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Research Studies in Music Education 2007; 29; 29

DOI: 10.1177/1321103X07087566

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On the narrative of challenged assumptions

Cathy Benedict

Abstract

This article explores the ways in which the construction of the narrative of music education was problematised through pre-service teachers' and an academic's engagement with a self-assessment project. While the self-assessment tasks afforded a place through which students were able to interrogate their personal construction of assessment and what it means to demonstrate knowings, larger concerns remained unaddressed and less documented. A key issue was the ways in which what had first been a seemingly "simple" qualitative design was overridden by larger philosophical and methodological concerns. What had seemed an obvious process of culling themes from narratives to document growth, development, and turning points soon disintegrated as the author realized the need to attend not only to which and what story to tell, but who had a say in telling the story, and how the story was to be told.

Keywords: qualitative research; critical interrogation; transformation; normative practices; self-assessment.

Introduction

The art of the possible is a perilous art. It must take heed of life as we know it, yet alienate us from it sufficiently to tempt us into thinking of alternatives beyond it. It challenges as it comforts. In the end, it has the power to change our habits of conceiving what is real, what is canonical. (Bruner, 2002, p. 94)

There is something comforting in the ordinariness of the story of music education. Yes, I think this must be so. Deep within the narrative of music education lies safety and contentment that speaks to the comfort of familiarity. Considering alternatives might provoke uncertainty and dissuade us from the reassurance of our perceived fringe status – a "status" often maintained through self-imposed immunity and few responsibilities. We take more comfort in telling our stories and having our stories told through the lens of second-class citizen, rather than through struggles that would be marked by interrogation of the canonical. If this is so, how do we then generate ways of engaging with structure, method, or even paradigms in order to create new narratives that challenge our embedded assumptions and discourses?

"Who" music education "is" has much to do with social contexts in which individuals are rewarded for very particular ways of being and knowing. Yet who we are also has to do with how we choose to tell our stories and, in that telling, how we choose to live our lives. Bruner speaks of "autobiographical turning points," rites of passage that not only "encourage but legitimate change" (2002, p. 83). What of these turning points, and in what ways can we concern ourselves with them? How do we create the *unexpected* in our narratives of self and, consequently, in the narratives of music education so that we may create turning points that are emancipatory? Where and with whom do we begin?

With ourselves, of course. And yet, internal narrative that consists only of the retelling of experiences, and stories may preclude the possibility of critical reflection and interrogation.

Bruner has called narrative an “utterance or text whose intention is to initiate and guide a search for meaning among a spectrum of possible meanings” (1986, p. 25). The utterance of experience initiates the search for meaning. Yet, relying solely on the utterance without engaging in the processes of examining the ways in which the experiences were constructed serves to reproduce particular meanings, discounting the spectrum of possible meanings and serving also to deny the possibility of discourse that allows us to construct with others the “dialectic of the established and the possible” (Bruner, 2002, p. 13).

The “established” is something about which we believe we are familiar. Yet it is exactly this familiarity that thwarts the possibility of processes that would allow us to recognize both hegemonic structures and the ways in which our assumptions and day-to-day experiences serve to reify those structures. Thus, we have Bruner’s *possible* and the possibility of process, both of which call for a very particular kind of dialogue. Bohm suggests that dialogue, or more specifically, the inherent reciprocity of dialectic, provides a:

continual emergence of a new content that is common to both participants. Thus, in a dialogue, each person does not attempt to *make common* certain ideas or items of information that are already known to him. Rather, it may be said that the two people are making something *in common*, i.e., creating something new together. (1996, p. 3)

I believe Bohm is saying that our goal is to create something new together through dialogue, so that then we may challenge how our experience has constructed this perceived arrival point of who we *are* and so allow ourselves to imagine and engage in the liberating process of becoming. This challenge, though, does not rely on agreement or disagreement, nor does it rely on simply creating space for stories to be told. Rather, the goal is to create reciprocal relationships – based on how we listen, respond to, and interrogate stories – that allow for the dialectic of the possible.

