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The Corporatization of Schooling and its Effects on the State of Music Education: A Critical Deweyan Perspective

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The Corporatization of Schooling and its Effects on the State of Music Education: A Critical Deweyan Perspective

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Introduction

Over the past thirty years, the corporate world and an increasingly neo-liberal political landscape have influenced the structures, pedagogy, and curricula of primary, secondary, and tertiary education. This influence often reflects—as stated in the call for papers for this conference—*little appreciation among some in business and government of the role and value of study in the arts and humanities in fostering an informed and critically engaged citizenry*. In this paper, I argue that some in business and government may not appreciate the humanities and the arts because these leaders are steeped in an epistemology that negates the importance of imagination and creativity in society, and dismisses the capacity of the humanities and the arts to spark them.

To set the stage for my inquiry concerning an increasingly *corporate conception of schooling* that ignores the humanities and the arts, I cite three examples of corporate influence on the structures, pedagogy, and curricula of education. Using Dewey's critical pragmatism as my conceptual framework, I will trace the epistemological foundations that underpin this limited conception of schooling, examine its impact on music education, and suggest ways in which we might undermine this narrow agenda for education.

Examples of Corporate Influence on Education

In the early 1980s, economist Milton Friedman began to advocate for an educational system modeled on private enterprise.¹ In his entrepreneurial model, all public schools compete with each other plus with charter and private schools to attract “customers” (parents) who “shop” for a school for their children via a voucher system. In this conception, standardized test scores are the sole determinant of a school's level of success. Successful schools attract more

students and thus, additional funding, which enables those schools to provide many and varied services and strengthens their capacity to prepare students for yet more standardized tests. Friedman's model makes invisible the distributive social justice factors (e.g., poverty) that affect student readiness to learn and the obligation of the state to address those factors (Bankston 2010). As middle class parents move their children out of "failing" public schools to charter and private schools, failing schools have less and less capacity to support their remaining students. Moreover, the social polarization encouraged by such an educational system contributes to the destruction of the public sphere (Fineman 2012), a setting where diverse young people might meet, come to know each other, and learn to value pluralism.

Friedman's vision has transformed the educational system of the United States. Currently, seventeen states employ some form of voucher system.² The Broad, Walton, and Gates Foundations, sustained by endowments of 1.4 billion, 2 billion, and 33 billion dollars respectively, support Friedman's educational vision.³ Currently, half the superintendents of American urban school districts are graduates of Broad's Superintendents Academy; most are from military or business backgrounds with little or no experience in the classroom.⁴ Their increased emphasis on standardized tests for core subject areas as the sole determinant of school success has resulted in a marked decrease in instructional time and funding for arts education.

In recent years, several corporate leaders have lobbied for schools to promote studies in science, mathematics, and technology to better prepare students for the kinds of jobs these business leaders anticipate will exist in the future. This spring, Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, called for "higher standards and accountability in schools and increased focus on learning about science, technology, engineering and math" in American public schools to increase the "knowledge economy ... [and] to ensure more jobs, innovation, and investment" (Ortutay 2013). His lobby group, financially supported by the CEOs of LinkedIn, Google, Netflix, and Groupon, seeks to influence senators and congressional representatives in Washington, DC for changes in curriculum and pedagogy that reflect their interests. Later in this paper, I will illustrate the ways in which this seemingly logical but actually myopic focus isolates scientific knowledge from the social context in which it exists, minimizes inquiry through the social sciences into the ramifications of scientific knowledge, and silences the imaginative capacity of the humanities and the arts to enable that inquiry.

For my last example, I illustrate one way in which an increasingly corporate and neo-liberal agenda has impacted music education in Canada. In the late 1990s, Ontario Premier Mike Harris advanced his *Common Sense Revolution*, a movement characterized by the use of QUANGOS (purportedly arms-length agencies created to monitor and standardize various aspects of the educational system), the implementation of policy with little public input, and the utilization of inflammatory phrases such as “‘local boards are inefficient and inept’ [and] ‘unions are a problem’” (Basu 2004, 632). Harris’ Education Minister announced school closures across the province, justifying them based on a formula that allotted so many square metres of educational space per student. Basu (2004) draws attention to the relationship between the school closure argument and music curriculum. He states, “the political definitions regarding what constituted educational space and what spaces were “frill” areas (often music rooms, child care spaces) link back to the logics of neoliberal ideologies as to the core areas of education” (630). Using terminology such as “frill spaces,” Harris’ government eliminated music performance space as part of a larger conversation concerning the reduction of space required for education, thereby effectively marginalizing music education.

