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by Karin S. Hendricks, Tawnya D. Smith, and Jennifer Stanuch

Creating Safe Spaces for Music Learning

Abstract: This article offers a practical model for fostering emotionally safe learning environments that instill in music students a positive sense of self-belief, freedom, and purpose. The authors examine the implications for music educators of creating effective learning environments and present recommendations for creating a safe space for learning, including (1) specific teacher attitudes and behaviors that nurture a sense of trust and respect, thereby encouraging experimentation, risk taking, and self-expression, and (2) music teaching strategies that foster purpose-driven student commitment and musical mastery toward a sense of self-actualization.

Keywords: creativity, environment, learning, motivation, music, performance anxiety, psychology, safe space, trust

To me, a human comes first.
—Josef Gingold[1]

Adam was considered the best trumpet player in his school band, but he quit mid-semester due to paralyzing fear.

Anita gets sick to her stomach every time she "has to" sing a solo.

Keisha plays the cello for fun several hours each day, but dreads going to private lessons each week.

Why do so many music education environments evoke fear, causing students to loathe performing or withdraw from expressive music-making? Fear-based performance anxiety is not an admirable outcome of music education, but it is the far too common experience of our students. As hosts and presenters of local and national performance anxiety workshops, we have witnessed countless participants describe how the demands placed on them by well-meaning teachers have caused them to perform in fear and, in some unfortunate cases, even to lose their love of music altogether. Our realization about the depth and breadth of this problem has caused us to more deeply consider the ways in which music students can be better nurtured and prepared for careers (or lifelong enjoyment of any sort) in music.

Drawing on literature in motivation, creativity, and psychology, we consider means whereby teachers can foster emotionally safe learning environments and instill music students with a positive sense of self-belief, creative freedom, and purpose. Our discussion is framed by four questions: (1) What kind of learning environments foster intrinsic motivation and musical engagement? (2) How do competitive structures affect

What learning environments are best for encouraging students to become confident, independent, and musical?

Karin S. Hendricks is an assistant professor of music at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana; she can be contacted at kshendricks3@gmail.com. Tawnya D. Smith is a recent graduate of both the Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study in expressive arts therapy at Lesley University; she can be contacted at createforpeace@gmail.com. Jennifer Stanuch is a recent M.M. graduate in music performance and literature at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign and is pursuing a master of social work degree at Washington University in St. Louis; she can be contacted at jennifer.stanuch@gmail.com.

student creativity and self-expression? (3) In what ways are music students influenced by critical, demeaning, or fear-based attempts at motivation? and (4) What effects do elitist notions of talent have on perceptions of music as an accessible, learnable skill? At the conclusion of this article, we draw upon our discussion to offer additional considerations for teachers in creating a safe space in music classrooms and studios.

Fostering Musical Engagement

Learning environments foster intrinsic motivation and musical engagement when students are treated as unique individuals. Many successful teachers have considered it a priority to perceive students as distinct people and understand how each student values the music learning experience.[2] When students are valued for their differences, they may enjoy more personalized learning experiences and may be motivated by goals that are related to their own needs and interests.[3] For example, some students might flourish better in environments with solo recitals, while students who value social musical experiences may have better success when given the opportunity to make music in groups.

Intrinsic motivation can be fostered by teachers who do not view musical ability as a fixed skill but allow students to develop their ability level through their own efforts.[4] When students perceive musical ability as a skill that can be developed, they understand that effort will be rewarded by increased mastery.[5] Students are able to achieve success that they can then attribute to their own effort and determination. As students accumulate successes, they will have positive personal experiences to draw upon, which then further develop their intrinsic motivation and willingness to engage with the music.

Teachers can encourage intrinsic motivation by praising students and recognizing accomplishments of progress and effort.[6] In such environments, students will likely become motivated by the process of learning itself, instead of by a concrete outcome. Additionally,

trusting students and allowing them to take ownership in their own music learning by incorporating their own ideas contribute to students' sense of ability and engagement.[7] In sum, intrinsic motivation can be fostered through learning environments that recognize student individuality, focus on progress and effort, and provide students ownership and control over their musical development.

