

# **Building Student Empathy and Perspective-taking Skills through Popular Music**

**2020 Innovations in Teaching & Learning conference**

**George Mason University, September 21-25, 2020**



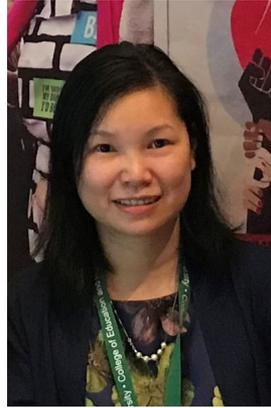
# Presenters



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# Teaching challenges

How do you approach social justice issues with your students in ways that are non-threatening?



# Why does music work?

- Is a powerful means to unite people around the world, who have previously been divided or isolated from each other (Alim, 2007)
- Provides pedagogical benefits for students of all ages, from young children (Shin, 2017) to adults (Lems, 2005)
- Helps students overcome shyness, embarrassment, and anxiety in small group discussions (Cunningham, 2014; Duarte Romero, Tinjacá Bernal, & Carrero Olivares 2012)
- Supports language acquisition (Turner, 2011; Wortham, 2011)
- Affords students of all language backgrounds, ages, and levels of proficiency a way to gain global awareness, explore their own identities, and cross barriers of culture, race, gender, and social class (Harden & Witt, 2018).



**Ella's Song: "We  
Who Believe in  
Freedom Cannot  
Rest Until it Comes"**

**Performed by  
Sweet Honey in the  
Rock**

**Lyrics by Bernice  
Johnson Reagon**



<https://ellabakercenter.org/blog/2013/12/ellas-song-we-who-believe-in-freedom-cannot-rest-until-it-comes>

## Using Ella's Song in a lesson

### Small group discussions:

What does freedom mean to you? Why might different people have different definitions of freedom? What does freedom look like in the United States?

This song was written about a Civil Rights Movement icon. Why do you think the Civil Rights Movement happened? Examples of other freedom movements around the world. Similarities or differences between the movements?

Review responses as a class. Are there similarities, differences, themes?

Listen to the song: Why do young people matter so much to Ella Baker? Why do you think young people participate in and drive freedom movements?

Look at the verse "I'm a woman who speaks in a voice and I must be heard/At times I can be quite difficult, I'll bow to no man's word" why do you think she calls herself difficult?

Written assignment: Have the students watch the first 10 minutes of Eyes on the Prize Part 1 and read about Ella Baker. Put yourself in Ella Baker's place. What kind of world is she struggling for in the song? Why? How do you know? Why has or has not her vision been accomplished?

## Ella's Song

Refrain: We who believe in freedom cannot rest/  
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until  
it comes

Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons  
Is as important as the killing of white men,  
white mothers' sons

The older I get the better I know that the secret of my going on  
Is when the reins are in the hands of the young, who dare to run against the storm.  
To me young people come first They have the courage where we fail  
And if I can but shed some light as they carry us through the gale

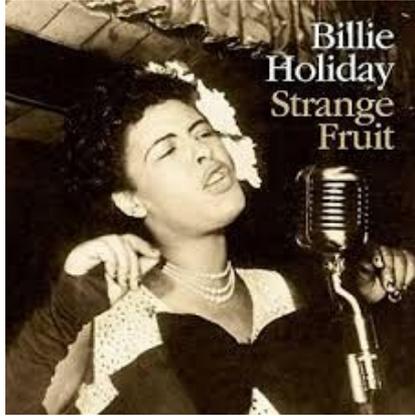
Struggling myself don't mean a whole lot, I've come to realize  
That teaching others to stand up and fight is the only way my struggle survives

I'm a woman who speaks in a voice and I must be heard  
At times I can be quite difficult, I'll bow to no man's word

That which touches me most Is that I had a chance to work with people  
Passing on to others that which was passed on to me

Not needing to clutch for power Not needing the light just to shine on me  
I need to be one in the number as we stand against tyranny

# Other songs



*Strange Fruit (Billie Holiday)*



*We shall not be moved (Pete Seeger)*



*I shall revisit (Trinh Cong Son)*



*I wish I knew how it would feel to be free (Nina Simone)*



*Mohammed Al-Durra: A Song for Jerusalem*



*This little lights of mine (Dixon Loes, H.)*



*Wake me up (Avicii & Aloe Blacc)*



# Wake Me Up by Aloe Blacc



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M\\_o6axAseak](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_o6axAseak)

# Take-aways

- 1) **Song Selection:** Begin with your students' many histories, realities and experiences and connect these to your course objectives
- 2) Ask “**Knowledge for whom?**” or “**Whom does knowledge serve?**”
- 3) Conduct gender, racial and other **identity audits**
- 4) Be careful **not to “out” students**
- 5) Encourage students to **utilize their marginalized** and **privileged positions** and **identities** to develop empathy and take on the perspectives of others.



# Resources

