues music was uniquely Black music but gave white audiences a window into a world they were unfamiliar with (Shonekan, 2018). One of my goals is to help students learn how to learn—to break down colonial influences that often hold our society frozen in fear. Music is often political, advocating for change. It’s often rooted in cultural change, technological change, spiritual and political change. Using music allows students a view of something they might not otherwise encounter, and perhaps feel empowered to shape their society based on their communities’ values, longevity and resilience.

Music is also a throughline. It can assist students’ understanding of the continually evolving anomaly that is American culture. Music has been present at key historic movements. The Civil

Rights Movement, The Red Power Movement and Anti-war Movement of the late twentieth century are wonderful examples. Those movements, and in movements of our own time, often harnessed “the impulse of this [or any] generation to weave music into the movement and utilize musical culture to impact and change the most problematic aspects of American culture.” Kendrick Lamar’s song “Alright” became an anthem of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Lamar is echoing “a history of freedom songs created by African-descended peoples in the United States.” He is using the familiarity of music, as generational culture, to connect people of all backgrounds. “Alright,” and music in general, is not just connecting people. It’s also rooted in historic context. (Undoubtedly, this is a subjective reality, as history, music, art, material culture are up to interpretation, up to the story/narrative we tell ourselves about those forms, and up to the individual’s interaction with each unique form.) Often the historical context comes with some weight. Music allows students to connect to the “ongoing battle against oppression, disenfranchisement, inequality, exploitation, and death” (Shonekan, 2018, p.1 & p.30).

While music may serve to connect people of various backgrounds and struggles, allowing people to process complex social issues, it can remind us of the seemingly daunting condition of our world. In the context of colonialism and two world wars, things like climate change and contemporary conflicts in Palestine and Ukraine, add weight to our individual attempts to break free of loneliness, anxiety and poverty. We ask students to get an education so that they can be part of a society that values equity, democracy, justice, peace and community, but fail to see that students rarely feel confident that change is possible. It seems as though students are struggling with an identity crisis. Some don’t know who they are and have been lied to, intentionally and unintentionally, about their history. Erich Nunn, riffing off W.E.B. DuBois’s, *The Souls of Black Folks*, shows how racial categories were created around country music in the mid-twentieth century. To erase the fact that African Americans played a central role in country music and justify segregation, efforts were taken to shape whiteness by music. Nunn shows readers, in “Country Music and the Souls of White Folk,” how the record industry and other commercial entities defined a genre of music as white music, while revealing how “[t]he music listed as ‘hillbilly’ in record company catalogs was in fact steeped in African American traditions and shared by whites and blacks” (Nunn, 2009, p.624). Realizing that the establishment of this lie in American society around something as beloved as music, shakes people to the core of their identities. White students, for instance, may feel paralyzed with the notion that their position in American society is not due to “Manifest Destiny” and hard work, but instead is largely due to colonial ventures like the enslavement of many African Americans and the dispossession and exploitation of Indigenous Peoples. They may struggle with the awareness that generation trauma rests in their genes, as well as, people of color. And that the culture they’ve been raised with is in fact largely centered on justifying continuing inequity. Given this disheartening situation, the study of art, philosophy and history seem all the more important. Students need to be reminded, or informed for that matter, that there are entire fields of study dedicated to dealing with a troubled world. For centuries we humans have been discussing what it means to be

human. How do we be the best human possible? What is morality? What do we need in order to live a happy life? One thing we've built consensus on is that education can serve as a wonderful platform and springboard for students to develop a sense of *moral imagination*. Education should cultivate the capacity to imagine different/multiple moral possibilities and the moral lives of others. It should help students develop empathy. One could study ancient Greek philosophers, like Aristotle, and discover a very relevant discussion of "happiness" and what it takes to be a "happy" human. We find Aristotle suggesting that external factors, like resources, relationships with other people and education impact one's ability to live a flourishing life. Some students might find an encouraging thought from existentialist Cornel West, who finds our impending deaths also our commonality. West suggests we all love to dance, laugh, play, eat, and so forth. We all can relate to each other's struggle, so we can then empathize. If we can empathize, we can care for one another, our planet and the future. By studying history and philosophy, aligning with contemporary forms of art, music can function as a baseline for all of us—helping us develop a moral imagination rooted in empathy.

