

Acts of Courage: Leaping into Mindful Music Teaching

Cathy Benedict & Patrick Schmidt

Introduction

The title of this article is one that might possibly evoke images of heroic acts that transcend mere mortal engagements. Images of people running into burning buildings to save their children trapped within. Legends who become part of our imaginations as children, larger than life acts of fearlessness, going above and beyond. Acts of courage may have become mythologized to such a point that they feel out of our reach; only for those who are willing to risk everything, no matter the cost.

But as teacher educators we both know this to be untrue. We witness acts of courage daily. The challenge is that while at times grandiose, most often these acts are barely noticeable—unless one is able to see them for what they are. We have come to know and recognize that acts of courage are much like the ‘Ah hah’ moment Eleanor Duckworth (2006) nurtures and cherishes. Much like Duckworth, we have learned to focus not simply on our own expectations, but to listen more carefully to where each student and teacher is on the continuum of courageous engagements. This wasn’t as simple as it sounds, however, and it wasn’t until we let go of the goal-oriented expectations we had been taught to ‘teach to,’ that we were able to see acts of courage for what they are. In other words, we had to recognize that too often our words, “circumvent[ed] the issue and silence[d] the actors” (Paley, 1986, p. 124). Facilitating acts of courage requires that we too act courageously, as the prize is on making them contagious, not convincing.

The question nagging at us is this: Has the affordance of space for mindfulness, reflection, spontaneity, wonderment, and care, become heroic? One might point out that in this day and age all teaching and learning is an act of courage. Both teachers and students feel threatened by externally imposed evaluation systems, working under curriculum expectations that leave little room for creative teaching and learning. Principals themselves lack the ability to support and encourage thoughtful teaching and learning, themselves pressured by external forces. The entire enterprise feels daunting if not impossible; at times even heroic. Indeed, one could go as far as to say that simply entering a teacher education program takes great courage. Finding money to pay for university as well as rent and food certainly can call for fortitude and endurance. The assurance of a teaching position once graduated is no longer guaranteed. Becoming a teacher is shrouded by uncertainty today. A leap of faith into teaching—once taken with little pause—is losing its affirming and qualitative aspects, allowing teaching to be flattened against checks and balances, oversimplified against measurements of effectiveness and efficiency.

In this short article we aim to illustrate how we have come

to think of the potential and promise of acts courage, uncovering the small but powerful places they begin. We focus on two different populations of teachers: pre-service undergraduate students who have not yet begun to teach, and in-service teachers, those who are attending graduate school at night while teaching during the day. We begin, however, by articulating our own paths toward these understandings, recognizing (and this may seem obvious) those ways our educational and pedagogical experiences have led us to think differently about the opportunities of doing and being differently as teachers.

Guidance, Happenstances, and Leaps of Faith

Growing up, becoming teacher educators was not something about which we both dreamt. When we first started teaching everyone knew that ‘teacher educator’ was a title reserved for the ‘experts.’ In our undergraduate programs we took the required classes, (at times) dutifully following the assigned teachers whom we assumed experts (how else could they be there?). At the same time, the sense they were teaching us to do something new was not there, as we both believed we already *knew* what to do. After thriving in successful music programs and organizations most our young lives, what more was there to learn? Our undergraduate studies came with few surprises; very little challenged what we had experienced as musicians and come to assume as learners. We were not asked to interrogate or imagine how things might be different. That would have been illogical. We did what was expected and thought little of the multiple meanings to be found in the role of the teacher educator. We taught for years in the uncompromising warmth of certainty.

