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Professional Knowledge: Imagining the Obvious as if it Weren't

Wayne D. Bowman, Editor



*By three methods we may learn wisdom:
First, by reflection, which is noblest;
Second, by imitation, which is easiest;
And third, by experience, which is the bitterest.*

Confucius

Readers familiar with this journal and its origins in the loose-knit, virtual, and global community(ies) known as the Mayday Group will know that the action ideals to whose exploration and elaboration *ACT* is committed have their origins in a distinctive constellation of theoretical orientations: critical theory, philosophical pragmatism, and critical sociology most prominently, with generous admixtures (depending upon people's predilections, circumstances, and concerns) of feminist and postcolonial theory, critical pedagogy, and more. While these orientations clearly differ from one another, they share a fundamental commitment to critique of the status quo—with the ultimate intent of changing or improving it. They seek to ask, in effect: What is really going on here? Is “music education” doing what it believes it is? Might its nature and aims be differently conceptualized? How might it be made more effective? Or, even more fundamentally: What is music? What does music education mean? What does it mean to be musical? To educate? Are we doing what we think we are? What should we be doing? What does society need and expect us to do? (And whose ‘society’, by the way?) What will best benefit our students, and in what ways? The fundamental concern, then, is not so much how well we are doing what we are doing as it is whether we are doing the right thing—and how we presume to know. Of what does professional knowledge in music education consist?

To a disciplinary field enamoured with scientization and technical (how-to) rationality,¹ questions and concerns like these can sometimes seem unwelcome diversions from the business at hand: music education is teaching music, after all, and there's little to be gained by critically examining the field's foundational assumptions. Music education is what it is: it is simply what people are doing when they say they are. So let's get on with it. The

questions most in need of exploration are how to make what we are currently doing more effective and efficient, and how better to garner support for those doings.

In a sense, the field of music education is comprised of what we might call “two solitudes”²—two uneasily co-existing groups of people with distinctly different paradigmatic assumptions about the relationship between theory and practice, what constitutes “the field” or “the profession”, and how best to chart or secure its future.

From one perspective, the field of professional music education consists of researchers and practitioners. The former create or discover professional knowledge by designing experiments, gathering and analysing data, and disseminating results. It falls to the latter, the practitioner, to consume such results and apply them to her or his instructional practice. To be a professional practitioner, on this view, is to approach one’s instructional duties armed with the latest, ‘cutting edge’ techniques and methods. Because a vital part of what characterizes a profession is its fund of specialized knowledge, music education requires (if its claim to professional status is warranted) both people to produce and refine such knowledge and people to consume and apply it.

A number of problems attend this model, not least the separation between researchers and teachers, between theory and practice, between producers and consumers—between those whose job is to think and those whose job is to do. What researchers do is design and execute experiments, gather data, and disseminate results; what practitioners do is teach music.

Another of the problems created by this way of parsing things—a more severe one, perhaps—stems from its assumptions about what constitutes professional knowledge: where it originates, how it is developed and refined, and how it relates to practice (in this case, music teaching). Too often, in this instance, the questions asked by research-specialists fail to connect to the broad, shifting socio-political issues that confront musical instruction: instructional means and processes take precedence over aims and ends. An unfortunately common result is that the idea of research is reduced to the systematic analysis and manipulation of “data.” Where that happens, preoccupation with research methodology (the selection and application of the right tools) takes priority over critical analysis of issues and ends. The eventual outcome is, as Charles Leonhard bluntly put it: “Design, elegant; results, puny.” Research generates data, to be sure; but professional knowledge?

When ‘research’ and the professional knowledge it is supposed to generate are conceived technically, the scope, influence, and importance of both are compromised.

Research is reduced to a process of fine-tuning the relationship between instructional means and preordained ends, and professional knowledge is reduced to instructional method.

Although both of these enterprises may be useful and important, their nature is essentially technical. Their validity is primarily a function of whether the correct methodology has been selected and properly deployed. Interestingly, then, both research and practice are conceived along lines of faithful adherence to method. The mark of good research is the propriety of its methodology, and the hallmark of good instructional practice is similarly methodological—the successful employment of means to ends whose examination lies beyond the purview of research ‘proper’.