The telling of stories

Narratives of liberation are always tied to people’s stories, and what stories we choose to tell, *and the way in which we decide to tell them*, [italics added] form the provisional basis of what a critical pedagogy of the future might mean. (Freire, 1970, p. xii)

How then, in the telling of our own stories, are we to create reciprocal relationships and facilitate autobiographical turning points so that all of us are able to challenge the existing (and established) narratives of music education? And more to the point, how do we tell the stories so that, in telling them, there may evolve a “critical pedagogy of the future” (Freire, 1970, p. xii) that serves to “illuminate the nature of social reality” (Giroux, 1983, p. 21) rather than to reproduce it?

The purpose of this article is two-fold. It is a retelling of a self-assessment project I implemented with students in my elementary pedagogy class. In the crafting of this story, I speak of the original intent of the project and the ways in which it unfolded over the semester. This article is also my attempt at confronting the ways in which the research methodology I had assumed I would “use” as a lens to examine the self-assessment project as a way to tell and present the stories of these students, undermined the transformational goals of the project. Thus, in this article there exist two parallel stories that I attempt to “draw together” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 152): one is the story of the self-assessment project, and the other, the story (or my story) of methodological and philosophical concerns.

Barone (1992) calls us to speak of and through honesty that is “achieved through a heightened *empiricism*, a determined scrutinizing of the world around us” (p. 142). In my initial attempts to write up this project, I began to confront and indeed scrutinize my own involvement.

I was called to attend to the responsibility to tell this story as one of failure – not so much that the implementation of the self-assessment project failed, but rather, failure framed as my inability to see that in my retelling of the story I may have discounted (and appropriated) the stories of my students. By choosing what stories would be told and how they would be told, what had seemed an obvious methodological process of culling themes from these stories to document student transformation growth, development, and turning points was neither honest nor critical.

Methodological concerns

This article began as a paper submitted to the *First International Conference on Narrative Inquiry in Music Education (NIME)*. The 2006 NIME call for papers stated: “The purposes of the NIME conference are to consider the current and potential contributions of narrative inquiry to music education, and to advance the philosophical, theoretical, and practical bases of narrative inquiry in music education.”

My project, as it stood, could have allowed me to contribute to the conference in the way described above. I realized, however, that in order to “advance the philosophical, theoretical, and practical bases of narrative inquiry,” I wanted to attend to the possibility of research as becoming “a doing” rather than research as “object.” Clandinin and Connelly (1998) ask us to consider that if the ways in which we engage with doing research do not make a difference in our lives, then what is the purpose? They ask, “Why engage in such research if its purpose is not to influence the lives of children in educative ways” (p. 152). Why indeed engage in research if it’s going to “advance the philosophical, theoretical, and practical bases of narrative inquiry” but not the lives of my students and, in the process, my own life as well?

Historically, the purpose of many studies in music education was driven by questions that were measurable but not, perhaps, questions that moved us toward growth or transformative possibilities, or ones that provided “the vocabulary to think differently to problematize taken-for-granted beliefs” (Bowers, 1987, p. 64). Studies with titles such as *The Effects of (fill in the blank) on the Behaviors of (fill in the blank) in Populations of (fill in the blank)* continue to proliferate. There ought to be a certain amount of discipline shame and embarrassment in this “fill-in-the-blank” research agenda. Not because the research in itself is at fault, but rather because it often appears that in these studies there is an unstated obvious or given, as if there is no need to interrogate why or what we do. Not only do these types of studies offer very little in the way of questioning and challenging the “established” and familiar, they seem distanced from an epistemological shift that is in evidence in every walk of life. Clinging to the efficacy of these studies, however, provides us a way to abdicate our responsibility to consider larger philosophical issues in the profession.

We now stand on the edge of embracing new purposes of research; we have the chance to engage in the processes of change. Lather argues that “we must go beyond the concern for more and better data to a concern for research as praxis. What I suggest is that we consciously use our research to help participants understand and change their situations” (1991, p. 57).