Interestingly, Sandra Hughes-Hassell reminds us how important it is to tell the story of those whose stories are not often told. Again, music stands in for other forms of art here, but can be a counter-story. According to Hughes-Hassell, "multicultural literature can play a powerful role. One of the key goals of counter-storytelling is to give voice to the lived experiences of groups that have traditionally been marginalized and oppressed in the United States. By reading multicultural literature, teens of color and indigenous teens gain insight into how other teens who share their racial, ethnic, or cultural background have affirmed their own identities" (Hughes-Hassell, 2013, p.219). Music (Rudine Sims Bishop would include books, as well as, folk tales) introduces audiences to cultures and histories that are important to one group, while "inviting comparisons to their own." While classrooms should use forms of art to provide "mirrors" students can use to see their relatable stories and cultures, it is also important to get students to reflect on their own narratives. They need to "understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in...their connections to all other humans...books may be one of the few places where children who are socially isolated and insulated from the larger world may meet people unlike themselves" (Sims Bishop, 1990).

While music can be leveraged for student engagement, it's a form of artistic expression. It's similar to the way Louise Rosenblatt explains poems. A poem, a painting, literature, music all become unique experiences once a person interacts with the form. Rosenblatt writes, "A poem, then, must be thought of as an event in time. It is an occurrence, a coming together...The reader brings to the text his past experience; the encounter gives rise to a new experience, a poem" (Rosenblatt, 1964, p.126). Getting students to draw on past experiences can be difficult at times. Maybe they are hesitant, inexperienced or maybe their personal background is full of traumatic experiences. No worries, literature and other forms of art, like music, can give us all a window into lives we may never come across. Judith Langer, speaking of how Toni Morrison introduces

readers to the complex lives of the *Beloved* (1987) characters and reminds readers, “As we read, we develop new thoughts...the perspective...represents the total understanding a reader has at any point in time, resulting from the ongoing transaction between self and text” (Langer, 1995, p.13). Treating the encounter between the form (a song) and the student as a unique experience, called music (similar to Rosenblatt’s poem), is central to this curriculum unit. Students are going to be continually asked to reflect on how the form (text/sound) transacts with (1) other forms (literature, history, audio, photo, etc.), (2) with the student’s own experiences, cultures/communities and (3) with the larger world. Each response will be unique (Text-to-Text).

Content Objective

In this curriculum unit, students will relate themselves to the complexities of past and contemporary American culture, developing understanding and forming empathy for others. They will do this through two main objectives:

1. Through music and other forms, develop an understanding of American culture different from their own.
2. Tell their own American story using music from their cultures, backgrounds and personal preferences.

To begin to understand others’ American culture, students must relate to the text or form used as the exemplar of that given cultural aspect. They will be asked to find ways the source relates to other sources we’ve addressed in the course. In writing or as part of the class discourse. For instance, a student could relate Kendrick Lamar’s song, “Alright” to Resmaa Menakem’s book, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, which we’ve already discovered helps us understand how racism can impact everyone. Then students will be asked to relate the sources to themselves. They might find a connection to being “wounded” by a traumatic event and personally resonate with Redbone’s “We were All Wounded at Wounded Knee.” Last, students are asked to make a connection between the sources and the world around them. They could make a connection to an event in the past, a community they’ve learned about, or possible future. Each student’s response will be unique to their own background and interaction with the source.

Once students have analyzed the sources and gained some understanding of others’ culture and history, it’s their turn to tell us their story. They are asked to go back to their communities, reflect on how music is connected to those communities and create a playlist that tells their individual story or their community’s story. Students will be encouraged to create a mock-up album cover reflecting their story. This is rooted in culturally responsive teaching practices, which have proven to enhance student learning. When students can personalize their learning, when the activities feel relevant to their lives, they are more likely to understand the complexity of our world and form empathy, which might lead to decolonizing actions.