Such technical understandings and capacities are undoubtedly useful and are sometimes important, but do they constitute professional knowledge? They are highly specialized and obviously require advanced study, but does what they bring to the field warrant the label “professional”? Technical knowledge is necessary, but is it sufficient? Frequently neglected by technically-oriented research are concerns about the ends to which instructional interventions are devoted (after all, this is not research’s job); considerations as to whether the problems the research seeks to address are practical or primarily technical in nature; and deliberations about whether the questions addressed are the right ones, how they emerge from or qualify (if they do!) instructional concerns, and whether they are formulated so as to improve professional understanding as well as technical execution.

Similarly, on the practitioner’s side of the matter, instructional method may become a highly efficient machine for the achievement of musical outcomes. But “musical” in what (or whose) sense? Is the efficient attainment of outcomes the only or even the primary concern of professional knowledge? If “music” and “education” are things whose meanings are plural, diverse, contested, and changing, and if “music education” exists to serve the needs and interests of students who are themselves plural, diverse, and changing, doesn’t professional knowledge also involve the capacity to choose the right course of action from among many good alternatives? To ask the right questions? To distinguish between the most expedient solution to a problem and the one that is best? Where in the field of music education are these crucial dimensions of professional knowledge and professional practice taught and refined? To respond “nowhere” would be an exaggeration, but the truth is that these crucial capacities and this kind of highly specialized professional knowledge tend not to be systematically or explicitly addressed in music teacher education.

Although the discipline of philosophy is among the places one might expect such concerns to be addressed, philosophical inquiry is a decidedly marginal concern in most music education curricula. This marginal status is not undeserved, some would say, because philosophy is seldom approached as a process devoted to critical inquiry: more often it is dispensed as a body of truths for dutiful memorization by practitioners. This tendency to reduce philosophical inquiry to dogma or doctrine is exacerbated when philosophy is mistaken, as it often is, for advocacy. Like technically-oriented research and instructional method, this use of philosophy to utilitarian ends may be useful, but it is not an acceptable substitute for broader and more critically-oriented inquiry. The danger in dispensing philosophy as a product is that—just as is the case for methodologically-driven research and instruction—it comes to function as a substitute for critical thought rather than as a tool for its enhancement.³

Philosophical inquiry is equally infamous, of course, for its theoretical excesses and for its indifference to practical concerns. It is from predilections like these—predilections that are unfortunately fairly widespread, in part because music education curricula offer so little by way of careful instruction in the area—that we learn to regard philosophy as a mere “diversion”, as the pointless exploration of matters of no immediate consequence to music education. This kind of ungrounded, generalizing inquiry and the abstract systematization in which it so often results impart to philosophy a well-earned reputation for irrelevance to the living, human worlds of music and education.

But philosophy’s potentials should no more be dismissed because of its abuses than should undertakings like research or instructional method. Theoretical inquiry guided by an ethical concern for ‘right action’ is what the practice of philosophy (yes, philosophy should be a practical undertaking) should concern itself with in music education.⁴ These are crucial to the intelligent conduct of research, indispensable components of professional knowledge, and essential complements to instructional know-how. These are also among the distinctive concerns of this journal. Action, theory, and criticism are not three discrete processes, but rather three intimately-related aspects of the same fundamental process—doing that is informed by thinking; thinking that takes and seeks its bearings from action; acting to change habits when needed and recognizing when that need may be arising or has already arisen; criticizing not for the sake of critique but for the sake of better practice and more informed action.

The balance among and between these concerns is delicate and fragile, requiring careful (care-full) monitoring and renewal. Without intentionality and critical reflection, action deteriorates into mere activity. Without practical ballast, theory becomes lighter than air. Professional action is ‘theorized’ practice. And in the social world, any theory worth its salt must have practical implications. Problematic situations requiring critical intelligence are at the heart of all social realities—and both music and education are fundamentally social realities. A truly professional knowledge in music education needs to preserve a place of honour for questioning, resistance, transformation, and change.

