

## Cultural Humility

### A Framework for Building Collaborative Relationships with Students with Diverse Cultural Experiences

By Jess Johnson, NCTM

**W**hen I was 15 years old, I was selected to attend the North Carolina Governor's School, a four-week summer program for high school students, as a clarinetist in the student orchestra. For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by talented peers with way better training in music. Insecure about my lack of experience, I reached out to students in my section and instructors in the program, who generously supplied fingering charts and encouraged me to take risks, leading me to realize I wasn't a half-bad pianist. The experience

proved transformative, awakening my dream of becoming a professional musician and educator. I credit the cultural humility practiced by my peers and instructors with helping me understand my unique position in that space. Rather than feeling like an outsider, my curiosity and enthusiasm were met with validation and a shared love for music making.

As a first-generation college student, my first music theory professor (with an elite musical pedigree) made fun of the way I pronounced "Mozart." This kind of shaming and "othering" backfired, shutting me down and creating a toxic class environment that made me afraid to show up and participate in an authentic way. While I found a sense of belonging with other professors and peers, similar experiences frequently reminded me of how I didn't fit in with the elite classical music scene. What this professor lacked was a sense of cultural humility: He failed to acknowledge my lived experiences in music shaped by my rural upbringing.

Physicians  
Melanie Tervalon  
and Jann  
Murray-  
García coined  
the term  
"cultural  
humili-  
ty" as a  
frame-  
work  
for



educating physicians working with culturally, ethnically and racially diverse populations in the United States. They outline three principles of cultural humility: (1) a commitment to ongoing self-reflection, (2) a willingness to remain open and teachable, especially when in positions of power and (3) an acknowledgement of how social structures and systems shape our reality. Tervalon and Murray-García describe cultural humility as “best defined not as a discrete end point but as a commitment and active engagement in a lifelong process that individuals enter into on an ongoing basis with patients, communities, colleagues, and with themselves” (Tervalon and Murray García 1998, 118).

Subsequently, the cultural humility framework has since been applied to a variety of fields, including social work, school psychology and music education. A recent study adapted the Cultural Humility Scale for Students (CHS-S) to assess middle school and high school students’ perceptions of cultural humility levels among their teachers. In the areas of trust, communication and alienation, perceived cultural humility was positively associated with teacher-student relationship quality (Srisarajivakul et al. 2023, 10–13). Similar studies support the efficacy of cultural humility as a tool for creating deeper relationships with students.

In “Cultural Humility and Intercultural Contexts of Music Education,” Hyesoo Yoo outlines strategies for integrating tenets of cultural humility in the music classroom. Yoo encourages music educators to reflect on how their beliefs and biases influence their



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teaching practices and curricular development. Questions like, “Do I recognize power imbalances that privilege Western classical music over popular or culturally diverse music?” and “How do my identities and values interact with the identities and values of my students?” spark ongoing self-reflection and exploration (Yoo 2021, 37). Cultural humility also requires an openness to learning while sharing power in situations where there are imbalances (such as the teacher-student relationship). Yoo points out that in the United States, music curricula centers around European-centric conservatory models of music performance. She calls for a more horizontal, rhizomatic approach that emphasizes connections across genres, styles and cultures as a way of validating other ways of musicking. She urges us to consider how Eurocentric standards in music education privilege written notation

over aural/oral approaches and to reconsider our own beliefs about meaning and sound that impact our attitudes toward global music styles. Yoo outlines strategies for working in partnerships with individuals, families and communities that honor each individual’s unique experience as a “multidimensional human being, each with their own history” (2021, 39). By relinquishing our control as “experts” and instead meeting each student with humility and vulnerability, we can build relationships that facilitate “continual, bidirectional learning” (2021, 40).

At the heart of all this is recognizing we cannot fully “know” the “other.” Only when we are willing to self-reflect with curiosity, compassion and non-judgment do we arrive at a place of mutual understanding and trust. I, for one, have learned so much from my students from diverse cultural backgrounds and



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am grateful for their patience and willingness to learn alongside me as we challenge the status quo and strive to make music teaching and learning more accessible and inclusive.

## References

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