

# Constructive Controversy in an Instrumental Methods Class

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SEPTEMBER 13, 2019



# Background

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The polarizing discourse of conflict in the current political environment

Characterizes some discussions of school as well

Controversy and conflict arise in discourse related to issues in music education as well (Kratus, Williams, Allsup & Benedict, Miksza, Tan)

But, are our students prepared?



# Background

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Conflict is beneficial for student learning (Hess & McAvoy, 2013)

## Constructive controversy

- When one person's ideas, information, conclusions, theories, and opinions are incompatible with those of another and the two seek to reach an agreement" (Johnson & Johnson, 2016, p. 38)
  - Better than passive lecture, debate, concurrence seeking, individualistic instruction
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# Purpose and Research Questions

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The purpose of our study was to investigate preservice instrumental music teachers' experiences during a semester-long constructive controversy project.

- 1) How do students' perspectives on controversial topics in music education change over the course of the semester?
  - 2) How do students understand the process of consensus building?
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# Framework and Context

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Nine 30-minute class segments

*The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (Hess & McAvoy, 2014)

“Open policy question” (p. 161)

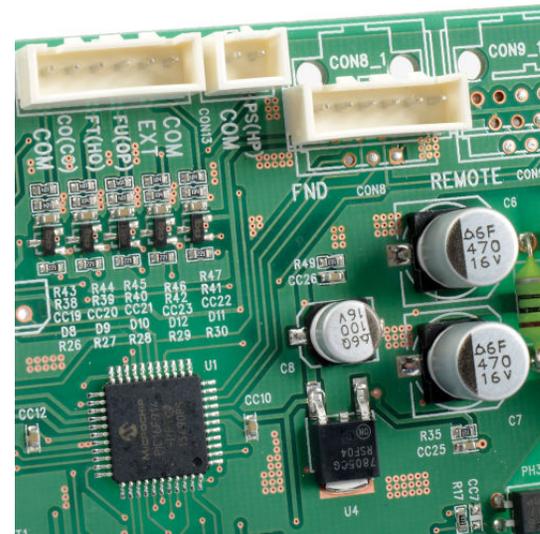
- Students’ roles
  - Standards
  - Traditional versus alternative repertoire
  - Traditional versus alternative and ensembles
  - Competitions
  - Program fees
  - Recruiting underrepresented students
  - Remember in 10 years
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# Each Session

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1. 5 minutes individual journaling
2. 5-10-minute 3-person presentation  
Give both perspectives “equal weight”  
Support each with evidence
3. Small groups diversified by  
Gender  
Size of high school graduating class  
High school location – state & urbanicity
4. Group consensus
5. 5 minutes individual journaling

Teacher role =  
timekeeper



# Participants and Data Collection

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## Participants - 24 undergraduate music education students

- 15 male, 9 female
- 13 brass, 7 woodwinds, 2 percussion, 2 piano
- 9 from Indiana

## Data from All Students

- Included initial and ending journal reflections (18 per student)
- Group consensus statements (9 statements x 5 groups)
- 8 PowerPoint presentations
- 24 final papers

## Additional Data:

- 13 students interviewed twice

## Analysis

- NVivo software
- 2 researchers coded separately, compared at regular intervals

# The Role of Personal Experience

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## General topics

- Beliefs heavily influenced by prior experience
- Appreciated hearing about the experiences of others
- Differences in experiences could serve as catalysts for discussion
- Dwelling on experiences could stifle discussion
- Recognized lack of experience impacted beliefs



# The Role of Personal Experience

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“My personal thoughts on this matter are influenced heavily by my experiences. Having moved in the middle of high school, I happened to see the two sides to this debate first-hand. My first program was bent towards having an experience that one thinks back to and remembers as a worthwhile experience for the sake of the life-changing nature of it.”



# The Role of Personal Experience

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“We are very accepting of each other's opinions although, it is really interesting to see like when debates do start because you know, I realize I am talking a lot about peoples’ backgrounds, but it’s really interesting to see how people... ..with different experiences find something to argue about versus when people who have the same experience find something to argue about. (student H, interview 1)”



# The Role of Personal Experience

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“... at my high school I did this and that and this and I feel like that's just so far away from where we are now and I wish we would draw on some other aspects but I get that that's probably the most formative time and what we remember most but I just wish it was something a little more relevant than High School” (student O, interview 1)



# The Role of Personal Experience

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“...there are certain things that for me at least I haven’t experienced yet so I don’t necessarily... ..feel that I have a totally educated opinion on certain things that we discussed. Which isn’t necessarily completely invaluable but it makes it a little bit harder to like form my full opinion on it.” (student M, interview 1)



# Change in Beliefs

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## Rare instances of change (some “progressive”)

- Open to programming multicultural repertoire reflective of local communities
- Open to embracing popular music and related performance idioms
- Open to student autonomy in the classroom
- Interested in how standards could expand a teacher’s curricular thinking
- Skeptical that value-added modeling can capture the most critical aspects of good teaching.

