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Top 5 Songs at My Funeral: Using Music for Critical Inquiry

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Top 5 Songs at My Funeral: Using Music for Critical Inquiry

Michael Robb Grieco

Looking to inspire critical discussion in your classroom? Just ask your students about music. Heated debates will ensue with shifting sorts of support and criteria for judgment, distinction, and description. Every student is an expert in some way. It is futile for a teacher to try to wrest the critical authority from the clutches of the factions that arise in the classroom when discussions begin about what is cool, what is important, what is obnoxious, what is positive or negative, what goes well with a trip to the mall or soccer practice. It is also dangerous to unleash the class full of competing musical authorities in discussion as the factions inevitably rip into each other in attempts to legitimize their own tastes. I have used music, with some success, in the usual English class modes—reading lyrics for poetic devices, listening to pieces as inspiration for creative writing, using songs as text for thematic interpretations, etc. However, none of these modes capitalizes on the range of passions, associations and critical perspectives that students own and profess through their music choices. When I first taught the Media Literacy themed junior English class at Concord High School in New Hampshire in 2000, I began polling my students annually about which medium is most important to them. Each year, an overwhelming majority claimed music. That sealed the deal for me; I had to find a way to bring music into our classroom safely and positively without diminishing its relevance and power to inspire critical discourse. Ultimately, my classes successfully negotiated this risky proposition through a year long series of carefully structured student music presentations set up by our study of the film *High Fidelity* (2000). This article describes the evolution of these classroom activities for critically exploring the roles of music in our lives.

Balancing the Approach and Theoretical Framework

When I began thinking how best to bring music into our English classes, I solicited ideas from my students. One of the most popular ideas was to have music presentations where students would share some of their own connections to music. The students loved the notion of bringing their own music choices into the class rather than

everyone examining music their teacher chose. At first, the idea seemed a little unwieldy to me, and perhaps impractical given the amount of time the project would demand if every student were to present. However, I am always seeking activities that develop language use and production skills while we develop critical thinking in language (or media) reception. Like most English curricula, developing oral skills is one of our core course objectives. Presentations and speeches always take time. Why not take time for impassioned presentations about music? I liked the idea because it allowed me to formally teach public speaking techniques and presentation structures while potentially allowing the students great freedom to choose relevant content. As students thrive when offered freedom of form in expressing their learning and mastery of specifically prescribed content, they thrive conversely when required to adhere to a specific form of expression for their own inspired choices from a free range of relevant content. As Nel Noddings attests in *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, freedom of choice and assignment relevance are essential elements to integrate in curriculum and lesson development, not only for motivating and engaging students, but also for encouraging respect in the classroom by valuing the skills and knowledge that students bring to the table. However, as Lisa Delpit vehemently argues in *Other People's Children*, we English teachers have a responsibility, beyond the challenge to care, to challenge students to achieve standards of reading, writing and thinking valued by our communities and demanded by the marketplace for which we must prepare students to be competitive by imparting and directly training such skills. In developing new lessons, I find myself constantly negotiating the tension between these educational philosophies of Delpit and Noddings. In the idea for our music presentations, I saw an excellent opportunity to strike this balance.

Collaborative Lesson Development

As a class, we excitedly discussed the possibilities for sharing our music tastes, experiences, and knowledge. We came up with two basic approaches: 1. Share personal stories or ideas that show how/why certain music is part of your life. (*Start with you, connect the music*); or, 2. Highlight the hooks you feel in certain music and articulate how/why you react so that others may get into it the way you do. (*Start with the music, connect to you and try to bring others in*). From there, we developed a menu of possible choices for presentation themes. The choices span a wide variety of roles that music play in our lives, from emotional connections to personal events to historical significance to participation through performance and more (see Appendix A for full menu). The

variety allowed each student across the spectrum of skill and motivational levels in my heterogeneously grouped classes to find a place to feel included and connected to the assignment. Conversely, the variety of options would apply to more homogeneous skill groups, highlighting the diversity of experience and personality in the class. The collaborative process of lesson design is a key to this process of inclusion and agency.

Next, we turned our attention to potential difficulties. As we discussed the sorts of problems that might arise for them in sharing connections to music in this public forum, my students actually requested that I impose formal structures to protect a number of their insecurities. They wanted a formal outline of required parts to the presentation, examples of speeches organized in different acceptable ways, and demonstrations of the sorts of vocal and personal presentation techniques that would make them look good. I anticipated these needs arising from students' common public speaking fears. I knew that, given their excitement and enthusiasm to share their music connections, I could provide more than enough structure to balance their basic fears with some formal public speaking instruction and examples of my own. However, students had other fears that were more problematic for our project.

