The Message in the Music: Popular Culture and Teaching in Social Studies

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Available online: 07 Aug 2010

To cite this article: Cameron White & Susan McCormack (2006): The Message in the Music: Popular Culture and Teaching in Social Studies, The Social Studies, 97:3, 122-127

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.3200/TSSS.97.3.122-127

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Songs are able to reach deep down inside the listener. This is the highest form of musical expression, where the music is not merely listened to but felt.

—Flaska 2000

Music is the universal language, or so the saying goes. Most people love music and may even find solace as they listen to their preferred musical genres. How often do songs “take us back” to a memory long since past? Because music can evoke deep personal meanings, social studies educators often use songs to emphasize larger historical moments. This personalization phenomenon continues as today’s youths explore their own musical genres and store today’s memories. Because music is a vital component of youth popular culture, preferred over even movies and television (Rideout, Roberts, and Foehr 2005), a teacher’s understanding and application of popular music can be a powerful tool for instruction and learning in social studies education.

Popular music is most often used to enhance history education through an investigation of the music of a period, a practice suggested by Harris (2004), Bafumo (2004), and Palmer (1998). Music’s full potential, however, is often underused, especially that of contemporary popular music. As social studies educators, our ongoing challenges are to provide students with effective tools to examine relevant societal issues critically and to make connections to the world of students; current popular music is a way to do that. Although traditional social studies education often focuses on covering essential knowledge to ensure high test scores and teachers often do not have enough time to include music, which some consider inappropriate for the classroom, teachers interested in a relevant social studies curriculum that facilitates active participation and problem solving may apply contemporary popular music in a variety of significant ways.

With myriad present social problems, meaningful integration of current issues is vital in social studies education. Music is a powerful tool that teachers can use for a serious examination of such social problems as poverty, racism, abuse, and addictions and such global issues as hunger, disease, and war. Following in the footsteps of former entertainers, today’s artists, like the Black Eyed Peas, Dixie Chicks, and Green Day, focus on social issues that should be considered in our classrooms. Through the students’ exploration of lyrics, music becomes a tool that offers social studies educators opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations about major social issues and to connect with students. Part of our responsibility as educators is to analyze the historical role that music has played in raising social consciousness, but more important, teachers need to use these examples to connect to the struggles that are being waged now.

Our Stories

Coincidentally, we both first stumbled on this music strategy as we began our careers as eighth-grade American history teachers, diligently plugging away at the prescribed curriculum and using district-approved textbooks and ancillaries. In a never-ending attempt to engage students, we tried more creative strategies such as simulations and cooperative learning. Our early teaching experiences remain similar in that we realized that we achieved little success in making connections with a majority of students in our classroom settings.
We were increasingly disillusioned and knew that changes had to be made but were unsure of which ones. We both knew that if we wanted to ensure that students learn the material, we would have to challenge them through active learning. Although it often seemed as if the students were unwilling to participate, the real problem rested with our inability to make the content engaging. Our students were unable to make personal meanings with the material. Fortunately, that trend changed. We both have powerful stories in which our students provided the push that created an epiphany regarding contemporary popular music’s potential for teaching and learning.

Midway through the inaugural semester as McCormack introduced material about acts and other historical events that happened before the American Revolution, her eighth-grade students demonstrated a determined resistance to learning. Perplexed by their blatant challenge, she was unable to connect with students, despite using the usual traditional pedagogical tools. On a morning drive to work, she heard a catchy tune played on the radio. Mentally running through the list of events to cover during that day’s lesson, she decided to change the lyrics of the song to reflect the events leading up to the Boston Tea Party. “The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire!” became “The tea, the tea, the tea was in the harbor” (Bloodhound Gang 1996). The factual information was now connected to a popular rap/rock-and-roll song, “Fire, Water, Burn,” with which most of the students were familiar.

Her use of the song had two results: the students gained new respect for her after her integration of a song that reflected their popular culture and they responded enthusiastically during the rest of a lesson designed to promote memorization of historic facts and dates. She sorted the students into groups and assigned each group a specific historic event. She directed the students to conduct basic research and rewrite songs that would explain the event. Former resisters produced outstanding performances that the audience and artists alike enjoyed. The two crucial points to consider are her realization that students’ interests were not being considered and her use of music to bridge that gap. The second point exposes the reality that this exercise was little more than facts-based memorization with an aesthetic flair.

In another instance, White was frustrated by the overreliance on traditional chronological and fact-based approaches in American history. He introduced historical folk music in an attempt to illustrate the connections between the issues, struggles, and conflicts that are the ongoing themes throughout history. Although the students temporarily appreciated the change in focus and the integration of music, many still had problems with the content because they found it difficult to connect to White’s personal musical choices. In an interesting conversation, one student asked White to consider Pink Floyd’s “The Wall” (1987):

We don’t need no education
We don’t need no thought control
No dark sarcasm in the classroom
Teachers leave them kids alone
Hey! Teachers! Leave them kids alone!
All in all it’s just another brick in the wall
All in all you’re just another brick in the wall.

