Using the Power of Music to Support Students’ Understanding of Fascism

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Music has been an integral part of humanity’s culture for millennia. Like many other artifacts of culture, songs have expressed a range of feelings, informed listeners of historical and political issues, and provoked social awareness and change at every level of sophistication. In nearly all corners of the globe, music is woven deeply into the fabric of life and significantly affects and reflects the contexts in which it is written and shared. Our almost universal passion for music, bolstered by its importance as an artifact of culture and history, has not resulted in the integration of musical forms and texts in our classrooms in any systematic or conspicuous way. In that context, we propose a framework for integrating music in the social studies classroom. Our example comes from two individuals who lived very different lives, yet experienced some tragic parallels confronting fascism at various points in history. The music and writing these individuals left behind enable us to explore best practices in social studies and literacy in particularly engaging ways.

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Music has been an integral part of humanity’s culture for millennia. Like many other artifacts of culture, songs have expressed a range of feelings, informed listeners of historical and political issues, and provoked social awareness and change at every level of sophistication. In nearly all corners of the globe, music is woven deeply into the fabric of life and significantly affects and reflects the contexts in which it is written and shared. While music matters to individuals of every age, it is particularly important for young people (Maira & Soep, 2005; Vahlberg, 2010). For youth the world over, music is often an elemental vehicle for cultural identity development (Alim, 2009). It also serves as one vehicle through which they communicate and express ideas and emotion (Houser, 2005; Pellegrino, Lee, Luongo, & Zakaria, 2011). Our almost universal passion for music, even bolstered by its importance as an artifact of culture and history, has not resulted in the integration of musical forms and texts in our classrooms in any systematic or conspicuous way (Brkrich, 2012).

For social studies and literacy educators, this reality is especially troubling, given the power of music to communicate and facilitate learning in compelling ways. In world history and global studies courses, specifically, music—with its ability to convey perspectives of past and current events that transcend certain language and cultural differences—holds great potential to captivate and inspire students to gain insight from its messages. Recent scholarship on the use of music in social studies classrooms has begun to demonstrate this power. Scholars (e.g. Brkrich,
2012; Pellegrino, 2013; Sanchez, 2007; Soden & Castro, 2012; White & McCormack, 2006) have introduced viable and engaging lessons, models, and conceptual frameworks related to using music in social studies classrooms. Rebecca Sanchez (2007), for example, described considerations for implementing music as a means of exploring social justice, while I, Anthony Pellegrino, introduced four pedagogical models through which teachers could include music in their lessons at various and increasing levels of depth and intensity. The need for teachers and researchers to explore how to connect music to the study of race and other issues central to social studies was more broadly outlined by David Stovall (2006). Providing students the opportunity to critically analyze music, enables them to broaden their perceptions on identity, ethnicity, and power in the knowledge that “the greatest benefit of the arts for citizenship education may be their capacity to help us examine existing problems through new social, cultural, and philosophical lenses” (Houser, 2005, pp. 65-66). For world history and global studies teachers, music provides an exceptional opportunity to spark student interest and reveal similarities and differences across cultures, or to highlight similarities and differences as they occur over time. In this article, we employ primary source artifacts, namely music, in lesson activities that allow students to explore the enduring legacy of extremist right wing ideology and culture, through the eyes of two of its victims, from World War II to the present day.

**Music as a Resource for Global Engagement**

As a significant component of culture, music has become a means to express emotional language of times, events, and movements of the past (Moore, 2003). Music has effected how youth around the globe identify as members of various communities within society (Alim, 2009). Music and other forms of popular culture, according to Nadine Dolby (2003), are “where youth are invested, where things happen, where identities and democratic possibilities are worked out, performed and negotiated, and where new futures are written” (p. 276). In relation to the spaces in which youth transact, Joel Spring (2009) noted schools as the front lines of global citizenship while acknowledging global flows of information and influence set forth, in part, by music and other forms of popular culture. Given the substantial influence of popular culture in creating this global network of citizens, the relationship between knowledge and application has never been more achievable or necessary than now. In this climate, it is incumbent for teachers to look to popular culture for means of engaging students in relevant content and meaningful learning.