Students did not want any discussion or comments from the class on their presentations unless they asked questions themselves. One student who had recently moved to New Hampshire from Tennessee was convinced that her country music choices would be laughed at by her new northern classmates. While the class denied such a thing would ever happen, they also demanded that I penalize any negative comments or embarrassing feedback. I then realized how important it was to protect each students' personal authority over the worth of the music and stories they would share. I also saw a deeper problem. Without some sort of warm up lessons encouraging students to critically explore their own connections to music, the music presentations would end up being a contest to look the coolest. My presentation examples, formal teaching, and rule enforcement would not be enough to deliver the spirit of positive, mutual intellectual curiosity about music choices that the class needed for students to take risks towards genuinely sharing their personal connections to music. The music presentation idea was a great one for getting students to invest in a public speaking project, and for exposing students to a range of roles that music plays in our lives. However, I needed a way to motivate students to explore that range of roles for music within their own lives. In thinking about my own life, my music choices had played significant roles in my personal relationships, in my self esteem, in my attitudes about sex, in my understanding (or

misconceptions) about other eras, in coping with emotional turmoil, and a myriad more ways. I needed a way to inspire students to consider the social and personal consequences of their music choices, and to be critical of those choices, without endangering their obviously embattled social positions so often represented by their music choices. In this hour of need, I stumbled upon the Stephen Frears film *High Fidelity* (2000), essentially the media literacy adventure of twenty something Chicago record store owner, Rob (John Cusack), who tries to figure out why he keeps failing in love by critically examining his entertainment and relationship choices in an attempt to disentangle the tightly knit weave of music, media, friendship, and romance in his life.

Film Analysis to Develop Meta-cognitive Awareness and Critical Perspectives

Since most students are more comfortable recognizing and analyzing media's influence in others' lives than admitting media's influence over themselves, Rob's character and quest in *High Fidelity* offers an important opportunity for students to discuss, criticize and inhabit a model of a critical thinker from a safe, vicarious position. As the movie opens, Rob removes his head phones to look at the camera and ask,

"What came first, the music or the misery? People worry about kids playing with guns, or watching violent videos like some sort of culture of violence will take them over. But nobody worries about kids listening to thousands--literally thousands--of songs about heartbreak, rejection, pain, misery and loss. Did I listen to pop music because I was miserable? Or, was I miserable because I listened to pop music?"

I reprinted these opening lines on a synopsis of the film to encourage students to take Rob's lead in examining the themes and messages that they may have internalized from their favorite music and entertainment choices through their lives. From his present misery amidst an estrangement from girlfriend Laura, Rob narrates flashbacks to his "top 5 all time most miserable break ups," beginning with early grade school, to examine his motivations and values that built his relationships and brought them crashing down. The format of the film echoes a chapter organization of a novel and allows for natural stopping points for discussion. We frequently stopped to explicitly discuss Rob's process which would become a meta-cognitive model for examining ourselves. I often allowed a few moments for students to free write notes and narratives about how their own lives and entertainment choices might relate to Rob's and be understood through his sort of questioning. Through his first two break ups, Rob humorously recounts

how his entertainment choices exacerbated and confused the strange new desires of his early adolescence, “discovering breasts...suddenly everywhere,” admitting that “we didn’t even know what we wanted.” Most of the vignettes through the film’s narrative offer such lessons in critical inquiry and personal examination. Although we watched the entire movie, splitting viewing with discussion over several class periods, film clips could be shown independently as vignettes to spur discussion of various specific themes. Beyond examining media effects on personal emotions and desires, the film illustrates various social uses of music and pop culture knowledge that Rob employs with various consequences, good and bad.

