

Curriculum as Professional Action

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The culminating issue in any professional framework for music teaching and learning involves complex questions concerning curriculum and instruction. Analyzing what "curriculum" means and involves provides key insights concerning these questions.

Curriculum is conceptualized in many ways, depending on each person's views of education, social values, students, assessment, and so forth. For example, traditionalists define curriculum as nothing more than a written plan. In contrast, contemporary theorists conceive curriculum in more complex terms, because the *what* of education cannot be realistically decided apart from the *why* and *who*, and because issues of *when* and *how* inevitably circle backward and forward to decisions about *why*, *who*, and *what*.

Accordingly, at the other end of the spectrum, some theorists take the broad view that curriculum is "what is taught in school or what is intended to be learned." (Posner & Rudnitsky 1986, 7-8) In more detail, curriculum can be conceived as "the planned and guided learning experiences and intended learning outcomes, formulated through the systematic reconstruction of

knowledge and experience, under the auspices of the school, for the learner's continuous and willful growth in personal-social competence." (Tanner & Tanner 1975, 45)

Curriculum becomes even more complex when we realize that a fully informed, professional approach to curriculum development requires curriculum makers to decide key issues in relation to their knowledge and beliefs about educational philosophy, history, psychology, and sociology.

In music education, we must also consider curriculum making in relation to our beliefs about the nature and value of music, learning themes, music sociology, and so forth. This picture gets even more complicated when we consider that, for example, curriculum developers must consider whether their approach will favor behaviorism, cognitive psychology, humanistic psychology, some combination of these theories, and so on.

In theory, then, there are several different concepts of curriculum from which to choose and many different ways to conceive, develop, and design curricula for every subject. Nowadays, however, this is not what happens in practice. Why not?

Curriculum the "Right" Way

Many scholars suggest that America is currently in the grip of a business model of education and curriculum that draws upon the pseudo-scientific values of behavioral psychology, and the input-output models of instructing-and-testing that follow from this orientation. America's current preoccupation with Educational Reform, National Standards, standardized tests, and "*No Child Left Behind*" (NCLB) are the contemporary equivalents of these top-down, managerial-behavioral approaches.

Who could possibly disagree with (let alone oppose) something called Educational Reform? But first impressions can be misleading. This is the case with notions of Reform and Standards. Beneath the surface, we can see that "Reform" is mostly concerned with *training* students. "Reformers" are not concerned with *educating* in the sense of providing a balanced curriculum for the whole child. If they were, then they would employ holistic evaluations and provide appropriate funding for carrying out the edicts of NCLB.

As Richard Colwell (2004) emphasizes, "Educational Reform" is directed and powered by politicians and business leaders who put marketplace capitalism above all else. In other words, says Colwell, marketplace educators will fund schools and teachers if and only if teachers are preparing students "to compete successfully, not only for jobs in their own country so better products are made and grown, but with competitors

throughout the world." (2004, 18) This agrees with Michael Apple: "For all too many of the pundits, politicians, corporate leaders, and others, education *is* a business and should be treated no differently than any other business." (2001, 1-2)

Apple puts these themes in a broader context when he argues that America's turn toward standardized curricula and testing is rooted in the fear of losing in international competition and a deep dread that "Western traditions" (e.g., the English language, Western religions, and so forth) will be overwhelmed and lost if people from Latin American, Asia, and other non-Western cultures succeed in the global marketplace. Accordingly, he points out, conservative forces have been fairly successful in taking control of American education by boiling it down to simplistic issues of economic productivity, and a "return" to more "rigorous standards," and non-critical thinking. Indeed, when teachers and students are forced to spend more and more time on behaviorist "Achievement Standards," teaching and learning will be much less creative and critically reflective.

Thus, and in the minds of marketplace educators and conservative politicians, Achievement Standards are the key to winning control of the American curriculum and securing the long- and short-term values and

interests of American business. (Colwell 2004, 18) In short, reformers are acting on a simple fact: what gets tested "rigorously" (i.e., in positivistic ways) in schools is what gets *taught* and valued in schools.

In summary, conservative business and political leaders want top-down control of American schools so they can control the future of the marketplace and protect "traditional" American values. In contrast, *educational* educators want control of the curriculum for the purpose of providing all children with a balanced curriculum for their complete development, which includes students' academic, social, culture, physical, artistic, and emotional selves.