My purpose for engaging in research is to challenge and interrogate who I am in this world as well as to inform and continually reframe dialogue and discourse created not only with colleagues and students, but also with all with whom I come in contact. I seek to model this challenge and interrogation for my students so that in the process of naming and challenging our realities, we may engage in a dialectical perspective in which we consider our individual actions as they interact (and are interdependent) not only with “general” society, but also with the society of music education, thereby opening the possibility to “create something new together” (Bohm, 1996, p. 3). Thus, rather than a research trajectory toward a prescriptive goal or pre-determined arrival point, I struggle to embrace a research model that reflects my pedagogical goal of reciprocity that is, by design, participatory in nature. At the same time, I must be mindful of what

it is I bemoaned in many of the research designs that came before. I must take heed and be persistent in reminding myself that my goals, purposes of liberation, and desire to become shape the questions I pose and, perhaps more importantly, those that I don't.

Freire believes that "current epistemological and ontological shifts taking place in social theory must be firmly grounded in human narratives of emancipation and social justice" (as cited in McLaren & Leonard, 1993, p. x). It seems ethically remiss to ignore or disregard the larger educative and humanitarian purposes of music education and thus what it means to contextualize and frame research in such purposes. The questions we pose, frame, and generate determine methodology. Hence, we are compelled to attend not only to the kinds of questions we pose but also to recognize the dialectic between questions, purpose, and the framing and reframing of story.

When I first began writing up the self-assessment project, I realized I couldn't ignore these issues. I realized that, even though the story I was going to tell did provide insight into the process of creating "autobiographical turning points," the soundness of the methodological fit with the goals and purposes of my question was indeed less than sound. My students became objects, as Lather warns, "targets of research – rather than active subjects empowered to understand and change their situations" (1991, p. 58). Even though my research goal was emancipatory in intent, in the final analysis, it was I who was perched and ready to tell the story. It was I who imposed "meanings on situations rather than constructing meaning through negotiation with research participants" (p. 58). I co-opted their story for my own purpose, for the way I wanted to structure my own narrative.

But perhaps I get ahead of myself.

The telling of the story of the project

The self-evaluation project, designed originally by Judith McVarish, was fairly straightforward. It began as a collaboration between McVarish, a mathematics professor, and two science professors at my institution. I was invited to enter their on-going discussion about how to better engage pre-service students with problematizing the assessment process. As part of this project, one of the ways in which the professors felt students could reflect and engage with self-assessment was by using index cards that would be passed out at the end of each class. On these cards, students were instructed to write anything they wanted in response to the class. During the days following the class, each professor, with the intent of pushing the students' thinking, would respond on the same card with questions and queries of their own. At the next class, the cards would be given back to the students, accompanied by a new blank card for new comments and questions.

Before implementing the project in the fall of 2005, I had several meetings with the three professors. They had implemented the project in the previous year, and our discussions focused on their initial findings. We looked at the card transcriptions from their classes, and they discussed some of the themes they felt had emerged: sharing ideas; sharing thinking, building community; connection to practice; ideas for classroom; control; the Truth of teaching; fairness. While these categories seemed interesting, I wondered if the cards could be used in more deliberative ways so that there would be a focus on the ways in which assumptions could be, and perhaps had been, challenged in light of the philosophical goals of my class.

I had a sense that the index cards could be a powerful strategy for transformative possibilities, but I had yet to articulate or experience the praxial possibilities embedded in the implementation. My initial plan was to contextualize the findings, or the emerging "themes and codes," in a framework provided by Bruner, Bohm, and others. So I blithely embarked on this "research" project, imagining that I would type up the data from the file cards and use content

analysis to uncover codes that would then “yield inferences” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 20). It all seemed straight forward and simple.

The process and the context

I am interested in modeling pedagogy that facilitates environments in which everyone involved is able to construct meaning individually as well as to engage in discourse that challenges normative practices of power and privilege. I am interested in dialogue, as Bohm writes, in which “each person does not attempt to make common certain ideas or items of information that are already known to him” (Bohm, 1996, p. 3), or as Lather would put it, “dialogue that allows for the development of empowering approaches to generating knowledge” (Lather, 1991, p. 51).