I had originally intended to conclude my comments here. But because I am not sure the point I had hoped to make is yet sufficiently clear, I want to approach it from a slightly different angle—or at least in slightly different terms—before moving on. Research must not be reduced to method, the kind of undertaking preoccupied with technical expertise and conducted by a select few for the consumption and benefit of the many. It needs to become a habit for all music educators—“habit” in Dewey’s pragmatist sense of “special sensitivities,” guided by “standing predilections and aversions.”⁵ The development of such habits needs to be of paramount concern in music teacher preparation and in professional practice at all levels.

Research, Dewey tried to show us, is not the kind of thing that improves educational practice directly. It does so (if and when it does) primarily indirectly, by expanding the range of fruitful possibilities for future action and future decisions—“through the medium,” in Dewey’s words, “of an altered mental attitude.”⁶ In the changing world of human endeavour, research does not relate to practice as a template for application, because in the changing world of human endeavour application always requires interpretation, imagination, and creativity. The primary way research improves music education, then, is by helping us approach new problems more intelligently, more imaginatively, more creatively, and more flexibly. And it does this not so much by discovering and dispensing facts as by helping us better understand problems and their significance for action.

Problems are not things to be done away with by research, temporary obstacles whose removal secures a path toward truth: problems are themselves valuable assets. And inquiry

doesn't so much "solve" problems as transform them into other problems. Every "solution" (resolution?) creates new conditions that in turn implicate new problems. The elimination of problems is not the purpose of inquiry, then, because without problems inquiry no longer exists. The existence of problems is not a deplorable situation from which research offers to deliver us. The resolution of problems is useful and desirable for reasons that have nothing to do with their elimination. Instead of a quest for ultimate truth, inquiry is a search for better beliefs and habits, beliefs and habits that foster better living.

It concerns me that music education's professional neglect of theoretical and philosophical inquiry (and our ensuing preoccupation with methods and means, whether as researchers or instructional practitioners) has the effect of confining questions about music's and music education's fundamental nature(s) and value(s) to inner arbitration: to deliberation in terms conceived exclusively within the framework of past and current practice. Bad habits like these exempt musical and music educational practices from critique through perspectives that might contribute to their reconstruction—that might change our habits—should they become, as I believe they have, misdirected or alien to people's lives and joys. Musical experience, musical education, and related research mustn't be confined to what those who dominate current practice regard as its internal goods. What matters most is not the efficiency with which current practice protects and delivers existing goods; what matters most is *improving the effectiveness of music education*—gauged by the richness, diversity, frequency, and depth of people's musical engagements, even (and perhaps especially) where they lie outside the practices with which musicians, educators, and researchers have conventionally concerned themselves. I submit that philosophical inquiry plays an indispensable role in that effort,⁷ one without which our direction and vitality as a profession are in question.

This issue consists of five provocative essays, each of which invites us in one way or another to think more critically about who we are and what we are about as music educators. Because things often aren't what they appear to be, among the more important professional capacities we should be developing as music education professionals is the recognition that what may appear natural, inevitable, and obvious is not necessarily so. From the perspective of those who are deeply invested in the status quo—often because of the comfort and privilege it

affords them—this may sound negative. But from the perspective of informed action dedicated to things like growth, transformation, and change, it is among our most precious resources, a crucial part of what makes music educators professional.

Vincent Bates' essay emerges from close critical reflection on his personal music educational practice, exploring the potential applicability to music education of a field of inquiry generally known as 'human needs theory': a collection of theoretical approaches that share the common conviction that human behaviour attends the pursuit of basic human needs like freedom, love and belonging, power or control, pleasure, and the like. Bates begins by inviting us to consider whose needs school music programs typically exist to serve: those of the students, their parents, and the broader community, or those of music teachers, their habitual practices, and the music education establishment. He shares with us his efforts to redesign his school music program with a view to basic student needs—efforts that were warmly welcomed by students, parents, and community *but not by the music education establishment*. Bates writes compellingly and caringly about the tensions between institutions and individuals—or as he also puts it, the tension between “structures and agency”—making a number of points worthy of careful consideration by music educators. First, for those whose work is dedicated to the well-being of others, meeting basic human needs is nothing short of a moral imperative. Second, a vital part of professionalism is “letting go” of comfortable routines and habits when circumstances warrant. And third, music educators need to re-think their commitments to “enforcement and advocacy” as responses to reluctance, scepticism, and resistance from students and others. Where human needs are met (and, Bates suggests, music itself is *not* a basic human need) it is seldom necessary to resort to arm-twisting, heavy-handed persuasion, or the like. Bates suggests that commitment to fulfilling such basic needs as autonomy, relatedness, and competence might help music educators re-examine instructional and curricular imperatives, developing pedagogical approaches that are more cooperative and responsive in nature and outcome.