I now turn to Dewey to deconstruct the epistemology that has fueled the changes in the priorities, structures, and processes of education illustrated by these three short examples. I will demonstrate the ways in which his critically pragmatic perspective is a valuable tool not only for unpacking and analyzing the epistemological foundations of the corporate conception of schooling, but also for developing action plans, based on the notions of agency and contingency, as a response to these corporate and political decisions that have had a negative impact on the humanities and the arts, including music education. But first, I will explain what I mean by the term *critical pragmatism*.

Dewey’s “Critical” Pragmatism

In recent years, several social science theorists (Biesta 1994, Farr 2004, Feinberg 2012, Hildreth 2009, Kadlec 2007, Midtgarden 2012, Rogers 2009, Shalin 1992) have countered suggestions that Dewey was unsuspecting of power (e.g., Gramsci 1971, Horkheimer 1974, Mumford 1926), drawing attention to his many publications that point to and address the ways in which we might uncover visible and invisible structures of domination. Both critical

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theory and Dewey's critical pragmatism reveal and critique power structures that may make inequity invisible. However, a critically pragmatic perspective differs in its approach to and understanding of power.

Critical pragmatism needs to be distinguished from critical theory in its various Continental forms. It does not assume, for example the hermeneutics of suspicion, typical of French theorists like Foucault ... or Bourdieu; ... nor does it assume *a priori* that one form of ideal discourse fits all, as with Habermas. (Feinberg 2012, 236)

According to Dewey (1916), power “denotes effective means of operation; ability or capacity to execute, to realize ends ... the sum of conditions available for bringing the desirable end into existence” (246). His conception of power emphasizes individual and collective agency—“power to,” rather than domination or “power over” (Hildreth 2009). In his view, power is contingent upon circumstance, norms, and habits, all fluid forces that may be revised and altered, rather than only an inflexible, domineering authority that must be overcome (Hildreth 2009). It is within this contingent fluidity, Dewey argues cogently, that individual and collective agency might operate, both influencing and influenced by uncertainty. For Dewey, it is within contingency that hope, imagination, and creativity reside.

In the remainder of this paper, I will outline Dewey's objections to four key philosophical and political claims informing the epistemology of those who presently advocate for the corporatization of schooling—the notions of elitism, rugged individualism, utilitarianism, and the quest for certainty. Then, I will point out the ways in which music engagement might be insignificant and even counterproductive from a uniquely corporate perspective and offer approaches that may be useful when responding to the educational values promulgated by corporate-driven educational systems. I will end with a concrete example of an action plan, not as a formulaic means to shift the marginalized position of the arts in society, but as a starting point for conceptualizing what we might do in our own unique situations.

Epistemological Foundations of the Corporate Conception of Schooling

Elitism

In the twentieth century, universal suffrage instigated debate regarding the public's capacity to and interest in engaging with complex social issues (Kadlec 2007, Rogers 2009). One of

Dewey's contemporaries, Walter Lippmann, championed *democratic realism*, a perspective that limits the public's role in the democratic process to voting in elections. Lippmann thought that citizens did not have the expertise to grasp issues and would resist any new information that countered their beliefs (Rogers 2009).

In response to Lippmann, Dewey (1927) presented a more interactive relationship between the public and its government.

The final obstacle in the way of any aristocratic rule is that in the absence of an articulate voice on the part of the masses, the best do not and cannot remain the best, the wise cease to be wise. It is impossible for highbrows to secure a monopoly of such knowledge as must be used for the regulation of common affairs ... the man who wears the shoes knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied. (364)

Note that Dewey does not call into question the need for expert knowledge; rather, he critiques the belief that experts should make decisions for the public without interacting with them through meaningful consultation.

