

Constructing Communities of Scholarship in Music Education

Estelle R. Jorgensen

The Oxford Handbook of Music Education, Volume 2

Edited by Gary E. McPherson and Graham F. Welch

Print Publication Date: Sep 2012 Subject: Music, Music Education

Online Publication Date: Nov 2012 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199928019.013.0049

Abstract and Keywords

This article discusses how music educational communities can be a mixed blessing. One of their disadvantages is that they can ossify musical beliefs and practices. They may be so focused on traditional practices that insularity, closed-mindedness, and parochialism on the part of community's members may make it difficult to adapt when changing circumstances and contexts require alternative ideas and practices. While forged around shared purposes and methods, communities also need to foster specialized functions and segmented groups that arise in the midst of specific and differing interests. The interplay of these forces can energize the system and open creative possibilities between sometimes contradictory purposes and approaches. The challenge for organizations is to find a balance between these forces. The creation of an international framework or organizational structure for music education scholarship is also discussed.

Keywords: music education, educational communities, international framework, organizational structure

Music education benefits from a community of scholarship and practice. From antiquity, music teachers, as other musicians, have formed themselves into colleges, guilds, schools, and associations. Whether in the context of individual or group instruction, of whatever tradition or specialty, these teachers have sometimes been music's principal thought leaders and exponents and the means whereby musical traditions have been forged, sustained, and transformed. Communities provide the public spaces in which collective and individual thought and action transpire and where ideas and practices forwarded by members are discussed, criticized, debated, evaluated, and contested. They foster imaginative thinking of individual exponents who, without being in these communities, may never arrive at particular ideas and practices.¹ By developing shared beliefs, values, and norms and limiting deviation from these commitments, communities enable collective action on behalf of certain goals and methods. As ideas and practices are put to the test, subjective understandings become objectified, in the sense that they are shared widely by a community's members. These norms provide the basis for and means of a conversation within particular communities and sometimes beyond their borders.

Constructing Communities of Scholarship in Music Education

Still, music educational communities are a mixed blessing. Among their disadvantages, they can ossify musical beliefs and practices. They may be so focused on traditional practices that insularity, closed-mindedness, and parochialism on (p. 638) the part of a community's members may make it difficult to adapt when changing circumstances and contexts require alternative ideas and practices. The social pressures on members to conform to a community's beliefs, values, and practices may be such that members are fearful of jeopardizing their situation and standing in the community and unwilling to risk thinking or doing things differently. As communities seek to contain, discipline, and domesticate the ideas and practices of individual members, they may inhibit divergent and imaginative ideas and practices. The oppression suffered by dissidents may be such that communities lose their resilience and traditions become isolated and moribund.

Viewed in terms of their characteristic social processes, communities are subject to centripetal and centrifugal forces that on the one hand enable them to cohere as unified entities or on the other hand cause them to fracture, fragment, and dissolve. Coordinated goal seeking and socialization processes are among the means whereby organizations cohere and act concertedly.² Alternatively, specialization and segmentation processes can cause organizations to break up and fly apart. Seeing virtue as a “golden mean” among opposites, paradoxes, tensions, and ironies suggests that social forces are needed to create and maintain a resilient and unified yet dynamic and nimble system that thrives in the midst of changing conditions over time and from place to place.³ While forged around shared purposes and methods, communities also need to foster specialized functions and segmented groups that arise in the midst of specific and differing interests. The interplay of these forces can energize the system and open creative possibilities between sometimes contradictory purposes and approaches.

The practical challenge for organizations is to arrive at as optimal a point between these forces as is practically feasible. Today's particular organizational challenges consist in containing pressures toward specialization and segmentation in a mass-mediated and technologically driven environment and fostering organizations that are unified in common purposes and can thrive in these new environments. Mass-mediated and technological advances such as the internet have created dynamic and rapidly shifting realities and facilitated organizational segmentation and differentiation. Present-day virtual communities or “milieu cultures” comprised of self-selected groups amplify the resulting disjunctions that make it more difficult to forge unified communities across a broad range of interests.⁴ In such circumstances, it is natural for an organization's members to gravitate toward groups of like-minded others, although such conversations may come at the cost of ignoring or resisting the perspectives of different others. Followed to its logical extreme, ideologically based groups of like-minded people can contribute to closed- and narrow-mindedness and parochialism; without the crossfertilization of different beliefs and practices, communities can be stultified and fossilized.

The music education research community faces this problem internationally. Lacking an international society for research in music education that embraces all the foundational disciplines of inquiry represented in the field and speaks on behalf of music education

Constructing Communities of Scholarship in Music Education

scholarship around the world, various groups, networks, and societies have been cobbled together, often in the midst of professional (p. 639) organizations originally designed for practical rather than scholarly purposes. In these circumstances, scholars attempt to pour scholarship into wineskins constructed with other political and practical interests in mind. A plethora of symposia have naturally sprung up to fill the void. These are often informally organized and framed around narrow interests; they attract subsets of scholars from time to time. Various nationally organized, discipline-based, and topically focused international networks, groups, and societies for research in music education have begun to emerge that are unevenly represented around the world. The result is a cacophony generated by activity that excludes some as it includes others; groups may be at cross purposes, and meetings are sometimes held at conflicting times and places. For example, immediately prior to this writing, I needed to choose among meetings within the course of a few weeks in China, Finland, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The costs of attending all of these important meetings were prohibitive, especially given the lack of university support for travel and the straitened financial circumstances in the country in which I live and work. The burgeoning numbers of interest groups, while indicative of a lively engagement with music education scholarship, also represent a fragmented reality of specialized constituencies and potentially important though differing imperatives. Ironically, notwithstanding the activity, the audiences may be smaller, and researchers, writers, and speakers may have less influence than might be the case were there fewer organizations with wider reach. Understanding organizations is also to grasp that once forged, they tend to have self-perpetuating tendencies. Those who control the emerging fiefdoms and their respective constituencies may be unwilling to cooperate with other organizations or cede power and control of their respective groups and organizations to others.

Music education ultimately exists for the public good. Its practice is an important aspect of cultural transmission and transformation. There is an ethical imperative for scholarship to benefit practice, be it immediately or over the long term. Unlike some academic fields that can be pursued for other than practical purposes, education in and through music occurs in the phenomenal world. Music educational thought and practice entail moving from theoretical assumptions, models, paradigms, and the like to the messy world of practical engagements. Given the public nature of its purposes and methods, music education naturally concerns issues of cultural public policy. Accomplishing this task effectively requires unified scholarly organization(s). Especially at a time when nation-states are increasingly intertwined, international cooperation by, and crossfertilization among, music education scholars can impact significantly the formation and conduct of international cultural policy.

How might such an improved international framework or organizational structure for music education scholarship be created? The field of music education needs an international community of music education scholars that expressly meets the scholarly needs of this community, widens the forum in which all can potentially speak, protects the specific interest groups that have already formed and allows them to flourish, coordinates the times and places in which meetings are (p. 640) held, and fosters the crossfertilization of ideas

Constructing Communities of Scholarship in Music Education

throughout the entire community. Meeting these objectives and creating a wider and more unified and integrated community of music education scholarship and practice is a daunting enterprise that may necessitate retooling and restructuring existing organizations and creating new organizational structures or coordinating mechanisms. Toward this end, a first step in determining a practical course of action might be to convene an international summit of leaders of research organizations and symposia in music education to examine various possibilities and determine further steps. Whatever the particular approaches taken, given the gifted leaders in our midst, we are surely able to foster and strengthen a community of music education scholars internationally. Doubtless, accomplishing this challenge will require diplomacy, tact, resolve, and imagination on the part of all those involved. