Jet-Lagged Jazz History: Teaching on the Other Side of the World

Elad Sobol
University of Pittsburgh
eladsobol@pitt.edu

As jazz has evolved into a truly global music form and has become cemented in higher education institutions worldwide, history classes for 21st-century students become ever more important for contextualizing a music that emerged in the beginning of the 20th century. Educators today, more than ever before, face challenges of distance: time, place, and culture. At the same time, education methodologies and technology have improved dramatically. These can be of great value for contemporary educators in addressing critical issues of diversity in the classroom, as well as leading to more effective content instruction and student assessment. In this reflective essay, I analyze how I implemented contemporary education methods (such as differentiation, VAK, informal assessment) and technology (such as social media, digital file-sharing, music, and video streaming services) to overcome challenges in teaching jazz history in China, where such issues are more exaggerated. Lastly, I propose novel possibilities for teaching jazz history with consideration for time, place, culture, and according to the identity of students as well as the educator.

Keywords: jazz history, contemporary education, technology, China, classroom diversity, DEI

Elad Sobol is currently a PhD candidate in Jazz Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. Prior to that, he taught in Sichuan Conservatory in Chengdu, China from 2015 to 2024, where he was one of the founding team members of the Jazz Department, teaching a wide range of courses in Mandarin. He was also very active in the local music scene, collaborating with locals and performing in a variety of professional settings. His arrangements have been performed at a number of Chinese jazz festivals, and he released a full-length studio album, *Vicissitudes*, in 2022. He has frequently been invited to lecture to the public on music in Mandarin, which led to a TEDx talk. He served with Peace Corps in China from 2013 to 2015. He earned his California Teaching Credential in Music Education in 2010 and his Bachelor's Degree in Music at UC Santa Cruz in 2006.

Jazz Education in Research and Practice Vol. 6, No. 1 • Copyright © The Trustees of Indiana University •
DOI 10.2979/jerp.00005

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

One hundred years ago, Louis Armstrong joined King Oliver in Chicago, where he made his first recording, "Chimes Blues." This was an important turning point, symbolizing jazz leaving New Orleans, its emergence from the underground, spreading across America and rising in popularity. One hundred years later, jazz has become not only a global music phenomenon but is also widespread in educational institutions, with almost 500 jazz degree programs worldwide, according to *Jazz Times*. As jazz moves into the future and circulates around the globe, it becomes extremely important to understand its past and where it came from. Jazz history is about understanding that contextual *why* of jazz and resolving inevitable issues of distance for our students: distance of time, distance of place, and distance of sociocultural context. Every jazz history teacher must deal with the reality that the context of jazz becomes more distant as time goes by. In this essay I will share with you how I handled these challenges in a unique setting where time, place, and cultural context are all more distant than most educators probably have encountered: China.

Every educator faces challenges teaching any class anywhere. Those reading this essay may never have faced the exact or even similar circumstances to those I describe. It is not my intention to bemoan and belittle the institutions I teach at and, obliquely, the Chinese state or its citizens. Rather, I present the challenges I faced as plainly as I can, in order to clarify the reasoning for the implementation of my particular teaching methods. Embracing contemporary educational methods and concepts in this very challenging setting proved, albeit allegorically and mostly qualitatively, that contemporary education methods and attention to classroom diversity can improve student engagement, knowledge retention, and formal assessment results. I hope that educators all over the world can gain a unique perspective and learn from my experience, which in turn may translate into specific changes in their own classrooms and improve learning outcomes.

Before I begin my analysis on how I teach jazz history, I think it is critical to contextualize my decisions by relating some of my personal jazz history, one where you probably would not expect jazz education to take place. It is the Summer of 2014. I am sitting in a café with ten other teachers from Sichuan Conservatory, and we are meeting to discuss and design the curriculum for the first ever jazz major in the province, and one of the first in China. There is one other American teacher, and since we both attended formal higher music education programs in the US, the staff are counting on us to consult them on emulating those standard curriculums: a core of required lecture classes for theory, musicianship, and arranging/composition; small groups for ensembles, basic keyboard and improvisation; and one-on-one lessons by instrumental concentration.

The discussion on how to handle jazz history was decidedly not as straightforward. In most college curriculums, this is a one semester course, typically taken in the second or third year. Some schools require jazz majors to take four semesters of Western music history as an overview (New York University), others drop these

and opt for a year of each jazz and Black American music history (University of Southern California), while others allow for a mix of both with flexible choices (Berklee College of Music). After much discussion, we decided on something entirely different. Because our students would undoubtedly have little cultural background related to jazz, limited listening exposure to it, and most likely zero experience playing it, it ought to be imperative to give them the context of jazz music as early as possible, in their first year. I was also glad that they elected to supplement the class with a year of Western popular music history in year two, and my popular music analysis class in year three. I felt, like other scholars (Tagg, 1996; Ewell, 2023), that the oft-required Eurocentric Western classical history content was at least outdated, of little relevance to many students today, and possibly problematic in its bias. This bias applies even more obviously with Chinese students, as they are not coming to college unconsciously informed by a Western music tradition, as so many Westerners do from growing up hearing that music all around them.

I had never taught jazz history before, but nobody else on the team had either. They felt I was best suited for the job given my experience with popular music analysis, which would be similar in scope and style. I bought the DVDs of the *Ken Burns Jazz* documentary with Chinese subtitles, set about curating the footage with attention to criticism of it (Lipsitz, 2004; Whyton, 2004), and supplemented that with additional pictures, scores, other documentaries, and live performance videos, as well as studying relevant jazz music vocabulary in Mandarin. I assumed that since my students were all Chinese, that a review of the basics of American history related to the development of jazz would be crucial. If they were not clear about that, starting from the roots of jazz would be confusing. I prepared an introductory unit that included a review of British colonialism, European migration, indentured servitude, the slave trade throughout the Americas, US independence, Manifest Destiny, the Civil War and all its related issues, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Civil Rights history, and contemporary race-relations and politics. Even basic geography such as where New Orleans was located and why it was important as a center of trade was a key point these students were likely missing. It was exhausting work, but it ended up being my favorite class to teach!

IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS AND OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

My joy quickly soured as I received a massive shock at the end of the first semester: 3/4 of the students failed, and nobody got even above a C! I was summoned to "drink tea" with my boss. He was surprisingly patient and sympathetic. We discussed the problem of cultural distance in depth and fixed some minor issues with the final exam organization and wording. But the most important change we decided was that we had to make the class more student-centered and ensure that the students were actively engaging with the content. Thanks to my graduate music education training and Peace Corps service, I was familiar with concepts of Differentiated Instruction (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006), multiple intelligences

(Gardner, 1993), formal/informal assessment methods for music (Kaschub & Smith, 2014), some basics of educational psychology via contemporary interpretations of Vygotsky (Subban, 2006), and cultural relativity and issues related to bias and diversity in the classroom (Hurtado, 2001). I was ready to take on the challenge. But first, I would have to figure out exactly what went wrong and why.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the enormous complexity of the Chinese education system and all of its related difficulties. Suffice it to say that there are several critical issues that an educator in China must contend with, particularly if they are a foreigner and particularly if they are in arts education, as well as unique issues specifically related to cultural norms and classroom and student-teacher dynamics that at times are strikingly dissimilar to the West. Generally, students are painfully shy, unwilling to ask questions, they display a deference to authority, a fear of public embarrassment, a conformist urge, and a focus on finding a right answer and getting a specific result over the process of learning as an end in itself. As such, motivating, engaging, and assessing students is a task that requires more attention and diligent adjustment, which I detail below.

SOLUTIONS & IMPROVEMENTS

"Larry" Lü, my supervisor and Jazz Department Chair, studied music education at Xinjiang University. He suggested I teach the content through a popcorn-style question and answer and Socratic method format, or through a non-linear rhizomatic approach such as Bares (2020) outlined in a previous issue of this journal. After one disastrous class of trying each of these, I realized I was still running into understandable issues of lack of cultural background (students would ask something, and the ensuing discussion would reveal an ignorance of either basic US American history knowledge that Western educators might take for granted, that would then force me to back up further and further in order to explain it to them sufficiently) and cultural difference (here, the mere act of asking a question is a public admission of ignorance deserving ridicule and as such should be avoided). So how could I overcome these obstacles?

After more discussion with Larry, much pondering and reviewing literature on contemporary education methods, I settled on a formula I still use today, in my eighth year teaching jazz history. I will share with you my methodologies, their reasoning, explain their efficacy, and touch briefly on their specific results and outcomes.

ACCESSING PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

That my students did not know much about American history or hadn't been exposed much to jazz music was only an assumption. I had to confirm it in order to be certain that the extra time spent on early American history and the roots of jazz would be worthwhile. The practice of "Accessing Prior Knowledge" (Tobias, 1994)

is a potent educational tool. Instead of launching into the content directly on the first minute of the first day, I now start with a few open-ended questions:

- Free association: What words come to mind when you hear the word "Jazz?"
- Free association: What words come to mind when you hear the word "America?"
- What do you think are the defining characteristics of jazz?
- Who are some jazz musicians you know?
- What do you hope to learn in this class?

Some typical answers to the first question include freedom, Black people, fusion, improvising, influence on popular music. Some typical answers to the second question: advanced technology, democracy, various cultural exports, racism, gun violence, drugs, openness. There is also a lot of overlap between the first two. I write everything they say on blank pages displayed on the projector and then we look at them both in alternation. I love the lightbulb moment that happens for so many of them every year when I reveal this intersectionality and connect for them Marsalis's opening salvo in Ken Burns's (2001) documentary: "Jazz represents America." Burns's point is that to understand one is to understand the other. But, as critics have pointed out, "However much Burns' film sparks conversation, discussions usually focus on uncritical commentary, reflecting on a body of 'evidence' that underpins an already inscribed history" (Whyton, 2004, pp. 130–131). Therefore, throughout the year I make sure to challenge this narrative repeatedly with my own commentary and supplementary evidence. Since attempts at critical discussions fail so consistently for the reasons I mentioned earlier, I am hamstrung to default to a linear, lecture-based approach. In doing so, I ironically place myself in danger of presenting a narrow and uncritical history to a passive audience. It is therefore extremely challenging to involve students' input but also guide them toward understanding content they have little to no idea about.

For defining characteristics of jazz, I again write everything they say without comment or critique, and that gives me a quick impression of what I can skim through quickly or what I need to spend more time on throughout the year. My only comment after they are finished is, let's revisit everything you all wrote here today and see if your presuppositions are correct or not at the end of the year. It is really rewarding to save this as a separate file and show them again at the end of the year so they can see how much they have learned and how much their initial impressions have changed.

The key is not to judge or correct them or go fishing for "right answers." As MacGillivray and Rueda (2003) note, "It is therefore important to understand and respond to what children know and to recognize what knowledge they come into the classroom with" (p. 2). They are here to learn, and it is important to learn about what they do and don't know so we can meet them where they are. Otherwise we are just assuming, and bias hinders the achievement of educational goals. For Chinese students, the fear of giving a wrong answer, displeasing the teacher, or being ridiculed by their peers is a strongly ingrained cultural norm (Wang, 2010; Li & Ni, 2011). Because I accept and acknowledge every comment

uncritically, it makes the classroom interactive from the beginning, and sets a precedent of openness and safety that I later utilize in ongoing informal assessment. Wang also notes the struggle of teachers with the constraints of classroom time and administration's expectations for fulfilling the curriculum's requirements at pace (p. 6). Therefore, it is a delicate balance between continuous teacher-centered "preaching" and classroom discussions with silent stalemates that waste time and lead nowhere. How we meet that challenge depends on our individual circumstances. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, so being creative with ongoing informal assessments can help both teacher and student.