Randall Allsup's essay begins with the seemingly innocuous claim that music is a reflection of the culture that produces it, but by examining two strongly contrasting American musical practices he asks us, in effect, “Of what kind of culture is America's music a record?” His answer invokes discomfiting themes of oppression, discrimination, and violence. The heart and the psychology of American culture, he implies, includes trouble, torment, and violence, and music plays a role in that. If this presents a strong contrast to more traditional,

comforting accounts of music as an inherently civilizing, ennobling phenomenon—or of music as a vehicle, if you will, for aesthetic education—one needs only peruse <http://www.motherjones.com/news/featurex/2008/03/torture-playlist.html> (accessed 20.02.2009) for a list of the tunes used in American military prisons and on bases “to induce sleep deprivation, ‘prolong capture shock’, disorient detainees during interrogations—and also drown out screams.”⁸ Music is not the charming, innocent phenomenon our advocacy arguments have long sought to portray. If music is not innocent, implies Allsup, neither can music education be innocent. His essay presents a significant challenge to music educators who are obliged, Allsup seems to suggest, to engage students in alternative ways of understanding music, ways that help them “imagine the obvious as if it were otherwise.”

In his provocatively entitled essay, Arnold Berleant takes on what he has come to regard as perhaps the most pernicious of false beliefs about music: the notion that music is the language of emotion. Berleant succinctly examines many of the tired but tenacious misconceptions associated with such claims, with the intent of dispelling misguided assumptions which, left unaddressed, have the effect in music education of substituting “abstractions” for “experience.” Music, argues Berleant, involves complex body-mind states that have little to do with the superficial abstractions we call emotions (a stance readers might wish to compare with claims advanced by philosopher Peter Kivy): emotion is mere shorthand for experiential states that are inchoate, unique, fleeting, and ultimately unclassifiable. A major concern of musical instruction, then, should be re-education: a process devoted to dispelling pernicious misconceptions like this language-of-emotions myth. Music education should seek to help students understand music in its own terms, not as an instance of something else. Key to the view of music Berleant wants to advance is the understanding that music does not exist in the abstract: it is immediate, contextually-situated, or, as he puts it, “environmental.” There is, he asserts boldly, “no musical object, no aesthetic object, no object as such.” Rather than *describing* music, then—basing our instructional approaches on assumptions about *what* music is or *what* it may adventitiously resemble—Berleant advises us to *locate* it, to ask, perhaps, *where* and *when* it is—and *how*. Music educators should base musical instruction upon an understanding of musical experience as a perceptual field.

Thomas Regelski’s essay takes as its point of departure the pragmatic conviction that meanings and values are functions of use: that claims to being *good* are at root claims about what things are good *for*. On this view, musical value and the value of musical instruction are

never inherent, never intrinsic, never self-justified or autonomous; rather, they are contingent, relative, and reliant upon the ways they serve human life and living (reliant, in other words, upon the uses to which they are successfully put). Critical of the field of “school music” for a curricular orientation he characterizes as *appreciation/connoisseurship* and for its increasing isolation from the worlds of musical and educational praxis, Regelski asserts that *method in school music has become the curriculum*: methodological (how-to) concerns have become paramount. And as the actual (diverse, multiple, changing) needs of student-clients have become marginalized, concerns over “positioning” (of directors, of programs, etc.) within the field have become more important than the actual differences musical instruction makes in the lives of students and society. As music education’s use-values become less evident to the worlds of praxis the field exists to serve, music educators are forced to turn to advocacy: “fine-sounding words,” as Regelski puts it, that generally fail to focus on value that musical instruction demonstrably adds to the health and vitality of music in people’s lives. As an alternative Regelski urges a turn to the reflective practice characteristic of all the so-called helping professions: an orientation that begins with the needs of clients and judges successful results by (a) what students *are able to do* as a result of instruction, and (b) what students eventually *choose to do* as result of the school music curriculum. School-based music curricula should be judged, in other words, by the life-long and life-wide uses to which musical/instructional ‘services’ are put. The fundamental challenge, as Regelski sees it, is to base school music curricula on the social functions of music. We should engage in school music, one might say, not for the sake of music, but for the sake of better life and living. And these must not be mere articles of faith: they must be manifest in things students are able to, are actually inclined to do, and can be seen to do as a result of instruction.

