

Pedagogical Approaches to Teaching a General Course on Popular Music Culture: Insights and Strategies

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Abstract: This article explores the benefits of incorporating popular music into university liberal arts education, emphasizing the role of popular music in student development and its ability to stimulate student interest. Through rich illustrations, it outlines strategies for effective teaching, such as connecting music to historical and cultural contexts, promoting interaction, and fostering critical thinking. The article also emphasizes the need for inclusive teaching methods to cater to diverse student backgrounds. By incorporating popular music, education can enhance cultural literacy, critical thinking, and creativity, and cultivate students' global awareness and social responsibility.

Keywords: General education; Popular music; Teaching strategies; Critical thinking

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1. Introduction: The history and current situation of general education in China

The origin of general education in China can be traced back to Confucius' educational thought in the Spring and Autumn Period. Confucius proposed the "Six Arts" and proposed that what makes a person a human being "begins with learning poetry, stands on learning etiquette, and finishes with learning music." In modern times, the concept of general education has already emerged in the Republic of China, which can be seen in the educational experience of Cai Yuanpei, Wang Guowei and others and their ideas in engaging in education. In the context of modern higher education in China, the term "general education" first appeared in 1940, when Ch'ien Mu ^[1] proposed in his article "On the Reform of the University System": "Today, in prestigious universities within the country, scholars who hold teaching positions have strong specialized knowledge but weak general education." Mei Yiqi, former president of Tsinghua University, also emphasized that "general education is the foundation, and specialized education is the end" ^[2]. In order to adapt to the needs of socialist construction and development and promote the industrialization of New China, the People's Republic of China adjusted the departments of universities in 1952 to quickly train a large number of specialized talents, which suppressed general education to a certain extent. General education gradually recovered after the reform and

opening up. Due to the awareness of the negative effects of excessive utilitarianism, “cultural quality education” was proposed in 1995, and it was not until 2008 that “general education” returned to the agenda of universities. In March 2023, the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China and eight other departments jointly issued the “National Youth Student Reading Action Implementation Plan” (2023), guiding college students majoring in humanities and social sciences to strengthen reading in the history of science and technology, and students majoring in science and engineering to strengthen reading in literature, history, philosophy, art, etc., to enhance college students’ scientific spirit and humanistic literacy ^[3].

Jiani Ma, an associate professor at Beijing Normal University, believed that “after nearly three decades of development, our country’s general education has gradually changed from the government’s macro-guidance to independent exploration by universities, and has achieved remarkable results in undergraduate education reform” ^[4]. In fact, the general education of each university is indeed unique. For example, Tsinghua University and Peking University have set up Xinya Academy and Yuanpei College respectively to promote general education, and Peking University has also formed a fixed series of general salons.

2. Significance of liberal arts courses

Whether at home or abroad, liberal arts education in universities pays great attention to humanities and arts literacy. Among the four major general education courses at Harvard University, Aesthetics & Culture ranks first, which is actually the tradition of liberal arts education. Roche ^[5] argued that many today unwisely “elevate an instrumental form of thinking, a means-end rationality, in ways that tend to obscure what is of intrinsic value.” In China, due to the obsession of parents for their children to get into good universities, the learning involution in the secondary education stage is serious and the competition is extremely fierce. It has to be said that these teenagers have lost the opportunity to think about intrinsic value at this stage. In view of this, the significance of liberal arts courses in college is more prominent—it can give these college freshmen who have just experienced cruel selection an opportunity to re-understand life and self.

3. Advantages of popular music as a general education course

Popular music education intersects with identity formation, learning, teaching, cultural adaptation, entrepreneurship, creativity, global multimedia industries, and numerous music production examples. It is a multidisciplinary field involving various practices and theories.

Compared with other aesthetic education courses, the popular music general education course is closer to students’ real life, easier to stimulate students’ learning interest and participation, and can also better cultivate students’ musical literacy and aesthetic ability. Through the study of popular music, students can not only acquire music knowledge and skills, but also improve their emotions, aesthetics, creativity, and other aspects. These experiences have been verified in the teaching of music and songs in schools during the Republic of China era.

As an art form closely related to youth culture, pop music is easier for college students to accept and understand, thus playing a role in aesthetic and personality cultivation. Compared with classical music, pop music is closer to daily life in terms of emotion and content. Therefore, pop music can also relieve stress and release emotions, playing a certain healing role.

4. Strategies for teaching popular music culture

Teaching students about popular music culture can be an engaging way to explore history, sociology, and artistic expression. Below are some effective strategies.

4.1. Connecting music to historical context

Connecting music to historical context helps students understand how music reflects and shapes the society, culture, and events of its time. It provides insight into the emotions, struggles, and values of people in different eras, making history more relatable and meaningful. Additionally, it deepens appreciation for music as a powerful form of social commentary and cultural expression.

