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Dewey, Communication, and *Habitus*

An Essay-Review of Erkki Kilpinen's *The Enormous Fly-Wheel¹ of Society: Pragmatism's Habitual Conception of Action and Social Theory*

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"Who can prove," humorist George Carlin asks, "that the alphabet is in alphabetical order?" In an exploration of *habitus*, it is right to engage insights as diverse as Carlin's and extensive as critiques by Edward T. Hall (1959, 1966, 1976/1981). Among other things, Hall cautions us against *extension transference (ET)*, the process by which it is believed, for example, "...that language *was* thought. In a sense [Sapir and Whorf] were correct if one looks only at the incredible influence that language exerts on thought" (1976/1981, p. 31, emphasis his).² Instead, one must look beyond the influence of language and other extensions of human beings on thought, an issue to which I shall return later, but Erkki Kilpinen's choice of the flywheel metaphor as an organizing theme is a case in point: That is, the influence of *descriptions* of social dynamics on thinking about society pervasively colors our understanding of ourselves.

In his book, Kilpinen takes on the narrow analytical task of showing how pragmatism grounded American sociology over the last 125 years (p. 18) and how American and European social theories relate to each other. Kilpinen's study of the heritage of European-American social theory successfully exposes the earnest scientism and, yes, the intellectual snobbery of modernist sociology. Kilpinen hints that, in spite of the Lakoff and Johnson obituary for the modernist era (1999 *passim*), the core assumptions of modernity in American pragmatism aren't to be so easily dismissed. (396-401).

Kilpinen's masterful grasp of 125 years of pragmatic and pragmatistic philosophy, its predecessors and antecedents, both in Europe and America, requires much of the reader. The tour is painfully slow, through a narrow hallway, peering through

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every crack between the floorboards at other scenes, and then examining each crack both in itself and in its relationships with other cracks. However, the accumulated weight of the journey achieves its purpose of showing how pervasively infused sociological theory in the 20th century was with pragmatist assumptions and methods. Although Kilpinen has wisely limited the work to this purpose, he takes his tourists' eyes off the cracks in the floor periodically to glance out a few windows, suggesting that pragmatism's influence on contemporary psychology, political science, and axiology are topics worth considering, albeit on another day.

That said, the hallway metaphor is apt in its hint of some windows that were unfortunately left out of the architect's plans, and in suggesting that the hallway should be widened:

1) Kilpinen gives little consideration to social theory's emergence early in the twentieth century in, for example, the work of William Graham Sumner. Also, although Alfred North Whitehead was not a pragmatist, his philosophy of organism resonated well with the pragmatists' broader attempts and he acknowledges their contributions (1929/1969, p. vii).³ Nor does Kilpinen acknowledge Bertrand Russell's early twentieth century contributions in the philosophy of science; contributions that show how empirical data can be a proper part of speculative reason as well as of practical reason (see also Whitehead 1929), thereby rationalizing the use of findings in fast-emerging early twentieth-century disciplines like cognitive psychology, cultural anthropology, and empirical sociology to emerging understandings of social theory. But I excuse Kilpinen on this because it would have extended his project beyond its purposes – more work for another day.

2) On the other hand, Kilpinen's selection of John Dewey's ideas in support of this business omits important material that would have contributed mightily to his cause. Arguably, *Experience and Nature* (1925 and subsequent editions) is the shortest path to understanding the perspective behind the rest of Dewey's works. In this place we find Dewey's metaphysics of naturalism most thoroughly explained, and his theory of

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knowing most completely integrated with other kinds of experience, including social life. Understanding pragmatism is one thing. Making the case for its application to social theory without this particular contribution from Dewey emphasizes technical definitions for the term *pragmatism*, weakens the relevance of Dewey's other works to the problem at hand, and reduces the impact of the argument that Kilpinen attempts to make. That is, *habitus*, if it is to be a robust enough metaphor for the nexus of that which makes life uniquely human, needs to escape the *extension transference* of which Hall spoke by taking in more of what makes human life possible. Dewey's naturalism provides a pragmatistic explication of this process.

