

## Popular Podagogy: Episode 9

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**00:05 Nathan Cheney:** Hello, and welcome to Popular Podagogy. I am your host, Nathan Cheney. This podcast is brought to you by Queen's University, Faculty of Education.

[music]

**00:21 NC:** We're joined today by Ben Bolden. Ben, how are you doing today?

**00:24 Ben Bolden:** I'm doing fine, thanks.

**00:26 NC:** So when I first approached you about doing this podcast, we spoke for a little bit and you mentioned that you were actually interested in the world of podcasting. So what is it about podcasting that interests you?

**00:36 BB:** Well, thanks. Thanks for the question. Yeah, I am interested in podcasting. I guess it started with my interest in radio. I've always been really drawn to radio. When I grew up, I didn't have a TV, so I used to listen to radio a lot. And there was always a lot of radio-listening around my house, and I like that. And so when I started doing research, actually, I learned that I could do the kind of interviewing that I'd been listening to on the radio all the time, and I decided that was a lot of fun. And so, I began interviewing people for my research. And it occurred to me that I could use those interviews, not just write them up, but I could also shape them into podcast-type things. And so that's kinda where my interest in podcasting came from.

**01:29 NC:** And you did some interesting things with those interviews. Can you give the listeners a little bit more of an example of what you did with those?

**01:36 BB:** Yeah, for sure. So I was interviewing teachers, experienced teachers, about what they knew about teaching, and these are people that had been teaching for a long time. So I was interested in what they had learned after having worked in teaching for a lifetime. And so I collected a lot of their stories and then I turned those stories into kind of musical pieces, by taking... First of all, looking at the stories to try and find out what were the key pieces and meaning within those stories. And then I would weave music in and out of their stories to act as a pedestal to highlight different parts of those stories that I thought were really important with regard to knowledge of teaching. And I could go on for more, but I'll maybe just leave it at that right now. So it involved using music, weaving it in and out of the participant's spoken words to highlight and to lift up the things that they were saying that I thought were particularly important.

**02:48 NC:** So, in that research, it was talking about building a narrative and how learning from other teachers narratives allows you to actually grow as a teacher professionally. And one of the things that I actually found quite interesting about that was when you added the music overlay behind the teacher's stories, it actually gave you more of a sense of emotion and sense of feeling that you would normally attribute to a narrative. So was that intentional or how did you come to kind of weave those two concepts together?

**03:19 BB:** Yeah. Well, first of all, I'm really glad that you had that emotional response. Because that's one of my marketing schemes, [chuckle] is to highlight the fact that by doing research this

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way, I can tap into emotion, or I can evoke emotion. And that's something that is not impossible, by any means, but is made a lot easier through the use of music. So that's kind of one of the reasons I think this is important and valuable to do, is that when I'm working this way and when I'm presenting knowledge or things that I have learned, when I'm presenting research in this way, I do have that potential of tapping into a listener's emotions as well. And I think that whenever we encounter an experience or an understanding that connects to us emotionally, it's much more likely to make an impression on us. And we understand it and experience it at multiple levels. So that's definitely something that I was aiming for. And again, that's what I see as one of the real strengths of this approach to research, is that I'm able to ideally evoke an emotional response from whoever is engaging with my research.

**04:32 NC:** Right. And that's not something that you normally experience with research necessarily, is an emotional response. A lot of the time, you're thinking of it in a clear mind or an objective perspective. And, part of the thing that you highlighted was that it was a subjective response, which I think was quite unique. And when I was listening to it, it almost reminded me of when you get an audio track in a sitcom or in a television series that tells you how you're supposed to actually feel, and you were doing a similar sort of technique to use in your research, and I thought that was really interesting.

**05:05 BB:** Absolutely, yep.

**05:07 NC:** So one of the things that you also highlight is the fact that you can use podcasting in a classroom setting. So how can we do this as teachers?