Standards

The call in the USA to develop National Content and Achievement Standards for each subject began with the "reform rhetoric" of the *Nation at Risk* report of the 1980s, a development that sparked controversy in most subject areas—except music. On the broadest level, "there was no public debate in the US about the value of the selected basic subjects and whether these competencies fostered in these subjects resulted in the best mix for American-style democracy." (Colwell 2004, 19) On another level, many subject specialists challenge the "standards" notion,

which claims that each subject has a core set of competencies that can be measured "objectively." An even more basic problem with Content and Achievement Standards is that they "do not begin to speak to the basic issues of equity in funding, opportunities, and quality among schools representing communities with vastly differing economic levels." (Schmidt 1996, 73) In short, only after the American government assists schools and supports teachers in tangible ways can realistic Standards be developed, applied fairly, and assessed rationally.

National Music Standards

Arts educators were among the first to submit Content Standards to the US Secretary of Education in 1994. *The School Music Program: A New Vision* is music education's statement of Standards. This document was authored by a small group of like-minded colleagues at the top of the National Association for Music Education (MENC). MENC membership was not polled about the final product of the task force that wrote the Music Standards. Instead, the authors simply "saluted" the dominant ideology of "reform" by reducing the nature and values of "music" to a list of simply stated skills that could be evaluated via behavioral methods.

Indeed, as part of her doctoral dissertation, C. K. Benedict interviewed seven original members of the writing task force for the National Music Standards about the writing process. (2003, 8) The music task force had three major concerns about the Music Standards. They needed to be: (a) as simple as possible, (b) about "content" in the simplest sense of "what students should know and be able to do," (c) measurable, and (d) politically uncontroversial. One member of the music task force explained that the leaders of MENC insisted on a united front due to the prevailing belief that the survival of American music education depends on speaking with one voice. (Benedict 2003, 115) Accordingly, and compared to other fields, music education remains an immature and uneasy domain, largely because the MENC leadership is unable to tolerate critical discourse that could lead to the kinds of deep curricular improvements that have occurred in other fields (e.g., Math, English, and History).

In summary, the Music Standards suffer from several crucial weaknesses. First, because the Standards do not take a position on the basic and long-term values and aims of music, there are no primary "targets" for teachers to hit while teaching, only secondary targets (e.g., singing in tune). Second, because the determination of content was

driven by the unexamined mindset and motivation to "measure" musical achievement in terms of observable behaviors, the Music Standards are hopelessly positivistic. Accordingly, although it is possible to "measure" whether a child is (say) singing in tune, doing so tells us very little about a child's growth in musical understanding and nothing about the "deeper benefits" these atomistic achievements may or may not contribute to the child's life. Indeed, without a deep and thorough foundation for music education, teachers are likely to "teach" simplistic and incorrect notions of the "doings" that make up the Music Standards (e.g., that sound-producing equals *musical* performing) and "achieve" the contents of the Standards according to behavioral measures, while children nonetheless remain unmusical and musically unfulfilled.

The Standards movement represents conformity and compliance with the most conservative and positivistic forces in American culture (past and present). In my view, music and music education should be free of such strictures so that music teaching can operate as a powerful force for individual creativity and empowerment. Indeed, there is a serious danger that judging children in relation to Music Achievement Standards will drive a stake into the heart of what many music teachers want most:

to foster students' intrinsic motivation to learn music, now and in the future.

What music educators need is not a list of so-called Standards. What we need is a critically reasoned concept of the nature and value of both music and music education, including a concept of what musical understanding *is*.

Curriculum Making for Music Education

During the last twenty years, leading scholars and teachers have proposed alternatives to the conventional and problematic notions of curriculum development. One of these is called *practical* curriculum inquiry. This approach has its roots in the writings of pragmatic philosophers (e.g., Charles Sanders Pierce, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey).

How does practical curriculum making differ from today's right wing procedures?

Traditional theory directs teachers to either follow or develop curricula by looking *outside* themselves and their situations. Teachers have been told to test students in relation to a Standard set of behaviors and State examinations. In contrast, advocates of practical curriculum development urge teachers to look to themselves and their own teaching circumstances.