3) Bringing Dewey's metaphysics into the mix would also have alleviated some of the anthropocentric narrowness of Kilpinen's work, broadening the hallway his book permits his readers to traverse by addressing more life forms than we mere humans. And it could have done so without straying from under the pragmatist umbrella. Admittedly, sociology is about human life and this is a book about sociology. However, in his effort to critique sociology Kilpinen restricts its insights to human behavior, and thereby overlooks or discounts potential parallels in other life forms, to say nothing of human genetic predispositions toward sociality (he joins others in dismissing such fields as sociobiology, on, e.g., p.279). Dewey's work lays conceptual foundations for a broader and more inclusive understanding of sociology, foundations that predate the important work of Edward O. Wilson.

In a nod to early cognitive psychology, Kilpinen validates insights by George Herbert Mead, who glimpsed ideas similar to later uses of concepts such as assimilation and accommodation (in Jean Piaget, for example). To do this, Kilpinen uses passages like this one: "...[C]hanges are going on in the universe, and ... as a consequence of these changes the universe is becoming a different universe. Intelligence is but one aspect of this change. It is a change that is part of an ongoing living process that tends to maintain itself" (Mead 1932, p. 4, discussed by Kilpinen, 160ff). Kilpinen permits the reader to take this passage anthropocentrically, because one ordinarily confines 'intelligence' to

humans. But on the face of it Mead seems not assume this anthropomorphic stance, and Mead's debt to Deweyan thought is well known. In addition, although such ideas as adaptive behavior in non-humans are both organicist and naturalist, the latter of these is more salient than the former in Kilpinen's review. Organicism is a primary motivation in Whitehead's cosmology and naturalism is basic in Dewey's metaphysics: these two can usefully be read together.

The primary concern of this essay review, then, is not the technical problem of whether Kilpinen used Dewey's best formulations in his account of *habitus*, but rather to bring Dewey's metaphysics (primarily as set out in *Experience and Nature* [1925/1926]) to the general problems of social theory treated by Kilpinen.

Kilpinen's framework re-framed

Kilpinen's tour seems focused on the following three destinations – destinations that, formulated as questions, I will also ask of Dewey, especially as he answers them in *Experience and Nature*⁴:



1. What core idea(s) offer a robust account of human life, especially when compared with those upon which social theorists have traditionally focused our attention?
2. What of society in humans? That is, how do human genetic pre-dispositions and capacities, shared knowledge and experience, and individual efficacy relate?
3. How do these square with the human predilection toward assuming hegemony in nature and framing much of what we do as choice-based behavior?

Human living

With William James and other pragmatists, Dewey railed against “the bifurcation of nature.” He argued not only against Cartesian dualisms but also against those that are captured in ordinary discourse: humans (he uses “man” almost exclusively) vs. nature, we vs. they, religion vs. psychology, science vs. myth, art vs. technology, and on and on.

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Another important anti-dualist of Dewey's era was Alfred North Whitehead who attempted "...to construct a system of ideas which bring the aesthetic, moral, and religious interests into relation with those concepts of the world which have their origin in natural science" (Whitehead 1929/1969, vi). Dewey, by contrast, speculated on epistemological universals first and last: "Thus conceived [as unities rather than dualisms in living things] there is no problem of the relation of physical *and* psychic. There are [only] specifiable empirical events marked by distinctive qualities and efficacies" (*E&N* 255, emphasis his). Where Whitehead strived to bridge dualisms, Dewey ignored them or argued them away, creating syntheses rather than mergers.

All life, including plant life, for Dewey, occurs in situations – all-inclusive, pervasive contexts – that may or may not include human actors. "The sacred and the accursed are potentialities of the same situation; and there is no category of things which has not embodied the sacred and accursed..." (*E&N* 41). This notion underlies most of Dewey's works, from *The Educational Situation* (1902) and *Democracy and Education* (1916) through his epistemological work with Arthur Fisher Bentley in the 1940s. The unit of analysis for Dewey is the situation, not a human being versus an environment, nor any sort of X versus Y. Living, for Dewey was not dualistic. "An organism does not live *in* an environment; it lives by means of an environment" (1938, 25; his italics).

Plasticity marks the quality of a living organism that allows it to remain viable. Its major importance is in the formation of habits, "... to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation ... the power to *develop dispositions*. Without it [plasticity] the acquisition of habits is impossible" (1916/1961, 44; his italics).