Effects of Competition

Music teachers (especially in the United States) have traditionally used competition as a means of motivating students to practice. Many teachers are capable of fostering a positive music learning atmosphere while engaging students in competitive activities, and for a number of students, competitions can be exciting, stimulating, and a source of musical pride. However, even if competitions are positive for *some* students yet cause other students to experience anxiety or to lose their love of music, teachers have a responsibility to consider means by which they can create even more healthy learning environments for *all* students.

Researchers have found that competition may influence neither achievement nor motivation,[8] and the competitive drive that many consider a part of our "human condition" may actually be based on familiarity, tradition, or pressure from others more than it is a personal or internal need.[9] Furthermore, emphasizing competition may cause students to rely more on social comparison than teacher feedback, to believe that their ability is fixed and unchangeable, and to give up easily after repeated failure.[10]

For some students, learning in a competitive climate may foster anxiety and fear, including the development of music performance anxiety. Research reveals that 23 percent of children and 34 percent of adolescents suffer from clinically relevant levels of music performance anxiety.[11] While percentages may vary in different contexts (e.g., varying teacher approaches, community values,

family support, student's state of mental well-being), it is evident that music performance anxiety interferes with the learning process for a sizable number of students.

There are certainly music teachers who engage in competitive practices and events who are also unconditionally supportive of their students and who do not intentionally use competition as a form of fear-based motivation. It is also likely that, even when competition *is* used as a form of fear-based motivation, many students will demonstrate resilience and not be seriously harmed. On the other hand, some students who are inclined to develop performance anxiety may also be in danger of developing anxiety or panic disorders.[12] In any case, the anxiety produced in competitive situations may interfere with students' abilities to learn to a lesser or greater degree, depending on their relative mental health.

Up to 70 percent of adult orchestral musicians report anxiety severe enough to interfere with their performance,[13] and adult choral artists may be three times more likely than members of the average population to report high anxiety.[14] This prevalence of anxiety among professionals suggests that ability and achievement does not lead to a reduction of anxiety in highly competitive situations. As the high attendance at our performance anxiety workshop suggests, the number of highly skilled performers who suffer from these conditions is large, and the condition is prevalent enough to consider alternative practices for motivation and achievement.

Some research suggests that student expressiveness and creativity may be hindered in highly critical, socially comparative musical environments, especially in cases where students enter the environment with a relatively low sense of musical ability. For example, Karin S. Hendricks discovered that students in a competitive honor orchestra seating audition more closely associated their perceptions of musical self-efficacy with their ability to impress an adjudicator than with their ability to perform expressively, a finding that points to the

emphasis of status over personal expressive freedom.[15] Ellis Paul Torrance and Teresa M. Amabile suggest that creativity is more closely linked with intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation, again demonstrating that personal expressive and creative freedom may best be fostered through environments where students are motivated by personal and internal interests.[16]

Finally, while competition may be a way to provide invigorating challenges, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi suggests that true enjoyment is lost when the focus turns from personal achievement to winning at the expense of others:

> The challenges of competition can be stimulating and enjoyable. But when beating the opponent takes precedence in the mind over performing as well as possible, enjoyment tends to disappear. Competition is enjoyable only when it is a means to perfect one's skills; when it becomes an end in itself, it ceases to be fun.[17]

Positive Teacher Feedback

Some music students may seem to respond to an authoritarian figure who motivates out of fear of failure or disappointment. However, it may be difficult for such a teacher to create a safe space in which students feel free to express themselves or take musical risks. Creativity in the workplace has been found to be positively associated with joy and love, and negatively associated with anger and fear,[18] and the detrimental effects of fear upon learning and productivity have been demonstrated through decades of brain research.[19] In the case of the honor orchestra seating audition mentioned earlier, students reported that the emphasis on competition and social comparison overshadowed and even inhibited their sense of expressive ability.[20] Creativity and expressiveness may best be fostered in music environments that do not promote fear but, rather, promote joy and love of music.