Teaching Strategies

Throughout the course I use a variety of teaching strategies. However, this curriculum unit is centered around a reading strategy asking students to relate the sources to other sources, their lives and the world around them (described above). “Text to Text, Text to Self and Text to World” allows us to “recognize how the ideas in a text connect to our experiences and beliefs, events happening in the larger world, our understanding of history, and our knowledge of other texts...[we] use this strategy with any type of text, historical or literary, and with other media, such as film. It can be used at the beginning, middle, or end of the reading process to get students engaged with a text, to help students understand the text more deeply, or to evaluate students’ understanding of the text” (Text to Text). Students will be asked to write and orally reflect on the sources. They will be asked to prepare for class discussion a selection of sources (background readings usually), using “Text to Text.” They will have time to use the same strategy in class to reflect on the music selections. Once students have reflected on the sources, they share their reflections with their peers in small discussion groups and address the following prompts: How do these sources shape or represent American culture? What American story is being told in each source. What does each source tell you about what Americans value?

I want students to feel comfortable expressing their reflections and connections to the sources. While writing and small group discussion will be the primary outlet, students will also be allowed to express themselves by illustrating an album cover. Students do not get a chance to show their abilities very often, especially at the university level. They are often incredible artists.

I prioritize removing barriers, so students have the ability to learn. In my courses, students have the ability to communicate that they need extended time on due dates and alternative outlets/activities/projects to reveal what students have learned. Students can write an essay, telling their American story, if that’s a strength, instead of producing a playlist and album cover.

Classroom Activities

Throughout the course, students have been asked to analyze and reflect on American culture, on who is an American, and much more. They’ve been given multiple sources and activities to facilitate the formation of their own opinions. This curriculum unit is specifically focused around music from different periods of American history. We’ll start with the Black Lives Matter Movement and Kendrick Lamar’s song “Alright” following the pattern laid out in the Civil Rights Movement and by other African American musicians. We’ll shift to the role pop music plays on the Hopi Nation currently and the role of music in the Red Power Movement of the 1970s. We’ll finish with a reflection on the role music has played in the dominant culture to justify colonialism. In this section, students will be asked to analyze a variety of sources,

including a children's book, *When We Were Alone* and a poem titled, "38." The song, about a man named Texas Jack, titled "Western Pioneer" speaks to the violence in our culture and attempts to justify the colonization of Indigenous Peoples. By using words like, "hostile," and phrases like, "scalped by Indians" the song gives students a window into a genre of music popular in America during the mid to late twentieth century (Lornell, 2012, p.95). However, the other sources ask students to think about what is being "justified" and the impacts of colonization on people of the past and present. For instance, *When We Were Alone* gets students to think about customs and cultures that were lost with the use of boarding schools on Indigenous children, as well as telling an inspiring story of resiliency and continuance (Roberston, 2012). "38" is a challenging poem that urges audiences to think about narratives around US President Abraham Lincoln's relationship with Indigenous Peoples versus narratives of Lincoln as "the Great Emancipator." These contradictory sources may force some students to suspect that the history they've been raised in, consciously or unconsciously, may be based on lies derived from colonialism. Similar to the way Erich Nunn describes (discussed above, in the Rationale section) the lie created by commercial entities to associate whiteness to country music, erasing the foundational and continued role African Americans play(ed) in that genre of music in order to reflect cultural separation in a segregated society (Nunn, 2009). Helping students deconstruct these stories allows them to reflect on their own backgrounds and relate to the narratives of others.

The first thing I do is give students an overview of the project. They will understand the intended outcomes and standards used to develop this project (see Alignment with Standards below). They will understand why they are doing these activities and the possible options to illustrate their learning. Over two class periods, students will be asked to read the background information on the music and the movements they are associated with. Students will use "Text to Text" to write their individual reflections of those readings. In class, in small groups, students will verbally reflect on those sources with each other. If students need some guided questions to facilitate and spark discussion, that can be provided by the instructor. Once small-group discussion is exhausted, we will listen to the music. Students will repeat the "Text to Text" format to connect to the music. Followed by small group discussion. The following is a basic outline with links to the sources:

Black Lives Matter Movement

Use [Text-to-Text](#), [Text-to-Self](#), [Text-to-World](#) to analyze each source.