Practical curriculum making holds that the most important solutions to curriculum problems will *not* be found in lists of Standards, or written plans but, instead, in the informed judgments and actions of individual teachers and their specific teaching-learning situations. Practical curriculum (a) replaces the top-down, market-place notion of teachers as curriculum "retailers" and "testers" with an emphasis on teachers as *reflective practitioners*; (b) it emphasizes situated knowledge instead of the specification of acontextual objectives; and (c) it employs multidimensional forms of authentic assessment instead of behavioral measurements and standardized testing. So, in opposition to today's "Standards" and NCLB doctrine, practical curriculum making places the teacher-as-reflective-practitioner at the *center* of curriculum development.

How?

Curriculum Commonplaces

Virtually all teaching-learning situations involve several related "curriculum commonplaces": aims, knowledge, learners, teaching-learning processes, teacher(s), learning context, and evaluation.

These are "commonplaces" in the sense that they appear and reappear in all teaching-learning situations and in all discussions of curriculum-making.

A comprehensive curriculum must resolve the problems presented by each and by their interactions.

Commonplaces are *open* categories: they remain empty until "filled in" by each teacher's critically reasoned beliefs, understandings, intentions, and actions. What a teacher believes and does in relation to the commonplaces before, during, and after each teaching-learning episode shapes the educational experiences of learners in that specific teaching-learning situation. One word for "specific teaching-learning situation" is *curriculum*. A curriculum is something *that teachers and learners experience in specific situations as a result of interactions between and among curriculum commonplaces*.

Praxial Curriculum Making

In *Music Matters* (Elliott 1995), I offer a praxial philosophy of music education that addresses each of the curricular commonplaces presented above. By "filling" each of the commonplaces with the central tenets of praxial philosophy, I also offer a praxial orientation to music curriculum development. The upshot of this orientation is an overall concept of the music curriculum-in-action.

1. *Aims*: The aims of music education come from one's concept of the nature and human significance of music. In my view, music and music education have many values. Developing students' musicianship and listenership by integrating listening, performing, improvising, composing, arranging, conducting, and moving enables students to participate in creating musical expressions of emotions; musical representations of people, places, and things; and musical expressions of values. This range of opportunities for musical expression and creativity offers students numerous ways of giving artistic-cultural form to their powers of feeling, thinking, knowing, valuing, evaluating, and believing which, in turn, engage other listeners' emotions, interests, and understandings.

Additionally, teaching and learning a variety of musical styles and works comprehensively (as music cultures) is an important form of intercultural education. Why? By teaching unfamiliar musics through active music making and listening, students engage in self-reflections and personal reconstructions of their relationships, assumptions, and preferences about other people, other cultures, and other ways of thinking and valuing. Inducting learners into unfamiliar musical practices links the central values of music education to the broader goals of humanistic education.

In and through doing all of the above, students can achieve enjoyment (or "flow" experiences), self-growth, self-knowledge (or constructive knowledge), and, through continuous involvements with music over time, self-esteem.

In *Music Matters* I propose that the most essential, long-term task facing our profession involves enrolling parents, colleagues, administrators, politicians and others in the quest to make schools more *educational* in nature. By "educational" I mean that schools should aim to develop students as *people*, not just job-fillers. As many pragmatic philosophers have argued, *education ought to be conceived for life as a whole*, not just for one aspect of life, such as work, or schooling. Indeed, much more is involved in the full and beneficial development of children than the acquisition of "work skills" and academic knowledge. Human cultures past and present pursue a fairly common set of "life goals" or "life values" that include happiness, enjoyment, self-growth, self-knowledge, freedom, fellowship, and self-esteem for oneself *and* for others.

If this is so, then music education should be in the core curriculum from kindergarten through secondary school because music education can enable students to achieve the life goals of self-growth, self-knowledge, enjoyment, flow, and the happiness that can arise from being involved with

others in musical ways of life. In other words, *music education is a unique and major source of many fundamental life goals*. By actively supporting the aims of music education, school systems increase the likelihood that students will learn to make a *life* as well as a *living*, both inside and outside school.

Another main theme of my praxial philosophy concerns social diversity. Due to the multicultural nature of music as a diverse human practice, and because of the many kinds of social actions and transactions that take place in the music curriculum-as-practicum, school music programs can be a primary way for students to achieve self-identity and self-respect.