**05:17 BB:** Yeah, sure, thanks. So I spend a lot of time in my work with teacher educators, trying to help teachers understand who they are, because I think that's an extremely important part of teaching. And so one of the assignments that I ask my students to do, and this is in a music education context, is I ask them to think about their experiences of music, that have been particularly meaningful or relevant to their own lives and could be important going forward as they become teachers. And so I ask these pre-service educators to collect those musical moments, both in terms of talking about them, and in terms of particular pieces of music that will take us or it will take the listener back to those particular moments.

**06:08 BB:** So that's something that I think is really valuable for teachers to do or pre-service teachers to do as a way of understanding themselves and who they are as music educators. But I also encourage my pre-service educators to do that with the students in their classrooms because I think it's a really valuable opportunity for students in classrooms to get the chance to think about their music, to share their music with others, and to talk about it. And hence, to come to greater understanding of what it means and particularly what it means for them.

**06:40 NC:** Right. And what has been the general response from your students for doing this type of assignment? Is it generally met with warm reception? Or is it a little bit more challenging than a usual six-page essay? How do they take to it?

**06:53 BB:** Great question. My response, for the most part, has been very positive. I think people, well, in my experience, they have appreciated the fact that it's not another six-page essay. And I try and sell it as an opportunity to learn about sound technology, which I think is super important for a music educator.

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**07:17 NC:** And is likely the intimidating factor in doing an assignment like this, more than anything else.

**07:20 BB:** Yeah, that's a good point, too. So I try and put various supports in place around that and there are certainly some people that end up frustrated, and that I hopefully am able to bail out of those situations. But to be honest, I haven't encountered those kind of challenges as much as I thought I would. People are actually... I guess these days, so much software has advanced so much and it's becoming more and more user-friendly. So it's really not too difficult, it's not that steep of a learning curve to get somebody up and running with sound-editing software.

**08:00 NC:** Okay, and you admitted earlier that you grew up listening to the radio and I'm assuming radio shows.

**08:07 BB:** Yes.

**08:07 NC:** And now that you're into podcast, do you have any favorite podcasts, other than Popular Podagogy, that you wouldn't mind sharing with your listeners? Any recommendations?

**08:16 BB:** Yeah. Admittedly, I still listen to most of my podcasts in an old fashioned way, that is on the radio. I still just listen to the radio a lot, but a lot of the things I listen to on the radio are now also available as podcasts. So some of my favourites are... I don't know, there's a CBC program called... By somebody called Terry O'Reilly called The Age of Persuasion, that it's about marketing. And I think that's a really great podcast. It's very, very engaging, and I like the way that he plays with sound effects and brings in really interesting and engaging stuff to keep it super interesting. Great music, great ideas. It moves really fast. He covers a lot, it's great.

**09:02 NC:** It's interesting to me that you pick up... Obviously, 'cause you're interested in it and that you have the music background, but the fact that you pick up on the sounds and the engagement on that side, the technical aspect of the podcast, as well as just the content. That's really cool to think about. We're gonna transition here a little bit. So one of your many titles is that you are the UNESCO chair in arts and learning. So first of all, this is extremely impressive, and congratulations to you on having that role. And second of all, can you just explain a little bit more about what you do in that role and explain it to the audience a little bit?

**09:42 BB:** Yeah, sure. Well, first of all, thank you. It is an impressive title. And to be honest, [chuckle] I kind of stumbled into it. I didn't go through any great... I didn't achieve anything really magnificent in order for them to give me that title.

**09:57 NC:** Don't be modest now, it's...

**10:01 BB:** Okay, fair enough.

[laughter]

**10:02 BB:** Without being modest, I had a former colleague who was Larry O'Farrell, who initiated the chair, and he retired and he had been mentoring me in a number of ways. And so he basically mentored me right into that position. So a UNESCO chair is a... There are a network of academics

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around the world that have this designation of UNESCO chair. And how I see my role as UNESCO chair, it is UNESCO chair in arts and learning, so my emphasis is on arts education. And so what I do is I work to facilitate collaborations between international arts educators and researchers, with a view to initiating and supporting projects that connect to UNESCO goals. In particular, the UNESCO goal of quality education for all. And from my perspective, that quality education for all, an essential piece is the arts. And so my work is to promote and advance the arts in that realm.