IMPLEMENTING ONGOING INFORMAL ASSESSMENT

It was critical to confirm that they really understood the content. There were obvious and not so obvious issues why this was not happening, unrelated to students' behavior or attitude. As I looked out onto a sea of students constantly on their phones, I hit on the idea of asking students directly yet privately, through the ubiquitous social media "everything app" WeChat, what they thought about the class. Numerous students complained that the translation in the Ken Burns documentary was weird. Upon review, I found numerous inaccuracies. For example, "horn" was repeatedly translated as 号角 "hàojué" (an outdated word for bugle) or 喇叭 "lābā" (car horn). Some translations were even written as opposite, such as Krupa's admission that Webb "tore [him] to ribbons" at the Savoy battle, which made it seem like Goodman's band had won!

In addition, they told me that they were really sorry but sometimes they could not understand what I was saying. Fair enough! My Chinese was far weaker back then. Even now, my vocabulary is probably equivalent to a teenager's. Some complained that the content was going too fast. Others asked questions or phrased their misunderstandings in ways that revealed that they still did not understand some basics of US American history. If we stop and think about why our students misunderstand something, understand their point of view, then we can better understand how to teach them. Rather than judging them as poor students, the way they ask and what they ask can reveal a lot if we reorient our listening and interpretations. This is more challenging in China where culturally it is safer to say nothing than to risk losing face by saying something "wrong." The Western conventions for open inquiry and good faith debates are not common practice.

A beneficial contemporary educational concept is uncovering the value of so-called mistakes (Borasi, 1994). Whoever makes a mistake does so unknowingly, and the mistake comes from either a particular problematic logic or an inaccurate point of reference. If we stop and think about why our students misunderstand something and strive to understand their point of view, then we can better understand how to teach them. If we can get to what those are and address them, we can then compassionately do the necessary work of unraveling those false assumptions, and that is at least one of the essences of education. I had to accept that I would be revisiting such gaps repeatedly throughout the year.

I needed to slow down, explain, and summarize more throughout the class. I needed to prepare more so I could be aware of poor translations in the documentary and correct them as they happened, and I needed to clarify and reinforce undoubtedly unfamiliar content.

Asking the students directly in this way, privately through WeChat (which they are using all the time), gave me an idea for a foolproof informal assessment method that I instinctively knew would be effective with this demographic. I would ask open-ended questions at the end of each class. This was intended to activate their short-term memory and reinforce the content by helping them to critically engage. It would also enable me to fill gaps and correct misunderstandings on an individual or collective basis. That first year I crafted questions related to the content at hand, for example, "what about Louis Armstrong's early life did you find the most compelling and why?" but eventually I settled on a formulaic set of open-ended questions that I simply repeated each week:

1. What did you learn today that you found particularly interesting? Summarize.
2. What did you find confusing, what do you want to learn more about, or what other questions do you have for me?
3. Listen again to at least one song that we learned about in class today from start to finish, and share your thoughts, impressions, and feelings about it [I list the specific titles and composer/performer names at the end of each class].

This informal assessment technique was a massive success, both for me and for the students. I got instant weekly engagement, with specific feedback on my teaching efficacy and their comprehension levels. The completion rate was extremely high and remained consistent throughout the year. Over 90% of students completed the questions every week. I now also had an objective record-keeping method for the typically subjective "Class Participation Score." I reminded them that I was not expecting specific answers, that anything was fair game, and I showed them my gradebook to prove that I was only writing a check if they sent me something and an X if they did not. This interactive assessment formula came with the added benefit of forcing me to read and write in Chinese for an hour or two every week as I seriously replied to each and every student. Written communication, with time to check the dictionary and read carefully, was beneficial for me in improving my Chinese too.

The students' feedback was immediately useful in improving not only the content, but also the presentation of that content in class. For example, students' requests for more live videos confirmed my hunch that more was better for this contemporary multimedia generation. Repeated inquiries about American cultural topics corroborated my presumption that it was important to spend extra time on early American history. Confusion about some advanced theoretical concepts such as bebop language (enclosures, tritone substitutions, bebop scales, etc.) urged me to break them down with more simple and isolated examples, accompanied by recordings and demonstrating via piano and singing. I also started communicating with the theory teacher so as to make sure our content

was aligned, and they were getting reinforcement there as well. Uncertainty about the exact definitions of the different post-bop styles spurred me to create a point-by-point summary of the specific characteristics of each. If I got multiple students asking the same questions, I could start the next class with either a review, or address the uncertainty with a different angle, without singling out anyone. By addressing misunderstandings starting with "many of you asked me about this last week," students felt safe from public exposure. I saved all the changes I made to the presentation files as I went along so they could easily be reused the next year. During COVID-19 lockdowns, my presentations got a lot more organized as I was forced to conform to strict online platform software, but it also opened up another ongoing informal assessment feature. The school wanted to make sure students were paying attention, so we were required to include at least three multiple choice "pop quizzes" throughout the class. I used these in mostly fun ways to try and spur critical thinking, for example (regarding Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach's performance on "Tryptych: Prayer, Protest, Peace"):

> Is screaming and smashing on the drums like what we just heard music?
> A: Yes—music means expressing something
> B: No—music should be easily understandable and/or pleasant
> C: Maybe—but it's not music I want to listen to
> D: Maybe—but I don't really understand why it's music or what it's expressing
> E: I don't get it at all

The responses were always mixed, and the ensuing discussions late in the year would often be lively since I had gained their trust. Just directing their attention to different musicians by asking "Which hard bop recording did you find most interesting?" was also a simple way to generate ongoing in-class engagement. Through this participatory process, I improved as a teacher and the students improved their understanding and performance on the exams. It helped me get to know my students more personally, and sometimes our conversations would veer into areas of American culture, career advice, and deeper topics like the meaning of music and its relation to culture and humanity, etc. I think my students appreciated that I spent the time to seriously read and reply every week, and they more often than not rose to the occasion with well thought-out and carefully organized summaries and questions. I could reply whenever I had a few free minutes—on the subway to a meeting, during a break at a gig, etc. It was convenient for me and for both of us.