2. *Musical understanding*: Musical knowledge is a form of "working understanding"; it is an incredibly rich form of multilayered knowing that is situated culturally, historically, and contextually. Musical understanding includes what others and I call "cognitive emotions" and "mindful feelings" that inform and guide the practical-cultural actions of music listening and music-making. In short, all forms of making music (performing, improvising, composing, arranging, and conducting) depend upon and express themselves as a multidimensional form of knowing

called musical understanding that I conceptualize as having two main aspects: *musicianship* and *listenership*.

Musicianship and listenership are two sides of the same coin: That is, the types of knowledge required to make the music of a particular style-practice (to perform, improvise, compose, arrange, or conduct a certain kind of music) are the same *types* required for listening to that music. In *Music Matters* I explain the five kinds of such knowledge: procedural (informed action), formal (or verbal), informal (or experiential), impressionistic (or intuitive) and supervisory (or meta-cognitive) musical knowing.

Teaching for musical understanding means helping students develop rich, multidimensional forms of cognitive-affective-social-cultural knowing. Indeed, my praxial concept of musical understanding is not just "cognitive" in the simplistic sense of isolated technical skills and verbal data processing. For example, the social and situational nature of musical understanding are seen in the *Dogomba* music community in Africa where, through their dancing, the community contributes to the several layers of rhythmic activity performed and improvised by *Dogomba* drummers. Musical performances, then, are concurrently *personal-community*

performances in the ethical and moral sense. One's musicing and listening reveals one's sense of musical *and* social ethics.

3. *Learners*: Musicianship is not something given "naturally" to some children and not to others. Musicianship is a form of thinking and knowing that is educable and applicable to all. Accordingly, all music students, whether they are in "general music" programs, or some other setting (e.g., a string orchestra), ought to be taught in the same essential way: as *reflective musical practitioners*. A music curriculum should be based on active, critically reflective music-making of all kinds: on learning to listen in the contexts of music-making of all kinds; on listening to recordings; on listening to live performances by students themselves; and on listening to guest artists and at concerts.

Because all music education programs share the same aims, all music education programs ought to provide the same basic conditions for achieving these aims: (a) authentic musical challenges and (b) the musicianship-listenership to meet these challenges through competent, proficient, and artistic music-making. What will differ between and among music education programs across grade levels, school regions (and so on) is not the essential content of the music curriculum (i.e., musical understanding) but, rather, the kinds and levels of musical challenges inherent in the curriculum materials

chosen for (and, perhaps, with) the students. In addition, music programs will differ in the kinds of music-making media (e.g., wind instruments, voices, string instruments, electronic instruments) chosen for (or with) students.

4. *Learning processes*: Music education is not only concerned with developing musicianship and musical creativity in the present. Equally essential is teaching students how to continue developing their musicianship in the future. This involves a kind of learning process that students can both engage in and learn how to employ themselves. I contend that the growth of musical understanding depends on constructivist principles, such as progressive musical problem solving, problem finding, and musical problem reduction. Achieving competent musical understanding, and becoming musically creative, also involves learning to reflect critically on the creative musical potential of the musical ideas (interpretations, improvisations, and so on) one generates and selects.

Implicit in all these processes is the broader requirement that all music students be engaged in rich and challenging music-making projects in classroom situations that are deliberately organized *as close approximations of real musical practices*.

5. *The Teacher*: Music educators must possess both musical understanding and "educatorship." To teach music effectively, a teacher

must possess, embody and exemplify musical understanding. Children develop musicianship not through telling alone, but through the sensitive actions, interactions, and transactions of musically proficient and expert teachers.

Educatorship is a distinct form of procedural knowledge that, in turn, draws upon several other kinds of educational knowledge, including formal, informal, impressionistic, and supervisory *educational* knowledge.

6. *Learning context*: The praxial curriculum-in-action centers on achieving self-growth and musical enjoyment from the thoughtful actions of *music-making* and *music listening* of all kinds. Teachers and students work together to meet the musical challenges involved in authentic musical projects through reflective musical making of all kinds. Music listening is directed, first, to the music being made by students themselves. All music that students are learning to interpret and perform, improvise, compose, arrange, and conduct is approached as a "full course meal"—as a *multidimensional* challenge (Elliott 1995, 199-201) to be made artistically and listened-for in all its relevant dimensions (interpretive, structural, expressive, representational, cultural-ideological). In support of listening-in-context, carefully selected recordings must be introduced in direct relation to the musical practices students are being inducted into.