To see the influence music influences citizens’ reflections on social and political events around the world, one needs simply to look to the recent past. Our own investigations into the import of music as integral to shaping culture, for example, have led us to discover the extent to which popular culture and music specifically has influenced the many of the protests that have occurred in the Middle East and North Africa since January 2011—the so-called Arab Spring. Although this music is certainly contemporary, it often addresses enduring issues such as: cultural responses to change and the emerging conflicts that result. Many socially conscious artists for example, “are concerned with social issues, civil rights, corruption, despotism of leaders” (Eyre, 2013, para. 30). Artists like Lotfi Double Kanon (2014) in Algeria and Tunisian rapper El Général (Walt, 2011) have written songs that have helped to forge unified messages of hope and inspired people in their protests for democratic change and social justice. In spring 2013, viewers of the widely popular “Arab Idol” television program watched contestant Abdel Karim Hamdan sing openly about the violence in war-torn Syria. Judges and even fellow contestants were brought to tears over the potent lyrics that asked, “How much blood is shed in my country?” (Fisher, 2013, para. 1). Artists all over the globe continue to utilize music to
garner international attention for a wide range of social and political ills (Dyson, 2004; Levine, 2008). Hip-hop pioneers DAM (2015) have written and performed politically charged songs for well over a decade about the plight of their Palestinian brethren. The rapper Supercharger in Uganda has written lyrics about the AIDS crisis in sub-Saharan Africa and efforts by the United States to provide medicine to his countrymen and women (McNeil, 2010). The members of Pussy Riot, the punk rock girl group and art collective from Russia, made international headlines for their political protests and subsequent arrests by Russian authorities (Mirovalev, 2012).

Influenced by American and European music but also clearly making these compositions their own, artists in Senegal and Nigeria have written songs that lament lasting effects of a European colonial presence while also speaking to the past and current political discord in their countries. In light of the proliferation of such music and the technological means to share it globally, we assert a more thorough examination of music is warranted if students are to be able to better understand world history and global affairs.

**Music in the Classroom**

With the promise of employing music in the social studies classroom to resonate with students (Houser, 2005; Pellegrino, Lee, Luongo, & Zakaria, 2011; Sanchez, 2007; White & McCormack, 2006), a challenge remains to harness the potential for pedagogical purposes without diminishing the allure of music as a creative means of expression. Mindful of that challenge, we present lesson activities to guide teachers who wish to use music in ways that resonate with students’ understanding of the world of the past, the world in which they currently live, and to which they will be expected to contribute. Students examine the various components of music including lyrics and tone of the songs. They close read the words and analyze the music in order to discover implicit and explicit messages in ways akin to analysis of other primary and secondary source material. Students, additionally, are asked to discern the contexts surrounding the message of the music and the audience for whom it is intended.

To begin the process with students, we suggest an activity worksheet, such as the one provided here (see Figure 1) to guide students’ efforts. Questions from the exercise in Figure 1 ask students to identify words and phrases that help them understand a song’s meaning. The questions, further, ask students to select context clues from lyrics that help listeners better recognize the tenor of the message the artist is trying to convey. While essential to helping students develop deeper acuity with the music to which they are exposed, these practices also benefit adolescents’ reading abilities more generally as they navigate other primary and secondary sources used in their social studies classes. Although teachers are generally inclined to utilize close reading practices with more academically advanced students, we concur with Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin and Chauncey Monte-Sano’s (2011), assertion that it is precisely those novice and “struggling readers who most need instruction in learning how to” close read (italics in original) (p. vi). Providing such scaffolded opportunities to develop reading skills through the relevant medium of music, can help facilitate a passion for learning about the world of the past and present in all learners.

