

Band Queer: Lesbian and Gay Marching and Symphonic Bands and Transformative and Emancipatory Learning Experiences for Adults

Sofia Bitela

Florida International University, USA

Abstract: Lesbian and gay marching and symphonic bands hold rich opportunities for adults to engage in transformative and emancipatory learning experiences.

Transformative learning involves the transformation of an individual's perspective after carefully considering the underlying beliefs and assumptions supporting the old perspective, a process known as critical reflection (Mezirow, 1998). Transformative learning encompasses a complex process whereby adults engage in active meaning-making and change how they see themselves and the world around them (Baumgartner, 2001). The process begins when a person experiences a disorienting dilemma, or a major event "a person experiences as a crisis" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 321). Next, the stage of self-examination leads into thinking critically about the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and personal biases underlying a particular viewpoint. After wrestling with one's thoughts and values, a person eventually reaches the stage in which perspective transformation takes place. Someone exploring his or her sexuality can come to terms with being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer (GLBTQ) through actively engaging in the transformative learning process (King, 2003). However, GLBTQ issues remain relatively invisible in the field of adult education (Grace & Hill, 2004; Hill, 2003, 2004; Rocco & Gallagher, in press).

Emancipatory learning, sometimes considered a subset of transformative learning (Olson, 2005), follows the same intellectual process as transformative learning. Emancipatory learning explicitly seeks social change to correct injustice as a primary goal (Imel, 1999). However, it moves beyond the scope of individual perspective transformation and seeks instead the transformation of a group of people and ultimately, society (Gordon, 1993; Welton, 1993). Emancipatory learning, or liberatory learning, seeks to release individuals, groups, and society from assumptions and perspectives that keep individuals marginalized and disenfranchised. As people become free of these assumptions and beliefs, a more just and equitable society will evolve. Like the African American civil rights movement of the 1960s, the gay rights movement currently attempts to make great strides in gaining equal civil rights and legal recognition for the GLBTQ community (Graff, 2002). Undoubtedly, the gay rights movement of recent years provides important considerations for the role of emancipatory learning for adults.

Spirituality can engage the learner more actively in the transformative and emancipatory learning processes by immersing the learner in the emotional experience of the event (Dirkx, 1997, 2006; Tisdell, 1999; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2001). Dirkx (1997) states "denial of soul within the learning environment is denial of a life force" (p. 85). The GLBTQ Christian community acknowledges the role of music in providing spiritually satisfying experiences whereby music gives hope to the oppressed and induces joy (Anderson, 2005; Chellew-Hodge, 2005), actively celebrating this life force. Music educators mostly consider the community-building aspect of adult music groups (Foster, 2000; LeCroy, 1998), although Mark (1996) addresses the role of

Bitela, S. (2007). Band queer: Lesbian and gay marching and symphonic bands and transformative and emancipatory learning experiences for adults. In S. M. Nielsen & M. S. Plakhotnik (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual College of Education Research Conference: Urban and International Education Section* (pp. 1-6). Miami: Florida International University. http://coeweb.fiu.edu/research_conference/

informal learning in adult music groups. Adult educators view music as an aid in transformative and emancipatory learning (Allsup, 2001; Rowland, 1999; Taylor, 2006; Yorks & Kasl, 2006). Music, then, can be used as a tool for adult learners to enrich their transformative and emancipatory learning experiences. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role lesbian and gay marching and symphonic bands play in providing transformative and emancipatory learning experiences for adults. The paper will discuss a brief history of the Lesbian and Gay Band Association (LGBA), LGBA bands and their role in transformative learning and emancipatory learning.

LGBA Bands

The Lesbian and Gay Band Association currently lacks attention in music education, adult education, and GLBTQ research literature. Brett and Wood (2002) mention LGBA in only one sentence in a 31-page article about lesbian and gay music; a search for gay band or LGBA through GLBTQ research literature, among them including the *Journal of Homosexuality* and *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, yielded zero results.

