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## **Electronic Article**

### **The Music Identity Project**

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## The Music Identity Project

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### Forward

At MayDay Group Colloquium 24 in East Lansing, MI, Sandra Stauffer (2012) charged that:

If we want change, we need to start telling different stories . . . we work with beginning teachers, and we worry about teacher identities. We tell them a story...one that does not serve them well. A story that they will be prepared. Maybe we should tell stories of self-making, of re-making and replacing ourselves. Of preparation as a constantly evolving teacher story. Maybe then transformation can be the norm. (11)

Sandy's comments of transformation resonated strongly with the very project I was presenting at the same colloquium on the lived-experiences and music identities of six preservice teachers in a Secondary Music Education Methods course during the spring semester of 2012. This paper emerged out of my presentation and it is my hope that by sharing the stories of these six preservice teachers, as well as my own, that we can show the type of self-making, re-making and replacing ourselves for which Sandy was advocating.

### Changing Narratives

The identity question, "Who am I?" is powerfully shaped by the contexts, relationships, and activities in which people are most deeply invested. Exploring such a personally meaningful question with participants required choosing a methodology that could best represent experience.

As such, I chose narrative inquiry because as Connelly and Clandinin (2006) indicate:

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study. (477)

Central to our Secondary Music Education Methods course were multiple assignments that explored music identity as a topic and as a personal journey. The assignments, reflections, interviews, and stories of the six participants in our class as well as my own stories as positioned as musician, teacher, and researcher were utilized as data.

Our stories together shape a deeper understanding of music identity and attempt to form a new narrative that advocates a need in all settings for music education to create mechanisms and activities that: 1) explore the multitude of intersecting identities found in each classroom and 2) draw on individual and collective knowledge and experiences to encourage collaboration and creativity. “The music identity project” is one such mechanism with which I have had success at the secondary and collegiate levels.

### **What is the Music Identity Project?**

The music identity project involves constructing presentations (on PowerPoint, Keynote, or Prezi) to showcase participants’ preferences and interests in music and how these selections reflect their identities both in and out of the classroom. To begin, students and teachers create top ten lists of songs that represent their music identities. They share these lists with the class and discuss during their presentation how these songs represent various contexts in their lives. Each participant then chooses one song from their top ten list that they think best represents who they are as a person. They then analyze and share this song with the group, describing not only important musical features of the song (i.e., lyrics, form, texture, instrumentation, mode, meter, etc.), but are also encouraged to articulate how the piece they chose reflects aspects of their own identities and histories.

#### *How the Music Identity Project Developed: A Personal Journey*

This project developed out of my experience teaching 8<sup>th</sup> grade general music in the Rochester (NY) City School District. Faced with the reality that I knew very little about the musical and cultural experiences of many of my students, I set out within my first week at the school to design a project that could help me understand who my students were, what knowledge

and experience about music and culture they already possessed, and how that knowledge and experience could be used to expand and make connections to other musical knowledge. What resulted was an eclectic mix of musics and cultures.

### *Reviewing literature.*

Through my personal experience with the music identity project, my preservice teachers and I reviewed literature throughout the semester that explored socio-cultural theory (Cole 1995, Rogoff 2003, Wertsch 1995) and the intersection of adolescence and identity (Arnett 2000; Brantlinger 2008; Erikson 1968; Fowler-Finn 2008; Galley 2008; Kimmel 2008; Lee 2008; Marcia 1980, 1991; Nakkula 2008; Noguera 2008; Sadowski 2008a, 2008b; Soares-Orozco, Qin, and Amthor 2008; Tatum 2008; Valenzuela 2008; Wehmeyer 2008; with music (Batt-Rawden and DeNora 2005, Campbell et al. 2007, DeNora 2000, Finnäs 1989, Folkestad 2002, Hudak 1999, Lamont 2002, McCarthy et al. 1999, North et al 2004, O'Hagin and Harnish 2006, Sloboda 1999, Tarrant et al. 2002). I explained how the majority of students in my urban 8<sup>th</sup> grade general music class presented current popular hiphop and top 40 hits. This was not surprising considering that the development of a successful musical identity and the forming of self-evaluations is greatly influenced by association with peer networks (Bandura, et al. 2001). According to Finnäs (1989), high importance is placed by adolescents on musical (dis)likes and these opinions change greatly when asked in private or in public. Additionally, Tarrant et al. (2002) say that adolescents may maintain the positive relations with their peer groups necessary for successful identity development by demonstrating appropriate musical behavior and preference within their group's parameters.