Translated to explanations of social and cultural life, then, Dewey "...made a radical contrast between the evolutionary process which is based on conflict and competition, and the process of personal development in a social community..." (Schneider 1970, p. 99). Human life for Dewey was an inescapable stream of constant integration of internal conditions with surroundings that included other humans and their

ways. But this was not a dualism in Dewey: “[L]iving as an empirical affair is not something which goes on below the skin-surface of an organism: it is always an inclusive affair involving connection, interaction of what is within the organic body and what lies outside in space and time, and with higher organisms far outside” (E&N 282) .

This drives the notion of habit deeper into living a human life (or plant life, even) than Kilpinen allows. Dewey sees habits not as mere advantages or impediments laid on an organism by external conditions, nor even as logical outcomes of the actions of living beings, but as the *sine qua non* of all viable, plastic life forms, including human life forms. Although Dewey doesn’t use the term, the *habitus*, for him, then, is that condition without which the life of an organism would cease.

Society’s dynamic

The essential, life-giving engine of human society, for Dewey – its “great flywheel” – is communication. Experience provides the fuel and the energy that keep the great flywheel spinning in human life:

Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful. That things should be able to pass from the plane of external pushing and pulling to that of revealing themselves to man, and thereby to themselves; and that the fruit of communication should be participation, sharing, is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales.

(E&N 166)

It is on this point, communication, that Dewey contrasts human life with other life forms. He admits that “sub-human animals” (E&N 176) behave socially, but through actions that are signaling acts, responded to, perhaps, by other life forms in the vicinity, but by reflex, conditioned reflex usually. “While signaling acts are a material condition of language they are not language nor yet are they its *sufficient* condition” (E&N 177, emphasis his). There is not the semiotic condition of partnership – of commonly shared,

experience-grounded meaning – that exists in human communication, according to Dewey. Dewey's semiotics is essentially Peircian, and there is little to say about it here beyond what Kilpinen has so thoroughly analyzed.

It is instructive at this point to consult Sumner on the business of dynamic models of society, since he was an important pioneer in using anthropological knowledge for social theorizing. In *Folkways* (1906/1959, p. 40ff), Sumner posits a dynamic model of society that combines function and human characteristics with stratification in order to show graphically how large social groups achieve stability. Its genesis is a standard curve representing a distribution of characteristics of people, from “genius” and “talent” at one end to “defective, dependent, and delinquent” people at the other. The curve is duplicated and the resulting two curves are joined symmetrically. The onion-shaped result is turned on end, resembling a child's spinning toy, a top or *dreidel*⁵. When ‘spun’ faster or slower by the people of genius and talent at the upper end of the model, the resulting energy is resisted not only by inertia in the middle but also in active ways by the people at the bottom. What keeps society stable at all are the masses in the bulging middle of the model. This ‘flywheel effect’ keeps society's *dreidel* upright, in a sort of stasis that I have called elsewhere *dynamic permanence* (Gates, 1994). Sumner goes on to defend a four-factor ‘engine’ for the model: the intellectual, moral, economic, and physical resources of a society (p. 41ff). Mores are what give social direction and energy their content.

Writing just a few years later, and without direct reference to Sumner, Dewey critiques the result while supporting Sumner's scientific approach (1916/1961, chapter 7):

In seeking [the measure for the worth] of any society, we have to avoid two extremes. We cannot set up, out of our heads, something we regard as an ideal society. We must base our conception upon societies which actually exist, in order to have any assurance that our ideal is a practicable one. But, as we have just seen [by showing how static models can describe the structure of a social group without critiquing its values], the ideal cannot simply repeat the traits which are actually found. The problem is to extract the desirable traits of forms of community life which actually exist, and employ them to criticize undesirable features and suggest improvement.

(p. 83)

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Progressivist and reconstructionist values are apparent here in Dewey, and he uses the rest of the chapter to critique several attempts to define the ideal society. Human genetics are of minor importance in Dewey: he merely accepts them. Rather, he concentrates on what can be done to capitalize on human capacities in the service of effective living.