For example, “Northwest Wind” is a unique phenomenon that emerged in the field of Chinese pop music in the mid-to-late 1980s. It has attracted widespread attention for its strong regional style and distinct social and cultural characteristics. This music genre is based on northern folk music and incorporates elements of pop music, reflecting the cultural psychology and value demands of Chinese society under a specific historical background. The songs of “Northwest Wind” combine the melodic characteristics of northern folk songs and the arrangement of pop music, forming a unique style that combines nationality and modernity. From its melodic characteristics, the pentatonic scale is used extensively, and the melody lines are clear and fluctuate greatly, showing the boldness and vastness of northern folk music. From its rhythmic characteristics, the cheerful and powerful 2/4 or 4/4 beats are used, with a distinct rhythm and dynamics, which can easily arouse the emotional resonance of the audience. “Northwest Wind” is not only a musical phenomenon, but also a reflection of the cultural psychology of a specific historical period. First, it is a renaissance of local culture. In the process of urbanization and modernization, “Northwest Wind” has aroused people’s recognition of local culture and become a bridge for urban and rural cultural dialogue. Second, it is also an aesthetic rebellion: In contrast to the “soft” aesthetics dominated by Hong Kong and Taiwan pop music at the time, the rough style of “Northwest Wind” is a call for cultural diversity and a redefinition of local culture from the perspective of “othering.”

Additionally, Daolang’s songs quickly became popular in the early 2000s, a period when Chinese society was rapidly urbanizing and modernizing, with a large number of people moving from rural areas to cities, facing unfamiliar environments and pressures. His works do not rely too much on gorgeous production, but touch people’s hearts through real and simple content, catering to the grassroots’ aversion and alienation from mainstream culture.

4.2. Discussing social and cultural impacts

Discussing social and cultural impacts helps students understand how music influences and reflects society. It shows how music shapes identities, addresses social issues, and fosters cultural exchange. This approach deepens appreciation for music as more than entertainment—it is a powerful tool for expression, connection, and change. For example, Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” became an anthem for the civil rights and anti-war movements in the 1960s, showing how music can inspire social change. Reggae music, led by artists like Bob Marley, reflected Jamaican struggles and spread Rastafarian values, becoming a symbol of cultural pride and resistance. As for the Chinese, in the 1970s and 1980s, Teresa Teng’s music became a symbol of emotional expression and personal freedom during a time when such sentiments were rarely publicized. Her gentle melodies and heartfelt lyrics resonated deeply with a society yearning for warmth amidst rapid modernization. Her songs bridged traditional Chinese sensibilities with modern pop, influencing generations and expanding the reach of Mandopop across Asia. Released in 2016, Lei Zhao’s “Chengdu” portrays life in a second-tier city with

warmth and introspection, offering a quieter, more personal perspective on urbanization in China. The song resonates with listeners seeking solace in an increasingly hectic world, while also elevating lesser-known cities in popular culture and fostering pride in regional identities.

4.3. Focusing on interaction and experience

Focusing on interaction and experience makes learning more engaging and meaningful. It helps students connect with the material on a personal level, improving retention and deepening their understanding. Active participation encourages critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration, all of which are essential skills in both education and life.

To foster interaction and experience in music education, several approaches can be employed. Group discussions encourage students to share their thoughts, listen to peers, and build on each other's ideas, promoting collaborative learning. Hands-on activities, such as using music-making tools for creating original songs or remixes, allow students to engage with the material in a practical way. Hosting live performances or bringing in guest speakers gives students the opportunity to experience music firsthand, making the learning process more immersive. Peer feedback also plays a vital role, where students critique each other's work and provide constructive feedback, helping everyone grow and reflect. Thus, the construction of roles and social meaning within the context of 'music making' is an integral part of the teaching and learning process ^[6]. By incorporating these interactive and experiential methods, students are more likely to engage deeply with the material and retain what they have learned.

For example, encouraging students to remix traditional songs like "Beaded Curtain Rolls" can be an engaging way to foster creativity and collaboration. In this activity, students work in small groups to create remixes that combine the traditional Chinese elements of the song with modern genres such as electronic or hip-hop. After presenting their remixes, classmates provide feedback, focusing on how well the remix balances modernity with tradition. This process not only enhances students' creative and teamwork skills but also deepens their appreciation for how traditional musical elements can be reimagined and preserved within contemporary frameworks.

4.4. Encouraging critical thinking

Encouraging critical thinking is important because it helps students analyze, evaluate, and question information rather than passively accepting it. In music education, this means understanding deeper meanings, cultural impacts, and historical contexts, which fosters creativity, informed opinions, and the ability to engage with diverse perspectives. These skills are valuable beyond the classroom, promoting thoughtful decision-making and lifelong learning. As a strategy, we can ask students to interpret song lyrics, identifying themes, symbolism, and social messages. For instance, students discuss how "Imagine" by John Lennon envisions a utopian society and its potential critiques for deeper meanings. We can also encourage students to compare different genres, eras, or artists to explore how music evolves with societal changes.

