Music as a weapon: Using popular culture to combat social injustice

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Teaching students about social injustice and challenging them to confront such injustice is an important function of democratic education. According to the National Council for the Social Studies (2008) revised statement on powerful teaching for social understanding and civic efficacy, when social studies education is value-based it becomes powerful. However, doing so can be challenging and professionally treacherous for teachers. In spite of these risks, not presenting challenges to social injustice does our nation’s youth too great a disservice.

Social studies educators who wish to incorporate discussions on social injustices such as systemic racism, sexism, heterosexism, and religious intolerance—to name a few—into their instruction may be at a loss of how to do so effectively. This article provides examples and concrete directions on how to use an assortment of musical genres to challenge social injustice through song lyric analysis across multiple social studies disciplines.

Since the onset of public schooling in the United States, civic education has been an essential part of the curriculum. However, the definition of what constitutes good citizenship has been highly contested, from the times of Horace Mann and Bishop John Hughes (Fraser, 2010) to the present day (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Should good citizens, as Rush (Fraser, 2010) asserted, be “Republican Machines” who are obedient to the law, individually responsible, and subservient to the interests of their government? Or, as Counts (1932) suggested, should good citizens take a broader social view of responsibility and seek to challenge inequity whenever and wherever it arises?

These questions are highly political in nature, and the ways in which social studies teachers choose to answer them through their own teaching inevitably reflect their own social, political, religious, and cultural beliefs and practices. As Graff (1993), Kincheloe (2008), Freire (1968/2010), and other critical pedagogues have asserted, all teaching is political and no teaching can be objective—in spite of whatever desires we might have to remain either neutral or impartial.

The political nature of teaching is essential to recall when teaching what Hess (2009) termed controversial public issues. Recalling this becomes even more important when teaching about social injustices past and present, such as systemic racism, sexism, heterosexism, and religious intolerance—just to name a few. Do we teach our students that obeying laws, having good character, and being personally responsible is sufficient to mitigate social injustice? Or, do we teach our students to seek out the root causes of injustice, question established structures which replicate injustice over time, and become political agents of change (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)?

Given the wave of recent state and federal legislative initiatives relating to race and immigration, women’s rights, GLBT rights, and the religion of Islam, the issues of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and religious intolerance are still very much alive in the United States. As these social injustices represent problems central to the core of what it means to be an American, teaching our students to be aware of these injustices and to challenge them and others like them—
either on an individual or a social level—is wholly consistent with our mission as social studies educators (NCSS, 2010).

Negotiating how to present these issues in our classrooms, however, becomes a challenge in itself. This is partly due to the fact that these issues are political, partly because they are controversial, and partly because people tend to have very strong personal views about such issues. Whenever classroom teachers introduce controversial issues into the classroom, there is a risk of parents accusing them of indoctrinating their children (Kelly, 1986), or of pressuring the administration to terminate their jobs (e.g., Chandler, 2006; Dahlgren, 2009). Make no mistake, the discussion of controversial topics in the classroom, particularly those that challenge the notion that our nation is not living up to its promise of freedom and liberty for all, can be dangerous work. Nevertheless, for teachers to avoid teaching students about past and present social injustices does them a disservice.

In arming our students intellectually to challenge social injustice, music serves as a very effective weapon. Though the terminology here may be off-putting for some, consider that the peaceful protest movements for women’s suffrage, for Indian independence from Great Britain, and for civil rights in 1960s United States of America all used the “weapons” of civil disobedience, peaceful and nonviolent protest, and cultural revolutions to achieve their aims. In this article, I provide a detailed explanation as to why and how music can serve this purpose through song lyric analysis across a variety of social studies disciplines. I also provide a number of song examples from a variety of musical genres useful in a variety of social studies content areas. Finally, I provide concrete directions on how social studies teachers can accomplish this form of instruction effectively in their classrooms.