The Lesbian and Gay Band Association began as a direct consequence of the gay liberation movement in the United States. In 1969, the Stonewall riots in New York City occurred, marking a milestone as the GLBTQ community rebelled against constant police harassment. After that, annual marches held in the last weekend of June commemorated the event and united the community to continue fighting for equal social and civil recognition (Shepard, 2001). Eventually, gay and lesbian marching bands across the country formed to turn the marches into genuine, festive parades. In 1982, bands from New York City (Lesbian and Gay Big Apple Corps), Dallas (Oak Lawn Band), Chicago, Los Angeles (Freedom Band Foundation of Los Angeles), San Francisco (San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Freedom Band), Houston (Houston Pride Band), and Minneapolis-St. Paul (Minnesota Freedom Band) met in Chicago and formed Lesbian and Gay Bands of America as an official organization. The nationwide network changed its name to Lesbian and Gay Band Association after two bands in Canada and two bands in Australia officially joined. Currently, LGBA bands exist in sixteen states in the U.S., the District of Columbia, Canada, and Australia. The bands form in cities with large GLBTQ populations. The official motto for LGBA states its goal as “bringing pride and understanding through music” (www.gaybands.org). In addition to providing a welcoming atmosphere for GLBTQ individuals, LGBA bands hold great potential for emancipatory learning since they have emancipatory roots and provide support for the GLBTQ community and its causes.

LGBA Bands and Transformative Learning

Through various practices, LGBA bands provide an atmosphere conducive to individual transformative learning.

Disorienting Dilemma

The disorienting dilemma consists of an event perceived to be a crisis; somehow it challenges the person’s established assumptions and beliefs about the world and how it functions (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The gay pride parade has been described as a transformative experience invigorating its participants and spectators with new political possibilities (Howe, 2001). LGBA bands perform on an annual basis at these pride parades for their local communities, giving members the chance to think about their positionality within the mainstream heterosexual society. They must consider individual occupational or family circumstances that may hinder them from publicly appearing and performing at the parade. While playing music affirms GLBTQ identity and the community’s integration into mainstream society, such as “I Am What I Am” (Herman, 1983, track 8) from *La Cage Aux Folles* or “I’d Like to Teach the

World to Sing (In Perfect Harmony)” (Salonga, 1971, track 6), the band actively engages the members and the audience in thinking carefully about their sexuality.

Performing at mainstream events provides another opportunity for experiencing a disorienting dilemma. When asked to perform at a mainstream Fourth of July parade, DC’s Different Drummers willingly acquiesced because “the board felt it was good exposure and incorporated ourselves into the larger community” (P. Shepherd, personal communication, November 7, 2006). In August 2003, when the Minnesota Freedom Band hosted the LGBA conference, delegates from LGBA bands worldwide joined together and performed at the Minnesota State Fair for a “somewhat puzzled crowd” (www.gaybands.org). The disorienting dilemma of the band members could consist of starting to think of themselves as genuinely belonging to the larger, mainstream community; the heterosexuals in the audience could have most certainly experienced some slight discomfort at seeing a GLBTQ band perform at family events and begin to rethink prior assumptions about GLBTQ individuals and their community.

Self-Examination and Critical Reflection of Assumptions

At this stage, individuals begin to examine the underlying reasons for their beliefs and assumptions (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Often, people reconsider the underlying power structures holding the beliefs and assumptions in place, questioning if in fact they are somehow wrong. The band’s GLBTQ status “becomes a transformative tool for thinking about the construction of one’s sexual identities vis-à-vis the interrelationships among language, history, and society” (Sears, 1992, p. 152). Unlike other traditional community bands, LGBA bands must face the issues of homophobia and heterosexism in seemingly simple matters such as selecting a rehearsal space and concert venue. If the host is not gay-friendly, or at least perceived to be gay-friendly, then the church or auditorium or any other rehearsal space immediately ceases to be considered for use. Lesbian and gay bands typically do not allow individuals under age 18 to join without parental approval for fear of being accused of pedophilia and ‘recruiting’ youth into the GLBTQ lifestyle. Furthermore, each individual member must carefully consider who he or she will invite to an upcoming concert to avoid any accidental outings and possible subsequent negative repercussions. In each instance, the band and its members must think about what it means to be gay and how basic societal assumptions about the GLBTQ community affects their individual choices as well as the falsehood of these beliefs and assumptions.

Reintegration with the New, Transformed Perspective

At the final stage, after engaging in critical reflection, people incorporate a new, transformed perspective with their previously held cognitive framework (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). LGBA band members learn to accept their own individual GLBTQ status, or role as a heterosexual supporter, and celebrate their sexuality through performing works by GLBTQ composers such as Aaron Copland, Benjamin Britten, and Peter Tchaikovsky and a host of Broadway medleys. The music encountered in LGBA band performances comprises a cultural artifact of GLBTQ life in America; performing such music helps solidify a unique identity and sense of community for GLBTQ individuals (Saliers & Saliers, 2005). More importantly, however, once the band members consciously accept not only their individual status as gay or lesbian but also the band’s status as gay or lesbian, it opens an avenue to begin working on behalf of the GLBTQ community. After realizing the marginalization they and the band must endure because of their sexual minority status, it helps transform their mindset from one of passive acceptance to one of community activism and social action.