Here are two examples of interactions I had on WeChat engaging in this way:

> S: Today I learned about some characteristics of bebop such as bebop scales which I think are interesting. I'm confused about exactly how to utilize them in improvisation. I hope next time we can learn more about bebop performance applications.
> T: How to utilize these improvisation concepts is not within the scope of this class, but don't worry! Next year you will have a dedicated improvisation class, and continue to learn to apply these concepts practically in your ensembles, as

well as with the guidance of your instrumental teacher. It takes a long time to learn this stuff, so be patient!

S: I was struck by the cruel immorality of slavery, but also surprised that so many people helped slaves escape and fought for their liberation.
T: There were white Americans who held different moral beliefs, there were lower-class whites who didn't own slaves, there were middle-class and wealthy black Americans, and there were mixed race creoles. America was as complex and diverse then as it is now.
S: Oh, Creole. I heard that before, I thought it was a different Chinese spelling.
T: Sorry, I didn't know what was the correct spelling for that term.
S: Haha, that's ok. But weren't white people much better off back then? How come were there poor white people?
T: There were wealthy and poor whites, blacks and creoles, just as there are now wealthy and poor Han Chinese and Chinese minorities.
S: So the wealthy black people didn't face oppression?
T: Sure they did. Have you seen the movie that came out recently, "The Green Book"? The main characters are a super wealthy Black American musician and his chauffeur, a lower-class white American. Even in the 1960s there were disparities in how they were treated.
S: The movie is called《绿皮书》in Chinese?
T: Yes, that's it.
S: Thank you, sir. I'll check it out.

In the first exchange, I address a confusion and curiosity of the student by reminding him that practical applications will be reinforced in other classes in the future, as perhaps he is unaware of the curriculum track. I also remind him to take advantage of his private lessons, since a demonstration and practice on his own instrument would be more productive in revealing the practical application of improvisation concepts and theory than texting. The second student's questions veered slightly away from jazz history, but I thought it was important to address her confusions about race and class dynamics in America, because that cultural background knowledge underpins so much of the content of the course. I presented a homology in Chinese society about race and class to help her correlate in a more familiar context. I also took advantage of a recent pop culture example that was well-known in China at the time. This is an illustration of how Chinese students often need extra edification regarding American history aspects we often consider to be common knowledge in other places. I also learned something from her about the word "creole" in Chinese.

While every US American student takes several years of American history throughout their academic careers, for Chinese students, American history is only a small chapter of their "World History" class, similar to how American students may spend a few weeks at best on all of Chinese history, perhaps only as a unit of a chapter on the history of Asia. In China, I am essentially teaching a "World Music" course (a mind-boggling example of cultural relativism)! Even

the clearest explanations would not overcome barriers related to the paucity of a jazz-related cultural background so many assume in the West. In a previous edition of *Jazz Education in Research and Practice*, Bares (2020) wisely points out the importance of "unlearning the jazz canon and rebuilding jazz history as a usable past" (p. 60). However, what we are striving to get our students to unlearn and what is a usable past differs depending on who and where they are! Before we set about decentering something, we must be clear about exactly where our center is located and what it means. In America, jazz majors may be very familiar with the consensus classics and the most common narratives. In China, some students tell me their favorite jazz musicians include Alicia Keys and Aretha Franklin, and most have no conception of any narrative, much less the dominant ones. Teaching jazz history as reinforcement of its place as a national cultural treasure may be a usable past for Americans. Elsewhere in the world, where this background and connection is absent, jazz history serves as the very foundation and introduction to the soul and meaning of the music, including the local jazz histories that lie outside the dominant narratives.

To address the issue of lack of familiarity with what many on the other side of the world often take for granted, I added another mode of informal assessment: assigning different students to take notes in pairs every week. Since the Ken Burns documentary (and later other documentaries I translated myself on Brazilian, Afro-Cuban, 70s fusion, and smooth jazz) had subtitles, a big drawback of the documentaries was that students often lacked an aural learning modality. The concept of VAK learning (Visual Aural and Kinesthetic) has been a hot topic in contemporary education theoretical frameworks (Willis, 2017). It is obvious that native English speakers can listen and take notes simultaneously, but my students are not able to. As stated previously, subtitles could be inaccurate and my explanations also unclear. By assigning note-taking, I could check for clarity and prevent misunderstanding. If they wrote something incorrect or incomplete, I gave them feedback privately to avoid public embarrassment. This had the added benefit of them being able to more elegantly summarize my imperfect Chinese in their more natural language.

IMPLEMENTING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION TECHNIQUES

Differentiation (using different teaching methods and assessment techniques in the same classroom according to the needs and learning styles of different students) in education has gotten a lot of attention in recent years. It is especially important in diverse classrooms, which are quickly becoming the norm. Yet Tomlinson (2006) herself acknowledges that:

> Differentiation does not advocate "individualization." It is overwhelming to think that it might be the teacher's job to understand fully the needs of every single student, including those from a wide range of cultural and language groups. . . . Feasibility

> suggests that classroom teachers can work to the benefit of many more students by implementing patterns of instruction likely to serve multiple needs. (p. 19)

That is the reason why I choose a range of different methods, hoping that one will benefit some, and another will benefit others. The point is to generate an overlapping, cumulative effect that can impact the vast majority of the range of student needs and preferences. By applying contemporary educational methods in different settings and implementing the latest technology, we can increase our chances of meeting learning needs. In addition to collecting all my students' notes and making them available to view and download online via cloud-sharing, I also upload all the PPTs. Furthermore, I created online playlists on the most commonly used Chinese streaming platform QQ Music and shared them with the students via WeChat.