**Music is Pedagogically Effective**

Teachers and teacher educators alike have long recognized the value of using popular cultural artifacts to teach important and powerful social studies concepts. For example, classroom teachers use film each year to teach a wide variety of social studies topics in a largely engaging and effective manner (Russell, 2009; Stoddard, 2009). Metzger (2007) argued that dramatic history feature films are “well suited to addressing in the classroom” for a variety of reasons, including the promotion of rigorous content knowledge and historical empathy (p. 67). Marcus (2005) likewise argued that “films have great potential to motivate and engage students with historical content and present alternative perspectives... [providing opportunities for] connecting the past to the present and to one’s own life” (pp. 61-62). I argue that music operates in a similar fashion, providing multiple opportunities for powerful learning experiences across the swath of social studies, including American and world history, sociology and psychology, and both civics and American government.

The power of music as a pedagogical device in the social studies is rather well-documented. At the college level, Ahlkvist (1999, 2001) demonstrated how the use of heavy metal and progressive rock can teach students complex sociological concepts such as alienation, functionalism, and class struggle by engaging the auditory as well as the visual, allowing students to engage schema which are both useful and familiar to them. Martinez (1994) similarly argued that pop music “can be used to illustrate that prejudice and discrimination—color lines and injustice—still exist in our own country” (p. 261) and that well-chosen examples can make the theretofore inaccessible concept of institutional discrimination comprehensible.

The use of music as a pedagogical device is becoming well-documented in the secondary social studies classroom. Stovall (2006) explored the use of hip-hop to provide historical and social context for use in a thematic unit on society and social inequities. The music, he argues, provides relevant examples for “African American and Latino students [who] are often labeled negatively early in their school tenure and [who] are unable to evade preconceived notions in their
educational development” (p. 589). Sánchez (2007) examines the power of music across genres from grades 6-12 to develop empathy in students for those unlike them and to help these students overcome feelings of powerlessness and personal guilt. Most recently, Mangram and Weber (2012) examine how secondary social studies teachers use music to provide historical context and to engage students who might otherwise feel disconnected from classroom instruction.

Though music has long served as a vehicle for challenging social injustice (Frith, 1996; Marcus, 1999), of the articles I cite above only Martinez (1994) and Sánchez (2007) specifically cite music’s power to challenge social injustice. Given the popularity of music with teenagers, its ability to engage students in the classroom, and its potential to make difficult social studies concepts more readily accessible, I argue the social studies teacher interested in teaching students to be aware of and to raise challenges to systemic social injustice can do so effectively by using song lyrics as text and by making connections between the text and formal social studies content through lyric analysis (Walczak & Reuter, 1994).

Multiple Genres for Multiple People

This exercise builds on my previous work of using hard rock and heavy metal to challenge systemic injustice. Because I find these musical genres to represent in large part the bulk of recent social critique and relate to them out of strong personal interest, I began exploring how to use music as an intellectual weapon in the fight against social injustice here. However, while I find the abrasive tones, explicit themes, and often coarse language highly engaging, these genres neither appeal as widely as others nor may be as appropriate for the classroom. Walczak and Reuter (1994) argued that students may not engage as strongly with music they dislike for artistic reasons, even if “it got the point across” (p. 267). Sánchez’ (2007) investigation additionally demonstrated that when students are able to bring in music of their own choosing, they make a more personalized and more meaningful understanding of the social studies concepts with which they engage.