Fast toward to our doctoral studies where both of us consciously chose to move beyond (even out of) the discipline ‘music.’ One of us chose to pursue Urban Education, Policy Studies and Educational Leadership and the other Curriculum and Teaching. In much of our beginning course work we were spoken to in what seemed to be a new language; faintly familiar sounds yet just out of reach. As interlopers, outside of our own discipline, we were ‘forced’ to try out different ideas considering what *else* education might mean. Out from under the auspices and even surveillance of the tradition of ‘music’ and music education we were seen differently by colleagues. No longer were we reduced or “deemed” musician or music teacher (Veck, 2013, p. 45), no longer were our assumptions self-understood, our codes instantaneously translated. We experienced critical exploration in the scholarly traditions of our new fields and were challenged to explore our pedagogies and leadership. Assimilating and accommodating this new language was facilitated by pedagogical engagements that served to scaffold dif-

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ferent ways of sense making and reflection; we were “called upon to think and to talk about what [we] think” (Duckworth, 2005, p. 259). Surprisingly, the affordance of time to do this did not interfere with the subject matter. Rather, the subject matter became something else; it became the exploration of thinking. Indeed, our discipline (music), having to contend with other disciplines, gave way to conversations that privileged “ideas and discussion” (Hansen, p. 413, 1993), rather than rewarding individual speakers and the truisms they cultivated—or were told to cultivate—in their own fields.

Ideas and discussions became transformative in classroom spaces where professors embodied a moral component of being with and in their discipline that had nothing to do with strategy or control. Their discipline area felt framed by consideration and reflection. As they assumed their disciplines to be in flux, unresolved, we generated more questions, and attending to the thoughts of others felt like we were constructing the discipline and its pedagogy again, anew. We thought that we too could be teachers who “[help] students get to where ideas can find them” (Duckworth, 2009, p. 185). By different paths, but in similar ways, we came to work under the premise that:

...teachers do not put themselves between the subject matter and the learners—do not try, through telling or showing, to persuade the learners to see things as the teachers themselves see them. Instead, the teacher respect the learners’ thoughts and encourage them to have more—knowing that students’ ideas will evolve as the learners keep thinking and experiencing more. (p. 187)

For a singer and a trombonist who had grown up in large and small ensembles led by someone to whom we, more often than not, relinquished control, management, judgment, and even passion, this was, to put it mildly, both extraordinary and frightening. Everything we had come to know as true was being challenged. “Before”, we were rarely asked to think out loud; rarely felt divergent answers were welcomed; had not been asked “to keep thinking about the problem, beyond the first thought that comes.” We had not been asked to take “thinking seriously” (Duckworth, 2005, p. 259), and we were not invited to seriously consider our practices.

In retrospect, we realize that our efforts to become teacher educators were less about our labours to enter higher education, and more about a transformation from music teachers into music educators. Consequently, we take stock, daily, of the processes that facilitated this meaningful change. We recognize that the explicit tasks of translation other educational realities to our own teaching contexts (music) were necessary and instrumental in how we think today. We now acknowledge that small acts of courage of others led to those of our own, and thus we continue to struggle with new ideas and unfamiliar texts; to

model anew and to take risk, to name uncomfortable realities, and to realize the multiple, baffling ways we often times fail. The wonder is that understanding the limits of expertise has turned itself into a process. Thus we challenge others to the fray, guiding by jumping right in alongside them and by bearing witness of their own small acts of courage.

In the next sections, we outline how we enact these processes with pre-service undergraduate students and graduate in-service teachers. We come to all of this recognizing that as we were prepared to “hear” and engage differently so must our scaffolding of pedagogical engagements and class assignments so that those with whom we interact are also prepared.