When I revealed at the beginning of the year that they'd be expected to listen and identify songs on the final exam and that there would be a playlist for them to refer to, many students asked for those playlists immediately, and I am in favor of them starting to listen early and often. I think most jazz educators would embrace music streaming as a positive development and essential resource in today's classrooms. Some students ask if they can record audio of the lecture. Some prefer to take notes on laptops or tablets. Some take photos of slides or even record several minutes of video on their cellphones. Some prefer to write their homework to me in English in order to practice their language skills. By being flexible with how we teach and being open-minded about how students can learn, allowing the student to follow their "aptitudes and passions, providing an opportunity within the classroom for them to explore and express these interests" (Subban, 2006, p. 941), we can improve content retention, classroom engagement, and academic performance.

Lastly, I maintain a requirement that I learned from my high school jazz band teacher John Mosley, which is to attend a live local jazz performance (making sure to specify where and when they can go without any bias) and write a one-page personal review. Back then I had to attach a ticket stub. These days I require a selfie as proof! It is important to localize and contextualize jazz music for students today, and we all know that jazz is at its best in live settings. Many people did not "get" or fall in love with jazz until they experienced its power live, and that holds true anywhere on this planet. Added up together, these varied and personalized assignments reveal the value of differentiated instruction in education and show that they can be applied in any subject, any classroom type, any locale, for any kind of group, and in any language.

ADJUSTING CONTENT FOR HERE AND TODAY

The final, most significant, and perhaps most controversial aspects of a contemporary education-informed student-centered approach are to *localize* and *personalize*. Understanding learners' cultural and educational background is critical. My

students are Mandarin-speaking Chinese freshmen, and for them, jazz history is not only their first contact with jazz music, it is also their first rigorous academic college-level course about music history.

At the end of the second semester, a student asked me: "What about the history of jazz in China?" Now I learn things all the time from my students, but this particular question shook me to my core. Despite including global content with units on Brazilian, Cuban, Japanese jazz, and emphasizing other renowned non-American jazz musicians with transnational recognition, I felt I had been irresponsible. I felt that my bias had blinded me to value transnational over national or even more nearly local. I felt that despite putting in so much conscious effort to deal with all the issues of language, cultural distance to the content, learning styles, differences in classroom dynamics and student-teacher relationships, I had failed critically in what should have been a basic consideration: localizing at least some content. As Lipsitz (2004) pointed out in his criticism of Burns, "by telling the story as a narrative about modern time and American space, the film necessarily, and regrettably, occludes other temporal and spatial dimensions of jazz that also need to be illuminated" (p. 11). The importance of making an effort to undo biases about the centering of jazz in modern America hit me intensely, viscerally. I suddenly felt awkward inside my American skin, looking with American eyes on that classroom of all Chinese students who had never been to America.

After that first year, I set out to find out as much as I could about China's jazz history. Academic publications by Jones (2001) and Field (2010) detail the early history, Portugali (2015) and Marlow (2018) add ethnographic and quantitative information on contemporary scenes, and biographies by Whitey Smith (1956) and Buck Clayton (1986) provide fascinating early first-hand accounts. I developed a unit on jazz history in China, which I edited, expanded, and improved every year and which I have been invited to lecture to the public about on many occasions. I am now somewhat of an expert on this niche area of music history, and it may perhaps turn out to be the niche that defines my career. All that would not have been possible had I not taken the student's question to heart. In the long run, both the students and I benefited from this initial tension. In the spirit of jazz, I rose to meet that (cognitive) dissonance with an open mind and resolved it elegantly because I was willing to listen to those accompanying me.

Some might say: but that history cannot possibly be more important than the roots of jazz development, big band swing as America's popular music, the bebop revolution, or any number of topics that are prominently expounded upon in widely used jazz history books (such as Giddins & DeVeaux, 2009) and repeated in classrooms around the world. Yes, those parts of jazz history are definitely important. Yes, if we choose to teach one aspect of history, then we must inevitably make difficult decisions as to what to cut out due to time constraints. Yet there have also been legitimate criticisms questioning the exclusion of marginalized populations (Beal, 2015) in these widely read texts, as well as alternative presentations of jazz history that focus on the more sociopolitical aspects of

jazz music's development (Porter, 2002; Ramsey, 2003; Monson, 2007). These criticisms and alternative studies point to an important development: "Perhaps the most striking theoretical trend in recent historical studies of jazz has been the shift towards transnationality, an understandable tendency in an increasingly globalized society and academic field" (Iglesias, 2020, p. 17). This globalization demands that we shift our attention and include other histories in order to teach with integrity today.

Teaching history is always going to be subjective to some extent, a matter of leaving something out in order to make room for something else. Most educators agree that "there will never be a jazz history course that, in a semester or even a year, offers a full and fully inclusive telling of the music's story" (Teal, 2021, p. 23). As such, we can reconsider what the overarching purpose of the course should be. Is it a basic introduction? Or a focus on one or another angle or entry point? DeVeaux's (1991) seminal article, written over 30 years ago, reminded us that "These alternative explanations need not displace the jazz tradition. . . . But the time has come for an approach that is less invested in the ideology of jazz as aesthetic object and more responsive to issues of historical particularity" (p. 553). It is precisely by focusing on historical particularity that prompts me to suggest that it would be more productive to reframe our task as jazz history teachers as such: "what can I teach this particular group of students in this particular place and time that nobody else can?" Rather than focusing on delivering the most standard content focused primarily on the music in and of itself, we should consider emphasizing the extraordinary, the most relevant (socially, culturally, temporally, spatially, to this one group of students), and exploring the meaning of the music both in its own context and others. A survey during the first class, accessing prior knowledge, can help direct how we might craft, curate, and narrate the content.