What follows are lesson activities focused on close reading primary source artifacts including the lyrics of a contemporary hip hop artist and a diary excerpt written by an adolescent victim of the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis during World War II. While we focus on the broad topic of fascism for this lesson, we propose that these activities serve as a model for other social studies content as well.
Preparation for Listening and Analysis (PLA) Worksheet

Preparation for Listening: As you prepare to listen to the song, complete Section I with your teacher and be ready to write down any notes and interesting and powerful lyrics you hear.

What is the title of the song?

Who wrote this song?

When was the song written?

Is the voice you will hear the songwriter or is this an interpretation of the original song?

Listening and Analysis: As you listen to the song selection, write down lyrics and notes that help you interpret the meaning.

What is the theme of the song (what is the song about)?

Who is the intended audience for this song?

What specific lyrics lead you to that conclusion?

What are some unique qualities of the recording or song?

What is the tone or mood of the song? Which lyrics make you think that way?

Describe any imagery or symbolism you find present in the song. Provide specific lyrics and analysis.

Aside from the lyrics, how does the music contribute to the tone of the song?

Is the song effective, in your opinion, to reach its target audience?
What in the lyrics makes you say so?

Does the songwriter take a direct or a more indirect approach with the lyrics?

Does this approach make the song more or less effective at communicating the message as you recognize it?

Is the song attempting to bring about change or is it written as a commentary on an event or era?

Include any final comments about the overall effectiveness of this song to express the intended message.

*Figure 1. Student Handout*
Lesson Context

In the fall of 2013, an example of music’s connection to social studies emerged from a single violent and gruesome attack on Greek musician Pavlos Fyssas. Members of a fascist political party in Greece allegedly committed this attack. Fyssas was a well-known and outspoken hip-hop artist in Greece who often chose to focus his art on the Greek economic crisis and resulting xenophobic sentiment he saw emerging in his homeland. In his music and in interviews, Fyssas promoted social justice in Greece and strongly criticized the anti-immigration views he saw most directly in his working class neighborhood near Athens. His lyrics garnered attention in both the hip-hop and political worlds. Some of that attention was from radical right-wing political figures in Greece who vehemently disagreed with his political positions and resented the influence he had with Greek youth. He was murdered on a street in his neighborhood. Strong evidence indicated his death came at the hands of those associated with the fascist Golden Dawn political party (Boyd, 2013).

Harkening back to extreme right-wing ideologies from post World War I Europe, the Golden Dawn Party has become a small but potent political force in Greece, capturing nearly 20 seats (approximately 7%) in the Hellenic Parliament in 2015 elections (BBC, 2015). The ideology of the party is explicitly rooted in German and Greek fascist traditions, with nationalistic and racist tenets and opposition to all forms of immigration. The Golden Dawn (English version) website specifically claims immigration has brought a wave of crime, rape, and diseases to Greece in the last five years and a return to a pure Greek homeland would ameliorate these social and economic problems (Golden Dawn, nd). According to Greek labor and human rights attorney and academic, Nicholas Sitaropoulos, the party promulgates explicitly anti-Semitic ideologies and openly acknowledges its appreciation for the fascist messages of Nazi Germany (Sitaropoulos, 2004). Associates of The Golden Dawn have been implicated in many acts of violence against their opponents, and an uptick in their political influence in the wake of Greece’s economic troubles have served to empower their beliefs and justify their tactics. Pavlos Fyssas, allegedly, became one of their victims for his public opposition to Golden Dawn’s principles, and although, at the time of the writing of this article, members of the Golden Dawn leadership have been arrested, many thousands in Greece and elsewhere continue to identify with its anti-immigrant ideology.