It is clear throughout his writings on human affairs that Dewey intended to get at the core of things, and in *Experience and Nature* he defends the notion that communication – not structure nor function, the dual analytical paradigm of the time in social theorizing – was the beating heart of human social affairs, the fuel and energy for its ‘flywheel’.

Intention, individuality and agency

If Dewey were prone to vernacular expressions, he’d ask in the face of *habitus*, “What’s a poor body to do?” How can individuals feel efficacious, if not make actual differences in the social conditions that surround them?

Democracy is a central theme in Dewey’s educational, social and political works. The democratic social contract is as complex as it gets, but this problem was not merely an intellectual challenge to Dewey. In the decade following his retirement in 1930 from his professorial duties at Columbia University, he was a prominent social activist and prolific critic of political affairs from a liberal democratic point of view.⁶ He worked publicly and wrote widely on social justice issues.

Dewey’s analytical treatment of the individual human in *Experience and Nature*, however, is nourished more by his psychological roots than by his ethics. He attempts there to develop the complex relationships among reflexive behavior, consciousness, intention, induction, education⁷, consummation, learning and more. Kilpinen, to his credit, provides an extensive account of these matters in his treatment of action. My contribution is merely to add Dewey’s voice in *Experience and Nature* to those whom Kilpinen already asks us to hear from Dewey and others on the issue of action.

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Dewey's problem was to integrate an explanation of unique acts – individualism – with a synthesis of habit development in persons and pervasive communication – discourse that emerges in general social knowledge. His account of ends, means, and consummation is famous enough that, although it needs to be brought into this mix, I'll do it by reminding the reader of it rather than to spell it out here. The reading of Dewey on this issue is at its most resistant to easy summary – a journey that changes the reader rather than one that charts some clear landmarks. I'll not re-take the journey here because I have little to add to what is well known, nor will I attempt to map it, but identify a key idea or two on the current point.

Situation, for Dewey, was the stuff of living. People live within situations of all kinds and respond successfully or less so, depending upon their abilities to *absorb* and *use* each situation – to make it a part of them – rather than to be defeated by it or to maintain some sort of distance from it. Since people vary in their abilities to do this, they also vary in whatever descriptions of them can be said to be valid. But such descriptions, for Dewey, are not confined to mere observables: they extend to include the most pervasive uses of the term *mind*. Put another way, Dewey's focus was not on an individual's thoughts but on the individual's *thinking*, not merely on *behavior* but on *action*. This latter is how persons live in integration *with* environments not merely *in* them.

This does not mean that people are free of aspiration and invention. Dewey's work undergirds later choice theory and theories of expectation. But he notes that such impulses have substance: "Man lives by expectation, but the content of expectation, *what* is anticipated, depends upon memory; and memories are group affairs before they are personal recalls" (*E&N* 26, his emphasis). And, as Hall cautioned in his concept of *extension transference*, language does not provide enough data to illuminate the phenomenon. Hall goes on (p. 38) to write that, "The study of man is a study of his extensions." Left at that, semiotics and philosophical analyses would seem to be apt tools. However, on the next page: "The danger [in what Hall calls second- or third-generation

extension systems, p. 31] is that real-life problems are dismissed while philosophical and theoretical systems are treated as real." (p. 39) Dewey's naturalism side-steps this danger.

So then...

Dewey's *Experience and Nature* is well worth bringing into Kilpinen's argument.

Being and having, exercising and suffering such things as these [institutions, arts, technologies, households], exist in the open and public world. As we digest foods derived from the extra-personal world long before we study or are aware of processes occurring in our own bodily tissues, so we live in a world of objective acceptances and compulsions long before we are aware of attitudes of our own, and of the action of say the nervous system, in bringing us into effective relationship with them.

(E&N 24)

Individuality in Dewey becomes agency, personal as well as social, but only when coupled with communication (in Dewey, the whole phenomenon, not merely a subcategory such as language, nor as a collection of markers of *habitus*) and supported by a naturalist perspective that includes humans without subsuming them as mere atoms put together differently nor raising them up as controllers of nature. Communication in Dewey is that feature of social life that integrates individuals in the myriad kinds of relationships we call society. This resource (communication) is not a mere explanation of what happens to humans – not merely the gradual decoding of a received set of symbols and sounds that illuminate the "buzzing, blooming confusion" of life around us – but the very life force of society, and Dewey is careful to pull imagination, creativity, the arts, aberrations of all kinds, etc. into the mix. Communication for Dewey is more than can be accounted for by appealing to the most robust semiotic theories. Communication is what people do. It is human being and belonging, synthesized.