Released in the 1980s, "The Outside World" by Chyi Chin is one of the defining songs of the Mandopop scene, resonating with themes of longing, self-discovery, and emotional connection. This song captures a pivotal moment in Chinese-speaking societies when individuals were beginning to explore personal freedoms and new possibilities in an era of rapid social and cultural transformation. In order to encourage students' critical thinking, the teacher should first analyze the music from various aspects, and then ask the students to express their opinions and think about it in the context of the present and their personal experience. The teaching

process around this song can be carried out in the following steps:

Step 1. Lyrical Analysis: Longing and Freedom

The lyrics of “The Outside World” convey a sense of yearning for freedom and the unknown. The protagonist addresses a loved one, expressing the bittersweet emotions of separation but also the hope and anticipation tied to venturing into new territories. The recurring motif of “the outside world” reflects both physical and emotional exploration, symbolizing a break from tradition and the pursuit of self-identity.

Step 2. Cultural Context: The Individual in a Changing Society

In the 1980s, Chinese people on both sides of the Strait experienced significant economic and social change. As global influences permeated the region, younger generations began to embrace new ideals of individuality and modernity. “The Outside World” became an anthem for this cultural shift, speaking directly to audiences who were navigating the tension between traditional expectations and the allure of independence. The song mirrors the growing trend of migration, whether for education, work, or personal growth, and resonates with those leaving their hometowns to explore new horizons.

Step 3. Musical Style: Blending Folk and Pop

Musically, “The Outside World” blends simple, heartfelt melodies with Chyi Chin’s emotive vocal delivery. The acoustic guitar accompaniment enhances the song’s introspective and universal appeal, creating an intimate atmosphere that invites listeners to reflect on their own experiences. The stripped-down arrangement ensures the focus remains on the lyrics and emotions, making it relatable across diverse audiences and transcending cultural barriers.

Step 4. Emotional Resonance and Longevity

The song’s enduring appeal lies in its ability to evoke universal emotions of longing, hope, and self-discovery. For listeners who have experienced separation or sought new beginnings, “The Outside World” serves as both a comfort and an inspiration. It remains a staple in Chyi Chin’s discography and continues to be covered and celebrated by artists, ensuring its place as a classic in Chinese pop music.

Step 5. Classroom Connection: Critical Thinking and Emotional Exploration

This song offers opportunities for educational exploration:

Discussion: How do the lyrics reflect the societal values and changes of the 1980s?

Creative Activity: Students can write reflections on their own experiences of exploring the “outside world,” connecting personal growth to broader cultural contexts.

Music Analysis: Compare the simplicity of “The Outside World” with other contemporary Mandopop songs that address similar themes but use different musical styles. Chyi Chin’s “The Outside World” is a timeless masterpiece that encapsulates the spirit of exploration and emotional resilience. Its lyrical depth, cultural relevance, and emotional resonance make it a rich subject for both academic analysis and personal reflection, offering a lens through which to examine the transformative power of music in navigating change and self-discovery.

5. Diversity and inclusion in popular music education

The teaching and learning of popular music are profoundly shaped by societal and cultural values, with different contexts giving rise to diverse educational approaches. In schools and universities, understanding and respecting varied ways of engaging with popular music is essential to creating an inclusive environment that meets the needs of all students. Furthermore, popular music education extends beyond formal classroom settings; informal learning, such as through social media, peer collaboration, or personal exploration, plays an equally significant

role, forming a cyclical and iterative relationship with formal instruction. To effectively teach popular music to students from diverse cultural and social backgrounds, educators should utilize multiple methods, incorporating auditory, visual, and participatory approaches to foster a dynamic and inclusive learning experience.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of popular music as a general education course in universities offers a multifaceted approach to enhancing students' educational experience. It not only enriches their cultural and aesthetic sensibilities but also provides a platform for exploring historical, social, and personal dimensions through the lens of music. The advantages of popular music education are manifold, as it fosters a deeper understanding of cultural identities, encourages critical thinking, and promotes emotional and creative development.

By connecting music to historical context, discussing social and cultural impacts, focusing on interaction and experience, and encouraging critical thinking, educators can create a dynamic learning environment that resonates with students. This approach not only makes history and sociology more relatable but also empowers students to engage with music as a form of social commentary and personal expression.

Furthermore, diversity and inclusion in popular music education are crucial for creating an inclusive curriculum that caters to students from various backgrounds. By embracing a variety of teaching methods and recognizing the importance of informal learning, educators can foster a comprehensive understanding of popular music that is both academically rigorous and culturally relevant.

In essence, popular music as a general education course is not just about teaching students to appreciate music; it is about equipping them with the tools to understand and navigate the world around them through the universal language of music. This holistic approach to education prepares students to be well-rounded individuals, capable of contributing to society with a deeper sense of empathy, understanding, and creativity.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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