Because musical identification is also related to specific contexts, like home and community life, it often manifests itself through fashion, expression of sexuality, and racial and ethnic identification (Hudak 1999). Many of my 8<sup>th</sup> grade students shared musical selections that were connected to their parent's generation, while others introduced the group to salsa, reguetón, nerdcore, and C-pop (Chinese), K-pop (Korean), and J-pop (Japanese). Most interestingly, however, were students who presented music that they or family members had composed. This exposed the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class and me to a vibrant local do-it-yourself hiphop scene in our city.

Beyond the musical journeys we took together, this project allowed us to unpack how some of our musical choices revealed important topics like nationalism, globalization, marketing, branding, censorship, racism, misogyny, sexism, and homophobia. We were able to view music as the location of the culture industry and the fabrication of new market-susceptible subjectivities rapidly (re)produced for consumption (McCarthy et al. 1999). We were also able to understand through further discussion, how music is used as a vehicle for the transmission of ideas and ideologies. This ultimately encouraged us to explore ways in which we could make listening choices, engage with, and create music that better represented our histories, values, and identities as individuals and as a class.

### **Preservice Teacher Narratives**

At the preservice teacher level, the music identity project has similarly allowed students to get to know themselves and others better as musicians, learners, performers, improvisers, composers, listeners, and teachers.

#### *Getting To Know Me, Myself, and I*

Like the 8<sup>th</sup> graders from my city school classroom, my preservice music teachers were also greatly influenced by their peer networks. Jennie Wade<sup>1</sup>, a rising senior in music education describes her experience:

I enjoyed doing the music identity project in the beginning of the semester because I finally had a chance to share my music. I had never taken the chance to reflect on my music identity previously and I think it's beneficial to do every once in a while. On the other hand it can be very puzzling especially for someone like me who hasn't had the same level of formal training that most people have had in their program. Trying to figure out what my musical identity is was one the most difficult things because everything for me right now is a learning process and I'm still trying to figure out what my strengths and weaknesses are. As part of my music listening identity, I know that I listen to a wide spectrum of music. By putting this project together I really wanted to give people a chance to know me as a person and understand what makes me who I am today. Music is a great way for me to be able to express myself. During the process, I consumed more time trying to compile ten songs that accurately portray me as a person and as a musician. Looking back on the project, most of the songs that I had compiled represented more of my past rather than the present. For me, I think it's important to look at my past and see what kind of musical memories I had in order to understand how I've grown today musically and as a person. Songs by the BeeGees, Celine Dion, Billy Joel, Linkin Park, and Whitney Houston are in some ways relics of my past. Embracing artists such as

Ledisi and LaShun Pace are markers for something new in my life right now. All these artists represent some of the struggles that I've gone through in my life but also provide hope for something new that will happen in my life at this given point. That's mostly what I wanted to share with my classmates (Interview June 5, 2012).

As Jennie points out, this project allowed her to know herself better as well as her classmates. She and her classmates reported that they spent more time preparing this project than many other assignments across campus, indicating a strong sense of investment in the project. In reflection, they also identified how their choices reflect their past, present, and future. This allowed them to explore identity as a fluid and changing phenomena. As Marie Tepe, another student, points out:

The most difficult aspect of this project was creating our top ten list. Like most people in class, I found that my top ten songs are not stable or permanent. It is instead completely fluid and changeable, and really does depend on the day. This made it close to impossible to finally settle on one list to share (Interview June 5, 2012).

Similarly, when interviewed, John Reynolds defined music identity as, "fluid, interconnected, and personal." He goes on to say:

Of course everyone did it in different ways. I had been reading all this Cage and Dada stuff, so it's sort of funny to do it in that context, because to say like, 'these are ten songs that have affected me,' is sort of an absurd thing, because it's going to be different for everyone, but it's also important to acknowledge that it's ok that it's different for everyone, and it's ok that it's going to change....and it was different for even everyone in our class, which was fairly homogenous and that we are all, you know, Western classical musicians attending the same place. It's interesting how much selecting the song versus the songs themselves is your actual identity. I noticed that some chose the songs they liked most and thought were best and I guess I intellectualized it more, so just even thinking of the way we did it is indicative of the way we tend to be, which is interesting. While some people think about it in terms of when they listen to songs and when they were there (Interview June 6, 2012).