Another student brought up selections by early rap groups such as Grandmaster Flash’s “The Message” (1982).

The bill collectors, they ring my phone
And scare my wife when I’m not home
Got a bum education, double-digit inflation
Can’t take the train to the job, there’s a strike at the station
It’s like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin’ under

During the remainder of the school year, White integrated music of historical times with current music, using the music as tools to compare similar issues in a variety of units. In subsequent projects, he integrated student-generated music selections. Students connected issues in American history, such as conflict, change, and rights, to music, which not only opened the door for communication but also resulted in more contextualized teaching and learning because the students were encouraged to speak through the messages in their music. That led to the ongoing integration of music in most social studies units as teacher, and students explored common themes across time, the first step of a long journey.

Addressing Social Issues through Music

Forging the way for all social studies educators, a few educators have been instrumental in setting the stage for the type of critical learning possible in a classroom infused with music. Responding to an ever-growing social diversity, music allows voices not related to the dominant culture to emerge. In his article “Middle Schoolers and the Blues,” Harris (2004) explains how he uses blues to appeal to a population of students who continue to be marginalized in history textbooks, only one of today’s important social commentaries. Most recent music genres and many individual contemporary artists include examples of songs that contain social commentary or historical references.

Many people are under the assumption that social commentary in music reached its pinnacle in the late sixties and early seventies. Founded in the eighties, punk, hip-hop, rap, grunge, and alternative are music genres that continue to provide considerable social commentary and historical references. Traditional rock still has much to say regarding social efficacy and activism. These are often the genres that most interest youths. Although we may not understand or even like the music of today, we cannot blindly dismiss its potential for critical social efficacy and activism.

Through its history, popular culture, like all forms of media, has not only served as a reflection of the times but also affected the times and served as a catalyst for critical social inquiry and societal change. Music can be a powerful theme as we investigate issues such as ethnicity and the struggle for equality, population growth, economics, technology, business and industry, and efficacy and empowerment within the context of social history (Szatmary 2000).
The impact that music has on those within societies who identify with its popular elements is hard to ignore. The effect of music is readily dismissed, however, by those who claim that popular culture is not significant to society’s development. Rosenthal (1998), reporting on his experience of teaching a course at Wesleyan University called Music and Social Movements, debates music’s function and whether it actually helps any social movement. He claims that movements do not need music to be successful and, conversely, that music needs no movement to be popular. However, he insists that his students gain much-needed media literacy by examining critical issues inherent in popular or contemporary music.

Dr. Craig Watkins, professor of sociology, African American studies, and radio, television, and films, suggests a cultural identity is maintained in part because of the success of hip-hop and its impact on black youth (Roach 2004). Today’s black youth struggle with issues such as the deterioration of family, drug abuse, and violence, especially toward women, which are themes frequently explored by hip-hop artist Queen Latifah (Dana Owens). These issues, however, are not isolated to one ethnic population; they transcend all ethnic lines. The same messages are demonstrated when the rock-and-roll band Everclear targets themes like emotional needs with the lyrics of “Father of Mine” (1997), which details the struggle of a family abandoned by the father. Other issues within the same ballad speak of spousal abuse and the problems faced when two cultures collide. Today’s artists recognize broad-ranging societal ills and their influence on our youth. Is it not time that educators recognize them as well? Our acceptance of their impact and our willingness to introduce them into our teaching can serve as the catalyst for critical communication and possibly future activism.

Although their messages are meant to galvanize today’s youth, many popular artists criticize student passivism. Do all artists take on the role of activist? Bob Dylan once remarked that “[t]here’s other things in this world besides love and sex that’re important” (Szatmary 2000). He encouraged an entire generation to reject racism and other social evils and to make a difference, regardless of youthful appearance. That philosophy was not embraced by the dominant culture, nor was it the last time that the establishment tried to disparage popular artists. As a result, fewer artists are willing to maneuver their way into social controversy. The late Kurt Cobain once claimed that he blamed his parents’ generation for coming so close to social change then giving up after a few successful efforts by the media & Government to deface the movement by using Mansons and other Hippie representatives as propaganda examples on how they were nothing but unpatriotic, communist, satanic, inhuman diseases. (Ali 2002, 64)

Raymond Horn (2003) charges educators with the duty to assist students as they began to decipher the messages in the media and develop a critical awareness of what they are consuming. Broad themes such as oppression and hegemony may be hidden within the lyrics, but students may not have developed an adequate media literacy that allows them to participate in projects at that critical level. As students transition from simply listening to music for enjoyment to evaluating the artists’ messages, there are ample opportunities for meaningful connections, but only if the educator is willing to translate the popular culture into the dominant culture’s terminology, which requires students to perform at higher cognitive levels than those expected in standards-based curriculums, but it epitomizes education that is aimed at teaching democratic values.

