

Popular Podagogy: Episode 5

[music]

00:08 Nathan: Welcome to Popular Podagogy, a podcast brought to you by the Faculty of Education at Queen's University. If this is your first time listening to the podcast, we're a podcast designed for teachers and educators who are looking to gain a little bit of professional knowledge, as well as have a good laugh and learn a few tips and tricks along the way. We're very lucky today to have a special guest, or guests, join us in the studio. We're joined today by The Harmony Club, which is an educational music collective. How are you guys doing today?

00:42 Alex Rochon: Good. Awesome. Thanks for having us.

00:44 Jillian Kerr: Pretty good.

00:45 Noah: Great.

00:45 Nathan: Yeah, thanks for coming in. My first question for you should be an easy one, but it could be a little interesting. How did you all meet?

00:53 Noah: Okay. Well, some of us are in the... We're in the Faculty of Education at Queen's, and the reason why this whole thing came about is because, for our alternative practicum and for those who are listening and don't know what that is, each year all the teacher candidates at Queen's have to do a chosen placement in something outside the classroom. And so many months ago, I was in my class and our teacher asked us what our dream placement was. And I had this idea of making a kid's album, so I wrote down a... And Fred Penner and my coordinator said to me, "No, I got the guy for you. His name is Gary, I'll give you his email." And so I met with Gary at the Small Batch Cafe downtown and we talked things through, and Gary said, "All right, Noah, grab some like-minded people, and let's see what we can do." And I went forth and grabbed some singer-songwriter friends who I thought are also very talented people as well, and then we got together for the alternative practicum.

01:54 Nathan: And how did it go from there? What was your next steps for the practicum? Did you just start and do an album or... What did you do from there?

02:04 Gary: I'll answer. It's Gary here. I was officially facilitating the experience. I'm a sessional instructor at Queen's University, and I have, over the past several years, run alternative practicums for students that are wanting to do projects that are creative projects, usually, that have to do with songwriting. So, once Noah and I had met and established the idea that we'd like to do this kind of songwriting collective, once the group formed and came together, there's five of us in total, it was pretty evident that the group really wanted to have their main focus on creating an album of songs for children. And there were some talk about how would we... What are the songs gonna be, what will be the focus for it, and the name of the album is called "How To Be Awesome." And so everybody, we spent some time articulating what was important in terms of how do you write for children, what kind of messages do we want those to be conveyed through our music, and then we just jumped in and started writing songs.

03:14 Nathan: And so speaking of the messages that you wanted to be conveyed, on the website that you have for the group, it says that you wanna "create music that serves as a toolkit for youth to be the best versions of themselves, to love themselves and the world around them." How did you

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arrive at this goal, and how do you hope to engage the youth with your music?

03:35 AR: Alex here speaking. I think we arrived at this goal because we all felt very strongly about the character education behind school, and we felt that sometimes, in traditional school settings, there's more of a focus on curriculum. And as being quite sensitive people, we generally gravitated because of our characters towards the goal of creating an album that focuses on themes of love and self-respect and compassion and caring for other things just to build up that inner sensitivity in children that we all feel is so important.

04:19 Nathan: And do you think that arts education is a way for us to develop on that character education? Do you think that's an area that we can use the arts to really find alternative methods of connecting with students in that way?

04:32 Evan: Evan here. Yeah, I think that there is just a very strong interconnected vibe that goes from arts, to emotions, to self-regulation character education because there is that self-expressive element to the arts that students really need when they're in school. They need that class where they have a place to focus on creativity, they need to focus on how they're feeling, and they need a way to express that. And sometimes students aren't the best at expressing that in verbal, oral, or a written way, and they need some form of art that they can express themselves through. I think very much, in a way, for a lot of us, this album was a way for us to express the importance of these sorts of feelings and emotions, and this how to be awesome concept through music, 'cause we're all educators here and maybe it's a little bit easier for us because we're all artists and educators to make that connection with students through music as well as our lessons. I think that using the arts in school really helps students connect to their emotions, connect to themselves, and then have that facet in their lives that allow them to express themselves and find some sort of creative freedom in their day.

05:51 Nathan: You've mentioned a couple of times now that your album title, which is "How To Be Awesome," how did you guys arrive at that title and where did you come up with the idea for creating that type of music? What were your inspirations for it?

06:05 JK: I think how it started, it was Noah's idea, when we got together and we started talking about the theme of the songs that we wanted, and we were brainstorming about how can kids be awesome 21st century humans. That was like the first idea, and then we ended up shortening it to "How To Be Awesome." But...