**11:17 NC:** And obviously, there's a lot of reasons that go into that, but why do you think specifically that focusing on the arts is so important, especially at this time and in this political climate?

**11:30 BB:** Yeah, a great question, and maybe I can see some threads to connect back to, but... First of all, I don't think... They're always important. This time is no different than any other in that we always have a deep need as humans to be able to both understand ourselves and to communicate about ourselves, and to understand the world we live in and to communicate to others our understandings of that world. And that's what the arts is really good at. It's really helping us... It's really good at helping us to explore our understandings of ourselves and the world around us, and it's really good at helping us to have a means of communicating our understandings of ourselves in the worlds around us. So I think that's something that all people deserve to have access to, that's what the arts can provide for people and offer people. And that's why it's such an essential part of a quality education.

**12:32 BB:** There's also one other piece, and that's that the arts have an amazing potential and capacity to bring joy to people's lives, and that's something that is... That also needs to be at the center of educational endeavours, we need to be bringing joy to our students. Not only in the moment, but in their whole lives. And the arts, by learning about the arts and learning to operate within the arts, we're giving students, people, opportunities for joy that can last throughout their lives.

**13:07 NC:** Do you think that with some of the challenges that are facing the arts with cuts to time in school, and more of a focus on maths and science and everything in the schools, do you think that integrating into other subjects is kind of the essential piece that we're going to have moving forward for the arts education programs?

**13:27 BB:** That's a great question. I don't think it's an essential piece. Well, first of all, integration has a lot of value. As I've talked about a number of times already, we can use the arts to communicate what we understand, and to explore understandings. So the arts can be leveraged to build our understandings of anything, and that could include math, it can include language, it can include science, it can include social studies. Certainly, we can leverage the arts to build understandings in other subject domains. The problem is when we justify the arts by their potential to help us in those other subject areas, because then we lose sight of the value that they have all on their own. And that's a real danger. So I'm always a little leery of advocacy that claims the value of the arts as its ability to help people in other subject areas. There's also... Maybe I'll just leave it at that. I think that I'm leery of that kind of... I'm leery of some of those arguments, and I prefer the arguments that the arts are important for themselves. There are ways that people can learn about the world and experience the world and can experience joy. And that's...

**14:48 NC:** There's value in them as a standalone.

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**14:49 BB:** Exactly, there's intrinsic value, which I don't wanna lose sight of. And that's always what should be forefront when people are talking about the arts and education, from my perspective.

**15:00 NC:** Okay. So we're gonna transition again here. So you've already mentioned earlier that you teach music to faculty of education students. So how do you find teaching music, or how do you perceive teaching music to be different than teaching other subjects?

**15:16 BB:** Well, from my perspective, it's usually a lot more fun. [chuckle]

**15:19 NC:** And a lot louder. My office is outside of the music room. It's definitely a lot louder.

**15:23 BB:** Lucky you.

[laughter]

**15:27 BB:** So I love teaching my pre-service teachers in music education classes because I get to... Well, first of all, they get to make music, but so do I. And that's a key part of it, too. I really enjoy making music with my students in all my classes, I get to do that. I get to sing with them, I get to play instruments with them, I get to dance with them, and I listen to music with them. And maybe that's another part of it, I guess I feel it's a little bit easier to remove the boundaries between professor and student in music, at least for me. I feel it's very natural to be a community of learners, rather than having somebody who's in charge of all the people. Most of what I do is us learning together and music seems to be able to accommodate that really well.

**16:21 NC:** Right, it's a collaborative experience and important experience almost. You spoke there a little bit about how you get to make and create music. You are a real live composer, you are an official composer. You've had other people perform your pieces and you can access your pieces online. So how did you get into composing music?