Perhaps our students are particularly interested in social justice or class economics. We can then reference various socioeconomic and political issues and relate them to the content at hand. For example, the bebop era would then include the economic issues of big bands becoming unsustainable, small clubs rising in popularity, the jam session becoming a profitable entertainment model, an amplification of African American empowerment and its associated identity and political crisis, and the recording ban of 1942–1944 leading to the enculturation of contrafact as a compositional technique, which initially was simply a way for smaller labels to avoid paying for mechanical licenses they couldn't afford and a new Black counterculture identity that refused to pander to mainstream white expectations (informed by DeVeaux, 1997). This is only one minor example. These types of contextualizations would then be incorporated into every unit.

As for localizing beyond just geographically, I noticed that there are a number of female instrumentalists in my class every year. I now make sure to emphasize the importance of the early female instrumentalists, such as Lil Hardin, The International Sweethearts of Rhythm (along with a trailer of Judy Chaikin's documentary *Girls in The Band* [2011] to which I added subtitles with my wife's assistance), Mary Lou Williams, and Valaida Snow (who also intersects with the Jazz in China unit).

I wanted to give my female instrumentalist students Asian role-models as well, so in my unit on contemporary jazz musicians, I take extra time to highlight Hiromi Uehara, Lisa Ono (who is massively popular here), as well as other non-Asian contemporary instrumentalists such as Esperanza Spalding, Terri Lyne Carrington (along with her brilliant new book and accompanying 2023 Grammy-winning album *New Standards*), and Tia Fuller, who plays the bandleader in the very popular movie *Soul* (2020). We shouldn't miss the opportunity to make the content more relatable whenever jazz arises in contemporary pop culture.

I also adjust the content by emphasizing early fusion forms and jazz developed outside the US (informed by thewonderful new publication edited by Bohlman & Plastino, 2016) and later "world fusion" jazz groups, particularly those from Asia, such as Hiroshima, T-Square, Casiopeia, Shakti, and Rudresh Mahanthappa (to name a few). I show Zac Zinger, Alec Haavik's Shanghai Shindiggers, and Golden Buddha as contemporary musicians who strive to incorporate traditional Chinese instrumentation, language, and stylistic concepts. Localizing content need not be a complicated effort seeking exotic portrayals of jazz history. In "Second Line Bebop," *Jazz Education in Research and Practice* contributor Simpson-Hankins (2023) skillfully expounds on the local jazz history of his city, Philadelphia, highlighting the legacy of musicians who grew up there, the venues they performed at, and the institutions they were associated with. In similar fashion, Douglass (2023) highlights a prominent figure, D. Antoinette Handy, who made immense contributions to Richmond, Virginia, as an educator. I am positive that students from Philadelphia and Richmond gain something incredibly valuable by learning about a slice of jazz history related to their specific locality and jazz education lineage.

In Chinese language, concepts and grammar are expressed in terms of largest to smallest. As we move from jazz history worldwide, to regionally, to nationally, to municipally, we can also talk about the history of our individual schools and their jazz programs and finally, our own personal jazz histories. As I am a small thread in a long lineage of jazz education and my students are now part of a phenomenon of a worldwide explosion of jazz education, I created a separate unit on jazz education (see Prouty's [2019] article for a well-written exposition on the history of jazz education). From early informal mentors and bandleaders, to George Russell and Mark Levine's literature, to Gene Hall/UNT and Schillinger House/Berklee, to the history of Real Books, to the Essentially Ellington competition at Lincoln Center, to jazz institutions around the world, I strive to demonstrate to my students where we are all located in this grand scheme. After all of that, I am struck by the notion that as we teach history, we make history ourselves and become part of that lineage. The notion of researcher and educator fulfilling a dual role, with the classroom as field, reflexively creating this phenomenon in a feedback loop, is articulated brilliantly by Judah Cohen (2008) in his essay from the classic *Shadows in the Field*.

I narrate to my students some pages from my personal jazz history: the jazz educational institutions (Agoura High School, UC Santa Cruz, San Jose State University) and jazz educators (John Mosely, Bill Douglass, Ray Brown, Rick

Rossi) that made me who I am today. I learned so much from all the aforementioned institutions and educators and now have the great burden of honoring their legacies by passing on what I learned to the next generation. As a second-generation Israeli Jewish American, I emphasize the stories of prominent Jewish Americans such as Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Norman Granz, and their heroism in standing up for equality. I further contextualize Burns's analysis of jazz as an idealistic opposition to Nazism, but also reinforce how Nazis appropriated jazz as a propaganda tool, a direct contradiction to the dominant "jazzocracy" narrative (analyzed in detail in Jankowsky's [2016] essay). I include the story of my family's tragedy in Nazi Europe and the triumph of Israeli jazz musicians such as Avishai Cohen. I also tell them about the development of the jazz scene in China and jazz education at Sichuan Conservatory and other Chinese institutions. I introduce them to the father of modern Chinese jazz Yuan Liu, a tenor saxophonist in the 80s. I also tell them of his bandmate Martin Fleischer, a German consulate general who arrived in Beijing in 1987 with his double bass, who became a good friend when I reached out after reading about him in Marlow's book. I tell them about Yong Huang and the first jazz festival in China, Nine Gates (now Taihu), and my participation in that festival from 2020 to 2023 with the Sichuan Conservatory Jazz Big Band, as well as the JZ School and Shanghai Conservatory Jazz Department. That "micro history," one that is not included in 99% of jazz history courses worldwide, is their macro history, one that shows them where they came from, where they are now, and where they could go.

