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## **Electronic Article**

### **MayDay Colloquium 23: The End(s) of Music Education? A Call for Re-Visioning**

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## MayDay Colloquium 23: The End(s) of Music Education? A Call for Re-Visioning

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In the summer of 2011 (June 16–19), the MayDay Group met in Salt Lake City, Utah (USA) for MayDay Colloquium 23, with presentations and discussions on the theme, “The End(s) of Music Education? A Call for Re-Visioning”:

In a time of rapidly changing political processes, power relations, and policies, music educators are challenged to re-examine the taken-for-granted, the status quo, the long-held aims, means, traditions, and ends of music education. The end of history (Francis Fukuyama), the end of art (Arthur Danto, Donald Kuspit), and the end of aesthetic experience (Richard Shusterman) have all been pronounced in recent years. Yet these claims, rather than announcing doomsday, argue for (or for the need for) renewal and re-visioning, for new ends, conceptions and practices and, consequently, for new and newly effective directions, values and benefits.<sup>1</sup>

To this list of authors we could add Neil Postman (1995), *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*: “To put it simply, there is no surer way to bring an end to schooling than for it to have no end” (4). Postman suggests that we need to find a new narrative, a new underlying (or overarching) story (or “God”) to guide and give purpose to action. “Mayday” is a universal call of distress, but as applied by the MayDay Group, it is also an invitation—an *urgent* invitation—to think critically and deeply about the aims of music education and to join together as a diverse group of educators and scholars in cultivating new, sustaining, and sustainable narratives. In this sense, the MayDay narrative has always been and continues to be a positive one: “[a] to apply critical theory and critical thinking to the purposes and practices of music education, and [b] to affirm the central importance of musical participation in human life and, thus, the value of music in the general education of all people” (see About Us at [maydaygroup.org](http://maydaygroup.org)).

A special thanks to **Joelle Lien** and colleagues from the University of Utah, in Salt Lake City, for hosting an enjoyable, well-attended, and carefully prepared and implemented event. In all, four countries were represented by forty-two participants, including eighteen students from six different colleges and universities in three countries. Fourteen presentations

were given and discussed. Joelle writes, “There seemed to be a consensus that the quality of papers was outstanding, and everyone enjoyed the beautiful surroundings.”

Four articles from MayDay Colloquium 23 are included in this issue of ACT. In the lead article, based on his keynote address, **Thomas Regelski** calls for a re-setting of the “default settings” in music education. He introduces John Searle’s concept of Background as foundational to this argument. In this way, of course, Regelski extends his prior applications to music education of Habermas’ *lifeworld* and Bourdieu’s *habitus*: “All three deal with the attitudes, dispositions, values, social institutions, paradigms, and practices that shape who we are, what we conceive and value, and what we can create.” Default settings, then, are socially constructed rather than inherent. And music teachers, Regelski argues, tend to take default settings for granted without critical reflection. “Worse, perhaps; some love their default settings—have come to love their chains—and are comforted by and dependent on the predictability and familiarity of their preferred settings, despite typically problematic results.”

Regelski identifies presentational performance as a primary default setting in school music and suggests participatory performance as an alternative setting, basing his discussion on Thomas Turino’s identification of these twin concepts. Because the focus on presentational performance underemphasizes the “socio-musical pleasures” of student musicing, it does not usually lead to “musicing in their adult lives.” Regelski suggests an “infusion of chamber musics” whereby participation is primary and the quality of the sound is secondary and inclusive of a wide variety of musical practices (praxes): “barbershop singing, steel drum bands, bell choirs, drumming circles, folk guitar for sing-alongs, karaoke, or so-called recreational instruments (e.g., harmonica, electronic keyboards, etc.)” He gives a range of practical examples in which teachers have successfully reset default settings including innovations by Rick Bunting (an original MayDay signatory) in upstate New York, where “Students performed on a wide range of traditional instruments, from dulcimers, to ocarina, fiddle, keyboards, guitar and other fretted instruments (e.g., banjo, ukulele, string and electric bass, etc.), to autoharp, recorders, penny whistles, and the like—all ‘real’ instruments, not classroom or ‘toy’ instruments.” By providing a thorough, practical, and extensive analysis (including 41 informative endnotes), Regelski opens the field to many possible and new guiding narratives. “Widening our selective use of other default settings can begin to exploit the fuller potential that school music can offer as its functional contribution

to graduates' musical lives and can help it restore its factual status as a vital social reality in the school and community.”

**Vincent Bates.** I had two purposes in mind while constructing my essay—“first, to discuss urban oppression and exploitation of rural people and places in American music education and, second, to offer suggestions for how rural ideals and ways of being might constitute a *hidden good*, something generally unnoticed that actually could serve as inspiration for more sustainable practices in fields of music teaching and learning.” In other words, a rural narrative should serve as (borrowing from Regelski) the most appropriate default setting for rural people and, in addition, might offer some new insights on/for the conduct of school music generally.