Becoming Educators Early On: Impacting Pre-service Teachers

Our undergraduates come from high school music programs that have prepared them to replicate and reproduce what they experienced. Asking them to reflect back and interrogate those programs can often be a challenge, but it can also be powerful. One way we scaffold this reflective process is to model the use of language similar to those ways we experienced in our doctoral programs. When we begin the classes we rarely explicitly address the language we are using; our goal is for them to internalize before interrogating. We stay away from using empty praise such as “good job,” we leave plenty of (what may seem uncomfortable) silence after questions have been posed, we push them to ask follow up questions, and we don’t use words which bear coded references (for instance, ghetto, underprivileged, classroom “management”). After a few weeks we then step out of pedagogical moments to call attention to those phrases and ask them to consider what we are *not* saying as well as *why* we might be using the language we are using. Subtle and powerful shifts take place. As we work hard at forming a community of learning and thoughtful interaction we return to the question: “whose job is it to make sure everyone is included?” We challenge the ways we come to identify what is “The teacher’s job” or what “a successful student looks like.” We ask them to consider that if it *is* the teacher’s job to be inclusive, what responsibility do *they* take on to care for others? As time passes they invariably come to look around the room to include those who may not know how to join a group, or for whom joining may yet not be a social skill, or for whom joining has always been fraught with exclusion. They begin, then, using each other’s names when they report back out of small groups: “Carlos, David, Kevin and I were speaking about...” At first, they find this amusing; as they all know each other’s names. But they recognize the community building, created on hearing their names spoken by others, and realize the power in honoring the other before they name themselves. This is how our young educators begin to relinquish their positioning, favouring trying new thinking based on what others have said, taking group ownership rather than needing to speak first. Hence, they begin to experience teaching as an “invitation...to participate in education...and not as a means for self-confirmation” (Veck, 2013, p. 42).

To further that invitation we also ask them to examine how questions function. They come to understand (admit) that students too often supply the easiest answer, which serves to both placate the teacher and deflect any further engagement by other

students. They see that when we accept the first ‘right’ answer others in the class know they aren’t accountable for thinking. They practice phrases such as:

What do you mean by ___? How did you come to think that? Have you considered ___? I’m not sure what you mean, Jessica. Can you give a concrete example from one of the readings we’ve had? What if you ___?

They also come to know that these follow up questions allow them to peer deeper into a response that may seem incorrect, but that is based on reflection, experience and reasoning. This kind of problem posing and questioning becomes the norm in the class, rather than moments of surprise.

Above all we continually ask them to attend to language that is used to assume and name ‘common sense.’ Music education does not lack in this use of language. We are told to “reward good behavior”, and rules—posted around classrooms or surreptitiously enforced until internalized—are rarely challenged. We point out how often we hear descriptions such as “good music program,” or “rehearsal techniques that work” and rarely, if ever, are asked to consider good for *what*, or works at *what*? Students begin to pay attention to the language around them as well as the language they use. They grapple with and often struggle to replace those ‘go to phrases’, but in that grappling begin to understand how language shapes, disrupts, and frames the possibility of agency – theirs and those with whom they engage.

Our most favorite example comes from three young men (instrumentalists) who found great joy (as many do) discovering their love in interacting with young children. Recently, our elementary ‘methods’ class was taking place with a group of nine year olds. Each week we would all take the class together at their school, in their music classroom, learning with and from each other. All were able to experience and witness first hand the possibilities of modeling language that frames and invites critical exploration, rather than that which excludes and rewards those with the “right” answer. All in that class were also able to experience first hand how young children can look around the room to make certain everyone is included in conversations.

Our class, 3rd graders and college students, was invited to sing for the opening of one of the Miami Dade School Board meetings. Before the performance, the Miami Dade Superintendent (Miami is the 4th largest school district in the United States) stopped by to chat with the all of them. After his brief encounter with us, in which he modeled many of the issues we had asked them to challenge, the following email was sent:

Good afternoon Dr. Benedict,

I’m speaking for the law offices of Gonzalez & Segura & Gonzalez. We noticed the Superintendent of Miami Dade County Public Schools asking a question to our 3rd graders beginning with the phrase “Who can tell me...?” And our red flags were thrown... Really high... Extremely high... That is all. (December 10, 2014)

Beyond the joy these kinds of emails bring us, these small but powerful moments—“why isn’t the superintendent engaging more thoughtfully with students under his care?!”—are a manifestation of these budding educators’ excitement in embracing their agency. Most significantly, they are not simply replicating

a new ideology but understanding the impact of looking at the educational experience in its complexity. And faced with that prospect, they are not shying away, as critics would often admonish. Indeed, in the presence of more than “entry level skills”—often named as “what undergraduates *really need*”—they thrive. In the absence of “external authority,” they labor hard to become “the judge[s] of their thoughts, without the anticipation of an outside censor” (Duckworth, 2009, p. 188).