The fluid nature of identity was an important discovery and emerged many times in our discussions. All students mentioned in their reflections and interviews how identity is not a static experience, but tied to time, place, and circumstance. Another student, Joshua Chamberlain, explains: "My understanding of identity became a more personal idea, as something that defines you, but it's also something that's changing, you know, it's something that defines you in a moment." As future teachers, this understanding of identity—as tied to specific contexts and as

being fluid over time—became important throughout the semester as they envisioned their future classrooms. Marie Tepe describes further:

In our class, we are constantly revisiting our musical identities and are free to express them as flexible and malleable ideas. In my future classroom, I would like to offer students several opportunities to revisit their definition of their musical identity. This would allow them to see how they have changed over the course of the semester, as well as encourage further introspective thinking (Interview June 5, 2012).

### **Self-Other Retrospective**

As a teacher, I was well aware of the influences peers can have on their music identity projects and I witnessed this frequently in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. I initially anticipated that my preservice teachers would have much less fear of being judged by their peers with this project. In some ways this held true because these six participants knew each other as a cohort over the past three years. However, when asked to take their top ten lists and present them on the campus radio station and broadcast it to a larger and less familiar audience, a greater than anticipated sense of being judged was felt by many. As Joshua Chamberlain explains:

Questions began to arise like, what if people don't like my music identity? What if my music identity isn't as cool as someone else's? Is my music identity what everyone thinks it is? If "they" believe my music identity reflects some style or manner then could it actually be my music identity because that means I embody it in some way? Basically, will people judge me and have they already been judging me because of my music identity? I knew that people judged others, in both the positive and negative sense because of their tastes in general, not just music preferences. Comments often arise around me like, "you like Nirvana? I would have never pictured you as a Kurt Cobain fan," or, "that song sounds like something you would like." Human beings are judgmental, but again this doesn't necessarily mean something bad, it just means that as humans we seek truths but have to make informed decisions in the process. I grappled with this issue for a long time until I finally came to a consensus that I was going to put up what I liked and the class could think whatever they wanted. In a way this leap was easier because I know everyone in music education and they know me, but when I heard I was going to put it on the radio I became slightly more apprehensive (Interview June 5, 2012).

Music, along with other forms of media, can help define and shape our identities through two vantage points: self-understanding, how we understand/define ourselves as individuals; and self-other understanding, how we are understood/defined by others (Lamont 2002). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Wertsch 1985) can be used in this context to illustrate that we are both influenced by and are actively influencing cultural and individual identity development. This

perspective posits people as simultaneously contributing to the creation and transformation of cultural processes and cultural processes in turn contributing to the creation and transformation of people (Rogoff 2003). Marie Tepe illustrates this transformation further as she sees her own self through her future projected student experience:

It was really hard and uncomfortable sharing my top ten songs. I felt like I was floundering while trying to describe why each piece was so important to me. For one thing, I didn't know who might be listening. Anyone could have tuned in; my professors, friends, my ex, people I have class with that I don't know that well. On the other hand, I knew some of the people who were listening: my parents, my roommates, and my professors. I couldn't decide which aspect I found more overwhelming. It felt more personal than I had expected, and I was ill at ease every time I had to talk. This really put me in the shoes of my future students. It was so important for me to realize that students may struggle more than we realize with sharing this information. I remember what it was like being 14, convinced that the only people who really understand you are the members of your favorite band. Sharing those feelings in a classroom full of other students, when you're convinced that they are judging you would be so overwhelming. As a teacher, it's important to remember that. When encountering resistance and snarkiness from students, it's important to remember how much of that attitude is just a front for all of the other little dramas they are ensconced in. Furthermore, it should drive us as teachers to find a way to make the entire classroom feel safe, comfortable, and welcoming; the way I feel with my music education peers. This is something that I am spending a lot of time reflecting on right now, and I think it is due in large part to my experience with the music identity project and the radio show (Journal entry April 28, 2012).

### **Prolepsis: A Once and Future Self**

As my students began to consider the experiences of their future projected students I was reminded of Michael Cole's (2003) concept of prolepsis, "the representation of a thing as existing before it actually does or did (185)." Cole illustrates this concept by considering the event of childbirth. Surrounding this event, the mother and father may draw upon the memory of their pasts to imagine a future for their child that ultimately determines subsequent behavior towards the child. Cole suggests in this sequence, "that the ideal aspect of culture is transformed into its material form as the mother and other adults structure the child's experience to be consistent with what they imagine to be the child's future identity" (185). For example, parents or adults in a particular cultural context may project gender identification onto a child by putting a baseball glove in a crib or dressing the child in blue if it is a boy. They may also project a sexuality on the child by describing the child as a "lady killer," even though the child may come to desire men instead.