06:25 Noah: That's more marketable, "How To Be Awesome."

06:27 JK: Yeah.

[chuckle]

06:28 Nathan: It's a little easier to say it, that's for sure.

06:29 Noah: Yeah. Yeah.

06:30 JK: And then, yeah, so we are all singer-songwriters, so what we did when we got together, after we brainstorm, we would split off and see what we could come up with on our own, and then

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we would come together and work together and collaborate. And so each song kind of has our own flavor and our own style.

06:49 Nathan: That actually leads me into one of the other questions that I was gonna ask you guys about, which, in each song, you guys have different vocalists and different leads. How do you decide who's singing each song, and who's doing what for each song then?

07:02 AR: Okay. We decided for this album that we would each write two songs, and during the course of the three weeks that we spent together, we would bring each song to the table and the rest of us would help sculpt each song and maybe give little suggestions and/or provide different harmonies or different instrumentation, like Alex provided some mandolin on the album, Evan provided some glockenspiel on the album. So, we'd originally... Each of us would have these two songs, but then the collaboration would happen. And it was quite magical, and we were in such a really open and safe environment where someone would make a little suggestion and then that would be accepted, and then the song would evolve. So, collaboration was really important. But then at the end, yeah, the two songs we had, we would serve as the lead vocalist, and then the group would harmonize on that song.

07:55 Nathan: And did you often have a lot of, we'll call them, creative differences when you're making these songs? When the person that brings the song to the other person, did you guys collaborate at that point in time and have different people suggest different things, or was it mostly just whoever brought the song that was their idea, that was what they were gonna go with, and everyone else just got on board with it?

08:18 Gary: Yeah. I think the idea behind it was that, as Noah suggested, that we worked both individually on our songs and then also collectively, and as in that manner, our job becomes just supporting each other. So, there weren't really creative differences, it was really just a support network. The whole thing was a workshop, so the idea was that we just wanted to help each other make the songs be as best as they could be. That process was actually one of the most fun and valuable parts of our workshop together was being excited at seeing what someone else brought to the table.

09:00 Evan: Yeah. And I think that collaboration part was great because, for example, when writing my second song, I was having a hard time figuring a theme, having a hard time figuring out or feeling inspired by it. I just had a quick conversation with Gary and he suggested a certain lyric or idea to use in it. And just from that small idea, he had really got me going, and I just spent that day working intensely on this song because of the spark that Gary provided. So, it was great to work off of each other that way and, yeah, I think it really fuelled the whole thing and allowed us to move forward efficiently.

09:38 Noah: That was a great day. Alex left and then he came back with this wonderful song. He mysteriously vanished, we were like, "Where's Alex?" But then he arrived later and then just presented this song, and we all... I think we all had an emotional reaction when that happened.

09:54 Gary: Hours later.

09:55 AR: Yeah, hours later.

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09:56 JK: That was the thing, right? I don't think we had any creative differences, because...

10:00 AR: No.

10:00 Gary: No.

10:00 JK: When we came in together, we were like, "Wow, you just wrote the most incredible song." We were very proud of each other.

10:07 AR: I think that collaboration really added a lot to each other's songs as well. My second song that I brought to the table, I just had this idea, I brought it up, and then Noah came up with this idea to do this a cappella doo-wop style, sort of baseline underneath, which totally built up the song and turned it into a whole new animal that I didn't even have in my mind. And that collaboration really allowed our songs to flourish and be as powerful as they could be because we had that teamwork together and that supporting environment that really allowed us to create amazing things.

10:38 Nathan: It sounds like the story behind creating the album is almost... Well, not almost, it's valuable in itself, because you're showing how collaboration can work, and even though each person is bringing different things to the table and bring different ideas to the table, it's actually making it so that the end product is better. So, each of you has your own individual talents, but then when you're working together, it's actually tenfold because you're working off of each other's strengths and picking up maybe where other people needed some picking up. And I think that's a good message that you can share when you are talking about your album as well, because it's not just about the actual message of the songs, it's about the message of the recording process and what you guys went through. That's pretty cool.

11:28 Nathan: I'm gonna circle back a little bit though and actually talk about the message of your song specifically. I think that, just in listening to your songs, it sounds like you're using your music to try and help students and help children, and circling particularly around the idea of mental health and bullying. How do you think that you can see your music helping students and children?