However, the classroom is fraught with cultural and political “norms.” There are particular (and normative) ways of going about being a student that are rewarded, modeled, and represented, and that have been internalized since pre-kindergarten. Gruenewald writes that, “Not only is our experience of places mediated by culture, education, and personal experience, but places themselves are products of culture” (2003, p. 626). Because creating unexpected autobiographical turning points and making the familiar unfamiliar was my goal, I had no desire to replicate hegemonized models of school culture in my elementary pedagogy classroom. The index cards seemed like a way to begin to create a space in which students felt free to articulate concerns and (perhaps) assumptions, a form of communication that Bohm (1996) believes:

can lead to the creation of something new only if people are able freely to listen to each other, without prejudice, and without trying to influence each other. Each has to be interested primarily in truth and coherence, so that he is ready to drop his old ideas and intentions, and be ready to go on to something different, when this is called for. (p. 3)

I imagined that once the students found a place in the cards to speak in ways they otherwise might not speak, it would be easier to move the same kinds of dialogue into the classroom – a dialogue that would allow each of us to challenge particular paradigms, including what it means to be and know in this world. I saw the cards as a way of allowing students the freedom of addressing anything and everything that was on their minds in a way that classroom discussion seldom affords.

The beginning of the project

As the first day of my fall 2005 Elementary Pedagogy class started, I passed the index cards out to the students. Immediately, they were suspect: they wanted to know exactly what they should write. Could they really write anything they wanted? “Yes, you can,” I assured them. I had no idea what to expect.

The first week the responses I received ran the gamut from philosophical inquiry:

Why is “hidden curriculum” hidden? (September 7, 2005)

to comments that I would come to see as defense of the status quo:

Isn't it important, though, that we provide younger students with a solid musical frame of reference, i.e., Western music theory, before exposing them too haphazardly to other world music? (September 7, 2005)

to practical applications:

I heard there're some cultures and religions that don't celebrate Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Halloween What should we do? (September 7, 2005)

to self-absorbed musings:

Do I fit in the music education program? ... I love performing, but I also need to pay the bills Music Therapy has also crossed my mind as it is performance based and touches upon some great criteria; however, I'm not sure what to do. (September 7, 2005)

and to (my personal favorite) challenges to my own pedagogy:

Is this type of "compelled inquiry" not similar to the often discouraged "entrapment" type question? (September 7, 2005)

It was easy to see that many of the comments did fall into categories: personal concerns, practical concerns, theoretical concerns, and so on, and that such categories would lend themselves to analysis. Clearly, I was on the right track. At this point, my goal was to reflect on what the students said and push their thinking forward. So I spent the next week commenting on the back of each of the file cards.

When I passed the cards back at the end of the following class, I felt a palpable shift in the class culture as the students read my comments. I got the sense that they hadn't really believed they could write anything they wanted and that they had not trusted that they would not be penalized for their remarks. The simple realization that they were free to write anything they wanted turned out to be a powerful pedagogical strategy in itself.

I really appreciate this giving-back-and-forth message system! At first, I felt really dubious when you said, "Just write ANYTHING." But reading your comment, I see that I could really write ANYTHING. (September 21, 2005)

As part of the class, one day a week the students also observed me teach, and they taught as well, in a public after-school program. These opportunities provided moments in which all of us were able to implement and address issues that were raised in class discussions as well as in the cards. I had hoped that engaging in activities that reflected the dialogue in class and in the cards would serve to create a reciprocal environment in which students were able to experience knowledge in the making. Lather refers to this as emancipatory knowledge. "Emancipatory knowledge increases awareness of the contradictions hidden or distorted by everyday understandings, and in doing so it directs attention to the possibilities for social transformation inherent in the present configuration of social processes" (Lather, 1991, p. 52).

However, if I was hopeful that the cards would effect a sea change in how classroom dialogue would open up and how liberatory transformation would spontaneously erupt, I certainly was faced with a differing reality. In fact, it wasn't until the third week of class, when one of the more quiet students in class spoke up, that the culture of the class seemed to shift and that I felt the class would be able to move toward "creating something new together" (Bohm, 1996, p. 3). This student spoke of feelings of hopelessness that had come over her because of our discussions. I almost didn't let her finish; I almost did that "teacher thing" of interrupting in order to "protect" the student. Her willingness to speak honestly and openly about her feelings seemed to afford space for others to begin entering the classroom discourse differently. Her card from that class spoke of that moment:

The fact that I was able to voice my opinion in class today was quite a big deal for me. Usually, I would just let my feelings subside and try to hold it in. I was sort of proud of myself for taking a risk and speaking my mind ... I hope it leads to other moments in the future. (September 21, 2005)