- Reading [Black Lives Matter and Music](#) (Page one, page 20, 111-113)
- [Alright](#)
- [F*ck Your Ethnicity - Kendrick Lamar \(Section.80\)](#)

Discussion Questions: How do these sources shape or represent American culture? What American story is being told in each source. What does each source tell you about what Americans value?

Indigenous Music Shaping American Culture (Redbone and Hopi Reggae)

Use [Text-to-Text](#), [Text-to-Self](#), [Text-to-World](#) to analyze each source.

- Reading [Indigenous Pop](#)
- [Redbone - We Were All Wounded At Wounded Knee - Lyrics](#)
 - [Redbone - Come and Get Your Love \(Single Edit - Audio\)](#) (for fun)
- [Honor The People](#)
 - [A Tribe Called Red - Electric Pow Wow Drum \(Official Audio\)](#) (for fun)

Discussion Questions: How do these sources shape or represent American culture? What American story is being told in each source. What does each source tell you about what Americans value?

Challenging the Colonization of Indigenous Peoples in the North American West

Use [Text-to-Text](#), [Text-to-Self](#), [Text-to-World](#) to analyze each source.

- [“Texas Jack Song”](#) Lyrics
 - [Billy The Kid](#) for sound/rhythm
- [“38”](#)
- [When We Were Alone](#) (need NAU login)

Discussion Questions: How do these sources shape or represent American culture? What American story is being told in each source. What does each source tell you about what Americans value?

Student Assessment Plan

I will assess student work with a checklist. Student’s grade will be based on the completion of the tasks. After all, their American story through music is their individual story. Checklist:

- Student completes “Text to Text” Reflections.
 - Reading *Black Lives Matter and Music*
 - “Alright”
 - Reading *Indigenous Pop*
 - Redbone- “We were All Wounded at Wounded Knee”
 - Casper Loma Da Wa- “Honor the People”
 - “Texas Jack Song”

- “38”
- *When We Were Alone*
- Student participates in class discussion, reflecting on “Text to Text” writing.
- In writing, student outlines their community’s American story (to be used to develop the playlist).
- Student creates a playlist of, at least, three songs, with annotations describing how the songs tell their American story. Album artwork is included.
 - Or, students write an essay examining their American story.

Alignment with Standards

This curriculum unit is part of a course that is centered on helping students build confidence and even discover their skills/strengths in order to be unique and effective global citizens. This curriculum unit is designed to get students to reflect on their background, encounter aspects of other cultures, form relationships and empathy, and then tell a story. I will utilize the following Diné Character Building Standards: Concept 1(K’édinisdzin dooleel), PO 1: I will apply my life skills to be a responsible citizen. Concept 1(Nitsáhákees), PO 3: I will present and explain cultural items and jewelry.

While these standards apply to Diné ways of life, I think it is incredibly important to respect all cultures. Borrowing from these standards to guide learning for those who are not Indigenous or Diné is appropriate. Learning and guidance from Indigenous Peoples is central to my life, the course I teach and this curriculum unit.

This curriculum unit is also designed around the *Core Principles of Culturally Responsive Schooling with/in Indigenous Communities (CRAIS)*. Specifically, the unit addresses standard 15: Indigenous peoples are represented as contemporary (not only historical), 16: Indigenous people are represented as diverse (not a monolithic “they”), 20: Actively works to counter stereotypes of Indigenous people and/or communities, and 23: Diverse narratives and perspectives are integrated.

The course I teach addresses the following Liberal Studies Essential Skills (Northern Arizona University) by giving students an opportunity to understand how individual perspectives take shape, while encouraging students to develop their individual perspectives upon encountering challenging materials, writing evidence based responses, and engaging in conversation with people who have different perspectives.

Critical Thinking: Critical Thinking includes the skills--particularly as applied to one's own work--of articulating the meaning of a statement, judging the truth of a statement

while keeping in mind possible biases, and determining whether a conclusion is warranted by the evidence provided.

Effective Writing: Effective writing conveys information or argues a point of view using organizational structures, supporting materials, and language appropriate for the topic, purpose, and audience.

Effective Oral Communication: Effective oral communication influences, informs, and/or connects with others by using organizational structures, supporting materials and delivery skills suitable to the topic, occasion and audience.

These standards guide the course overall and this curriculum unit in particular.

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