**16:43 BB:** Yeah, okay. Well, thanks for the question. I love to talk about my composing. It's something very close to my heart, something I love very much. So how did I get into it? I took music lessons when I was younger, and I took piano lessons, and I was never very good at it, to be honest. I was always a lousy technical performer. And so often, I found that what I wanted to say musically, I just simply couldn't, because my fingers didn't move fast enough, or my brain didn't move fast enough, or something wasn't happening fast enough that I could really produce the kind of music that I wanted to be able to produce and that I felt like I could say something with.

**17:30 BB:** So I began creating music for myself that I could play. So I created music that was within my technical capability, and I realized that I... That worked really well for me because then I could start to communicate the stuff that I wanted to communicate, and I could define my own technical parameters, and therefore, create stuff that was easy enough to sound good as I perceived it. So that's why I started and I guess that's why I continue with it.

**17:57 NC:** And this has helped shape you as an educator as well, as you've integrated this into your teaching. So what would you say to music teachers out there that might be a little bit hesitant to compose their own pieces?

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**18:10 BB:** Yeah, another really good question. A few thoughts there. First of all, I really do think it's important for students to have the chance to compose music and not just to reproduce music that others have composed. I'm not saying that it is the most important thing or that all of the students will love it. I'm just saying, it's really important that they get the chance to do that. I think too often in music education, we haven't given students the chance to create, as in compose or improvise their own music, and we need to give them that chance. But you raise a good point. A lot of teachers may be reticent about providing those opportunities to their students because they themselves don't feel comfortable with composing or improvising.

**18:52 BB:** So what I would suggest is to start small, is to impose some really strict parameters on yourself. So maybe you're gonna compose a piece that uses four different pitches or something like that, but just start small. And if you're already in a teaching context, then to share those fears and those learning moments with your students, like compose along with your students and identify to students that you're not really sure how to do this either and it's something that you're intimidated by, too. But simply to make that effort and to try because, of course, your students are more likely to try to do it if they see you trying to do it. So that's what I try and share with people.

**19:36 NC:** Right. And this is something that... You said two things that I really think is really important, and the first thing is the creativity piece where it's addressing the fact that we're always looking for ways to find... Or encourage our students to become critical thinkers and inquiry-based learners, and become creative with their problem-solving. And this is a ready-made way of making sure that our students have opportunity to create and be different and not just answer the question the way that we want them to answer the question, but do something a little bit more unique. And I think that's one thing that I took away from that idea is that the ability to compose and the ability to create, even if it's just a small piece is something that is extremely important in developing that creativity.

**20:23 NC:** And the second thing is, a lot of the times as educators, we have to feel like we're invincible, and we have to feel and put on a facade where maybe we don't wanna show weakness to the students or show that we have emotions, and fears, and ideas that way. And it's not beneficial because when it does happen that you do break down, you will break down and then they will see it and then the entire myth is gone. And so to share that open learning idea and to have the idea that you're learning together with students, it's extremely valuable. And I found that when I was teaching is that I knew a lot of the answers but I could also openly admit to students, "I don't know an answer, let's look it up." And I was teaching Social Studies so it was a little bit different than music, but I don't know all of the history in the world. And even though that was surprising to students at first, it's just the reality that I don't have that much space in my brain for that.

**21:18 NC:** And I think that's also something that a lot of music educators can think of when they're looking at this and they're unsure about composing their own pieces is, you don't have to be Mozart or Beethoven to start off, you can start off with a few lines and see what happens from there. So I thought that was a really cool thing that you highlighted there. I'm gonna circle back though because you have done quite a few compositions. What is your favorite piece that you have composed and why is that your favorite?

**21:47 BB:** That's a tricky one. I once heard a great composer, one of my favourites, and now his name's gone right now, it might come later. But his response to that question was, "Well, they're all my children. So I can't raise one above the other because..." He thought... It was Aaron Copland. So

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he thought of his compositions as his children. So that's one answer, but I'll go a little... Offer you a little more than that. I certainly do have ones that I like more than others. And what comes to mind? Well, I was listening to a pop song that I wrote a couple of nights ago, I hadn't listened to it in years. And I'm not gonna say it's my favorite by any means, but it's one that I enjoy it re-listening to, and that's kind of fun when I rediscover pieces I've written a long time ago, and to be honest, I've forgotten about. And then I listen to them and I find that I still like them because there's lots that I listen to again and I find I don't like them anymore. [chuckle] So, every now and again, I find one that I do still like and I guess they're amongst my favourites.