That brings us to the localization of time. Our students are most likely listening to jazz musicians who are active and popular today, pulled into the music by the power of social media and online streaming. If we don't contextualize and tie it together for them, they may not do it themselves. Adam Neely's (2023) recent video on the nuances of jazz style and lineage related to Laufey is a great example of the discussions we need to have with our students: What are the different tributaries and influences of jazz and how do contemporary musicians fit into that chronicle in terms of, as Neely puts it, cultural foundations, stylistic sonic components, and institutional participation/perception. As such, I designed a final unit titled "The State of Jazz Today," which I divide into three parts: "Preserving the Past," "Popular Propensities," and "New Directions." Together, all these adjustments combine to paint a portrait of jazz history that nobody else can and hopefully engages and inspires my students.

CONCLUSION: WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

1. Contemporary education methods like differentiation, technology, and concepts like classroom diversity awareness lead to better results. My situation is an extreme one, and you may likely never encounter a teaching situation so markedly different. Nevertheless, I hope that these examples prompted you to consider ways that you could improve what you teach and how you teach. If we apply these

concepts and methods with consideration to different students in our classroom, we may soon find that such diversity is more pertinent than expected, especially as more international students pursue jazz education. Therefore, these issues demand our sincere attention and effort in order to address them equitably.

2. The best educators are also the best students. I am always learning. Chinese language is only a small part. My students helped guide me to discover critical lapses in my content as well as revealing my biases. After I learn something new, I can adjust content or address a major misunderstanding next time. I continuously read related literature to expand my knowledge and listen to contemporary music to keep my finger on the pulse. Through this continuous refinement process, I improve both the content and myself as an educator.
3. Jazz history is a collection of stories. Which stories we tell and how we tell them tints the content in a certain way no matter how hard we may try to be objective and fair. Biases are not exclusively ethnic or national, as in the case of my American-ness in China but may also be related to sexual orientation/gender. For example, am I, as a straight cisgender male, doing enough to reach all students and incorporating relevant content in a traditionally straight cisgender male-dominated music? We have to be continuously critical, vigilant, responsible, and aware of our own biases, as well as the biases of our audience.
4. History is about the why. If theory is what and lessons/ensembles are how, then history is about *why* we play jazz. Dig deeply into the meanings of why musicians made music in the way that they did. What sociopolitical and economic environments did they live in and how did that influence their music and vice-versa? Presenting these issues uncovers a critical part of the meaning and soul of the music. My students need to know why because the cultural background related to the music is not part of their prior education, but the value of such context is equally significant for any audience anywhere.
5. We can make choices to localize and personalize class content. Personalize: a short unit or extra emphasis throughout the semester on relevant minority groups who are in your classroom, for example, women (Carla Bley, Nina Simone, Melba Liston), contemporary heroines (Dianna Krall, Geri Allen, Norah Jones), LGBTQ_ (Billy Strayhorn, Billie Holiday, Meshell Ndegeocello, Gary Burton), non-Black American POC (Vijay Iyer, Hugh Masekela, Richard Bona), East Asian instrumentalists (Ngyuen Le, Toshiki Akiyoshi, Masato Honda), disabled (Chick Webb, Django Reinhardt, Michel Petrucciani, Rahsaan Roland Kirk), just as a few examples. Localize: talk about the history of jazz in your area, and don't underestimate the value of telling your personal jazz history.

There is no one definitive history. History can be told in different ways by different people according to local and personal factors. Yes, there is bias in such tellings, but bias can never be avoided. Instead, if we strive to recognize biases and embrace them with compassion and open-mindedness, it changes the equation significantly. As Whyton (2019) points out, it is not easy:

> The challenge for jazz scholars today is not simply to replace dominant and canonical narratives with alternative local and hidden histories. Indeed, by resisting binary formations of history, it is important to explore intersections between local and dominant histories, to consider how the lives of hidden musicians both within and outside of the US have informed and been informed by the household names of jazz, and to examine how dominant narratives around jazz have been formulated and sustained. (p. 5)

It is our task to connect and contrast macro and micro, dominant and alternative, global and local histories. We must also stay up to date on new developments and interpretations and take care not to be bound to one narrow account of history. History changes every day as forgotten or lost knowledge gets uncovered. History is being written every day as we teach the next generation of scholars and performers, who will go on to make their mark in the world and become part of the ever-expanding tapestry of jazz history. In fact, part of my content on the history of jazz education in China was informed by a former student of mine, who completed his dissertation at the University of Glasgow (Wang, 2022). We are all links in a chain.

Just like there is no one definitive history, there is also no one definitive method of teaching. Rather, the most effective teaching involves a combination of student-centered in-class or private discussions, differentiation, utilization of technology, accommodation, formal and informal assessment, attention to diversity; along with much creativity, patience, experimentation, open-mindedness, and conscious effort on behalf of the instructor. Through contemporary education methods and efforts to address diverse student backgrounds, we can engage students better, improve retention and performance, and tell the story of jazz history in a meaningful and special way that they will always remember. I hope this essay opened your mind to new possibilities of what, how, and why you can teach jazz history, according to who you are, and to whom, where, and when you are teaching.

References

Bares, W. K. (2020). A jazz history course for the information era. *Jazz Education in Research and Practice Journal, 1*(1), 59–78.

Beal, A. C. (2015, January 27). We still have work to do! An open letter to young musicologists. *American Musicological Society Journal*. https://musicologynow.org/we-still-have-work-to-do/

Berklee College of Music. (n.d.). *Jazz studies curriculum*. https://college.berklee.edu/program-requirements/jazz-composition-bachelors-degree

Borasi, R. (1994, March). Capitalizing on errors as "springboards for inquiry": A teaching experiment. *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education, 25*, 166–208.

Burns, K. (Director). (2001). *Jazz* [Film]. PBS.