LGBA Bands and Emancipatory Learning

LGBA bands provide emancipatory learning through two primary mechanisms: “building cross-cultural empathy through music” and “promoting collective consciousness and “social action through music” (Olson, 2005, p. 57).

Building Cross-Cultural Empathy Through Music

All of the LGBA bands open membership to anyone who wishes to play, regardless of sex, race, nationality, and HIV-status, among other considerations, and most importantly, sexual orientation. By creating an open and tolerant rehearsal and performance space for its members, LGBA bands provide a safe environment for GLBTQ individuals, both closeted and out, and straight allies to collaborate and learn together. Although said in context of teaching band members of different musical abilities, “given tolerance, members will teach each other effectively” (Ryon, 1992, p. 36). A potential straight ally with limited knowledge of the GLBTQ community and its advocates could easily learn through informal conversations and fellow band members. Also, performing at mainstream events, which can create a disorienting dilemma at the individual level, can help foster empathy between the GLBTQ and mainstream heterosexual society at the group level.

Promoting Collective Consciousness and Social Action Through Music

LGBA bands can perform at events benefiting the local community. The Oak Lawn Band, in conjunction with all of the other GLBTQ music groups in Dallas, performed at a Gulf Coast Relief Concert dedicated to assisting GLBTQ victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Other community activism events include performing at rallies and demonstrations against anti-gay legislation, as when the Oak Lawn Band performed at an anti-Federal Marriage Amendment rally that garnered local mainstream media attention. LGBA bands can even engage in social action at national events, as when they performed at the March on Washington, held in 1987, 1993, and 2000; the March on Washington represented a political movement in favor of gay rights (Garnets & D’Augelli, 1994; Graff, 2002; Shepard, 2001). In each of these situations, LGBA bands thought of the larger GLBTQ community at the local and national levels and engaged in actions to benefit it. Although they performed music, their presence could help inspire individuals in the band take action on more concrete and visible levels once they leave the rehearsal or performance space.

Implications for the Field

Adult educators fail to recognize the role community groups play in transformative and emancipatory learning (Imel, 1997, 1999, 2001). The consideration of LGBA bands and their role in transformative and emancipatory learning not only addresses this issue but also the field’s tendency to neglect GLBTQ issues in general. As the gay rights movement continues forward, GLBTQ community groups, and especially LGBA, will play an increasing role in demonstrating visible emotional and political support. Using creative arts as a medium to explore one’s own sexual identity, as well as community identity, and seek support could hold promising prospects for the future (Grace & Wells, 2005). By placing an acute emphasis on building cross-cultural empathy between GLBTQ individuals and their allies and mainstream heterosexual society and promoting social action (Olson, 2005), LGBA bands provide much more than just a pleasant tune in the parade, at the park, or in the performance hall. They inspire GLBTQ adults to continue learning more about the issues affecting their community and find ways to redress societal injustices committed against them. As Don and Emily Saliers relate, “whenever music touches us deeply, the potential for transformation exists. What we think and what we perceive about the world and about ourselves can change” (p. 174).