11:53 Gary: Well, I think, just to back up a little bit, I think that our songs didn't necessarily... We didn't say, "We wanna write this kind of song." We decided that we want to write a certain spirit of song, and myself, one of my roles in the workshop was I make a living as writing songs for children and for families, and I think there's a big difference when you're writing a song between saying, "I wanna write a song with this goal of promoting mental health," versus somehow, when you're writing songs, you want to find some balance between maybe talking about a serious topic in a playful way so that you can be playfully serious or seriously playful, that idea. I'm not sure if I'm addressing the question you asked, but I think that we didn't really have this explicit goal, like a curricular goal, of saying, "At the end of this project, we'd like 10 songs and they're gonna accomplish these six curricular goals." We gave ourselves permission to play and to let the muse visit us, and to see what arrived, but in terms of the sensibility to the songs and the spirit behind the songs, I think that's really where... Just the idea of, yes, being playful, but also being generous and creating something where there's enough room in the songs that... We're not telling anyone what to get in the song, we're offering a song, and so we're trying to show rather than tell. I suppose this is what the spirit of the workshop was.

13:37 AR: And I think, in regards to specifically talking about bullying or mental health stuff, one

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of my songs, or both of them are more on the mental health spectrum. One of them is called "The Dressup Parade," and it's a song that's about going into a dress-up chest and pulling out whatever you want to wear, and it's just sort of... The basic underlying theme behind it is for kids to be comfortable with who they are, and to support others for who they are, and really value each other for who they are as people and not make judgments and stuff like that. Yeah, I think a lot of... Looking at topics like bullying and mental health, we... It wasn't like songs that said, like, "Stop bullying." It was songs that positively encourage children to be aware, and aware of their own emotions, too, as well. Yeah, just be conscious of that more.

14:38 Evan: Yeah, I think that just the nature of how our album is titled and how the songs progressed throughout it, we have these light imperatives that represent our own perspectives on education and the important things that we need to teach to students. So, there are songs like "Listen To The Trees," "Give Thanks to Mother Earth," these seemingly imperative songs that actually just reflect our values as educators and what we wanna see in the future with the children that we're going to be teaching and the values that we want to help them come to on their own. Especially with, for example, "Listen To The Trees," one of my tunes, it was focused on giving students that motivation to respect and listen to nature, get outside, value the world around them, use all of their senses to have that experiential education experience outside, but a lot of it is open to their own interpretation. They can listen to that song, and they can have whatever imagination that it brings along with them, whatever reality that it brings forth inside their head that motivates them to go outside and respect nature. So, I think that playful aspect that Gary was just talking about really allowed us to represent our values as educators in all of our songs.

15:50 Nathan: That's a really cool way of looking at it, because it's kind of... It's taking your own values and mixing it with values that we would see in an education system and then putting it into an album so that... But I really like the idea that you said... I think it was Alex that said you didn't focus on the negative side of things, you were focusing on the positive side of things and bringing it out in a way that... It's how you would want people to act, rather than focusing on how you don't want people to act, which I think is something that will be a lot more receptive to educators and students, even if they're listening to it, which leads me into my next question. You're all educators in one form or another. A lot of you are becoming teachers, so how do you see... And this podcast is for teachers, so how do you see teachers using your music in their classrooms?

16:41 JK: Well, I'm the only person at this table here that's a secondary teacher, [16:46] _____ teaching in a high school. And for me, I've kind of looked at this album and thought it would be a great way to study and break down poetry or songwriting. So, I think that would be a great way to use in your classroom. Or we have songs, like Evan was talking about, getting outside in nature. You could use those in your science classrooms or on... What's the environment take from the cover? Green? Earth day?

17:10 AR: Earth day.

17:11 JK: Yeah. So that's my IS perspective.

17:15 Noah: Yeah. And from my PJ perspective, I feel like my song "Smile," I just have this vision of if I were maybe to teach that to students, maybe do a choral version of it and maybe even the intricacies of art or something, and draw something that makes them smile, so I use it in that context.

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17:32 AR: And Jill had a really good idea that she was mentioning the other day which was we... What we're thinking of doing is making lesson plans around the songs so that they're like a resource for teachers to use and know how to use the songs correctly, or whatever.

17:49 JK: Yeah, exactly. Not saying, like, "Oh, this album is just a tool that you can use in your classroom." Like, let's give teachers concrete ways and lesson plans that they could just take them and use in their classroom.

18:00 AR: Yeah. And I think with that, a lot of these songs could be used in a mental health unit, in a health class, for example, like in PJ, for example.