I saw this idea of prolepsis emerge in our preservice teachers' discussions on music identity as they began to see themselves as future teachers. Jennie Wade says:

I think it's important to look at my past and see what kind of musical memories I had in order to understand how I've grown today musically and as a person. These artists I've selected represent some of the struggles that I've gone through in my life but also provide hope for something new that will happen in my life at this given point (Interview June 5, 2012).

Like parents with their newborn children, teachers with their own students project their own identities and preferences on them. They forge future projections based on their own past cultural histories and experiences, often assuming that what worked for their past experiences and contexts will apply to their students' current experiences and contexts. As I reflected on this, I found myself realizing the many ways I have projected and mapped my own trajectories onto my preservice teachers. Questions began to arise: Are our future projections meant to agree? Have I kept them from their full potential in any way? Whose projection am I influenced by? Are my projections important for them? Do my projections prepare them well for the realities of their future worlds? Do my projections stifle them in anyway?<sup>2</sup> The students also explored these questions as future music teachers and I think the following two quotes help explain their emerging views:

When I'm answering the questions, I'm reluctant to say something because there's an image you want, and it's also an image that someone else has helped you develop, it's not just 'well this is me, this is me because I am a product of who I am from just my self growth, but no. It's very complex, it's not easy to put into a definition, but that's like what the idea of identity is, it's like you are able to interpret something differently because of your experiences because of what you want to say and you're going to present things a certain way because that's how you want other people to think you are. You know? (Interview with Joshua Chamberlain June 5, 2012).

And John Reynolds says:

I think you should respect everyone's preference, choice, identity, and your own as well, but I definitely think there is a tendency for teachers and people to think that what they like is worthwhile because they see the intricacies, and I don't think that is the worst thing, but I don't think it should be necessarily the first thing. That's gonna be a challenge for me. You know, like letting go of your own personality to let the students have voice. And again this is a sort of impossible thing, like the Schippers (2010) thing, that even when people think that they are being pure facilitators they are clearly not, but to try to do that as much as possible will give them not as blank as a canvas but as much open space to become very aware of yourself and others at all times. Even if you don't think you are, you know, you'll be oppressing the students with your own musical

identity. And then again, all of these things are much harder to do than actually talking about them (Interview June 6, 2012).

John brings up a great point about oppressing our students that began to have me think back to one of the essential questions I wrote for the course: “What barriers are in place in our programs that prevent students from seeing themselves as musicians or future music teachers?” I began to apply Michael Cole’s model to our conservatory and asked myself: How do our institutional projections limit our students? Are parts of their identities ignored?

I discovered through analyzing the interviews that many of my student’s narratives were filled with emotion; I could hear in the voice of one of my students, Tillie Pierce, the struggle she had been experiencing with her music identity as a student at the conservatory.

Once you have to . . . kind of . . . explore your music identity . . . I guess I had to kind of face it in a way and rediscover parts that I hadn’t addressed in a long time. Like being in a rock band or writing music . . . because I hadn’t done that in awhile. So it was nice to see that there are these other parts of my musical identity that I hadn’t looked at in awhile or I had ignored them because I thought I *had* to ignore them. So by exploring these different areas and the activities that we did in our class I was able to just revisit different parts of my musical identity and rediscover them . . . and reaccept them (Interview June 5, 2012).

This project opened up some wounds for Tillie, but in the process she became empowered to bring her passion for writing her own music and for playing in a rock band into her assignments in our class. Over the semester, she began to see that there could be space for both her interests as a drummer in a rock band and as a conservatory percussionist. Because of this experience, Tillie saw how schooling often acts against student interests and creates unspoken narratives about what musics and which identities are “acceptable” to be accessed in school. Through much reflection over the semester, Tillie began to bring more of her identity as a drummer into her identity as a future music teacher and regularly expressed in her assignments, that she will, “share this part with my future students.”