Who should decide the messages to present? One history teacher claims that musicians function as artists, releasing their music to express opinions that they want audiences to hear. Yet, he argues that the artist is only part of the equation because, like other art, it must be interpreted; those interpretations may vary (Lane 2005). The equation is compounded when one considers corporate media’s role in playing music. For Green Day, cutting through the incoherence became the theme and was the motivation behind their successful album American Idiot, which earned them a Grammy Award for best album in 2005 (Hendrickson 2005). The message behind American Idiot defies youth’s passive acceptance of corporate media and challenges them to think for themselves.

Don’t wanna be an American Idiot One nation controlled by the media Information nation of hysteria It’s going out to Idiot America Welcome to a new kind of tension All across the alien nation Everything isn’t meant to be okay Television dreams of tomorrow We’re not the ones who’re meant to follow.

Although the dominant population disagree with and perhaps fear the messages in the music as presented by popular music icons, students embrace those messages. There is undeniable success associated with initiating critical conversations induced by bringing popular culture through the music medium into the classroom because so many of the messages explored by contemporary artists are reflections of the larger society. They are not always popular messages, and their inclusion within a curriculum is often criticized. DeLorenzo (2003) argues, however, that music within the curriculum is one way to open conversations about democracy even when choosing what to select within the curriculum and students’ access to music are practices for critical debate.

Other critics argue that the messages in today’s music actually create the problems in our society and should not be explored in any classroom setting. First, this problem is most significant to researchers interested in the hip-hop generation, which continues to practice misogyny toward black women (Roach 2004). Second, controversial legislation, like the Patriot Act, is a prime discussion target when artists such as Rickie Lee Jones introduce political commentary like “Tell Somebody.”

Tell somebody, tell somebody, tell somebody I want to know how far you will go to protect our right of free speech? Because it only took a moment before it faded out of reach
Oh, tell somebody, tell somebody right now, tell somebody
What happened in the USA?
I wanna read about it in the news
I wanna hear about it on TV, yeah
What happened in the USA?
When they ask you
What happened in the USA?
Tell somebody
They’ll wanna know, oh people
The depth of our democracy is only as good as the voices of protest she protects
Voices of protest—rise!

The strength of these issues defies Cobain’s claim that the messages too often soothe those in the dominant culture who are uncomfortable with suggested images that are actual reflections of contemporary societal problems.

The artist Eminem moves beyond exploration to expose a variety of difficult issues, including the war in Iraq, racial profiling, and families in poverty, and goes a step further. His intention is to encourage youths to organize in a move for change, a move that has been aptly labeled “da black hoodie movement” (Popkin 2004). He is a reflection of a growing culture that dominating ills, his lyrics offer solace through the fog

Come along, follow me as I lead through the darkness
As I provide just enough spark, that we need to proceed
Carry on, give me hope, give me strength
Come with me, and I won’t stear [sic] you wrong
Put your faith and your trust as I guide us through the fog
Till the light, at the end of the tunnel, we gonna fight
We gonna charge, we gonna stomp, we gonna mash through the marsh, take us right through the doors. (Eminem 2004)

Eminem’s call to action mirrors citizenship education. Using these lyrics as a text would diversify the curriculum and allow communication across various social groups (Houser 2005). According to Houser, our role is to promote and involve students in civic affairs. That is not always achieved with curriculums that focus on standards-based instruction that does little to involve students, but it can be achieved by using art and aesthetics “as a means of addressing those issues through citizenship education” (45).

Conclusion

Music is a powerful tool to enhance learning, to connect issues and the times in history, to illustrate a cultural identity, or to promote unity for a cause. According to Popular Culture and the American Child (2005), children spend approximately 10,500 hours listening to music during their school-age year. To highlight the significance of this number, consider that this is only five hundred hours less than the hours they spend in school over their entire twelve-year enrollment. Surprisingly, over the course of students’ years in school, the use of music in the classroom diminishes until it is almost nonexistent in the upper-level classrooms. That seems like an odd practice when so many junior high and high school students spend so much of their personal time listening to music. Silent support for this practice is demonstrated each time educators maintain the status quo with reliance on curricula that do not reflect the needs of the general student population but rather reflect policymakers’ goals of standardization.

According to researchers, American students do not recognize their roles as active citizens because they credit societal changes to historical leaders rather than to individual acts (Epstein and Shiller 2005). In other words, they do not believe that their voices are important. We must reverse that view and prepare students to become critical, active citizens in a democratic society. A successful method to empower students early on is to show them that their points of view are valued and to accept their choices of media by welcoming a variety of musical genres into the classroom. All one needs to do is conduct an Internet search for musicians, songs, lyrics, or connected themes in music to find an extensive list of possibilities. Educators may feel inhibited by the technological aspect of locating appropriate selections, but the actual task of acquiring this information is simple with MP3 technology and a computer because lyrics and individual songs are just a download away. Students are happy to share their expertise in this matter. Considering the value of the relatively recent explosion of music and other available media, it is difficult to understand why educators are still not making that meaningful integration.