18:09 Evan: Yeah. And just in general, just using music in your lessons. For example, using those lesson plans that we may make for our songs, just introducing music in general into your classroom just to expand the ability to reach all the learners in your classroom. Some of them are gonna connect a lot more with a song than they will with a worksheet or with even an activity on the iPad. If they can sing a song that allows them to remember things or, in this case, feel things towards the character education side, it may stick with them a little bit better than if there's just straight up dialogue.

18:42 JK: I think one thing I just want to add to, especially talking about mental health or using these songs in the classroom, I think what is so awesome about this album is that our songs are very real. We don't sugarcoat anything, and I think that students could really connect with that and would be excited about using it in their classroom, 'cause it's not so happy little songs that, "Everything is awesome and everything is great." We talk about negatives and positives, and how do we put positive spins on negatives.

19:14 Nathan: What are the plans for the band from here? Are you gonna go on and do school performances or what's... Do you have any idea?

19:22 AR: I'm moving overseas to Korea next year, so I'm bringing this to Asia. I'm bringing "How To Be Awesome" to the Asian masses.

19:28 S?: K-pop.

[overlapping conversation]

19:28 AR: K-pop, yeah. We'll K-pop-ify it, we're gonna K-pop-ify the "How To Be Awesome." But I'm certainly... Yeah, I'll be working at an international school outside Seoul, and I don't know how, but I'd love to bring this there to some capacity. We were toying with the idea of The Harmony Club turning into The Harmony Collective, and maybe expanding and maybe grabbing some new like-minded awesome educators wherever we go.

19:54 Noah: Yeah, totally. Yeah, I just think it'll be nice to have... Like I'm gonna be doing a bit of music teaching next year, so it'll be nice to have them as resources around. But, yeah, I think we're all trying to think about how we can continue to expand this and how we can add more to it and just... Yeah, I guess continue in our own ways. I think there's lots of opportunities around King Center, or wherever, to play music for kids.

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20:25 Gary: I also think it's important to point out that this project, we did this project in March... Started March when... It was the dates of the alternative practicum was held, and in the time... In three weeks that we were together, we wrote and recorded the 10 songs. They've had a life from April till July, we've been doing gigs, we've been in various settings to perform the songs. So, the record does have a life of its own and certainly, as of the end of the program for all the B ed candidates, for all the members of The Harmony Club, everyone's going off on different adventures. It's not clear what happens next, but that's one of the nice things about creating an album is that the music is there and you don't know how what's going to happen, but the music can have a life of its own, and we'll see where it takes us.

21:18 Nathan: All right. Well, thank you, guys. We'll be right back with your classroom confessions after this break.

[music]

21:27 Nathan: Are you an occasional teacher looking to improve your job prospects? Are you an experienced teacher trying to reach the next pay scale? Are you interested in improving your overall teaching practice? Queen's Continuing Teacher Education has you covered. With easy-to-access online courses, you can log on to your course from anywhere you have access to the internet. Courses offered by CTE range from special education, to technological education, to safe and accepting schools. Queen's CTE courses work with your schedule, have supportive expert instructors that want to help you succeed. Registration is fast and easy, with no commitment to pay until the Friday before the course starts. What are you waiting for? Visit CoursesForTeachers.ca for more information or to sign up today, that's CoursesForTeachers.ca.

22:26 Nathan: All right. And welcome back to Popular Pedagogy. We are now going to go into what we think is our favorite segment, which is the classroom confessions. Our classroom confessions are designed to bring a little bit of lightheartedness to the teaching profession, and recognize that we all do things that are relatable and we can all make mistakes, but the best way to go about it is to laugh about it after. I'm throwing it out to The Harmony Club, is there anyone out there that has a classroom confession?

22:57 AR: Okay, I'll start with mine. This is Alex. I was at a school in Toronto, with a large Muslim population, and I would bring in my guitar a lot to... I wrote songs about different curriculum points that we were looking at, like songs about decimals, fractions, different topics on science. Anyways, so I spent the better portion of the night before my class preparing the song, I spent a lot of time on it and I was quite proud of it. And so I got to the school the day of, and I pull up my guitar, I'm about to play in from these kids on the carpet. And then one of them goes, "Mr. Rochon, it's Ramadan." In Ramadan you can't listen to music, and there's none of that. [chuckle] So, I was there with my guitar and had this whole song planned out and lesson and everything around this tune. Anyways, it was kind of an awkward situation. I was going to put my guitar away, and then my associate teacher kind of said, "No, it's okay." So I awkwardly started playing and started singing. And a third of, or half, the class, was covering their ears. [laughter] That was the first time I've ever played to a group of children with their ears intentionally covered. It's quite funny.