Re-engaging in Risk-Taking: Graduate Students

The graduate students with whom we currently engage are for the most part full time teachers. Some have been teaching for several years, others are right out of undergraduate programs with very little teaching experience. Our goals for these teachers are much like those for the undergraduates. Language, experience, and explicit naming is key to helping them think differently about the practices of others and their own.

Graduate students must take a curriculum and policy class as part of their common requirements. We begin, as many curriculum classes do, with Franklin Bobbitt and John Dewey. These two contrasting worldviews help them confront and name what they had experienced as learners and now as teachers. They become interested (and horrified) that many of these curricular models, decades upon decades old, continue to inform what they had assumed to be common sense. They are asked to document each week something they notice in their teaching environs that resounds with the readings. These observations lead to the assignment of ‘acts of courage’ in which they are asked to do one thing *they* perceive to be an act of courage. It is important to stress their own self-perception as we have come to understand that acts of courage exist on a continuum that unfolds differently for different people who have had distinct experiences and find themselves in different stages of their professional and personal lives. For instance, the first week our graduate students came back to class they were asked to share with the class their act. Oliver raised his hand slowly and explained that he did not yell at his class this week. New to this kind of assignment and not yet understanding how powerful and personal these acts were, our instinct was to “point out” that this was hardly an act of courage. Thankfully, we remained nonjudgmental and asked him to tell us more. He explained that he felt he was too quick to yell in frustration, referencing the need to discipline in his classroom. This week, however, he attempted to do differently. Clearly, for Oliver, this was huge and his ability to share with the class suggested a level of trust. Had we commented immediately, classifying and judging, the class dynamic would not have emerged as

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one of invitation and everyone, not just Oliver, would have known that acts of courage were to be gauged by our preconceptions. The task would have become about 'best practices' and not about 'our practices'. It would have been about 'fixing' rather than uncovering; about problem solving, rather than problem posing. Oliver began recording moments in his class and sharing them with us. One week he asked his students where they felt they should begin rehearsing.

Last Friday I asked my [elementary] concert band at the beginning of rehearsal "Where should we start practicing on this song?" and immediately students started calling out rehearsal numbers, not showing any surprise that I was asking for their advice, "73!" I then answered: "OK, let's start at 73." Yesterday I didn't ask them but I would like to ask them that at least every other rehearsal or so. Felt good. (October 1, 2014)

As a class, we realized how profound this was to a teacher for whom control was most important as a teaching method. His excitement that students would respond was matched only by his surprise at their engagement level. Regardless of previous behavior, Oliver was taken aback that his students were not surprised that he cared for and welcomed their responses. This was a profound discovery, one that changed the personal and musical dynamic of his class. As a follow up, and as a way of continuing to scaffold these processes, our class asked him to extend this conversation the following week by asking them *why questions*: *Why* should they begin at measure 73? When he came back to our next class he was surprised they knew what they needed to work on as well as their excitement to share with him their knowledge:

I did it yesterday and it was AWESOME! After we warmed up I then asked "Where should we start today?" and this time almost everyone was yelling out a number. I heard "33" more than anything so I then asked "Why 33?" and I got a fantastic answer from a 3rd grader, I really wished I was recording it. He said, '33 because that is where the song goes from slow to fast.' He remembered how last rehearsal it was hard for them transitioning from one tempo to another tempo. Then others replied with other rehearsal numbers, 'From the beginning because that way you can stop us when we make a mistake.' and 'From 5 because that is where clarinets have 12 beats of rests and we want to make sure we are counting those right.' [I think that] just the fact that they have a voice in rehearsals now is really making them feel as more part of the rehearsal and decisions towards our success in having an effective rehearsal. (October 4, 2014)

Stephanie also shared her experiences as she took courage to shift one small component of her class.