# Change in Beliefs

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“After participating in this discussion, I would really like to see as much of a hybrid type classroom where the students in the band/orchestra courses are exposed to the curricular content presented in Music Appreciation throughout the four years of high school. ...there is an exponentially growing disconnect between band/orchestra and modern music; I think the best way to counteract this is implementation of these musics on the most basic of levels: listening to music, and teachers being open to new music. ...it is imperative now more than ever that educators are open the new kinds of music, especially when those musics mean more to students than the band repertoire that they may be playing.” (student L, blog)

# Change in Beliefs

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Lack of change MUCH more common

- Reiterate
- Elaborate
  - Sometimes add additional arguments
  - Sometimes add more detail about prior arguments

# Change in Beliefs

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“Nobody should be left out of band based on financial burden. Fees should be limited and should always be clear about what they cover, and go towards improving the musical and artistic experience for the students. Fundraising efforts can help with many roadblocks when done well. Payment plans are a great strategy, as well as scholarship opportunities through boosters or outside programs”

(student G, blog)



# Change in Beliefs

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“Competition and festivals should be used very carefully and in an educational way. The main goal should not be about winning. It should be about doing well as a group in that particular environment. Competition should be used as a way to motivate doing better for the ensemble itself, and not necessarily to be better or beat anyone else” (Student O, blog)

# Conflict

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“I think that the reason for their stance is more important [than] trying to figure out the differences between our two viewpoints”  
(Student L, Interview 2)

“Where people express different opinions, but these people were very like ‘I understand your opinion and I see the merit in it, but this is what I think.’” (Student M, Interview 2)

# Conflict



“Obviously today we kind of gave her more speaking time because that’s an opinion that not any of us are super familiar with, and the rest of us all kind of had similar scenarios as far as competition goes. So I think the way that we sort of format our discussions is a little bit based on like whose experiences are the most applicable to the topic but also how can we get the largest variety of answers as possible.” (Student H, Interview 1)

“Nobody in our class came from a program that was only taught through pop music, because that kind of student unfortunately doesn’t make it into [this institution]. So that’s the roadblock that you see. . . . that we can’t gain insight . . . I’d ask them: ‘Did that work for you? Did you get excited about music when you learned more about the music you were listening to daily?’” (Student L, Interview 1)

# Listening – Or Not



“We are very accepting of each others’ opinions” (Student H, Interview 1)

“Everyone listened respectfully and offered constructive feedback” (Student T, Final Paper)

“two very opinionated people going back-and-forth just spewing whatever is coming to their mind, and the rest of us are just listening to what’s going on” (Student M, Interview 1)

“The three males are very, very, very talkative—really very strongly opinionated—and me and my other female friend do not get to speak a lot. . . So I remember one time I had to literally like raise my hand like in their face and be like, ‘Can I can I say something because this is not like they were discussing all of what was up on the presentation?’ . . . Me and my female friend have to like insert ourselves pretty aggressively to get them to stop talking and listen. Yeah, so I would say that the small group thing for me at least is pretty excruciating.” (Student O, Interview 1)



## Consensus: Easy or Impossible?

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“I would say we pretty much come together and we are always very agreeable on the thing. Or if there is something that we are like, ‘Well maybe I think just a little bit differently,’ [then] this is our tree and there is somebody over here. We discuss, and we end up on the same page again.” (Student G, Interview 1)

Consensus-building process got easier over the course of the semester

“Difficult” “Arduous”

“We get into our groups that are made to have differences built into them . . . and we’re asked to come up with a consensus which . . . feels like an oxymoron. How do you come up with consensus in a group with people that are meant to be different?” (Student Q, Interview 1)

# Impact

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“We are all going to work with people that we don’t see eye to eye with. Whether this is on small issues like the benefits of a rhythmic counting system or snare stick grip, or on larger issues such as money allocation and the role of competition in your program, being able to have civil discussions and work through disagreements will mean that the program will be stronger through the combined influences of people with different understandings and experiences. It also gives your students an example of finding compromise and consensus despite having those differences. Such an example is integrally important in the current social and political climate in our country.” (Student E, Final Paper)

“Before we started doing this kind of thing I was very like: ‘I’m gonna set up my classroom like this, and I’m going to program this repertoire, and we are going to do this kind of marching band stuff.’ And now it has just shown me that everything I could ever want to or need to do as a teacher is entirely variable and dependent upon students’ needs and how my teaching style interacts with [what] other students learned.” (Student H, Interview 1)

# Implications

**Course Listing: METH & MATLS TEACH INST MUS**

**Fall 2019, Bloomington**

1. No mandatory evidence; presenters can emphasize personal stories
  2. Added readings and flexibility
  3. Traded opening journal for a discussion post prior to class
  4. End with questions, including “If you were going to totally reimagine instrumental music education in light of this discussion, what would it look like?”
  5. Rotate small groups halfway through the semester
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# Future Research

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Include more voices

Concerted effort across classes

Other institutions

“Frankly, this is this has been the height of challenging my ideals of music education, which is great; and there's a lot of courses . . . that aren't really designed to challenge but more [to] inform” (Student 1, Interview 2)



# Thank you!

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