24:22 Nathan: It's good to integrate arts into education, but maybe not in that situation.

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24:26 AR: Exactly. Yeah.

24:28 Noah: All right. I've got a short one here. This is Noah. One of my lessons was for my grade four students, we were doing... We were in the unit of sound, and so I had a lesson that actually Alex and I had developed earlier in the year of making paper megaphones and learning about basic properties of sound by constructing these paper megaphones. And also what I wanted in the end was for the students to use the megaphone and say something positive in the megaphone to one another and just show how the sound travelled. But, of course, it was a bad day for some of the students and a few of them were getting into fights. And at the end, all these paper megaphones were made, and the one kid picked it up and was just like, "Hayden, you smell! You suck!" And just saying really mean things to the other kid. And then the other kid reciprocated, and he picked it up and started making really mean messages. The other one was like, "No, no." And this happened to be during my observation, my practicum liaison was there watching this all go down.

[laughter]

25:27 Noah: And then actually also at the end, we were giving... We were letting the kids take the megaphones home, and there weren't enough megaphones for them all to take. Keep in mind, these are really cheaply made Dollarama-inspired megaphones. And these two girls are fighting over the megaphone, pulling at each end, and so they did a paper, rock, scissors to see who would take it home. And one of the girls won, the other girl lost. And the girl who lost started crying, like bawling her eyes out, because she couldn't take this megaphone home. And it didn't help that the other girl was gloating about it and dancing with the megaphone around this class. I'm like, "Gabrielle, that's not really nice to do." And so I had to console the girl who... And we made another paper megaphone later. It was all just a fun, fun task.

26:18 Nathan: It sounds like a really good observation.

26:20 Noah: Yeah. But, Nathan, she was laughing with me. She goes, "That's gonna happen." We had a good laugh about it, but...

26:26 JK: Okay. I have one, too. This is Jillian. I was teaching at my practicum this grade nine band class, and we were doing an elements of music unit. At the beginning of every class, I made this chart up for them and we would listen to music of all different genres. And I encouraged them to bring in their own stuff so we could hear their music. But I said over and over and over again, "Don't bring anything with swearing," and all that sort of stuff.

26:50 Noah: I know where this is going.

26:50 JK: So, anyways... Yeah, right. [chuckle] So, I come in that day, I hadn't prepared anything. I figured that they would have a song. None of the students had a song, and I was like, "All right," thinking off the top of my head. I forget what it's called now, but the one that won the Juno, it's like, "I wish I could hurt you back," that song. [chuckle] Anyways, I was like, "Oh, this is a good one, this is a female artist who won a Juno. I'll play this song." And I'd only heard the radio version before. Anyways, I started playing it, and she swears all through the song. And then I was like, "Okay," and all the kids, their eyes lit up and they're like, "Ms. Kerr played a song with profanity in it." [chuckle] So then I had to teach them the difference between swearing from emotion and then actually just swearing. Yeah, that was pretty funny. That was my mistake.

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[laughter]

27:39 Nathan: And that teaches us how to be awesome.

27:43 JK: Yeah.

[laughter]

27:44 Nathan: All right. Well, that does it for our classroom confessions section of the podcast. Before we go, I just wanted to give The Harmony Club an opportunity. Do you have anything that you have coming up or anything that you want the audience to know about?

27:58 JK: We have our album available online.

28:00 Noah: Yeah. You can find "How To Be Awesome" on... It's now on all the streaming sites, so you can find our album on Google Play, iTunes, Spotify, and also on CD Baby. And on Bandcamp, it's theharmonyclub.bandcamp.com.

28:17 Nathan: Awesome. And I've actually gone on and listened to your album, just in preparation for the podcast and because I really need to know how to be awesome, and I really recommend it to anyone that's out there. It's a really... First of all, it's good music. It's not anything that you'll be upset about. And it's also a really good resource for any teachers out there to use. So, I highly recommend it. And thank you to all of you for coming on the podcast today, and I wish you all the best of luck. And as you move into a collective, I hope that, as you recruit more people, it continues to keep the same message and the same spirit. So, thank you for coming on.

28:57 JK: Thank you.

28:57 AR: Thank you. Thank you.

28:58 Gary: Yeah, thank you.

29:00 Nathan: And that does it for another episode of Popular Podagogy. If you like what you hear, you can find us on iTunes, Google Play and Stitcher, as well as on the CFRC and Faculty of Education websites. Please give us a rating and review, and we'll see you next.

[pause]