

Designed With Love: Learning Contexts in Higher Education and Their Implications for Music Education

by David Potter and Elise Dixon



“What I really love about that concept [loving the learner] is how it calls on us to identify something in someone else that is love-able. Because by calling on us to do this, you’re also calling on faculty to do an awful lot of emotional work, not just intellectual work, which we love to do, and we love to think that everything is intellectual work. Instead, you’re really calling on us to do a lot of emotional work and make the demands on ourselves.” -Professor G

While the concept of “love” is often connected to music, less has been said about loving the learners of music.

Instead, in the context of music education, “love” is often directed towards musical experiences as a reason for studying music, or even becoming a music teacher (Elliott, 2012; Gillespie et al., 1999; Hellman, 2008; Thornton et al., 2008). Still others have focused on nurturing a love for music in others, especially at the PreK-12 level. (Jorgensen, 2010, Kratus, 2019). However, while music educators have often focused on facilitating a love for music among students, less is known about the work of facilitating a love for those studying the music.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of love for music learners, Hendricks (2011) argues that music educators need to consider shifting their focus away from the value of musical content, and towards Suzuki’s principal focus on the music learners. Hendricks describes Suzuki’s philosophy as “Music Education as Love Education,” by which Suzuki focused on a love for children that was articulated both in writing and in pedagogy (p. 136). Hendricks also found Suzuki’s philosophy to be a timely response to trauma in the aftermath of World War II, noting that “Suzuki demonstrated an outpouring of love for children” (p. 145). While Suzuki’s philosophy is rooted in the love of children, Hendricks suggests that there are some in higher education who are bringing similar philosophies of love for the learner at the university level. However, there are a lack of studies that explore love in higher music education. Moreover, while Suzuki’s work focuses on philosophy, pedagogy, and practice, there is a lack of work that has considered the role of design in loving the learner in higher music education.

In a recent study (Bosse et al., 2022), we sought to distill the experiences and insights of faculty in the arts and humanities who have been recognized as faculty who teach with love. Moreover, while the study with our colleagues brought about themes like student-centered learning, intentionality in the use of boundaries, and reflexive analysis of their teaching, the two of us found that design also played a major role in loving the learner. Moreover, given that five of the professors interviewed for this study expressed ideas pertaining to course design (including two music educators), the purpose of this work is to describe how these educators design their courses through a lens of love for the learner, and their implications as it pertains to higher music education.

Our primary lens for exploring love for the learner through course design comes from the work of Nel Noddings. In work on cultures of care in K-12 education, Noddings (1988) advocated for a relational ethic borne not out of duty, but love. In other words, she described love and care for the learner as an orientation for guided learning rather than a method for meeting objectives and obligations. Creating “an ethic of caring” is orientation-based, that is stemming from one’s orientation to their students rather than from a set of principles an educator might stand by (1988). Consequently, many in music education have used the work of Noddings to highlight the importance of participating with students (Bates, 2004), connecting with students (Watts et al., 2020), and demonstrating love and respect for students, both as musicians and as human beings.

From the perspective of course design, our study participants echoed sentiments of care, and each teacher talked about their teaching as a set of relationships with students. They considered student responses as critical to shaping the learning environment—the course design, content, and execution of their courses. For the participants, loving the learner stemmed first from regarding the students as respected individuals worthy of compassion with whom they were in relationship. Furthermore, they emphasized the fact that learning requires vulnerability; and that we need to love and nurture that vulnerability in order to help students to develop and learn.

By viewing students as people with complex lives and complex emotions that shape learning, teachers recognized the realities of education. One study participant, Professor L, framed this as recognizing the “cultural context of teaching” in which scholarship and learning occur within a matrix of social, political, cultural, economic, and personal experiences. In other words, teaching is a conversation among the students and teacher(s) that takes place in a particular institutional and cultural context.

The participants in our study demonstrated not only a commitment to treating their students with compassion, but they have also cultivated a regular practice of creating student-centered learning environments that prioritize the students’ needs and abilities over external expectations of content or discipline. These professors get to know their students as human beings whose own interests and values may not line up with theirs, and they experiment with course design, assessments, classroom activities, and communications with students to find what works best, both for their teaching style and their students’ learning.

There were a number of ways that our study participants cultivated a student-centered and compassionate learning environment, including multiple approaches to course design. All were valuable and effective. Furthermore, as Robinson, et al.(2020), building on the work of Noddings note, student-centered designs are more important than ever, both in the context of in-person and online learning: “Modeling care happens through course design and student-centered vs. course- centered teaching practices. Both themes require instructors to be sensitive to learner needs and consider those needs in the design and delivery” (p. 103).