**23:03 NC:** We're gonna take a quick break, but we'll be right back with more Ben Bolden.

[music]

**23:12 NC:** 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](http://coursesforteachers.ca) for more information or to sign up today. That's [coursesforteachers.ca](http://coursesforteachers.ca).

[music]

**24:10 NC:** And we're back with Ben Bolden. So you taught overseas a little bit, and that was a learning experience for you. I imagine another learning experience is the fact that you had noted in your Faculty of Education bio that you are the father of three young boys. And I can only imagine that that's a learning experience every single day.

**24:32 BB:** It certainly is.

**24:33 NC:** So my question for you is: Have you passed on your love of music on to them? Or have they just abandoned that and gone and take another interest?

**24:41 BB:** Yeah, a great question. And of course, as you're kind of suspecting, it's a difficult or a touchy subject. So both my older boys have taken piano lessons and one is still taking piano lessons, and the oldest one is no longer taking piano lessons, which was sad for me but what he does do is play a lot with Garage Band.

**25:15 NC:** Okay.

**25:16 BB:** And work within Garage Band, so I like that he's doing that.

**25:20 NC:** So maybe a podcasting future for him?

**25:22 BB:** Yeah, or else... What he's really into these days is the idea of creating parody songs.

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**25:29 NC:** Oh, cool.

**25:30 BB:** So finding a karaoke track and then making up his own words, funny words to a song. Yeah, so he's doing that. And the youngest one, who's just three, he hasn't taken any music lessons or anything yet. And probably like so many third children or later children, I've neglected him...

[laughter]

**25:58 BB:** In lots of areas of his life. There's no photos of him anywhere in our house and things like that, it's not entirely true. But I certainly haven't been as active in my promotion of music with him as I have with the others. So yes, it's something I need to get on with, [chuckle] is trying to do what I can to bring him into a musical world. He certainly has music around him, and he knows that it's something we all do, but I haven't put him in any lessons yet and it's probably nearly time to do that.

**26:32 NC:** Did you tell them that they're not allowed to have a television, that they're only allowed to listen to the radio or...

**26:36 BB:** Right. Well, kind of. We don't have cable, but of course, they watch lots of television via Netflix. But we do, very severely from my son's perspectives, limit their screen time.

**26:55 NC:** Of course.

**26:56 BB:** And that's an ongoing point of contention, but something that I feel pretty strongly about because I benefited hugely, I think, from having limited screen time as a child.

**27:10 NC:** Absolutely.

**27:10 BB:** And I wanna be able to pass on that benefit or that opportunity to my children.

**27:18 NC:** Okay. I gotta ask the question, and you can stay silent if you don't wanna answer it. But I grew up around hockey parents and I was in a hockey family, and I saw lots of hockey parents and the way that they kinda went a little crazy, but I never experienced the music side of things. So I have to ask, are music parents just as crazy as hockey parents? Or is it a little bit different in the music world?

**27:43 BB:** Great question. I think they absolutely have the potential to be as crazy, or more crazy than hockey parents. I think there's the potential for craziness everywhere, right? [chuckle] And there are certain cultures that promote that kind of craziness and hockey is one of them, and music is definitely another one of them. I think I've got... I don't think I go crazy, I think I've got a wife who keeps me in line in that respect, but I hear what you're saying and I've certainly seen that kind of craziness from music parents, too.

**28:25 NC:** Alright. We're just almost done here, but we're gonna actually go into our Classroom Confession section of the podcast. So our Classroom Confession is designed for educators to be able to give a little bit of a confession about something that either they have done or they have seen in a classroom setting. And to basically give us a laugh at the end of the podcast, but also confess and show that no one is actually perfect, and no one is actually getting everything right right away,



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and it's something that we've all had an experience for. So, Ben, may I ask you: Do you have a classroom confession for today?