With regards to education and its relation to elitism, as early as 1913, Dewey (1913b) states, "the price that democratic societies will have to pay for their continuing health is the elimination of an oligarchy ... that attempts to monopolize the benefits of intelligence and of the best methods for the profit of a few" (127). Although this oligarchy might wish to impose a hierarchical educational system, "all others should be united against every proposition ... to separate training of employees from training for citizenship, training of intelligence and character, from training for narrow industrial efficiency" (1913a, 102). Dewey's later experiences while lecturing in China in 1919–1920 reinforced his belief in the importance of education for countering political and economic elitism (Midtgarden 2012) and for creating "a population that would guard against the acceptance of arbitrary claims" (Feinberg 2012, 228). This broader conception of education for citizenship has become increasingly more important as "the cultural industry of capitalism works over time to produce mass consciousness suitable for the market economy and amenable to social control" (Shalin 1992, 242).

The reason why industrial capitalism must be viewed as a crucial component in the nexus with democracy and education is precisely because its deleterious features are always threatening to co-opt the education practices and methods that aim to develop the social democratic potential in society. (Kadlec 2007, 80–81)

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Elitism is evident in the deliberate erosion of public schools through the promotion and financing of charter and private schools at the expense of the public system. It is also evident in the emphasis by some business and government leaders on educational programs that provide individuals training solely for employment, which, while enabling them to contribute to and participate in society economically, do not provide them with the means to think critically about the decisions of those leaders and to imagine other possibilities.

The Quest for Certainty

Dewey was deeply influenced by Darwin's (1859) insight into the role of contingency in the evolutionary process, an insight that collided with religious certainty and scientific experimentation that sought Truth. Dewey (1929) suggests that most empiricists conceive scientific experimentation as "revelations of antecedent properties of real Being and existence" (153). For Dewey, this form of experimentation represents a quest for certainty, which is an "obstacle to understanding the importance of contingency to human action" (Rogers 2009, 67).

An empirical method which remains true to nature does not "save"; it is not an insurance device nor a mechanical antiseptic. But it inspires the mind with courage and vitality to create new ideals and values in the face of perplexities of a new world. (Dewey 1925, 4)

Dewey proposes a Third Way that rejects certainty, be it in the form of religious dogma or scientific principles. Collapsing the distinction between theory and practice, Dewey creates a new focal point for knowledge creation where knowledge is continuously forged through inquiry, subject to circumstance rather than to ontological certainty. He states, "practical activity deals with individualized and unique situations which are never exactly duplicable and about which, accordingly, no complete assurance is possible" (Dewey 1929, 6).

In his view, scientific truth may seemingly provide security, but should always be treated as partial and subject to new information. I suggest that the quest for certainty is discernible in the corporate definition of educational success (e.g. marks obtained via standardized testing), its simplistic methodology (e.g., statistics), its rhetoric, and its reductive approach to the complexity of the classroom.

Rugged Individualism

Rugged individualism, a concept that originated in the late 18th and early 19th centuries within a context of growth in scientific knowledge and an accompanying decline of ecclesiastical authority, emphasizes the capacity of the individual to overcome adversity. Although this concept was originally a natural reaction to the crushing social immobility of a static, hierarchical society, it soon foregrounded individual pride and gain over social good, cultivating “hubris rather than humility, and [overstating] ... what human intervention can achieve” (Rogers 2009, 73). In contrast, Dewey emphasizes contingency in “an attempt to cultivate humility by making us aware of the fragility of the objects of inquiry” (Rogers 2009, 73). Kaldec (2007) illustrates Dewey’s foresight and relevance in today’s world.

In being educated by a discourse of rugged individualism which places the highest value on individual pecuniary gain and competition, we are the manipulated products of a “mental and moral corporateness for which history affords no parallel [and] live exposed to the greatest flood of massed suggestion that any people has ever experienced (Dewey 1930, LW5, 61)”. (Kadlec 2007, 47)

Utilitarianism

Notions of rugged individualism inform utilitarianism. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey (1920) contends that utilitarianism fostered “enormous desire for wealth and the enjoyments it makes possible,” and that “the acquisitive instincts of man were exaggerated at the expense of the creative” (144). He states, “utilitarianism gave intellectual confirmation to all those tendencies which make ‘business’ not a means of social service and an opportunity for personal growth in creative power but a way of accumulating the means of private enjoyment” (145).

In utilitarianism, inquiry is limited and the ends are already in sight (Rogers 2009). One deliberates solely on the means of achieving those ends, rather than engaging in a continual conversation concerning the means, the ends, the social consequences of one’s actions, and the ethical considerations that inform them all.