Course design is a major part of a faculty member’s philosophy of teaching. Many of the professors we interviewed had an openness to redesign their course structures based on student reception, growth, and assessment. First, however, they focused on the work of building the kinds of relationships with their students that would allow them to foster a sense of trust and willingness to take risks. Over the course of their years as teachers, they often took the time to thoughtfully plan curriculum, in order to foster a community of learners that would come away from the class, not only understanding the material, but also having a practical application of the content.

In this section, we discuss three themes that arose in faculty’s discussion of course design: Values-based curriculum development, relationship-based design, and narrative-based assessment. In summary, teachers tended to develop their curricula based on subjective sets of values, design their courses around relationship-building, and assess the success of their courses based on the stories they and their students shared about the course. We conclude this section by discussing some of the ways in which struggle and failure played a role in each of these elements and offer implications for music educators.

Value-Based Curriculum

Orientation to Self and Others

While faculty’s perceptions of values were different, each faculty member’s curriculum operated from sets of values that rejected notions of objectivity in their curricular design. These values were often formed based on the faculty member’s connection to their students and to themselves. Professor M, a music educator, developed his curriculum on the basis of implicit connection with students who major in his area of expertise, versus those who major outside of music:

With the sophomore music history [students], I will probably see a lot of those students again. So, there’s already a kind of implicit connection that the [non-major] does not have. And then when I get somebody in a 400-level class already, I’ve already read their writing.

Thus, for Professor M, curriculum development was based on implicit connections from previous interactions. Professor M, then, did not have to concentrate on developing a rapport with students to better understand what kind of teaching they might benefit from, or as Thompson (2019) describes it, “learning learner attributes” (p. 15). In addition to the notion of implicit connection, Professor V emphasized disincentive as a reason to maintain previously established curricular values, saying,

Once you write a lecture class, it’s really disincentivizing to totally redo it because it’s so much work and if it’s okay, I try to edit it and make small changes, but I’ve never redone that course from the ground up since the first time I wrote it.

Thus, while Professor M focused on curricular reproduction on the basis of previous connections with students, Professor V emphasized curricular reproduction on the basis of previous connections with oneself.

While Professor M and Professor V focused on the maintenance of curriculum for the purposes of maintaining established relationships and efforts, others focused on facilitating connections with first-year students, positing that building a curriculum based solely on an instructor’s personal experiences would be insufficient for meeting students’ needs. Professor C, another music educator, believed that teachers tended to focus on meeting the needs of students who fall in the middle of a bell curve with respect to academic achievement and problematized the idea, saying, “I think what we often tend toward is to hit the middle, which misses for everybody, or nearly everybody.” One reason for teachers designing courses that fail to meet the needs of all students is that teachers tend to focus on their own experiences when designing curriculum for new college students, saying, “You’re going to design what you want to do for yourself.” Professor G described such self-oriented designs as a “narcissistic position,” and problematized the matter of course design by asking, “How are we going to redesign our courses so that they are meeting the needs of everyone?”

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Models

Each faculty member offered both intrinsic and extrinsic ideas for meeting the needs of students. Professor G, for example, described how the impact of course design changed his positioning as a teacher, saying,

I began to see that people really studied this stuff, and you could design your classes to make students learn certain things, or at least to facilitate the learning of certain things. That’s when I began to move myself from a kind of narcissistic position to a position of, I can help people, this is a public service.

When Professor G reoriented his classes from what he wanted to teach to what he felt would most benefit students’ learning, his course design paradigm shifted. Similarly, Professor C began to explore theories developed outside of his music content area and shifted the focus of conversations with colleagues from content to pedagogy, saying:

The conversations were really in disguise, but they were about what we teach more than they were about pedagogy. And the beautiful thing is once you don’t share content with somebody, the conversations can’t be about that so you actually get to talk about issues that cut across content.

Moreover, Professor V’s approach to course design focused on shifting the responsibility of research, design, and interaction to the learner, saying, “I’ve never done another class where I only just talk, even my big lecture classes. It’s like half discussion, major activities and games, and it’s much more interactive.” Offering an example of best practices surrounding design (outside of music), Professor V said,

This is a class where students redesign the constitution, and I think it’s one of the most exciting classes I’ve ever done. They’re freshman, they know very little about government and politics, though they do have an interest. The class is designed to get them to do research and take ideas seriously about the way they would like to address certain problems in wider society through the constitution.

For each of these faculty members, they can pinpoint moments in which they chose to shift their paradigms of course design, based on a shift in their values. Making choices based on their values allowed them to shift and grow their practices as their principles shifted.