For this lesson, we juxtaposed the music and story of Pavlos Fyssas in concert with a diary excerpt from Yitskhok Rudashevski, a Lithuanian teenager forced into the Vilna Ghetto in 1941, which at the time housed an estimated 40,000 Jews (Berenbaum, 2006). His time in the ghetto was chronicled in a journal he began shortly before his 15th birthday. After the liquidation of the ghetto began in the fall of 1943, Yitskhok and his family escaped and went into hiding. Two short weeks later, Nazi soldiers discovered Yitskhok and his family. All but Yitskhok’s cousin, Sore Voloshin, perished in the subsequent mass shooting in nearby Poner. When Vilna was finally liberated, Sore returned to the family’s hiding place and found her cousin’s diary. The excerpt included in this lesson comes from a translation of that diary (Zapruder, 2001). Together, the events surrounding the attack on Pavlos Fyssas and the experiences of Holocaust victim, Yitskhok Rudashevski, serve as the backdrop to this lesson.

Within the context of the National Council for the Social Studies’ (NCSS) C3 Framework (2013), this lesson assists students and teachers in using “questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context” (p. 11). This lesson is ideally suited for secondary world history or global
studies classes as part of a deeper investigation of the roots of fascism to illustrate how the racist and xenophobic principles of this ideology have simultaneously endured and transformed over time. As presented, these activities require students to listen to Pavlos Fyssas’s music and to compare the sentiments he expresses with those of a Holocaust victim from World War II.

Lesson Activities:

1. Introduce students to Fyssas’s music by playing his 2011 composition, “I won’t cry, I won’t fear” (see Web-based References for source). Before listening, provide the printed and translated lyrics to all students (see Appendix A) and a copy of the Preparation for Listening and Analysis (PLA) worksheet. Address the Preparation for Listening questions. Have students complete the PLA worksheet as they listen to the song and close read the lyrics. Upon completion, debrief with the whole class or in small groups asking students to share their responses to worksheet questions. Note: although performed in Greek, having translated lyrics to go along with the audio will allow students to follow along and respond to the questions from the worksheet. Next, distribute the diary excerpt from Yitskhok Rudashevski (Appendix B). Before reading, share this youth’s story as described above. This excerpt was taken from the 2001 book Salvaged Pages by Alexandra Zapruder, which includes hundreds of diary entries from those affected by the Holocaust. Read the excerpt aloud to the class. Then ask students close read the passage and identify any comparable words, phrases or sentiments from Fyssas’s song.

2. Place students into small groups of 3-4 and ask them to share their individual findings of the similarities and differences from the two sources and discuss the writer’s audience and intent for each source.

3. After completion, debrief with the class, highlighting the small group findings on a T-chart, or similarly constructed graphic organizer.

4. Extrapolate how the similarities and differences identified help us understand how and why fascist ideologies have persisted. Consider the following questions to prompt discussion: What are the conditions in which fascist ideologies seem to thrive? What specific events and conditions are going on in these populations that allow for such thinking?

5. In this final step, instruct students to develop artifacts based on research of Nazi and Golden Dawn ideologies and the contexts in which they operated. This assessment may take the form of comparative presentations that include text, images, music, or political cartoons.

Conclusion

Effective social studies teachers do far more than ask students to read from a textbook or passively listen to a lecture filled with names and dates. These teachers realize the dynamic nature of society as well as the fundamentals of student cognitive development. Historian and history educator, Peter Stearns (1993), reminded educators the most potent social studies practice fosters the students’ ability to challenge traditional narratives, seek deeper knowledge about the past, and apply that knowledge to their present lives. This active wrangling with social, political, and economic issues includes judicious selection of primary and secondary sources. Such sources allow students to address a particular query from multiple perspectives designed to
enhance empathetic understanding of important themes, while inviting comparison, analysis, and interpretation (Perry, 2012; Wineburg, 2001).

Music, an essential and everlasting part of the human experience, remains an underutilized resource for enhancing students’ understanding of the social studies (Brkich, 2012; Pellegrino & Lee, 2012). Its power can be felt in African polyrhythms, Aztec spiritual chants, 19th century labor songs, and through contemporary punk and hip hop artists exercising their working class angst. Its potency can be felt in the reactions of fans and concerned citizens watching Arab Idol (Fisher, 2013) or reading about a young hip-hop artist gunned down for his anti-fascist lyrics. Many of the messages in contemporary music address the fundamental themes found in world history and global studies. Racism, classism, colonialism, and social justice are all topics prominently featured in music from around the world and are, of course, central to world history and global studies curricula (Rosaldo, 1994; Sanchez, 2007).