The praxial music curriculum is deliberately organized to engage learners in musical actions, interactions, and transactions with close approximations of real music style-cultures. The praxial curriculum immerses students in music-making projects that require them to draw upon the standards, traditions, lore, landmark achievements, "languages," and creative strategies of the musical practices of which their projects are a part, and to work creatively inside and outside the boundaries of those practices.

From this perspective, the music teaching-learning environment is itself a key element in the music education enterprise. The musical actions of learners are enabled and promoted by the interactive, goal-directed "swirl" of questions, issues, and knowledge that develop around students' efforts as reflective musical practitioners.

By treating *all* music students (including "general" music students) as reflective musical practitioners, and by teaching all students how to find and solve musical problems in "conversation" with selected musical practices, music educators *situate* students' musical thinking and knowing.

7. *Evaluation*: Educators today make an important distinction between two forms of assessment. *Formative assessment* requires using a variety of cues and languages to give students helpful moment-to-moment feedback about the quality of their efforts-in-the-moment. This

casts music educators in the role of coaches who *guide* students by targeting their attention to key details of their musicing, by adjusting their acts of musicing and listening, and by cueing them to reflect critically about their musical actions.

In contrast, *summative assessments* or "Achievement Standards" usually require us to step back from our students' efforts in order to examine, test, judge, and otherwise reduce their musicing and listening to brief, fragmented tests of isolated skills and facts that we can "describe" as numerical grades and/or brief verbal reports.

Achieving the aims of music education depends most importantly on formative assessment. Learners need constructive feedback about why, when and how they are meeting musical challenges (or not). Formative feedback promotes self-growth and enjoyment. Students also learn to assess their *own* musical thinking-in-action by learning what counts as competent, proficient, expert, and creative music-making. To become knowledgeable and independent judges of musical quality and creativity, students need regular opportunities to reflect on the results of their musicianship and of their peers. Thus, assessment is the joint responsibility of teachers *and* students.

Conclusion

In matters of curriculum and assessment, our primary ethical and educational obligations should be to our students, *not* to politicians, principals, State supervisors, or policy makers. Caring for the welfare for students comes ahead of obeying edicts from "above," especially edicts rooted in simplistic "Standards-think." Indeed, as I have pointed out above, many rigorous scholars give good reasons to believe that the Standards Movement being forced on teachers and schools by conservative policy makers is deeply and profoundly flawed.

For music educators who agree, I suggest the most important step to take is to make the decision to be caring, ethical professionals. This involves making another key distinction between the political (official, Standards-based) curriculum and what I will call the individual, ethical musical curriculum. In daily practice this means working in two different ways that correspond with the two types of thinking I have been discussing all along. Politically, teachers will be required to "walk the walk and talk the talk" of Standards-this and Standards-that. But this does not mean this way of thinking must be applied in their classrooms. For one thing, the political curriculum is just a paper document. And, teachers will infrequently have the curriculum police in their classrooms to determine

whether they obey, or measure students by, the Standards ideology. If needed, tell them what they want to hear using the Standards-*jargon de jour*. If this sounds too contrary, keep in mind that acting professionally means caring about the growth and development of students, not about the curriculum police.

Second, when summative assessments of students are required, we must base these on formative assessments as much as possible. Formative assessments are not perfect, but they are far more holistic and knowledge-fair than summative assessments. The ethical professional will close the classroom door and get on with caring for students by protecting their opportunities to achieve the values of music education through the development of musical understanding.

Third, realize that the Standards movement is a temporary political agenda and will pass. American education and music education have experienced many swings of the pendulum. For now, develop survival strategies (including those above) with colleagues and persist with the central curricular missions.

If this was a more enlightened age and a more enlightened culture, then I am reasonably certain that curriculum and assessment experts could engage productively in dialogues that would lead to more

sophisticated, humanistic, and educational models of music curriculum design and development. Unfortunately, in these un-enlightened times policy makers have lost their way. They are intent upon forcing all teachers and all subjects into one narrow mould dominated by economics-based, input-output procedures. Accordingly, and in the spirit of Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner (1969), we must "push back" by conceptualizing and practicing music education as a "subversive activity" for the sake of our students and of our art.

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