

The Research Gallery at the 2008 NYSSMA Winter Conference

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As I write this, it is July, and everywhere I look in my home there are stacks of books and articles I never seem to have enough time to read during the school year. I walk around the piles on the floor overwhelmed by the desire to just lie down among them. And I do. (It is after all summer, and what better place to nap!)

I pick them up and I enter them with the expectation of connecting ideas to each other, building and extending my practice through words and concepts that might not make sense to me on the first read, or even the next read. I enter to find the unexpected, to find and uncover questions that may lead me, rather than “teach” me. Indeed, I welcome questions that in their very asking potentially change and reshape my thinking about teaching.

Summer comes and goes, and now, as you read this, we are weeks away from the 2008 NYSSMA Winter Conference and I have before me the honor of thinking through with all of you a small, but very important, component of this conference: the poster session, or as it is now designated, the Research Gallery.

A diverse offering

This year’s Gallery is relatively small, but quite

diverse in many ways. There are presentations on listening skills, rhythm skills, autism and music learning, elementary school principals, and urban music teachers, among others.

For the longest time when I heard the words “poster presentation,” I was immediately reminded of those 6th grade science fairs that were held in the gymnasium of my school. On my way to school the morning of those science fairs, I would pass by students fumbling with large, poster boards with diagrams and multi-colored descriptions of projects that may or may not have been meaningful to the presenter, but very rarely meaningful to me.

In retrospect, I recognize that one reason I didn’t engage more directly with these presentations was because the presentations seemed devoid of context, a false engagement and presentation of something one had to do. As a learner, I have since taken part in many meaningless metaphoric poster sessions that have led me to consider more deeply

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what it means to engage in research that's not only meaningful to me, but also could be constructed by others as meaningful.

Case in point. More than 12 years ago, I was at an MENC conference at which a woman gave a presentation on Gardner's Multiple Intelligences. It was an engaging presentation, but I didn't take away any of the interesting points she may have been making. Unfortunately, what I took away was an off-handed comment she made to the audience, which was something to the effect of, "Don't bother reading the book, you won't have time."

At the moment, I'm not sure what bothered me most, the assumption that I couldn't find the time or what seemed to be the presumption that she could distill this remarkable research down in ways that left no other possible engagements. I wanted to enter Gardner on my own terms, through my own lens, and I certainly didn't want her to dictate what time meant or didn't mean for me.

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Parts of these conferences are those presentations that afford the space to consider what making music may mean in our own classrooms. However, other sessions – such as the Research Gallery – provide the space for each of us to engage in thinking as researchers ourselves and thinking with other researchers.

Maximizing the opportunity

Dr. Janice Smith of the Aaron Copland School of Music and NYSSMA Research Chair sends these recommendations for how to attend the Research Gallery:

KEY POINTS

- Poster session offers wealth of topics.
- Participate actively. Ask researchers questions.
- Use these new ideas to implement your own research.

- Read the abstracts in the *School Music News* in November and enter these abstract on your own terms.
- Think of questions to ask the researcher. For instance, "How did you think of this idea?" "In what ways will this inform your own teaching or my teaching?"
- This is not a formal presentation, so walk up and ask questions anytime. If the researcher is talking to someone else, listen in.
- Alternatively, walk up to a poster and start reading. Do this if the researcher is busy talking to someone else and you don't want to listen in.
- If the poster especially interests you, ask the researcher to send you a copy of the full paper. They will want to do this, and it's always helpful to connect to others in the field.
- If the session is not crowded, talk with each of the researchers even if you aren't particularly interested in the topic. They want to talk to people and you never know what ideas may connect to your own.

And, finally, if you are shy, go with a chatty friend!

Here is the thing. We are all researchers. All of us are 6th graders at heart who really would like to present what we might be considering in and outside of our classrooms. And while these presenters may be engaged in research out of higher institutions this does NOT preclude each of us from designing our own research projects, for our own contexts, our own situations. So, stop on by and don't be timid. Stop by and see how others are "doing it!" Research isn't something for "others." It's who we all are and what we all can do.

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"Published by the New York State School Music Association, a non-profit educational organization whose mission is to advocate and improve the education in music of all people in New York by promoting appropriate music activities and programs in the schools and communities of New York State."

Periodicals Mailing Statement

The School Music NEWS (ISSN 0036-6668) is published monthly except June, July, August and February by the New York State School Music Association, 718 The Plain Road, Westbury, NY 11590.

Annual membership dues are \$111.00 which includes \$27.00 subscription to The School Music NEWS. Periodicals postage paid at Bethpage, NY. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: Avon Press, att. NYSSMA, 175 Engineers Road, Hauppauge, New York, 11788.