It is our view that effective practice in social studies must include listening to, analyzing, and creating music as treasured and indispensable sources through which students develop knowledge of the past and their present. Such explorations provide complementary benefits of enhancing related skills, including close reading strategies, literary analysis practices, sourcing artifacts, and evaluating artifacts’ reliability when constructing an interpretation of social and political issues. Musical heritage is most certainly ripe for exploration in social studies classrooms, and we hope that from within the lesson activities and broader framework of using music in the classroom teachers might find ways to use this resonant medium to foster meaningful understanding and student engagement.

Appendix A
I won’t cry, I won’t fear
by Pavlos Fyssas (2011, Self-Released)

The world has become a big prison
and I’m looking for a way to break the chains.
There is a place waiting for me,
there at a high mountain peak for me to arrive.
That’s why I stretch again my two hands very high,
to steal some light from the bright stars.
I cannot take it down here and I’m about to choke from
this human misery, as much as sorrow.
I cannot stand it anymore and all these people were not from me,
so I followed another path and not the one they forced me to.
It was rough, tough and with many pitfalls,
bad love and friends like venomous vipers.
It had monsters with strange uniforms
always secretly lurking in the shadows.
Don’t stop if you decide to follow it,
tighten your teeth firmly and do not cry.
I took it myself and reached its end
and as the old wise people write in books
when the sun reaches its end,
eagles will light a fire from above.
To those who betrayed me by back stabbing me I want them to know that
I will not bother to cry.
And to all my old loves I want them to know that
I will not bother to cry.
And to those that threatened me burning chains I want them to know that
I will not bother with fear.
Let them come and find me at the mountain top, I’m waiting for them and
I will not bother with fear.
They told me not to have “crazy” dreams,
not dare to look at the stars,
but I’ve never took them seriously,
I took the whole world in my arms.
They want nowadays to build me a nest,
where there’s more fear, ugliness
and a moaning cry and a heavy chain,
carrying the curse of the gods and blasphemy.
I will not shed a tear and I will not be afraid.
I will not let them steal my dreams.
I fly free, high, very high
while they are jealous of my proud unbound wings.
And I’m waiting for other brothers to come here
in this mountain peak waiting for them all,
as long as they don’t cry and fear
living in this well thought fraud.
To those who betrayed me by back stabbing me I want them to know that
I will not bother to cry.
And to all my old loves I want them to know that
I will not bother to cry.
And to those that threatened me burning chains I want them to know that
I will not bother with fear.
Let them come and find me at the mountain top, I’m waiting for them and
I will not bother with fear.
To those who betrayed me by back stabbing me I want them to know that
I will not bother to cry.
And to all my old loves I want them to know that
I will not bother to cry.
And to those that threatened me burning chains I want them to know that
I will not bother with fear.
Let them come and find me at the mountain top, I’m waiting for them and...
Appendix B

From the diary of Yitskhok Rudashevski (Zapruder, 2001, pp. 216-217) Courtesy of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, NY. Used with permission
Wednesday the 10th of December (1942)
It dawned on me that today is my birthday. Today I became fifteen years old. I discover that days and months go by, that the ghetto is not a painful, squirming moment of a dream that constantly disappears, but is a large swamp in which we lose our days and weeks....Must I in my best years see only the one little street, the few stuffy courtyards?
Still other thoughts buzzed around in my head but I felt two things most strongly; a regret, a sort of gnawing. I wish to shout to time to linger, not to run. I wish to recapture my past year and keep it for later, for the new life. My second feeling today is that of strength and hope. I do not feel the slightest despair. Today…I live confident in the future. I…see before me sun and sun and sun…

References


**Web-based References**


Author Bios

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