Critical pedagogy is a particular perspective that views teaching and learning as a conversation among students and their teachers. Advocates of critical pedagogy, and particularly Critical Pedagogy for Music Education, believe that students learn best when they take ownership for their own learning. Teachers who embrace the tenets of Critical Pedagogy for Music Education acknowledge that students come to the music classroom, applied lesson, or rehearsal with knowledge and experience gleaned from their own interactions with the outside world. Critical pedagogues use that as the anchor to ground new learning. Four fundamental questions guide the development of strategies that are consistent with the philosophy of Critical Pedagogy for Music Education: “Who am I?”, “Who are my students?”, “Who might they become?”, and “What might we become together.” In classrooms where learning is informed by the ideas and ideals of Critical Pedagogy for Music Education, one notices a shift in power. That is, not only do teachers teach students, but students teach their teachers as well. It is a collaborative endeavor where all are simultaneously teaching and learning together.

This summer, I was fortunate to serve as a counselor at the Middle School Music Theatre Workshop at Westminster Choir College where I watched and learned how 16 middle school students could ready a full-scale performance of *Seussical, Jr.* in just five days of rehearsal.
What follows are some of the strategies I saw that were particularly effective and move the students through the four questions mentioned above. These strategies show how teachers can integrate ideas from Critical Pedagogy for Music Education into the preparation of school musical productions. In all, the strategies empowered students to make decisions and express their opinions in ways that fostered a sense of unity and cooperative learning. Using what they know and have experienced gave them the assurance that they matter and that they are valued.

In a critical pedagogy environment, directors are not dictators demanding results but students and actors themselves working together to create the best show possible. For instance, by giving students the freedom to create their own characters the way they perceive them to be, the show becomes a collaborative project that involves and acknowledges everyone. What was best about the experience was that characteristic “aha!” look that shows that a deep and inner knowing, called conscientization, has occurred.

**The Audition – Who am I? Who are my students?**

The middle school students in this music theatre workshop learned a lot about themselves and about each other. This began at the audition. One of the first questions asked of the students was “how many of you have had to audition for something?” A flurry of hands went up. None went down for the following question: “What kinds of tips do you have for auditioning?” The students were excited to have the opportunity to share their experiences with the group. This was the kids' first encounter with the directors' critical pedagogy approach to music theatre. It really centered their focus on what they were trying to accomplish and allowed them to express their own ideas and views on auditions and theater. Rather than telling the kids what they thought were good approaches, the directors empowered the students and allowed a guided conversation to occur. The directors left no suggestions unheard, though most of their ideas revolved around
confidence and nerves. Their advice was to take pride in what they are doing; keep your head held high and a smile on your face. After this volley of helpful tips from peers, the directors held a mock audition. The director selected a few students to be audition judges (switching them out every few auditioners) and had students stand up individually and sing the opening chorus from *Seussical* called, “Oh the Thinks You Can Think!” When each student had finished his or her sing-through, they were asked to self-evaluate. Then their peers at the judge’s table were asked to come up with something positive to say to the students as well as constructive criticism. Once again the students were empowered to use what they know and understand to benefit everyone. This essential tenet of critical pedagogy created an atmosphere of equality. The directors and counselors for the camp were learning as much as the students as the week progressed. When all the students had auditioned, the group participated in games where they got to know each other better and further express their own ideas for the week. One game, suggested by a counselor, was a question and answer game. The students sat in a circle and each got to ask one general question that all the other students had to answer. One example is “what’s your favorite show that you have been in?” This allowed the kids to see how alike they all were and how much experience they all had.

**The Rehearsals -- Who might they become?**

The challenge was set and day one of rehearsals began. The majority of the students had stated during the previous day’s workshop that working hard to learn parts and lines was one of the most important things they could do that week to be ready for the show. This self-stated task was met head-on by all of the students. Once given the responsibility of learning their own parts, the kids worked endlessly to do so, with very little intervention from the staff. When not in rehearsals, many of the students could be found in practice rooms or in small groups running
lines and going over solos. All of the students were given access to counselors who could help them during breaks but students had to take the initiative themselves to ask for help. This indefatigable motivation was the direct result of the release of authoritarian power that could have been held by the directors. The directors did not try to force extended rehearsals and they did not constantly remind students to work on their parts. This shift of power is a cornerstone of the critical pedagogy perspective. The students were allowed to decide for themselves how much work they needed to do and how much of their break they needed to devote to doing it. And not only did the students memorize their parts, they created and developed their own characters. The directors could easily have told each child how to play their part a certain way, what voice to use, what gestures to make, when to laugh, etc. Instead, they relinquished the stronghold some directors hold over the actors and allowed the students to become their own idea of the character. This made the job of learning the show in a week so much simpler and far more exciting for the kids.

The Performance – What might we become together?

Because of the hard work and dedication of the students, and the use of critical pedagogy by the directors, the kids had the night before the performance to relax—no rehearsal. After running the show once the morning of the performance, the students were geared up and ready to go. It was show time! As parents filled the seats of the Playhouse, the students took their places backstage. Announcements were made, the lights dimmed, and the music began. It was a fantastic performance by sixteen fantastic children. Everyone in the audience seemed not only pleased, but impressed as well. The kids, many of whom had been in multiple other shows, were amazed that they had been able to pull it off in so short a time. They did not surprise me, though. I knew it was going to be great on day three, when the kids had already memorized the blocking
for half the musical and the music for as much or more than that. I had my own “aha!” moment halfway through the last rehearsal that Wednesday. The students did not have much time to develop their characters on their own because free time was scarce. Despite this, when that rehearsal began I could see new characters coming out of them. As the rehearsal progressed, they were thinking and developing their characters without any prompting or assistance. The directors did not shout out to the mayor or his wife to be a certain way, or for JoJo to act any differently. Instead, they gave the children the freedom to make their characters their own. It worked.

After the show, the kids headed to their rooms with their proud parents to pack up the stuff. As I said my goodbyes, the one thing that all of the kids said to me was that they were so glad they had come and were definitely planning to come back next year. Students had experienced an environment where they could talk with their directors and counselors as fellow students and actors rather than as masters in charge. Everyone involved with this production had become a better musician, a better actor, a better performer, and someone who understands the power of conscious cooperation.

In music education classes at Westminster, we are taught that the purpose of music education is to empower students to be musicians and in the process to transform both the students and their teachers. Critical pedagogy, while not a method, is a way to view teaching and learning such that students construct meaning for themselves by contextualizing learning within their unique realm of personal experience. We are taught that the engagements we have as teachers with our students in music classes, applied lessons and rehearsals must add value to their lives as well as our own and that all must be changed, or transformed in some significant way in order to claim success. Research shows that this promotes life-long learning. Working at
the summer Middle School Music Theatre Workshop, I witnessed students and their directors engaged in experiences that truly added value and enriched the lives of all who participated.

Notes: Westminster alums Derek Cressman and Jason Vodicka were the directors of the Middle School Music Theatre Workshop. Augusto Boal’s seminal work *Theatre of the Oppressed* applies principles of critical pedagogy to the dramatic arts. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire is a good first look at the basic tenets of Critical Pedagogy. Joan Wink’s book *Critical Pedagogy: Notes From the Real World* now in a 4th edition applies critical pedagogy to actual teaching situations.