Chaikin, J. (Director). (2011). *Girls in the band* [Film]. One Step Productions.

Clayton, B. (1986). *Buck Clayton's jazz world*. Oxford University Press.

Cohen, J. M. (2008). Shadows in the classroom: Encountering the Syrian Jewish research project twenty years later. In G. Barz & T. Cooley (Eds.), *Shadows in the field* (pp. 157–166). Oxford University Press.

DeVeaux, S. (1991). Constructing the jazz tradition: Jazz historiography. *Black American Literature Forum, 25*(3), 525–560.

DeVeaux, S. (1997). *The birth of bebop: A social and musical history*. University of California Press.

Douglass, S. G. (2023). The influence of D. Antoinette Handy—Musician, scholar, administrator, visionary—On the expansion of music education in Richmond, Virginia. *Jazz Education in Research and Practice, 4*(1), 43–63.

Ewell, P. (2023). *On music theory: And making music more welcoming for everyone*. University of Michigan Press.

Field, A. D. (2010). Shanghai's dancing world: Cabaret culture and urban politics: *1919–1954*. Chinese University Press.

Gardner, H. E. (1993). *Frames of mind, the theory of multiple intelligences*. Basic Books.

Giddins, G., & DeVeaux, S. (2009). *Jazz*. W. W. Norton & Co.

Hurtado, S. (2001). Linking diversity and educational purpose: How diversity affects the classroom environment and student development. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Diversity challenged: Evidence on the impact of affirmative action* (pp. 187–203). Harvard Education Publishing Group.

Iglesias, I. (2021). Beyond romance: Rethinking time and narrative in jazz histories. *Jazz Research Journal, 14*(1), 8–26.

Jankowsky, R. C. (2016). The medium is the message? Jazz diplomacy and the democratic imagination. In P. Bohlman & and G. Plastino (Eds.), *Jazz worlds/world jazz* (pp. 258–288). University of Chicago Press.

Jazz education. (2024, January 25). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jazz_education

Jones, A. F. (2001). *Yellow music: Media culture and colonial modernity in the Chinese jazz age*. Duke University Press.

Kaschub, M., & Smith, J. (Ed.). (2014). *Promising practices in 21st century music teacher education*. Oxford University Press.

Li, Q., & Ni, Y. (2011). Impact of curriculum reform: Evidence of change in classroom practice in mainland China. *International Journal of Educational Research, 50*, 71–86.

Lipsitz, G. (2004). Songs of the unsung: The Darby Hicks history of jazz. In R. G. O'Meally, B. H. Edwards, & F. J. Griffin (Eds.), *Uptown conversation: The new jazz studies* (pp. 9–26). Columbia University Press.

MacGillivray, L., & Rueda, R. (2003). *Listening to inner-city teachers of English language learners: Differentiating literacy instruction*. Education Research and Development Centres Program.

Marlow, E. (2018). *Jazz in China. From dance hall music to individual freedom of expression*. University Press of Mississippi.

Monson, I. (2007). *Freedom sounds*. Oxford University Press.

Neely, A. (2023, September 7). *Is Laufey jazz?* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/68zOvCLwcL8?si=PGEA47zY1BHoIHgx

New York University. (n.d.). *Curriculum, BM, Jazz studies*. https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/degree/bm-jazz-studies/curriculum

Porter, E. (2002). *What is this thing called jazz?* University of California Press.

Portugali, A. (2015). *Marginal sound: The story of jazz in China* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Tel Aviv University.

Prouty, K. (2019). Jazz education: Historical and critical perspectives. In N. Gebhardt, N. Rustin-Paschal, & T. Whyton (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to jazz studies* (pp. 45–54). Taylor & Francis.

Ramsey, G. (2003). *Race music: Black cultures from bebop to hip-hop*. University of California Press.

Simpson-Hankins, F. (2023). Second line bebop: Philadelphia and New Orleans. *Jazz Education in Research and Practice, 4*(1), 20–42.

Smith, W. (2017). *I didn't make a million*. Earnshaw Books. (Original work published 1956)

Subban, P. (2006). Differentiated instruction: A research basis. *International Education Journal, 7*(7), 935–947.

Tagg, P. (1996, Dec. 14). *Popular music studies versus "the other"* [Conference session]. Symposium: Music & Life World: Otherness and Transgression in the Culture of the 20th Century, University of Liverpool.

Teal, K. (2021). Highlighting collaboration in the music history classroom through the Duke Ellington Orchestra. *Jazz Education in Research and Practice, 2*(1), 4–24.

Tobias, S. (1994). Interest, prior knowledge, and learning. *Review of Educational Research, 64*(1), 37–54.

Tomlinson, C. A., & McTighe J. (2006). *Integrating differentiated instruction and understanding by design: Connecting content and kids*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

University of Southern California. (n.d.). *Jazz studies (BS)*. https://catalogue.usc.edu/preview_program.php?catoid=18&poid=25597&returnto=7168

Wang, D. (2010, August). The dilemma of time: Student-centered teaching in the rural classroom in China. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 27*(1), 157–164.

Wang, L. (2022). *Jazz education in mainland China: Historical and contemporary perspectives* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Glasgow. https://theses.gla.ac.uk/83211/

Whyton, T. (2004). Telling tales: Witnessing and the jazz anecdote. *The Source: Challenging Jazz Criticism*, 116–132. https://www.amherst.edu/media/view/346739/original/Whyton+-+Telling+tales-+witnessing+and+the+jazz+anecdote.pdf

Whyton, T. (2019). Wilkie's story. In N. Gebhardt, N. Rustin-Paschal, & T. Whyton (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to jazz studies* (pp. 3–16). Taylor & Francis.

Willis, S. (2017). Literature review on the use of VAK learning strategies. *The STeP Journal, Student Teacher Perspectives, 4*(2), 90–94.