Along with his frustrated and confused physical quest, Rob recalls his interest in Penny, break up number two, as based in her mature musical tastes in Carly Simon, Cat Stevens and the like—mature and tasteful choices perhaps, but too nice for his teenage lust. Here, gender differences and pressures enter class discussion as we examine what Rob fails to see, the dilemma from Penny’s point of view. Rob’s stereotypical masculine urge and drive is contrasted with Penny’s softer, more intellectual and poetic tastes in singer songwriters. This contrast offers an opportunity to discuss students’ senses of gendered music, allowing for questions like, “What makes music masculine or feminine, for boys or for girls?” “What music styles resist gendering, and how?” And recalling the frame from the opening monologue, “Do certain music styles reflect realities of gender, or are gender realities shaped and constrained by music styles?” Raising the questions here is the key; as Rob learns, simple answers are not the point, and worse, they distract from the complex reality that questioning reveals, a complexity which allows for understanding and evaluation of many competing influences. This process facilitates a major media literacy goal, to make issues questionable and to value the questioning. No magic answers for Rob’s problems are revealed, but as trends in behavior and influence take shape, Rob benefits from the questioning, as do we as a class. When we stop the film through this sequence, I encourage students to articulate Rob’s questions and write their own alongside his. Homework assignments often asked students to further explore the ideas raised in this questioning process, developing their notes into short response papers comparing Rob’s experience to their own.

Through *High Fidelity*, my classes explore and examine the use of music taste

and pop culture expertise for self esteem through social status. In his early college years, Rob became obsessed with hipster Charlie who achieves her popularity by way of her pop culture and intellectual savvy, “She talked about books and music and politics...why should someone like Charlie like me?” He aspires to acquire her ease with knowledge, lamenting his insistent taste in more specialized and obscure pop trivia, “I’ve read [hip, intellectual] books...and I think I’ve understood them...but my all time favorite book is Johnny Cash’s autobiography *Cash* by Johnny Cash.” Rob’s insecurity, “Charlie’s out of my class: too pretty, too smart, too witty, too much,” comes to bear as she dumps him, a calamity he “never got over.” His experience inspires class discussion of how people form friendships and social groups based on shared tastes and taste distinctions. Falling out with Charlie, Rob drops out of school, loses weight and starts his record store business where he can be the reigning authority. These uses of music taste and knowledge for social connection and power make a familiar experience explicit and discussable for my students. Our discussions of this film section allowed students to develop a meta-cognitive awareness and language for understanding this tricky process, which inspired many presentations about negotiating musical tastes for social purposes. I constantly reminded students of our impending music presentations as we found opportunities for topics of inquiry suggested by the film.

At the record store, Rob and his employees, Dick and Barry, engage in heated debates over the worth of music by sparring their top five lists of what they judge to be the best music for various top five criteria and contexts. This evaluative game is an important developmental practice in itself, one familiar to most of my students, as the sides build arguments and evidence while asserting the context within which to judge their efforts. It’s not unlike the language game we English teachers ask students to play in their own essay writing, although we often prescribe the criteria, teach the discourse rules, and evaluate how well our students play according to them. While this is an important practice, especially when the discourse rules and argument skills that we teach are prerequisite for economically advantageous “real world” academic and job opportunities, the practice of developing objective or shared (inter-subjective) criteria and creating contexts for argument and judgment offers another important level of opportunity. Rob and his employees clearly enjoy jockeying for dominance in their expressions of which music is best. Students also enjoy displaying their authority and dominance over their areas of expertise. However, they do not always see the limits and consequences of concentrating and wielding their power.

When Barry teases a customer by selling a cherished, rare record to another regular customer whose tastes he values more, the beneficiary challenges the clerks as follows:

"You guys are snobs."

"No we're not."

"Seriously, you're totally elitist. You feel like the unappreciated scholars so you shit on the people who know less than you."

"No!"

"Which is everybody."

"Yeah."

"And that's just sad."

Film sequences such as this in *High Fidelity* allow students to discuss ethics related to these taste-sparring sessions, which have great repercussions in each character's romantic relationships. "A while back, Dick, Barry and I agreed it's what you like, *NOT* what you *are* like. Books, records, films, these things matter. Call me shallow; it's the... truth." Our class discussion questions this philosophical, shallow "truth" as we see how it plays out for each of the characters. Barry's sharp wit never finds its match, but he finds a band; Dick finds a kindred soul through shared tastes; and Rob must transcend his own philosophy, which helps him in some professional and social relationships, in order to regain his romantic relationship with Laura. As students try out these critical perspectives, their own social identities and investments in taste distinctions must be supported. For deconstruction to be playful, students must first be secure in their own constructions. Otherwise, critical views can threaten their personal integrity and self esteem in violent ways. I have seen students pressured by convincing criticism into converted capitulation, bewildered disillusionment or rebellious resistance. They need to construct a sound understanding of the taste cultures they create and appropriate before they can play with deconstruction. Students need opportunities to articulate their own investments in media.