Hildegard Froehlich’s essay explores a term often invoked by music educators and policy “wonks”: community. Indeed, central among the oft-claimed solutions to the perceived insularity of school music are things like community outreach, community service, community involvement, community music education, and so on. Well-intended and altruistic though these ideas no doubt are, the notion of “community” is extraordinarily elusive and complex. Many sociologists, Froehlich reminds us, consider “community” a warm, fuzzy term, with nostalgic connotations of unity and harmony that don’t necessarily withstand close scrutiny. It is one of the most elusive and vaguest terms in sociology, a rhetorical flourish that often represents little more than a conceptual muddle. The trouble for music education,

suggests Froehlich, is that unexamined invocations of community may actually impede rather than facilitate well-guided action and constructive activism. What, then, is community? Who is this public to whom “we” turn for support, whom “we” strive to serve? Are (“we”) music educators not also a community of sorts? Isn’t everyone a member of multiple communities? Froehlich explores these questions through lenses of symbolic interactionism, an analytical tool that maintains meaning and identity are constructed through interactions with others, and that others’ meanings and identities are constructed in the same way. Froehlich offers a number of different ways of conceptualizing community: as macro- and micro-level affiliations, as geo-political configurations, as practice communities, as close personal bonds, and so on. She also draws an intriguing distinction between like-minded and other-minded senses of community.

Froehlich succeeds in showing very clearly that “community” is not at all the straight-ahead term it is often assumed to be; that it is, rather, something of a catch-all term for relations that are fluid, diverse, and complex; and that casual references to community by music educators can be deeply problematic. In particular, the intimate relationship between “us” and “them”, between who “we” are and who “they” are, is one that warrants careful and critical scrutiny by those concerned with policy in music education. Froehlich’s primary point is one of considerable import: those who would transform extant special interest groups into communities of practice (two very different kinds of ‘community’, as she shows us) need to resist temptations to “reach out to the community” and focus more carefully on “living purposefully and consciously *in* the community.”

Because the obvious so often isn’t, critical discernment is a crucial part of knowledge that is truly professional.

Notes

¹ One might speculate that music education's infatuation with the 'hardness' of science and 'control' claimed by iron-clad methods are in large part compensatory: an effort to compensate for the softness, unpredictability, and alignment with feelings (stereotypically feminine traits, note) attributed to music by modernist aesthetic theory and philosophical idealism with which it is closely allied.

² My allusion here is Canadian: Canada's "two solitudes" are its French and English cultures: co-existing, but not integrated.

³ "Critical" here and throughout this essay means "discerning" – not negatively judgmental.

⁴ This is admittedly a sweeping claim, and one that begs elaboration. However, I stand by it and hope its bluntness may help generate the kind of deliberation it warrants.

⁵ *Human Nature and Conduct*. In *The Middle Works (1899-1924)* vol. 14, page 32. Dewey's statement continues "... rather than bare recurrence of specific acts."

⁶ *The Sources of a Science Education*. In *The Later Works (1925-53)* vol. 5, page 15.

⁷ Again, I am not advocating the pursuit of theory as something opposed to practice. Indeed, on pragmatist views, theory and practice are inseparable features (merely different emphases) of the same fundamental process. The point for research that follows, I think, is that research requires theory (which is not at all to say that it takes its marching orders from theory), and that to that extent theoretical/philosophy inquiry and research must not be viewed as discrete concerns. Perhaps, then, it is inadvisable to consider philosophical inquiry a discrete mode or method of research, since that may have the unintended effect of isolating such work, and consigning it to a scholarly ghetto.

⁸ See also Suzanne Cusick's 2006 essay, "Music as Torture/Music as Weapon" in volume 10 of *Transcultural Music Review* (http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/trans10/cusick_eng.htm).