Corporate conceptions of schooling make evident their rugged individualist stance in their emphasis on competition and their related utilitarian perspective in their support of non-profit charter schools operated by publically traded, for-profit companies, which are

ultimately most concerned with their bottom lines and their responsibility to shareholders, rather the quality of their students' learning.

The Irrelevance of Arts Education to the Corporate Conception of Schooling

If, like Dewey (1934), we regard the arts as having the capacity to unleash the imagination, then we might begin to understand why those business and government leaders who hold elitist and utilitarian values (also supporting certainty and individualism) might consider the arts irrelevant and even counterproductive to their worldview. Dewey discusses the many ways that imagination contributes to our lives. It enables us to develop intelligent sympathy, which “widens and deepens concern for consequences” and puts us “in the place of another, to see things from the standpoint of his aims and values” (Dewey 1932). Intelligent sympathy may not be particularly useful when one's mindset is focused on competition with others.

For Dewey, imagination is also the vehicle for reflection, which is the capacity to consider actions and their possible consequences. It improves “our capacity for tapping into the critical potential of lived experience in a world defined by flux and change” (Kadlec 2007, 49), also fostering creative and innovative trajectories. Imagination is a means to bridge temporal, cultural, geographic, and social dimensions, enabling citizens to engage in the complexity of issues, rejecting the simplistic, rigid dualities promoted by some elitist leaders to minimize options and engender obedience. As artistic practitioners, we have experienced the ways in which our artistic practice has sparked our imagination; we can readily appreciate the tremendous tool at our disposal that we might employ to see beyond dualities and envision new approaches.

Agency and Contingency

Dewey's “meliorist” or Third Way (Rogers 2009, 81) challenges us to do more than either obey or critique the system; it propels us to act. Kadlec (2007) suggests, “there are always new opportunities to exploit cracks and fissures in various structurally entrenched forms of power” (130), and that, by building dense, horizontal connections to create interdisciplinary collaborations, we might make those cracks and fissures larger. Using intelligent sympathy, reflection, and creativity, all sparked by imagination, we may communicate and join with others (who may have different backgrounds and starting points) on an equal basis (Biesta

1994). This kind of dialogue may require creating new public spaces that enable public awareness and may also feature a confluence of participants who are guided by ethical conduct, not just convenience (Kadlec 2007).

Through collaboration, occurring in and creating the public sphere, grassroots movements are able to grow and build power external to the administrative power of the state until they involve a large portion of the public and represent their sentiment. Over time, these movements gradually inform state policy. Rogers (2009) reflects, “The fact that these counterforces also, for him [Dewey], emanate from the public sphere means that the state and its institutions are always a fiduciary power, the source of which lies elsewhere and is always in ready position to reclaim power if necessary” (233).

Thus, in order to help *shape professional and public opinion with regard to the potential and value of music and arts and humanities programs in creating informed and critically engaged citizens who can contribute to a better world*, from a critically pragmatic perspective, we need to join with others on an equal basis (Biesta 1994), create multiple points of horizontal contact and public spaces for dialogue (Kadlec 2007), and identify contingent opportunities to work towards interdisciplinary confluence on small projects (Shalin 1992), whose legitimacy rests outside the sphere of government (Rogers 2009). In this way, we might shift social customs, including an increased public valuing of and demand for music education. As Dewey (1939) points out, “the great social changes which have produced new social institutions have been the cumulative effect of flank movements that were not obvious at the time of their origin” (LW 14, 96). Shalin (1992) expands on this concept, stating, “social reconstruction starts in one community, envelops the city, moves to the state level, and then comes to the national legislature” (273). I will end my paper with an example of one such social reconstruction through the arts, located in Montreal, and spearheaded by Simon Brault, director of the National Theatre School of Canada.

Simon Brault and Culture Montréal⁵

Since 1993, Simon Brault has been central to a movement that regards arts and culture and the creativity they promote, not simply as a motor for economic development (Florida 2002), but as a comprehensive eco-system, key to learning to know, learning to be, and learning to live together (Brault 2010, 53). In this vision, arts and culture are integrated into larger

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societal considerations—notions of human rights, diversity of cultural expression, participatory democracy, and conditions for peace. Brault (2010) suggests, “support for the arts must not be reduced to its sectorial dimension; rather, it must be understood as a *sine qua non* condition for the realization of the full social and economic potential of Montreal” (136, trans. Prest).