**29:05 BB:** Yeah, sure. My classroom confession is actually a locker room confession.

**29:11 NC:** Uh-oh.

**29:12 BB:** Yeah, there's a foreshadowing for you. So I'm gonna talk about a time when I was in high school. And [chuckle] I don't think there's any lesson to be learned from this story, but it is one of those things that sticks with me. I was in grade nine, brand-new to my high school, and was not very athletically dis-positioned, wasn't an area where I excelled, by any means. And it was... So every time I went to gym class, I was always kind of frightened, that something was gonna happen to me or I was gonna look like a goof or somebody was gonna do something awful to me and...

**30:01 NC:** Which is a feeling I'm sure a lot of people can relate to.

**30:03 BB:** I think so, I think so. And so at this one particular day, I'd managed to make it all the way through gym class without anything too awful happening to me or without embarrassing myself too much. And we were in the change room and I was getting changed from my gym clothes back to my regular school clothes when the fire alarm went off. And so, I just kind of sat there with one sock on and one sock off and no shorts on or pants. And everybody's kinda stood up and started to move towards the exit, and I was getting changed near the exit. And so somebody decided it would be a good idea to just pick me up and push me out the door...

**30:52 NC:** Oh, no.

**30:52 BB:** In the midst of changing. So I ended up being propelled out of the doorway of the change room into the school, and then from there out of the school, into the parking lot in front of the school, where everybody lines up when there's a fire drill. So my sort of introduction to the larger school population as a grade niner was to be [chuckle] standing in front of them in my underwear, and that was a pretty embarrassing moment, I have to admit.

**31:27 NC:** Yeah. Well, you know what? You said earlier that there isn't a lesson to be learned from that. I think the lesson to be learned is: If you are by a change room, do not stand by the door because you're always at risk of getting ushered out the door for a fire drill...

**31:39 BB:** Yes.

**31:40 NC:** And going from there. So just before we wrap up, I wanna give you an opportunity to talk a little bit about the research that you're working on now. So can you just give us a little bit of a snapshot of what you're doing right now?

**31:53 BB:** Yeah. Well, I'm always involved in multiple projects, but the one that I'd like to talk about is... Has a title called Building Creative Capacity Through Assessment for Learning in the Arts.

**32:05 NC:** Right.

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**32:05 BB:** So what we're doing there, I'm working with my colleague, Chris DeLuca, and we're looking at how teachers in the arts are nurturing creativity. And in particular, we're interested in how they're leveraging formative assessment practices to help develop students' creativity. And we've chosen the arts as a subject area to do this within because we believe that there's a lot of nurturing of creativity going on in arts classrooms. And we think that a lot of teachers are doing interesting and innovative things in terms of the way that they're providing support for these students through the vehicle of Assessment for Learning, which they probably aren't calling Assessment for Learning, but basically they're giving feedback, they're structuring learning experiences, they're encouraging self-reflection in ways that are helping students develop their creativity within an arts domain, whether it's dance, drama, visual arts or music. So we're really interested in learning from teachers about the ways that they're going about facilitating and nurturing creativity.

**33:19 NC:** Wow, that sounds like it's a really interesting topic, and it sounds like something that a lot of arts educators can actually learn from 'cause it's collaborative and it's learning from other educators and what they're doing and kind of identifying, and similar to what we talked about earlier, is picking off different pieces of what other educators are doing to make it work for yourself in your class. And so...

**33:38 BB:** Exactly, right. Yeah, we're really hoping that we learn something that we can in turn pass on to educators.

**33:48 NC:** Right. So that is going to do it for another episode of Popular Podagogy. Ben, thank you for coming on today and...

**33:53 BB:** My pleasure.

**33:53 NC:** We really appreciate you, you being here and making the time for us.

[music]

**33:58 NC:** If you like what you hear and you are interested, you can subscribe to our podcast on Apple, Google Play, or Stitcher, or you can check us out on the CFRC or Faculty of Education website. Thank you for listening and catch you next time.

[music]