Many still question the integration of music in social studies education. They are concerned about specific school policy banning controversial materials such as contemporary music, about possible complaints from parents and administrators, and about connecting the use of music to specific course objectives. We suggest addressing those concerns with openness about one’s teaching strategies. Periodic letters to parents outlining music integration ideas connected to course objectives can help address parental concerns. Providing detailed lesson and unit plans to administrators can also help. Classroom management techniques that focus on rights and responsibilities, tied to integrating student choice in music, also are integral to success. Perhaps even more important are the teachers’ modeling and suggestions that integrating music facilitates the development of lifelong skills such as critical thinking and problem solving.

Contemporary popular music can enhance social studies teaching when students relate the meanings of the lyrics to a real-world context. They realize music’s effect on society and how it is often a powerful tool for civic involvement.

Key words: music in the classroom, music and social issues, teaching citizenship with music
APPENDIX

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

When developing lessons centered on social studies themes such as democracy and social justice, teachers find music is a powerful pedagogical method for examining the past and the present. Rosenthal (1998) offers a model that forces students to examine the following aspects:

1. The definition of a social movement
2. The exploration of the differentiation between pop and folk music
3. The function of music for social movements
4. Exploration of lyrics and the extent to which lyrics convey messages to the listeners

The educator’s role is that of a facilitator who encourages the students to make meaning of all materials presented.

The message in the music is a powerful medium for engaging students in meaningful learning experiences.

Our first duty to students is to supply them with a curriculum that is meaningful to them and that will help them be productive citizens in an ever-changing society. The message in the music is a powerful medium for engaging students in meaningful learning experiences.

A Sample Lesson: Using Music to Teach Social Issues

1. Pass out lyrics to any song that deals with social issues, for example, “Where Is the Love” by the Black Eyed Peas.
2. Play the song and play other examples of songs that deal with social issues.
3. Ask the following questions:
   • What is the song about?
   • What issues and ideas are presented?
   • Why does the song begin and end when it does?
4. Form the students into groups of approximately four each.
5. Tell students that they are going to write their own lyrics on an agreed upon social issue. Have students individually brainstorm current social issues. Have group members share. Create a group stanza.
6. Pass out a transparency and have groups write a new stanza. Each group shares and then sings the new stanza.

Following the sharing, the groups discuss the rationale for events and issues that they included.

Groups:
• Individuals in groups brainstorm themes, social issues and music examples for integration.
• Brainstorm application ideas. Share.

Modeling:
• Suggest examples of music for groups to investigate.
• Examples include songs from Public Enemy, System of a Down, Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, Ani Difranco, and Woody Guthrie.
• Discuss the examples and choose specific examples of music for classroom integration.

Examples:
• Have lyrics and music for songs such as “Changes” by 2Pac, “Roll with It” by Ani Difranco, and “Shimmy” by System of a Down.
• Groups should brainstorm integration ideas.

Music and the Twentieth Century

Introduction:
Play two or three of your favorite songs (history, social themes). Inform students of the meanings, connections, and your reasons for liking the songs.

Have students do the following:
• Write names of three favorite songs.
• Describe what the songs mean.
• List reasons for liking the songs.
• Bring in examples or lyrics.

Groups:
Share examples. Have group members write or draw a response to the examples. Determine the similarities and differences between songs.

Discuss in groups:
• What are the elements of a good song or artist?
  • What kind of music do you like?
  • What are current issues regarding music in society?
  • What are your thoughts about these issues?

Extensions:
Do the same with themed collections such as the jukebox hits of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

• Long Walk to Freedom
• Say It Loud

Connect other themes or issues in the music to history and social issues.

Useful Web Sites

Popular Songs in American History
http://www.contemplator.com/america/

One Hundred Years of Music Posters
http://www.music-posters-history.com/

This Day in Music History
http://datadragon.com/day/

Black History in Music
http://www.rhino.com/blackhistory/

Top Twenty Music History
http://www.top20musichistory.com/

Education Planet—History and Music
http://www.educationplanet.com/search/

Songs for Social Studies
http://songsforteaching.homestead.com/

SocialStudies.html

Teaching Media
http://www.media-awareness.ca/eng/med/class/teamedia/popcul.htm

Popular Culture Appreciation Society
http://home.vicnet.net.au/~popcult/net.htm#TOP

History in Song
http://www.popculture.com/tripart/2/history.html

Elementary School Songs
http://www.canteach.ca/index.html

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