Table 1
Sample Songs Challenging Social Injustice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Musical Act</th>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Lesley Gore</td>
<td>You Don’t Own Me</td>
<td>Teen pop</td>
<td>Sexism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Johnny Cash</td>
<td>The Ballad of Ira Hayes</td>
<td>Country music</td>
<td>Racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Bob Dylan</td>
<td>Only a Pawn in their Game</td>
<td>Folk music</td>
<td>Racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Iron Maiden</td>
<td>Run to the Hills</td>
<td>Heavy metal</td>
<td>Racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Queen Latifah</td>
<td>UNITY</td>
<td>Hip-hop</td>
<td>Sexism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Chumbawamba</td>
<td>Homophobia</td>
<td>Anarcho-punk</td>
<td>Heterosexism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>DC Talk</td>
<td>Colored People</td>
<td>Pop rock</td>
<td>Racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Rage Against the Machine</td>
<td>People of the Sun</td>
<td>Rapcore</td>
<td>Racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Propagandhi</td>
<td>Homophobes are Just Mad Cuz they Can’t Get Laid</td>
<td>Punk</td>
<td>Heterosexism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Halford</td>
<td>Silent Screams</td>
<td>Heavy metal</td>
<td>Heterosexism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Nickelback</td>
<td>Never Again</td>
<td>Rock and roll</td>
<td>Sexism/Abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Kanye West</td>
<td>Jesus Walks</td>
<td>Hip-hop</td>
<td>Racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Clawfinger</td>
<td>The Faggot in You</td>
<td>Heavy metal</td>
<td>Heterosexism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Native Deen</td>
<td>My Faith, My Voice</td>
<td>Hip-hop</td>
<td>Religious intolerance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. The table above is but a small sample of music addressing the systemic injustices of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and religious intolerance.*
To interest as many students and teachers as possible in using music effectively to challenge systemic injustice, I exited my musical comfort zone and expanded the scope of my vision. By looking back as far as the 1960s and including the genres of pop, hip-hop, country, folk, punk rock, and rock and roll, I have provided a broad starting point from which interested social studies teachers can engage their students in using music as a means of exploring and providing challenges to racism, sexism, heterosexism, religious prejudice, and other social injustices (see Table 1).

Note that the songs provided in the table represent only a starting point; ultimately allowing students the choice of what genres and which songs to explore will produce a more authentic and more engaging learning experience (Ahlkvist, 1999; Martinez, 1994; Sánchez, 2007). In the interest of promoting social justice in the social studies classroom, ensuring students come to a more personalized and meaningful understanding of past and present social injustice is more likely to produce a powerful and life-changing learning experience.

Applications in the Content Areas

From the time of its inception, the NCSS (2010) has had a very broad definition of what constitute the social studies. However, for practical purposes at the secondary level, these typically refer to American and world history, sociology and psychology, geography, and both civics and American government. In each of these subjects, there exist numerous and powerful opportunities both to raise awareness of social injustice and to challenge it through the use of music.

Looking to use music as a weapon to combat social injustice on an intellectual level is not something which happens effectively in a vacuum; it is more likely to take when grounded in firm social studies content. As a world history teacher, I knew of countless instances of social injustice across time which had lasting effects on the present—but getting students to understand the present-day relevance of these injustices to their own lives and experiences proved difficult. I had the good fortune one morning while in the midst of a unit on European conquest of the Americas to sing along with my car stereo on the way to work. The song blasting out my speakers that morning happened to be Rage Against the Machine’s “People of the Sun”, which begins with the following lyrics:

Check it, since fifteen hundred and sixteen, minds attacked and overseen
Now crawl amidst the ruins of this empty dream
Wit’ their borders and boots on top of us
Pullin’ knobs on the floor of their toxic metropolis

But how you gonna get what you need ta get?
Tha gut eaters, blood drenched, get offensive like Tet
Tha fifth sun sets, get back, reclaim
Tha spirit of Cuahtemoc, alive an’ untamed

Now face tha funk blastin’ out ya speaker
On tha one, Maya, Mexico
That vulture came ta try and steal ya name, but now you got a gun
Yeah, this is for the People of the Sun

As the words flowed both from the speakers and from my own lips, I had an epiphany: the lyrics of the song themselves could serve my purpose! Through some additional reading and some internet-based research, I came to a better understanding of the historical reasons for frontman Zach de la Rocha’s rage. Prior to the arrival of Hernando Cortés, the Mayan and Incan empires enjoyed tremendous cultural, political, and religious sophistication. Once the conquistadors arrived in
search of gold, those First Nations saw their rich heritage “attacked and overseen” by European whites who viewed it as foreign, pagan, and sinful. Applications to a number of additional topics in Latin American history gained additional context for me: the imposition of national borders by force and the Zoot Suit Riots became more accessible to me through the song’s lyrics.

To help my students understand the lasting effects of a longstanding history of anti-Latino/a discrimination in the United States, including racial profiling by law enforcement officers and allegations that Latinos/as were taking away jobs (white) Americans wanted, I had them draw comparisons between what they were reading in their textbooks, what they saw on the news, and de la Rocha’s assertion that Latinos/as have been channeled disproportionately into low-paying jobs, “pullin’ the knobs on the floor of their toxic metropolis”. While some of my white students expressed anger that the music “discussed themes that they did not choose to believe” (Martinez, 1994, p. 264)—namely that Latinos/as face discrimination presently and are entitled to affirmative action initiatives—others came to an accessible understanding of current anti-Latino/a racism situated in historical context.