In the mid-1990s, Brault (2010) and others realized the need to foster creativity in order to reenergize Montreal, which was experiencing a general malaise and up to 23% unemployment. This was a crisis, a critical point that Hall (1998) and Wyman (2004) suggest often provides an impetus for the acceleration of creative activity. Brault (2010) believes that frequent experience of the arts reinforces creativity by tapping into the imagination, fostering critical thinking, forging a desire to traverse mental boundaries, and increasing the capacity to dream (87–88).

Two elements were fundamental to this reinvention: a belief that artistic creation is important and enriching for all who do it, be they amateur or professional, and the need to work with multiple partners, including ordinary citizens, in a non-hierarchical process, to create an environment whereby all have the opportunity to participate in culture—in other words, in a non-elitist, collaborative, and confluent manner. Dense and multiple relationships between artists and the public are central to this conception of artistic practice at the heart of community living. The elites, arts organizations, and governments play secondary roles. In Brault’s (2010) vision, “elites must be present and engaged, functionaries and experts mobilized, artists and their associations consulted, without losing sight of the importance of civil society and the direct participation of citizens (129, trans. Prest).

The group set out to answer two questions: “What activities would promote their objectives?” and “How could they achieve their objectives in a confluent, collaborative, and non-hierarchical manner?”

Over the course of twelve years, beginning with a relatively small group that met casually over meals to discuss the role of culture in the city and how it might contribute to society, Culture Montréal took shape. During that time, the organization hosted three Summits, first to discuss the concept of confluence and the ways in which the cultural sector might be involved in the day-to-day issues that affect Montreal residents, then, as they grew to over 400 members, to support action plans that furthered their vision. In this supporting

role, the group rallied protest over the threatened closure of school music programs, worked against the closure of artist workshops, and helped develop an environment in the Montreal School Board conducive to supporting arts education.

In 2007, Brault and Culture Montréal held the third Summit with over 1300 participants, a confluence of community activists, educators, universities, artists, cultural entrepreneurs, private foundations, and business leaders. Together, they democratically hammered out a ten-year cultural plan for Montreal with five objectives: more investment in arts and culture, the democratization of access to culture, a widening recognition of the cultural dimension to quality of life, an increase in the influence of culture, and the necessary financial means to fund their plan of action. At the Summit, all three levels of government announced massive financial support for the project, ensuring its success.

What can we learn from this grassroots, organically-evolving vision that shifted community perception of the value of the arts, culminating in a democratically created, long term action plan for an entire city, supported financially by all levels of government? This project points to a way that invites all parties, including those we sometimes think are misguided, to a conversation, whereby respectful dialogue slowly bridges differences and participants forge and implement a common vision. Brault (2010) elaborates.

I am more and more convinced that much more paramount than organizational and governing structures and models are the intelligence, ideas, and initiatives of individuals, supported by institutions and organizations. The engagement and leadership of individuals are the foundation of all transformational movements. (147, trans. Prest)

It is possible that what we do, individually and collectively, can make a difference, and that gives me hope.

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Notes

¹ <http://www.edchoice.org/>

² National School Boards Association website. <http://www.nsba.org/Advocacy/Key-Issues/SchoolVouchers>

³ <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/got-dough-how-billionaires-rule-our-schools>

⁴ Rethinking Schools website. http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/27_01/27_01_jehlen.shtml.

⁵ <http://www.culturemontreal.ca/en/>

About the Author

Anita Prest is a doctoral candidate in Curriculum & Pedagogy at the University of British Columbia. She has a Master of Music (Wind Conducting) from the University of Calgary and a Bachelor of Music (Music Education) from the University of Victoria. Anita taught band, choir, music composition, and music theatre in the small community of Keremeos, British Columbia for sixteen years. Her ensembles have played in England, Cuba, the United States, and four Canadian provinces, also performing for the Prime Minister of Canada in 2002. She was the artistic director of the Music Under the 'K' Festival, a community-based, non-competitive festival that over a ten-year period supported music making of all kinds by people of all ages. Her research concerns the effects of bridging social capital emerging from rural school-community music partnerships on community vitality and conceptions of the value of music education. Anita, a Liu Scholar, is a recipient of SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council), Webster, and four-year fellowships.

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