If one were to extend these ideas, then, into music teaching and learning, one can wonder how the notion of *habitus* affects the mix of influences on its practice. What differences would it make in the conduct of music teachers if we saw *habitus* clearly?

Because this is not intended as a treatise on music education, I shall use my reflections on Kilpinen's book to suggest a few questions for investigation rather than to provide answers.

First, how are the *habitus* and music learning related? That one's easy. It is now widely understood that music learning begins before birth, and that the content of this learning is determined by the musical environment of the mother and other care-givers. Left to our own devices after birth, then, in our personal musical lives we absorb, learn, create, contribute to, make use of, and accept or reject experiences that have musical components based on what is at hand.

However, putting a Deweyan emphasis on this commonplace changes its importance: We live musically not *in* a musical environment, but *by means of* a musical environment. We have based our pedagogical actions on the assumption that these musical environments (actually: life-worlds, *lebenswelten*) are external to people – describable, therefore, in general terms, and subject, therefore, to manipulation "for the good of the students." Musical lives, however, are lived personally – not externally and in general terms. Music teachers are just now beginning to come to grips with this idea. Musical life-worlds in a Deweyan rationale are deeper waters than can be dammed up or channeled merely by altering the mix of musical resources through curricular manipulation. Furthermore, because music learning is pre-natal, individualized musical life-worlds have a huge head-start.

Second, what then are the socio-cultural functions of music teaching and music study? In what sense can music educators change a localized *habitus*? Can we ignore it? use it? circumvent it? combat it? Does music education create more *habitus*-related problems than it solves? Or do music teachers strive to avoid *praxial* questions by seeking to create a separate, utopian *habitus*, one that so far has proved to be so weak by comparison to students' *own* life-worlds that it gives the musical culture no sporting competition? From what source does this complex of pedagogical actions come? What

are the ethical implications of intervening in the musical lives and learning processes of students, because that is precisely what music teachers are hired to do?

In my view (Gates, 1990) there is a universal music teaching problem: *To preserve a culture's musical skills, knowledge, values, and experiences by causing following generations to learn them.* From whom or where do music teachers derive their warrant for making this kind of claim? Or is it merely hubris on the part of music teachers to assume that we can add value to the musical life-worlds of our students?

Standards of care can regulate music teachers in pursuit of their actions on behalf of students, and can protect them from both hubris and assumptions of cultural superiority. In my view, there is a core standard of care in music education that provides the potential for peer regulation against both vices: *One should intervene in the music learning processes of another person only if one can improve them.* This standard recognizes that incidental music learning takes place and obligates music teachers to take it into account. Further, it concentrates less on preservation than it does on participation. It also obligates music teachers to define what it means to improve musical learning processes. This is a just obligation.

However, neither the preservation ideal nor the core standard of care obligate music teachers to expand the musical horizons of students by engaging them in musical situations outside of their (generalized or individualized) life-worlds. The way out of this box is to recognize that improving the music learning processes of students includes confrontations with alternative life-worlds in music. One's values remain largely unexamined until they are challenged by alternatives, and musical values and preferences are no different.

The *habitus*, then, provides both professional and musical reasons for music teachers to expand the social life-worlds of their students through music. Interacting with a wide variety of others in mindfully musical ways opens social experience to insights that language alone cannot achieve. And, social experience today can no longer be hemmed in – dammed up in stagnant pools of captured habits, or in curriculums and

time-worn music programs. Communication *is* the *habitus* springing from human sociality, and music functions best in that world.