Feedback that is informative rather than evaluative does not inhibit creative efforts.[21] Albert Bandura suggests that "innovativeness requires an unshakeable sense of efficacy to persist in creative endeavors" and points to the power of positive verbal persuasion in promoting self-belief.[22] Similarly, Ronald A. Beghetto found that the strongest predictor of a student's creative self-efficacy belief was from positive teacher feedback regarding his or her creativity.[23]

Individuals have been found to be more spontaneous and creative in settings in which they feel genuinely respected and appreciated.[24] John S. Dacey found that children whose parents modeled creative problem solving rather than using prescriptive rules or conventional punishment enjoyed playing with their parents and had many opportunities for creative activity.[25] It is clear, then, that negative or fear-based attempts at motivation may in some cases *appear* to get students to do what teachers want, but these effects may be short-term, less effective, and in some cases, even detrimental to learning. A much more effective approach may be, as David M. Harrington, Jeanne H. Block, and Jack Block suggest, to create a climate in which individuals experience psychological safety and freedom, openness to experience, and the opportunity to experiment.[26]

Music: A Learnable Skill

One of the authors once worked for a school principal who was turned off of music at an early age by a choir teacher who told her to "just mouth the words." Not only did this experience discourage her from future participation in music, but it also instilled in her the belief that music requires special talent, therefore rendering music education inaccessible to all but the specially gifted. Because of this early negative association with music education, this principal reported she has "hated music ever since." This administrator's choir teacher may have thought that she was "saving" a performance by asking one monotone girl to keep quiet. However, one must wonder how often music educators "save" performances at the expense of the emotional and educational needs of their students, thus losing support for music education when those children grow up and become influential members of society.

Many in our society might doubt the practicality or accessibility of public music education because they share a belief in discriminatory "talent," where music study—especially participation in performance ensembles—is best limited to a select and "gifted" few. According to Rudolf E. Radocy, the American emphasis on competitive performance ensembles poses limits to (1) the amount of repertoire students can potentially learn, (2) musical opportunities for students who are not among the elite minority of highest performance ability, and (3) possibilities for more student-centered instruction.[27]

Gary E. McPherson and Karin S. Hendricks found that high school students in the United States reported low competence beliefs, values, and interest in music as a school subject yet reported a strong interest in music learning outside of school that was equal only to their interest in extracurricular athletics.[28] The authors suggest that "music participation itself may not be what is undervalued, but . . . music study in U.S. schools may not presently serve a broad population of students in ways that sufficiently promote the value of music for them at an individual level."[29] They stated that music educators should provide broader performance opportunities that include more experiences of personal expression and encourage autonomous, self-directed learning:

> Performance and competition hold an important and fundamental place in the tradition of musical excellence in the United States. A broader emphasis and opportunities for autonomous and student-directed musical activity may, however, be inviting to students who are not presently served within the American music education system. Providing more extensive, enriching, and more varied musical experiences at school may make music more accessible to a larger and more diverse population of students, and help students to experience first-hand the value that music can have in their lives.[30]

Considerations for Creating a Safe Space

After examining the research, we offer several suggestions for music teachers who are interested in creating safe musical "spaces" for their students—learning environments in which students will be more likely to freely express themselves. These include both actively shaping environments and personally reflecting on one's state of being in order to foster purpose-driven student commitment, musical mastery, and a sense of self-actualization and "flow."

1. *Listen and be emotionally present* so that students have the sense that they are really being heard. Sometimes teachers may get so involved in considering how to shape and lead the lesson that they mentally "check out" instead of really listening to the music as well as to their students. On the other hand, students can sense the genuineness of a caring teacher whose focus and mental investment is demonstrated through specific constructive feedback regarding musical improvements and effort. In addition to being mentally present with students, being emotionally present allows teachers to be sensitive to how students are responding to feedback, thereby allowing them to better gauge the level of pacing, praise, and/or challenge.

Studying music requires students to be musically, emotionally, and creatively vulnerable. It is essential that we as teachers respect this and pay attention to the difficult work that we are asking our students to undertake. Being present involves giving our full attention to students in the moment, and waiting until the lesson has concluded and students have left before directing our attention elsewhere (e.g., future lesson planning, checking e-mail, etc.).

2. *Use ability-appropriate and challenging situations* to encourage and stimulate students, but *focus on the challenge at hand,* rather than encouraging students to compare themselves with others. Much trust is lost when students believe that their teachers have set them up to fail, either by choosing material that is too far out of reach or by engaging in competitive experiences that can leave students focused on their shortcomings and failings. In this case, rather than feeling a nurturing learning environment, students may experience their music education as a humiliating exercise and will be unlikely to trust their teacher to protect their well-being in the future, which may hamper musical growth.