This is not to say that I always felt successful in facilitating this freedom, and certainly not to suggest that all students felt free to speak. In fact, eight weeks into the semester, a student admitted in class that he wasn't able to share his thoughts in ways that others could. It was one of those "some people speak more than others" issues that come up in any class. A few of the

students commented on his willingness and ability to confront this publicly. One student in particular wrote of responsibility:

I'm curious about our "discussions." Michael's ⁱ comment really struck me. My first thought was shame since I was one of the contributors to the conversation he was lost from. That made me afraid to speak up in the rest of the discussion. I wanted to ask a question to the class, hopefully one that everyone had an opinion about and was comfortable talking about. I wanted to use body language ... direct questions at everyone else. It's made me more aware of the rest of the class (those we don't usually hear from). I'm GLAD he said it. (November 9, 2005)

My response:

This comment was one of those that (as a teacher) you have to first allow it to be articulated, and second, take responsibility. I felt immense shame as well. Shame and dread. My heart rate skyrocketed. I try so hard to manage discussions and often they seem just out of reach, or I make one comment and everything goes awry. It's a matter of balancing discussions with other ways of allowing people to contribute. I'm glad he spoke up. (November 9, 2005)

I was feeling like the introduction of the cards into the class culture did begin to provide the impetus for a "sudden reversal in circumstances" which would "turn a routine sequence of events into a story" (Bruner, 2002, p. 5) that might, in turn, become an autobiographical turning point for students. As the semester progressed, there were definable moments in which I felt students were better able to challenge and interrogate assumptions they held. For example:

In terms of the whole gay/straight thing, I'm not exactly sure how that would translate to the wind band setting. I can see how multicultural stuff can be addressed, but how do I promote tolerance of homosexuals? Do I talk about how certain composers were gay? Do homosexuals have their own music? I'm not trying to sound like a jerk, and I probably should've asked these questions in class, but how do we bring these alternative diverse groups into practice? (October 5, 2005)

First, I must say that since I have been thoughtfully enjoying the ideas in this class, I have been leaving EVERY other class in rage and frustration. I am learning to look at everything through different eyes and question the meaning of what we say, think and do. I have crossed an obstacle in my thinking, and I am thankful that I can never go back. When we discuss those ideas I continue to open my eyes to the unasked questions the world refuses to ask. (October 12, 2005)

However, what really seemed to force autobiographical turning points was reading Alfie Kohn's text, *Punished by Rewards* (1991). Kohn asks us to challenge the assumptions embedded in that which we hold so dear:

There is a time to admire the grace and persuasive power of an influential idea, and there is a time to fear its hold over us. The time to worry is when the idea is so widely shared that we no longer even notice it, when it is so deeply rooted that it feels to us like plain common sense. At the point when objections are not answered anymore because they are no longer even raised, we are not in control: we do not have the idea; it has us. (p. 3)

Certainly these words echoed what John Dewey wrote 75 years earlier: "Consequently [habits] possess us, rather than we them. They move us; they control us. Unless we become aware of what they accomplish, and pass judgment upon the worth of the result, we do not control them" (1916/1944, p. 29).

The Kohn text provided the framework, or perhaps even the vehicle, for creating the kind of dialogue I had hoped for in the cards. Indeed, throughout the semester I felt, for the most part, that my comments didn't provide "answers." Instead, I thought I had found a balance between giving students my own reactions to particular situations and posing questions I'd hoped they would pursue more deeply. But the Kohn text seemed to flip that "lecture" circuit in me. It

may have been that I didn't trust myself enough to just ask questions. Or, it might have been that I felt so strongly about this text that I had to weigh in with my own interpretation. Perhaps it just had to be about me. One student had this reaction to Kohn:

I'm really enjoying the Kohn—I love how he assaults some sacred cows in our culture, things that I take for granted but can also recognize as absurd and counterproductive (promising rewards, recognizing “excellence,” etc.). (11-09-05)

My Response:

I love that by opening ourselves to assault one sacred cow we are able to take on the habits of mind to challenge others. This is what we want for our students. This is what we need to model for them and then allow them to do. (November 9, 2005)

And another student wrote:

I'm now grappling with the concept of creating praise out of every situation...For example: When we were giving our quotes from the Kohn book, I noticed that some quotes received more discussion than others, which immediately made me think, “Was my choice not as worthwhile as another quote? ... then I slapped myself.