I was playing the piano in hopes they would be quiet when I noticed they started clapping and making up rhythms (this wasn't the song I usually encourage audience participation). Normally, I would have stopped it there and gone to whatever I wanted to teach. Today, a light bulb went off, I thought 'Hmm, maybe instead of worrying if they're quiet and listen-

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ing, I should let them mess around with the song?' So I encouraged them to use their feet or clap to add whatever they wanted to the song. The response I got was incredible; I had students essentially improvising elaborate hand movements, stomps, whistles, and claps. Its funny how changing just one small practice can impact the classroom in a huge way. (November 5, 2014)

These seemingly small moments are powerful in the lives of these teachers. They are both proud of and shocked by how simple and easy these steps are. They come to see how their actions afford multiple and creative actions from their students and that they do indeed know so much more than what we give them credit for knowing.

In their psychology of music class they are asked to observe each week any kind of music group that is not their own. We are keen on stressing that they document anything that appears as a red flag, or of interest. Whether they understand or can name what they are observing is not the issue; we help them to see that if something catches their eye there is probably a reason for it. Each week their reading assignments are geared toward a particular psychological issue. Motivation, identity construction, operant conditioning (positive and negative reinforcement, rewards and punishments) are only a few lenses they use to think about the teaching and learning in a context not their own. Of course, as the weeks progress we begin to ask them to reflect on their own teaching (if they have not already begun to do so). At this point they now have the safety of reflecting on their practice through experiences once removed from their own. Acts of courage emerge out of research and content analysis of field notes. They find happiness in reporting back to their colleagues:

I was teaching about 'echo' this week and asked students to tell me what it is as an informal assessment. One student said that an echo is a really loud sound. I asked him what made him think that. After a little digging, I realized that he'd had an experience where he heard a loud sound and it echoed and he was thinking about that rather than what we had sung and played in class. I otherwise might have mentally dismissed that answer as 'weird' and verbally as 'not quite'. (Ruth, November 2014)

I was taking attendance and I said, 'When I call your name, please say here.' One student decided that she would say 'yeah' instead, and I corrected her. But then I went back on what I said and said, 'Actually, there's nothing *wrong* with saying 'yeah', but in certain situations someone might think it's rude.' I could

see that she understood the explanation, whereas if I'd just let it at 'Say 'here' she might have said 'here', but not really understood anything more than thinking that I'm a stickler about the word 'here'. (Stephanie, January 2015)

Concluding Thoughts

We believe that all of these engagements move these teachers toward being “present in their teaching” (Duckworth, 1987, p. 187); attending to their students’ social and musical desires and needs. Rather than moments, or isolated acts, they become attuned to directly responding to those with whom they interact in care (Noddings, 1986). Music and musicing remain integral as subject matter, but agency, critical thinking, decision making, independence and care begin to inform and guide their pedagogy. It is worth citing Noddings (1986) at length on this issue. While Noddings comes to her subject matter as a mathematician she recognizes these engagements as central to all disciplines.

Our guiding principles for teaching mathematics, or any other subject, are derived from our primary concern for the persons whom we teach, and methods of teaching are chosen in consonance with these derived principles. An ethic of caring guides us to ask, What effect will this have on the person I teach? What effect will it have on the caring community we are trying to build? (p. 499)

These questions remind us that acts of courage need not be heroic, but rather are embodied in care. The task is to think of the educative process as one that provides encounters with others so that each of us might experience and create new beginnings, and the “potential space of appearance” (Arendt, 1958, p. 200). This space, where we come to know ourselves and each other, is based on both promise and forgiveness (Arendt). Promise, in that we both allow and afford these spaces through our pedagogical engagements, and forgiveness when we all insist, “words will have weight but...you also may write your story in pencil” (Higgins, 2010, p. 435).

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