I first explore what I identify as rural and urban archetypes in the Book of Mormon, Country music, and the fable of the City Mouse and the Country Mouse. With these frameworks in mind, I discuss rural community life as an optimal living arrangement and an alternative to unsustainable modernity. I then trace some historical developments in rural music education in the United States, underscoring oppressive attitudes and trends. In particular, I note the urbanization and consolidation of rural schools and the imposition of elite musical styles and practices. “Overall, the efforts of school music reformers of the progressive era were aimed not simply at reforming school music, but were explicitly intended to modernize the musical tastes and social sensibilities of rural populations.” Finally, I explore how music education might benefit if guided by three rural ideals. *Intrdependence*—living in community with each other and with the natural environment—can be fostered through small ensemble performance of folk and other place-based musics. *Cyclic time* “calls multiple aspects of modern music education into question, including national and state behavioral standards (“Students will be able to \_\_\_\_\_”), linear curriculum models whereby students progress gradually and logically/sequentially from one level of skill or understanding to another, and the isolation of music as a domain separate from all other domains of knowing/doing.” Under the final rural idea, *avoiding risk*, I explore how music educators might foster less-competitive and more sustaining/sustainable practices.

**Vincent Cee** brings together the work of “several authors who wrote in the late 1960s through the early 1980s” (Postman and Weingartner, Alexander, Small, Ferguson, Berman, Capra) in an insightful re-evaluation of advocacy for school music. Cee argues that “the current MENC/NAfME driven Advocacy Movement” developed out of an overriding aim “to

respond to industrial and governmental mandates” and has grown into “a prominent, yet false god/false narrative” that “exists and grows unchecked.” He suggests that music educators build upon the “humanistic, post-modern alternatives to positivism” put forth by his select panel of authors, in order to “provide new leadership for music education that is external, synthetic, and full of momentum.”

In his review of the selected authors, Cee identifies an interesting set of commonalities: They embrace technology as a catalyst for radical change, “reject Cartesian-Newtonian science and are even willing to work past Einstein for a new world view.” They argue for the preservation of the natural environment, espouse “student-centric” themes in education, build upon the thoughts of John Dewey and Marshall McLuhan, and they make predictions, most of which have come true.

Cee argues that “aesthetic” has been replaced by “advocacy” (a utilitarian justification) as a “false God/false narrative” in music education. As such, advocacy provides little help and questionable direction to inservice teachers. “MENC/NAfME is simply a brand name, and we are simply co-opted consumers and marketers of our own obsolescence.” For Cee, music education’s rejection of his list of authors and the corresponding embracing of advocacy, can be attributed to unprecedented Federal intervention in public schooling, a crisis mentality addressed through increased standardized and high-stakes testing, and punitive school reform agendas. He explores some alternatives to advocacy-based narratives, including an extended discussion of the Alaska Summer Research Academy, an “educational endeavor based on experiential learning, open ended possibilities, and fun-based inquiry.”

Finally, **Brent Talbot** asks how we might “engage as teachers, practitioners, and researchers in re-visioning our field to be more relevant, inclusive and understanding of multiple ways of knowing and experiencing music?” To this end, he explores the potentialities of *discourse analysis* (Foucault, Bommaert, Scollon and Scollon): “Discourse analysis holds great potential for re-visioning the field of music education.” Rather than discourses, Foucault’s focus is on discursive *practices*. “Membership in these systems, whether voluntary or not, come with guidelines and tools (some more stringent than others) on how to act, communicate, and operate; and this is known as discursive practice.” Talbot next discusses Blommaert: “Because music, like language, is a social good and social practice that carries meaning and value in social context, I find Blommaert’s work extremely useful in analyzing discourse surrounding music teaching and learning, because ultimately

using ethnography within our studies helps us reveal who we are in situ.” Scollon and Scollon are included in Talbot’s overview “because they take practice into account in a process of nexus analysis.” In addition to rigorous and detailed analyses of social practices, Talbot asserts, research based on these three foundations has the potential of “uncovering how power relationships are woven into social practices at a micro level in complex ways.”

Talbot eloquently suggests that discourse analysis, by explaining “who we are, what we do, and how we do it,” can help us resist centering institutions and understand our own musical histories pursuant to understanding and accepting the histories of others. “If they are aware of various legacies of participation, teachers and students alike gain freedom to discover who they are and freedom to become who they are not yet through music.” Talbot calls for “hopeful action” as we resist practices such as standardization and advocates that discourse analysis can serve as a means for individual music teachers to “resist homogenization of practice” and “share their cherished ways of knowing and making music with students, just as students and teachers are free to explore new ways of knowing and making music together.” Throughout his article, Talbot’s voice is one of pragmatic hope—providing a viable means whereby teachers and scholars in music education can regain a sense of freedom and creativity in the face of institutional inertia. In this way, Talbot, along with the other three authors in this issue of ACT, clearly and consistently addresses the call for a re-visioning of ends in music education.

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<sup>1</sup> Citations for these sources were not given in the Call for Papers. For readers who might find it interesting or useful, I have supplied a list of these references.