The characters of *High Fidelity* offer model activities for students to build and organize their own understandings of *how* music means for them, and to thereby fortify security in their social identities to which their entertainment choices and tastes are integral. To pass the depressing time after Laura leaves, Rob endeavors to rearrange his record collection autobiographically. He explains to Dick, who has dropped by to check on him, how the order of the music tells the story of various phases and relationships in

his life. I offer this activity as a homework option, which is one of the most popular despite its great demands of time and effort, “Organize your music collection autobiographically and share your list and process with paragraphs explaining connections to your life.” When Laura’s father dies and she seeks out Rob for support, the record shop clerks play a game in her honor, naming the top five songs they would want at their funerals. While morbidly comic, the exercise reveals how powerfully music represents and speaks for the players’ lives. As an assignment option, “List the top 5 songs for your funeral and provide rationale for each choice,” this becomes another powerful learning opportunity for students to express themselves through their music choices, this time with meaningful audiences in mind. By the end of the film, Rob realizes that his own insistent criteria and expertise in taste and judgment have kept him from respecting and loving fully in his romantic relationships. Throughout the film we have witnessed him using the “subtle art of the mix tape” to assert his prowess with friends and seduce various women. In the final scene, after Rob and Laura reunite, we leave Rob as he is making a mix tape for Laura “of songs she will like.” He has accepted her difference and has begun to cherish it. What she likes still matters, but it no longer matters whether Rob likes, or even respects, the same things—he has learned to value her with her own tastes, which he, in this final moment, wants to indulge rather than to dominate. Discussing this transformation set the tone for the class as we made the transition to exploring and expressing our own values through connections to music.

Music Presentation Structure and Classroom Environment

Steeped in ideas about the roles of music in their own personal and social identities discovered through the film discussion and activities, the class turned back to the issues of making a positive classroom environment for sharing their ideas and connections. I voiced my predictable teacherly concerns with students choosing appropriate material for class. Students assured me that there would be no blatant transgressions. They wanted this project to succeed. After discussing such a great range of roles that music played in characters’ lives in *High Fidelity*, the students were as eager to listen to their classmates’ powerful connections to music as to express their own. Still, the students wanted to share their presentations without scrutiny from their peers. As audiences, students were required to listen silently during presentations. This helped address one of my core concerns about engendering an ethic of inquiry and curiosity, as opposed to discrimination, with respect to others’ entertainment choices, musical tastes and their implications for social and emotional identity. Inattention was as

unacceptable as distraction with tangible consequences that would detract from violators' own presentation grades. We agreed upon a format where students would present for about ten minutes, I would briefly comment highlighting the positive aspects of the presentation and balancing the student's connection with other critical views as necessary, and then students would silently record their reactions in their notebooks for a few minutes for their private use. The structure worked well in block scheduling at Concord High School as we began most of our 90 minute classes through the year with one of these student music presentations. When I recently taught in a more traditional English program at a high school in Manchester, NH, the music presentation structure fit the 45 minute classes well as a weekly event featuring three presentations. Before students began developing their work, I offered a few model presentations illustrating the aspects of structure (introduction, body, conclusion, and transitions) and delivery (vocal quality, verbal emphasis, pace, gesture, eye contact, etc) for which they would be held accountable. A handout of the presentation structure outlined the formal requirements, including playing music and using visual aids to compliment their speeches, and not the other way around. My modeling also showed how various personal connections to music could be presented effectively. Comfortably supported by these clear expectations and structures, the students were free to showcase a combination of personal risk, motivated expression, invested skill development, and critical perspectives that far exceeded my high expectations.

Results: Students' Music Presentations and Class Building

A particularly withdrawn student, whose reticence combined with her family's wealth led many classmates to consider her stuck up, shared her family's strife through a series of songs: a lonesome ballad longing for her absent father; a country song of alcoholic self medication for her mother; an ideal Disney number recalling carefree vacations together in years past. Eyes welled up through the class as she spoke, and two formerly estranged students offered hugs as she finished her presentation. Through the music, she was able to share parts of herself others had not seen, and she gained respect, sympathy and friendship. A troubled student at the other end of the social and economic scale shared his analysis of the materialism in the rap music he loved. He explained how the constant references to money, clothes, and jewelry were ways of dreaming out of poverty, but that the stories were often balanced by the failure of these material things to deliver friendship and love. "It's just ways of working out desires, and puttin' out fires, maybe posing as liars, but keepin' on as try-ers," he quipped in his own

original lyric during the presentation. The analytical approach allowed him to explore and explain personal values, and allowed the class to connect and respect his connections in ways they had never considered.