One of music's values, and one that we would do well to emphasize more, is the *creative* adoption of musical gestures from across musical 'boundaries'. This process is universal. It is the creative, active synthesis of musical material that keeps musical cultures alive, not mere preservation in musical museums or school programs. Music educators can preserve musical values such as these by engaging people with musicians outside their own worlds. They can manage music learning processes mindfully rather than by inertia. If human social processes such as these are as deeply embedded as Dewey says they are, then we can agree with him that "communication ... is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales." (E&N 166)

An outline of a naturalist rationale for music education might proceed thus:

- I. Sociality is a genetically-grounded, universal human impulse.
- II. Communication in all its variety is our primary means for acting on the sociality impulse.
- III. We have musical capacities that permit us to include musical actions in the human discourse we call communication.
- IV. We have insights that are musically formed and that can be shared along with insights formed in other human ways.
- V. Music study is the most reliable and efficient way to develop the musical expertise necessary to contribute to musical discourse and derive meaning from the musical contributions of others.

Music participation is therefore part of the *habitus* – a commonplace . But, for Deweyan views of communication, music lives at its most fundamental level. Our most confident and successful colleagues accept notions such as these as guiding ideals, largely without being able to – or needing to – analyze them. Using ideas at least as pervasive as Deweyan insights about human life would move us onto more solid and affirming foundations.

Notes

¹ Just in case you wondered: A flywheel was required on many basic machines through the middle 20th century. It was a large, heavy, disk-shaped device on small machines such as potter's wheels, lathes, and pumps, and large machines such as steam engines and farm tractors, that functioned to maintain and stabilize the momentum of a drive shaft between firings of fuel in the cylinder head (or kick from the potter's foot). Such machines usually had very few cylinders – only one or two – and firings necessary to impel the drive shaft were relatively infrequent when compared with today's internal combustion engines. Without the flywheel, the drive shaft would pulse (which it did at slow speeds, even with the flywheel, by the way) rather than spin smoothly. Heavy machines in fast motion – steam railroad locomotives for example – used the momentum of the whole machine to solve this problem. The metaphor was rendered effective by the ubiquity of such machines throughout the industrialized world of the 19th century, and employed when there was a need to discuss momentum or dynamic forms of social or political stability – e.g., habit – without resorting to explanations based on progress or infusions of new visions that inspired changes of direction or level of activity. Kilpinen's title comes from William James (1890, p. 121).

² Hall applies ET to schooling throughout *Beyond Culture* (1976/1981), viz: "Education is simply one more instance of man's having developed an elaborate extension (in this case, complex institutions) to do and presumably enhance what he once did for himself quite naturally." (p. 35) In this section, he notes the *extension transference* exemplified in the substitution of *learning* for *schooling* in professional and governmental language. His more extensive analysis comes in chapter 13, "Cultural and Primate Bases of Education."

³ In that passage, Whitehead acknowledges Henri Bergson, William James, and John Dewey for their contributions to his thinking and reveals a "... preoccupation ... to rescue their type of thought from the charge of anti-intellectualism..." (p. vii).

⁴ All page numbers prefaced by *E&N* are from *Experience and nature* (1925/1926), which also, by the way, provides a good prolegomenon for Dewey's *Art as Experience*.

⁵ This is sometimes spelled *dreydl*.

⁶ Dewey became president of two organizations in 1929, People's Lobby and the League for Independent Political Action, and he wrote prolifically on political issues in the decade before World War II. See Brickman (1970) for a checklist of his political writings and a summary of his activities on behalf of workers, especially unemployed workers, and Jane Dewey (1939) or other biographies for more.

⁷ *Eduction* is similar to Peirce's *abduction* (see Kilpinen pp. 63-65 for an introduction). It refers to a more specific process of learning from experience than Peirce intends, so that one extracts from a situation features of similar situations, so that one meets the next similar experience as a changed person. Some educational theorists contemporaneous to Dewey referred to the 'eduction of correlates' in experiences, presaging Jerome Bruner's cognitive learning schemes. Dewey's accounts of induction and deduction in ordinary life are well known. See *How We Think* (1910/1997) for example.

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Biographical Information

J. Terry Gates joined the music department faculty at the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1986 after elementary, secondary and higher education experience in Illinois, Ohio, and Alabama. His contributions to the research literature include history and criticism in music teaching and learning in various refereed journals, as well as an edited book, *Music Education in the United States: Contemporary Issues* (1988). He was a member of various international boards and commissions and co-founded the MayDay Group. Now retired, he lives in St. Louis, where he continues his international organizational work in music education, and leads the Hoenny Center for Research and Development in Teaching <www.hoennycenter.org> an organization he also founded.