This represents but one example of using music to fight the injustice of racism in history; sexism, heterosexism, and religious intolerance—along with other social studies disciplines—deserve attention too. Teachers can address the cases of sexism and heterosexism easily through a variety of social studies content areas. When discussing the differences between sex and gender in either sociology or American history, music can help inform students’ understanding of norms, mores, and laws as well as the ongoing political shifts related thereto. Lesley Gore’s teen pop hit “You Don’t Own Me” from the 1960s will be familiar to many teachers, and serves as a direct challenge to the notion that women constitute the “weaker sex”. The first two verses and chorus provide multiple opportunities for content-related instruction:

You don’t own me
I’m not just one of your many toys
You don’t own me
Don’t say I can’t go with other boys

And don’t tell me what to do
Don’t tell me what to say
And please when I go out with you
Don’t put me on display, ‘cause

You don’t own me
Don’t try to change me in any way
You don’t own me
Don’t tie me down ‘cause I’d never stay

The stanza “I’m not just one of your many toys” and “Don’t say I can’t go with other boys” serve as poignant critiques to the existence of a gender-based double-standard. Teachers in sociology classes can use this as a doorway to examining prevailing gender roles and norms; teachers in American history can use the song lyric as a period piece for examinations on the Civil Rights Movement, the Sexual Revolution, and the current referred-to “war on women”. In similar fashion, Propagandhi’s punk rock blitz “Homophobes Are Just Mad Cuz They Can’t Get Laid” problematizes notions of equality before the law. The opening verses are as blunt in their meaning as they are fast-paced, and teachers in American government, psychology, sociology, and American history can use them to their advantage:
Nothing I can say will change your little mind
It’s your clique and right or wrong, you won’t be left behind
But you’re weak

Equality’s your trip when all your friends agree
But freedom’s just not hip when it’s of sexuality
So you hate

The stanza “It’s your clique and right or wrong, you won’t be left behind” speaks to the nature of the herd mentality which may serve as a point of discussion in a psychology class. Equally, teachers of American government and history can make connections between considerations of the First, Fourth, and Fourteenth Amendments and the second verse with discussions on Lawrence v. Texas (2003), the recent repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (2010), and ongoing debates on marriage equality.

Finally, religious intolerance has gained tremendous ground since the turn of the millennium, particularly in the form of Islamophobia. Teachers can incorporate challenges thereto in geography and religious studies classes with ease. As vicious anti-Islamic and anti-Arabic rhetoric gained tremendous publicity—from claims President Obama is a secret Muslim to arguments that development of Cordoba House in New York should proceed only when Christians can build a church in Mecca—artists have begun saying, “Enough.” Members of the popular Washington, DC hip-hop group Native Deen penned “My Faith, My Voice” as an effort to reclaim their faith from its demonization in certain American circles:

“Islam means peace? Nah, that’s a front!
It’s all a deceit, till they get what want
Don’t trust them, even the nice ones
Wait till the bite comes - Mike Tyson”

Not fair. The KKKs, and the Timothy McVeighs,
Militia Brigades, the old crusades, they’re all renegades
From the faith that you claim, it’s them we should blame
I don’t blame you, you should refrain too

Hopefully, more acts will raise their voices against this tide of religious intolerance.

Guided Steps for Using Music as a Weapon

Ultimately, the classroom teacher wants to know: How do I use music in my classroom to challenge social injustice? There are many ways of doing so, but I will outline below the steps I used with both my high school students and preservice teachers, and that you can use with your students.