Teachers can provide positive experiences by carefully selecting repertoire that has a mix of challenges and already mastered skills so that students neither feel bored nor that they are floundering. In group settings, where performance tests are often used to compare and rank students, teachers might try an alternate approach of conducting pretests and posttests for each student to highlight individual accomplishments of progress and improvement.

3. As teachers are not the only individuals involved in creating a safe space, it is necessary to *educate others about creating a safe space, both through words and through modeling.* A sense of safety is created not only by a teacher but by other individuals in the student's life, including parents and peers. This effect may not be understood by everyone, however, so it is important for teachers to inform parents of the need to create a safe space where students are protected physically and emotionally. The learning environment should allow for "safety without safety"— a climate for risk taking that supports experimentation, creativity, and expression such that students feel safe to practice, experiment, and learn without severe judgment or criticism.[31] With parents, this can be achieved through holding parent information nights for new students and parents that outline the importance of safe spaces for musical learning. Fellow students must also learn the expectations for a safe learning environment that fosters growth—something that students can talk about and agree upon together through the facilitation of the teacher. In the classroom or studio among students, teachers must nurture mutual trust and respect while holding themselves and all students to the expectations of being present and offering honest and affirming critique of each other.

4. *Be sensitive to the relationship between students' musicality and their personal life.* Outside factors influence students' music-making. At times, this means that teachers might need to wait until the outside influences resolve in a way to allow for musical growth. It is also imperative that teachers make critiques—and even offer praise—about the music itself, and not about the person as an individual. For example, a student's struggle to capture the expressive elements of a certain piece does not necessarily reflect upon the emotional maturity of that student, just as the learning of a technical passage does not equate with the student's being a good or bad person. Additionally, as part of the safe space, teachers should be open to students expressing their feelings and needs as the music elicits various responses. For example, teachers can be supportive of a student performing an elegy who is recalling feelings of grief related to a deceased pet or loved one.

5. *Some instruction must be unconventional.* Safe spaces are created when teachers adapt the learning environment and repertoire to the students' social, emotional, and physical needs. This includes developing individualized teaching approaches and activities that relate to a student's age, interests, or particular abilities. For one of the authors, this has included allowing a student the autonomy to perform Mozart in a heavy-metal fashion before any

headway could be made in developing a classical style. Teachers can also step outside traditional authoritarian roles by offering their own experiences and honest failings as students grapple with new musical skills and techniques. Knowing that a teacher once struggled with a similar challenge (and is willing to talk about it) can both further the trusting bond and offer a realistic view of the teacher, which may inspire a student to persevere.

Supporting All Learners

The practice of creating a safe space for our students begins by creating a safe space inside ourselves, one in which we are able to openly reflect on any present teaching practices that may not be beneficial or effective. Whether our students may be prone to serious anxiety or just require a safe space to take musical risks, *all* students need teachers who can respond to their diverse needs. The five considerations described here, when adapted for various contexts and individuals, can promote learning spaces that are supportive of all learners.

NOTES

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8. James R. Austin, "Competitive and Non-competitive Goal Structures: An Analysis of Motivation and Achievement among Elementary Band Students," *Psychology of Music* 19, no. 2 (1991): 142–48; Charles P. Schmidt, "Relations among Motivation, Performance Achievement, and Music Experience Variables in Secondary Instrumental Music Students," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 53 no. 2 (2005): 134–37; and Walter P. Vispoel and James R. Austin, "Constructive Responses to Failure in Music: The R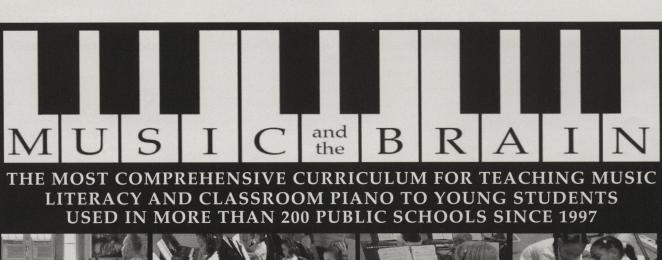ole of Attribution Feedback and Classroom Goal Structure," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 63, no. 1 (1993): 110–29.

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