Towards the end of the semester I asked the class to create a definition of music identity, drawing upon the numerous readings and the many assignments they encountered along our journey. Rich debate occurred among the students surrounding issues of context, labeling, positioning, preference, power, and agency. It took a little more than a week to solidify a definition that all could agree on, but the results were fruitful:

Music identity is the perception of one's musical self as a learner, teacher, performer, improviser, composer, listener, and consumer. Music identity is fluid and ever-changing. It can be shaped by the perceptions and actions of social groups and institutions (such as family, schools, houses of worship, governments, corporations, etc.), as well as one's age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or socio-economic status.

### Parting Words

In conclusion, I have found that exploring music identity and presenting music identity projects opens up many possibilities for participants to be exposed to new repertoire as well as share in familiar and unfamiliar musical experiences. Each song becomes a conversation piece that leads to greater discussions and connections between all participants. As Joshua Chamberlain describes:

One of the most important aspects was understanding the viewpoints of others and how the interests of others can be used to construct knowledge. The music identity project is powerful in the classroom because it allows the opportunity to present on music we know and understand as compared to the music we are told to experience in music class, which is often very separate and foreign from everyday life. We need to recognize that music class can be an inclusive place to learn and experience many forms of music, and that just because someone might not play an instrument, sing, or know music a certain way, does not mean they don't have knowledge of and can't make connections to music others introduce (Written assignment May 3, 2012).

Music identity projects encourage participants to use music as a medium of communication to express their varied experiences. By using music to communicate our interests and beliefs, we validate participants' identities within the group structure. Students see themselves as equal contributing members of the class culture as they recognize and make connections with the histories, identities, socio-cultural backgrounds, and preferences of other classmates.

Engaging with such an activity allows for the exploration of stereotypes and further discovery and discussion of musical and personal differences and similarities. It provides space for students and teachers to critically reflect on their choices and on their orientations towards a variety of musical genres, systems, and ways of knowing. In addition, it aids curriculum stakeholders in developing and providing more meaningful and diverse offerings tied to the context in which the stakeholders live. As Winfield Hancock mentions,

Music is a result of its context, and I believe that music education should reflect the context of its students. Music education should open students to new ways of thinking about the music that they listen to on a daily basis, and empower students to create their own music in similar and new styles. Music education should also allow students to experience new contexts. I have done the same through my experience with jazz and gamelan, and they have shaped my identity as a teacher. I wish for my students to have similar experiences in my classroom, and for my students to reap long-term rewards from music education (Written assignment May 3, 2012).

As a teacher and teacher educator, I have found this to be one of the most rewarding experiences. While assessing their presentations, I make every effort to purchase each top choice on iTunes in order to compile a playlist that I listen to regularly on my commute and in my office. As a result, I am introduced to wonderfully diverse musics to which I would rarely find myself exposed. I am able to make connections between musical works with which they are familiar and musical works and concepts that are part of the curriculum. The benefit of knowing how students and teachers identify, engage, and interact with music provides all participants opportunities to shape, guide, and build on pre-existing knowledge during our time together. This in turn helps foster an environment where knowledge is co-constructed and shared, and active dialogue and inquiry are encouraged.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms to protect for anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> Readers can explore the concept of prolepsis on music education in an upcoming chapter in *Navigating the Future* (Talbot, in press).

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## About the Author

Brent C. Talbot is Assistant Professor and Coordinator of Music Education at the Sunderman Conservatory of Music of Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, PA. Prior to joining the conservatory, Dr. Talbot served as Visiting Instructor in Music Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He has taught middle and high school music in the Rochester (NY) City and Webster (NY) public school districts and was former Coordinator of Music at Polytechnic Preparatory Day School in Brooklyn, New York. Dr. Talbot earned his Ph.D. and M.A. in Music Education, as well as a Diploma in Ethnomusicology from the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester, and earned his B.M.E. from the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University. Dr. Talbot's current research involves using discourse analysis and other ethnographic and qualitative approaches to examine varied settings of music learning in the United States and abroad. Brent serves on the steering committee for the MayDay Group and is a peer-reviewer for the *Journal of Homosexuality*. He is the author of the book, *Finding A Way*, which examines music transmission in cross-cultural classrooms, and the co-author of *Empower Music Technology*, a web-based textbook on music technology found at [www.empowermusic.tech.com](http://www.empowermusic.tech.com). He has published in *Action, Criticism, and Theory in Music Education*, the *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, *Visions of Research in Music Education*, *Illinois Music Educator* and *PMEA: News*. For more information about Brent, visit his website at [www.brentctalbot.com](http://www.brentctalbot.com).