Step One

Be explicit regarding your purposes. You can accomplish this easily at the beginning of the school year, the semester, or the nine-week grading period, and with minimal difficulty in the middle of a unit. Let your students know that throughout your teaching, you will be actively challenging systemic social injustices such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and religious intolerance. Additionally, sending home letters to your students’ guardians or parents ought to suffice in providing additional fair warning. You may also want to notify your administrators.
When beginning the lesson, again be explicit in your purposes. Opening phrases such as “Today, we’re going to look at how music can help women secure equal rights” or “Let’s examine persisting racism in the United States through the use of song lyrics” will engage your students’ interest and will also announce your position clearly regarding the social injustice you are challenging.

**Step Two**

If you have selected the music you will be using in class, ensure you have sufficient written copies of the lyrics to the songs you will be playing, such that your students can follow along easily—a benefit for all students, but an accommodation in particular for students who may be hard of hearing or who are English Language Learners. If you want students to bring in music of their own choice, as Martinez (1994) recommended, ensure your students provide you with artist and track title information ahead of time, and make copies of the lyrics for them.

**Step Three**

Model the kind of analysis you want your students to do, and think aloud throughout the modeling process. Draw your students’ attention to the song’s lyrics, and have them follow along as you play it aloud. You can use paper handouts or PowerPoint slides presenting the lyrics on a line-by-line basis as the students hear them. Once the song is finished, make connections between its lyrics, the major social studies content you are teaching, and your challenge to social injustice. Entertain a few of your students’ questions, and be prepared to have them contest you on the spot. Instead of shying from them, adopt a position of committed impartiality. This stance allows you to openly disclose your abhorrence of systemic injustice all while encouraging your students to challenge your position in a respectful and academic manner (Hess, 2009; Kelly, 1986).

Ensuring you do not skip this modeling stage is absolutely critical, as it serves two additional purposes. First, having students watch you think through the lyric analysis aloud serves as a scaffold in the development of critical media lenses (NCSS, 2009). Second, and perhaps more importantly, modeling respectful interactions with students who disagree with you provides an opportunity to teach civil modes of discourse when addressing controversial issues.

**Step Four**

It’s time for your students to make some sense out of song! Having modeled the analytical process, break your students into groups of four. Regardless of whether you have selected the music yourself or have allowed students to bring in relevant music of their own choosing, have each group discuss a single song’s lyrics at a time. Inform your students that you will be requiring the same kind of analysis you modeled. Have the students individually read through the song's lyrics and keep a running list of their original ideas and connections on the piece. Following this, I recommend having them share their ideas and connections using one of the National School Reform Faculty’s discussion protocols. These protocols have been developed by master classroom teachers and teacher educators to promote engaging discussions in an equitable fashion. The “Save the Last Word for Me!” protocol provides each student the opportunity to have the final say in a round of discussion (nscrharmony.org/protocol/index.html). Throughout this entire step, circulate the classroom and monitor the process, ensuring students remain on task and are respectful.

**Step Five**
Once you feel that your student groups have sufficiently wound down their discussion, call back the class’ attention. Have the groups share a summary of the song they each analyzed and the connections they made. Encourage students to think about the connections they can make across the different songs analyzed, and how each either successfully or unsuccessfully challenges the social injustice under scrutiny. Try to anticipate differing and conflicting ideas, and be prepared to problematize them collaboratively with your students. Draw a few final connections to the major social studies content of the day and to the social injustice you are challenging.

Conclusion

Music can challenge social injustice powerfully, and can serve as a useful pedagogical tool in raising students’ and teachers’ interest. Opportunities to use music to challenge social injustice while teaching important social studies concepts are countless. The ones I discussed in this article represent only the smallest fraction of those available. Furthermore, using music to engage students in critical media literacy acknowledges that the world in which we live “is media saturated, technologically dependent, and globally connected” (NCSS, 2009). Teaching students to apply a critical lens to music as well as to their textbooks and the news they watch plays an important part in “influencing young people’s thinking about citizenship and social responsibility” (NCSS, 2009).

So, the next time you are browsing through your collections of LPs and worn-out cassettes, your mountains of CDs, and your iTunes playlist, I encourage you to look with a mindful eye of the ways in which you can use music as a weapon to combat social injustice. You will engage your students in a noble cause, all while helping them to come to a deeper and more personally meaningful understanding of complex social studies concepts across a variety of social studies disciplines.

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Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented as a professional development session at the 2010 annual meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies.

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