But then it made me realize what a deep effect rewards/punishments have had on me... I was creating a system of judgment for myself to justify the validity of my comments. How do I fix myself, to better guide students? (November 9, 2005)

My Response:

This card stayed with me all week. And I waited till the end to face it. It is (not seems) what happened in class. Some comments/quotes got more response than others, even though I said we wouldn't be able to comment when I first began the conversation. So, or however, I wanted to be able to speak after each comment but then I realized this was just me guiding the (my) agenda, and so I worried in some moments and then in other moments some people just spoke up (the usual suspects, by the way). It just seems like I should give up control or come to terms with keeping/guiding it. EEEKKK! So ... I think of this, too, that it's my job to fix myself. Lots of responsibility, lots of great lows with that (November 9, 2005)

Were these cards indicative of autobiographical turning points that allowed the entire class to engage in creating something new together? Perhaps so, in my estimation, but it really shouldn't have been my estimation that “counted.”

Practicing what we preach

The essence of my argument, then, is that we who do empirical research in the name of emancipatory politics must discover ways to connect our research methodology to our theoretical concerns and commitments. At its simplest, this is a call for critical inquirers to practice in their empirical endeavors what they preach in their theoretical formulations. (Lather, 1991, p. 172)

At the beginning stages of this project, I had a sense that the index cards could be used as a way to get at unpacking assumptions, and even as a way to “empower [all of us] to come to understand and change [our] own ... realities” (Lather, 1991, p. 53). Because my students were watching me teach young children as well as observing how I engaged with them in our own classroom community, I felt that all of the pieces were in place to facilitate research that was participatory and thus hopefully emancipatory in intent. I had the sense that all of us moved through the class, taking on new possibilities of seeing who we could be in the world. But of course having a “sense” doesn't mean this is what happened.

How much did this project “reorient, focus, and energize participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it” (Lather, 1991, p. 68)? I am not sure. The participants were not involved in choosing the stories to tell or in the presentation of the stories. I did not ask them to reflect back on the cards and describe what they experienced so that they might “gain self-understanding and, ultimately, self-determination through research participation” (p. 68). I imposed the telling of the story, I imposed the theoretical construct, or as Lather writes, “In the name of emancipation, [I] impose(d) meanings on situations rather than constructing meaning through negotiation with research participants” (1991, p. 58).

Bruner talks about stories and how they “typically begin by taking for granted the ordinariness or normality of a given state of things in the world – what ought to prevail” (2002, p. 6). This is how stories may begin, but it takes something unexpected, or the dialectic between what was expected and what came to pass (p. 15), to make a story liberatory. My study isn’t just a story of the ordinariness of a research design gone unexpectedly awry, it is also a story in which I have been tempted, as Bruner would say, to think of alternatives beyond.

The *First International Conference on Narrative Inquiry in Music Education* provided a place in which music educators could grapple, if only for a short time, with the “philosophical, theoretical, and practical bases of narrative inquiry” (NIME, 2005). Yet I am again reminded that I ought not to take comfort in the epistemological shift this might reflect, but remain actively vigilant. Not the silent kind of vigilance; rather the type of vigilance that facilitates discussion and challenges systemic inequality. Perhaps we can consider this epistemological shift as a rite of passage that will encourage and legitimate change (Bruner, 2002, p. 83), and embrace all of the uproar that may entail. Bruner reminds us that the dialectic between the “comfort of the familiar past and the allure of the possible” is “often noisy” (2002, p. 62). Freire reminds us that, “The more ‘unquiet’ a pedagogy, the more critical it will become” (as cited in Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003, p. 359). Noisy, unquiet. Dialogue is noisy and discourse that challenges power structures is definitely unquiet. How glorious the possibility of inviting and embracing working methodology that can also be so – that as Bruner proposes, is certainly perilous, but also embraces the contradictions so needed in our research engagements, of challenge and comfort.

Note

An earlier version of this paper was presented to the *First International Conference on Narrative Inquiry in Music Education, Narrative Soundings*, Arizona State University, April 5-7, 2006.

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