Relationship-Based Design

Modeling Vulnerability

A critical aspect of course design centers around creating a classroom environment that fosters vulnerability, both for students and for instructors. Participants note that creating space for students to struggle is a critical aspect of learning and is based on two elements: Modeling vulnerability for students, and creating low-stakes opportunities to fail in favor of learning.

Modeling vulnerability in oneself for students can occur in multiple ways. For Professor L, this modeling comes from showing students that expertise is developed over time:

Students tend to look at teachers. . . as a being a part of someone who's different from them. "Oh, I could never read that many books." "Oh, I could never stand up and talk like this teacher is doing" and yet, all of us started the same way. Having read all those books, having to talk in front of classes. We had to start somewhere. And I think if students can see that the teacher has had some of their own experiences they start to connect with the material as well as the person in front of the class.

Modeling vulnerability, for Professor L, is about showing students that he was once in their position as an undergraduate in order to illustrate that they too might reach his level of expertise over time. In this way, his modeling of vulnerability is an individual act of modeling for the group. Modeling vulnerability, however, can be also exemplified through building close connections with students through sharing experiences. For example, Professor C notes that the shared experience of traveling to Cuba with students helped to develop a bond that facilitated learning. He suggested,

I can spend time with them before we go, also when we get back, and when we're in Cuba... they get to see an experience and taste, and feel, and smell what they've been learning. Creating that community of people who... come close to people who are open to Cuba and ready to fall in love with Cuba is a beautiful experience.

In this case, Professor C noted that the shared experience of a particular place or group of people can develop bonds of emotional closeness that allow students to feel comfortable with him. Modeling vulnerability, in this case, is about being in close community with the students. These two cases of modeling are articulated differently. In one case, the work of vulnerability is about articulating to students that the instructor was once on their level. In the other, the instructor begins from the same reference point alongside students. Both acts, however different, help to facilitate a common understanding between students and faculty.

Making Space for Failure

In addition to thinking through ways to be vulnerable with students, faculty discussed the need to create space for failure in their courses. Vulnerability is one piece of space—students need to be comfortable with a classroom space in order to be willing to fail. However, failure also has to be encouraged and discussed in order for students to feel willing to learn through their own failures. To do this work, it may be important to faculty to ask of themselves what Professor G asked: “If someone like me with my track record can't go into a classroom and purposefully fail in order to get better, then who the hell is going to feel the freedom to do that?” Creating ways for students to fail on purpose requires a development of trust and conversations around what we all learn from failure.

Professor C notes that conversations around failure are certainly vulnerable conversations, but also suggests that if failure is normalized, the vulnerability one feels when they fail might be alleviated. For example, Professor C outlined a specific kind of conversation he has with his students in his music class. He said:

Trying to counteract what I can only assume that [students] experienced at some point from some teacher and say, “Yeah, this didn’t go well. Good. It’s an opportunity. Let’s look at why. Like, we have nothing more important today to do than to explore this thing that was hard for all of you. I’m glad it was hard for you because it gives us stuff to talk about.” So, asking people to be, I mean- I almost said vulnerable because I think that’s part of what it is. But trying one step above that, to make it so that you don’t have to be vulnerable.

Thus, discussions of failure become part and parcel of developing a “vulnerable” classroom where students feel supported by their instructors enough to take risks in their learning processes. Similarly, Professor G stated that “I want [them] to have the best learning experience possible.” Thus, creating the best learning experience for students requires just as much of an acknowledgement about what a person does not know but could know, as it does a willingness to explore and learn through failure.

Narrative-Based Assessment

For the most part, discussions about participants’ assessment of success tended more toward an assessment of the course’s success as a whole for the students, rather than upon student’s collective success in the course. For example, Professor V remarked that “I can tell students are excited when I can tell that students are really getting into it and liking it.” Like Professor V, faculty tended to note these informal assessments of the course as an example of success. Rarely did these instructors note specific content knowledge they felt would mark a class as successful.

Assessments like these are informal but are critical to the future re-configuration of a course to make it more helpful and enjoyable to students. Professor A remarked, “I definitely feel that my effectiveness is strongly influenced by my students’ engagement level. And I know that as teachers, we’re always trying to find ways to keep our students engaged and to motivate them.” Motivation and engagement appeared to be indicators of both enjoyment of the course and also a willingness to learn the material, both collaboratively and independently. For example, Professor M noted in a reflection on one of his music courses where students were self-directed that “It was a three-hour class and they went over. Because they were just really getting into it. And they didn’t need me to do that.” Professor M’s values, then, were similar to Professor A’s in that he recognized engagement as a key aspect of learning.