References

- Allsup, R. E. (2001). Music education as liberatory practice: Exploring the ideas of Milan Kundera. *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 9(2), 3-10.
- Anderson, R. L. (2005, March/April). Music and spirituality. *Whosoever: An Online Magazine for GLBT Christians*, 9(5). Retrieved October 15, 2006 from <http://www.whosoever.org/v9i5/stars.shtml>.
- Baumgartner, L. M. (2001). An update on transformational learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 89, 15-24.
- Brett, P., & Wood, E. (2002). Lesbian and gay music. *Electronic Musicological Review*, 7, 1-31.
- Chelley-Hodge, C. (2005, March/April). Language of the spirit: Gay and lesbian musicians on the mystery of music. *Whosoever: An Online Magazine for GLBT Christians*, 9(5). Retrieved October 15, 2006 from <http://www.whosoever.org/v9i5/music.shtml>.
- Dirkx, J. M. (1997). Nurturing soul in adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, 79-88.
- Dirkx, J. M. (2006). Engaging emotions in adult learning: A Jungian perspective on emotion and transformative learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 109, 15-26.
- Foster, R. (2000). Community bands thrive from coast to coast. *The Instrumentalist*, 54(8), 38-44.
- Garnets, L. D., & D'Augelli, A. R. (1994). Empowering gay and lesbian communities: A call for collaboration with community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 22(4), 447-470.
- Gordon, B. M. (1993). African-American cultural knowledge and liberatory education: Dilemmas, problems, and potentials in a postmodern American society. *Urban Education*, 27(4), 448-470.
- Grace, A. P., & Hill, R. J. (2001, June). *Using queer knowledge to build inclusionary pedagogy in adult education*. Paper presented at the 42nd Annual Adult Education Research Conference, Lansing, MI.
- Grace, A. P., & Hill, R. J. (2004). Positioning queer in adult education: Intervening in politics and praxis in North America. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 36(2), 167-189.
- Grace, A. P., & Wells, K. (2005, June). *Social learning for fugitive learners: The Out is In arts-informed queer community education project in Alberta*. Paper presented at the 46th Annual Adult Education Research Conference, Atlanta, GA.
- Graff, E. J. (2002, October 21). How the culture war was won. *The American Prospect*, 33-36.
- Herman, J. (1983). I am what I am. [Original Broadway cast]. On *La Cage Aux Folles: The Broadway Musical (1983 Original Broadway Cast)*. [CD]. New York: RCA Broadway Victor.
- Hill, R. J. (2003, June). *Working memory at AERC: A queer welcome and a retrospective*. Proceedings of the 1st LGBTQ Pre-Conference at the 44th Annual Adult Education Research Conference, San Francisco, CA.
- Hill, R. J. (2004). Activism as practice: Some queer considerations. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 102, 85-94.
- Howe, A. C. (2001). Queer pilgrimage: The San Francisco homeland and identity tourism. *Cultural Anthropology*, 16(1), 35-61.
- Imel, S. (1997). *Adult learning in groups: Practice application brief*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED404569).

- Imel, S. (1999). *How emancipatory is adult learning?: Myths and realities no. 6*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED436663).
- Imel, S. (2001). *Learning communities/communities of practice: Trends and issues alert no. 26*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED452434).
- King, K. L. (2003, June). *Changing from the inside-out: Transformational learning and the development of GLBT sexual identities among adults*. Proceedings of the 1st LGBTQ Pre-Conference at the 44th Annual Adult Education Research Conference, San Francisco.
- LeCroy, H. F. (1998). Community-based music education: Influences of industrial bands in the American South. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 46(2), 248-264.
- Lesbian and Gay Band Association. Retrieved October 14, 2006 from <http://www.gaybands.org>.
- Mark, M. (1996). Informal learning and adult music education. *Bulletin-Council for Research in Music Education*, 130, 119-122.
- Merriam, S. B., & Caffarella, R. S. (1999). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1998). On critical reflection. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(3), 185-198.
- Olson, K. (2005). Music for community education and emancipatory learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 107, 55-64.
- Rocco, T. S., & Gallagher S. J. (2006). Straight privilege and moral/izing: Issues in career development. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 112, 29-39.
- Rowland, M. L. (1999, June). *Missing the beat: Adult learning through religious music in an African-American church*. Paper presented at the 40th Annual Adult Education Research Conference, DeKalb, IL.
- Ryon, T. (1992). The enduring joys of community band. *The Instrumentalist*, 47, 32-44.
- Saliers, D., & Saliers, E. (2005). *A song to sing, a life to live: Reflections on music as a spiritual practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Salonga, L. (1971). I'd like to teach the world to sing (In perfect harmony). [The New Seekers]. *On We'd Like to Teach the World to Sing*. [CD]. Itasca, IL: Collector's Choice.
- Sears, J. T. (1992). Researching the other/Searching for self: Qualitative research on homosexuality in education. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 147-156.
- Shepard, B. H. (2001, May). The queer/gay assimilationist split: The suits vs. the sluts. *Monthly Review*, 53(1), 49-62.
- Taylor, E. W. (2006). The challenge of teaching for change. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 109, 91-95.
- Tisdell, E. J. (1999). The spiritual dimension of adult development. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 84, 87-95.
- Tisdell, E. J., & Tolliver, D. E. (2001). The role of spirituality in culturally relevant and transformative adult education. *Adult Learning*, 12(3), 13-14.
- Welton, M. (1993). Social revolutionary learning: The new social movements as learning sites. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 43(3), 152-164.
- Yorks, L., & Kasl, E. (2006). I know more than I can say: A taxonomy for using expressive ways of knowing to foster transformative learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 4(1), 43-64.