Several students shared such intensely personal connections between music and their particular experiences. Some told stories about the songs they associate with their parents' divorces, the death of friends and family members, or the anger they have felt at being ostracized by peers. Students found new respect for their classmates' struggles as well as respect for the value of music, which they might otherwise have ignored or disparaged. Other students emphasized positive associations of their music choices to experiences such as romantic relationships, family bonding, relaxing and coping. Students learned how music creates different opportunities for experiencing emotion for different students. The ability to use music in the presentation inspired students to share such powerful emotional investments while directing their classmates listening experiences to understand and feel the music in specific ways. One student brought his experience as a competitive swimmer to life through an original narrative of internal monologue read with an ingenious soundtrack bringing the class into his emotions. The structure of the assignment allowed students of all skill and interest levels to fully participate, telling the stories of when and why they listen to their favorite songs. Tears were not uncommon, nor head bobbing, nor spontaneous smiles or even dancing. Some students took a more intellectual tack, arguing, for example, the historical, social or political significance of music that interested them. We saw presentations connect the Dave Mathews Band to understanding apartheid, Jennifer Lopez to issues of Latina representation, and Green Day to economic exploitation. Echoing Rob's humorous journey in *High Fidelity*, some students comically related their attempts to be cool through the various musical fads they had indulged growing up. The range, depth and quality of presentations was staggering. Students often thanked me for making time in class for them to consider each other in new ways. I thanked them for their efforts, interests and respect. We had achieved something special.

Final Thoughts: Worth the Risk

Encouraging students to explore, examine and explicate their own music tastes in the classroom is a risky proposition. English teachers are not in the business of encouraging rifts between students. And if we have learned anything from the movie *Footloose*, or any of the countless other tales of misunderstood youth culture rebelling through music and dance, playing the meddling minister trying to drive a wedge between

students and the music they love is bound to backfire, no matter how clear the negative influences appear from our wizened perspectives. By the same token, however, teachers would be downright irresponsible if they allowed students space in their classrooms to extol the virtues of misogynist rap songs, suicidal ballads, or party-till-you-drop pop music without discussing critical views and possible consequences of such choices. So, the challenge of this risky proposition boils down to harnessing relevance and inspiring critical inquiry without compromising safety issues, including self esteem and appropriateness. My students managed this proposition through their engagement with *High Fidelity* and the strict structure of our music presentations, which became an invaluable class building experience as well as an avenue for serious investment in the practice of public speaking skills. Our experience was well worth the risk.

Works Cited

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Appendix A: *Music Presentation Theme Menu (assignment sheet, side 2)*

Presentation Ideas:

- Music as Basis/Component of Relationships:** share stories of how certain songs/bands/styles played roles in relationships between friends, family members, boyfriends/girlfriends, etc

- Music that Made You:** share formative experiences involving music, share eye opening moments, show how influential songs/lyrics/music opened doors to you

- Music that Changed the World:** share how a musician's work has affected the world, represented a culture, etc.

- Music Scenes:** discuss how/why music means certain things to a certain social group or community of music supporters

- Appreciating Musical/Lyrical genius/innovation:** share importance of an artist's musical or lyrical contributions, personally, artistically, historically, etc.

- Can You Hear How I Hear?:** try to share your fervor for a certain artist or style, articulate your attraction to try to give classmates a way into your enjoyment

- Share Some New Sounds:** share the importance of experimentation, stretching your personal tastes through listening broadly, share something new you are unsure of, and discuss why this listening interests you

- Offer Connections, Go Old School:** share some of the less known influential recordings that have influenced more popular artists

- Refute the Critics:** show classmates why certain music should not be dismissed, show how it deserves to be appreciated, take on criticisms with knowledge and passion

--**Soundtracked Stories:** tell how certain music/songs played a big role in one of the better stories from your life, tell the story, play the songs

--**Creative Soundtracks:** tell a true or made up story you have scripted to involve an accompanying musical soundtrack (avoid lyrics overlapping your tale)

--**Performance:** dance or lip sync to music or song; talk to class about the inspiration for your interpretation (this can be as serious or silly as you like)

--**Make up your own idea:** center your presentation on something else...run your idea by your teacher before you present to assure credit.