In both cases, faculty noted that the importance of a course may be reliant more on student engagement rather than objective measures of content retention. They tended to separate assessment into two different questions: Are students enjoying the learning process, and are students learning what they are supposed to? Faculty responses tended to indicate that these teachers saw the more important indicator of course success to be rooted in the level of student engagement and connection to the course, rather than in specific content knowledge. Indeed, Professor V suggested that in history, “It’s not necessarily first and foremost the content . . .” but rather, “I want it to be deep. I want it to be memorable. I want to tell stories. I want to do it in a way that sticks.” Methods of course instruction that these faculty tend to value is about creating memorable learning experiences rather than simply measuring retention.

Furthermore, these kinds of classroom assessments are often the result of years of experience. Assessment of the success of a specific class is not just about the course in front of them, but also in light of the previous courses. Most of the participants referred to their experiences of varying kinds: The frustrating experience of students not reading the feedback on their papers (Professor A), students citing negative experiences of a course, and recreating it based on their feedback (Professor C), considering how their field experiences have shaped how they teach content (Professor M, Professor G), or considering generations of student experiences over decades at the same institution (Professor L). In these ways, an assessment of a course’s particular success is not just based on the present course in which they are teaching, but also a collective understanding of past and future course experiences.

Struggles

The participants’ approaches to course design have not come without temporary struggle. As Professor C

noted after redesigning a music course for the first time, some students “found the design of this course to be unkind or heavy handed.” Still others like Professor A expressed frustration about not receiving feedback from students, even when prompted. Yet, as Professor G noted, “Out of that failure – which I embraced, it was a beautiful failure – came a completely new design for something that will be an enormous amount of work for students, but I think will really meet them where they’re at.”

Implications

Among the most notable commonalities among instructors regarding course design was that they placed the greatest emphasis on relationships, followed by pedagogy, and finally, on content. Furthermore, the centering of students in course design over curriculum coincided with Noddings’ (1988) deprivileging of content for the purposes of building trust, writing, “It is clear that hardly anyone thought that the school’s major or only job was to teach academic skills” (p. 217). Indeed, as Watts et al. (2020) pointed out, the National Association for Music Education’s Strategic Plan focused on “community, stewardship, comprehensiveness, inclusion and equity, and innovation” – all of which “call upon us to care for all individuals” (p. 51).

For each of these participants, student responses were critical to course design, and the instructors cared about student feedback, which Noddings (1988) described as a relational ethic borne not out of duty, but love. In other words, Noddings described love and care for the learner as an orientation for guided learning rather than a method for meeting objectives and obligations, stating, “Acting out of caring, one calls on a sense of duty or special obligation only when love or inclination fails” (p. 219). Loving the learner, then, is orientation-based, rather than principles-based. In other words, being a caring educator comes from one’s orientation to their students rather than from a set of principles an educator stands by. One of the ways in which instructors take an orientation-based approach is through modeling care through dialogue. For example, building on Noddings’ work, Robinson, et al. (2020) note that student-centered designs are more important than ever, both in the contexts of in-person and online learning. In their words,

Modeling care happens through course design and student-centered vs. course-centered teaching practices. Both themes require instructors to be sensitive to learner needs and consider those needs in the design and delivery. (p. 103)

Similarly, every instructor in this study designed their courses based on teaching orientations that focused on their relationships with students and their desires to build deeper connections with them. Building on their work, we echo the sentiments of music educators like Jorgensen (2002), who contend that such emerging topics should be carefully considered and critiqued in music education.

Only a few teachers in this study described failures of course design, yet the narratives surrounding failure were some of the most meaningful when it came to using course design to build relationships with students. As successful teachers in the field, their narratives offered constructive ideas for exploration and growth, as well as support for Noddings’ (2005) critique of performance-based systems in education that focus on “100 percent proficiency” and “content knowledge” (p. 10). As Noddings explains, “We must allow teachers and students to interact as whole persons, and we must develop policies that treat the school as a whole community” (p. 10). Overall, while the instructors’ designs varied widely, both inside and outside of music, every participant described course design as the result of some combination of previous failures, a privileging of pedagogy over content, and most of all, relationships with students.

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Biography

David Potter holds the position of Assistant Professor/Coordinator of Music Education at the University of Wisconsin-Superior, where he teaches courses in music education and songwriting. Before coming to UW-Superior, David taught courses in music education and songwriting at Michigan State University, where he earned his Ph.D. in music education. Before earning his Ph.D. in Michigan, David taught elementary music in Memphis, Tennessee, where he also directed community bands and choirs. During his time in Memphis, he was named Teacher of the Year. David also holds degrees in music education from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, and the Crane School of Music in Potsdam, New York.

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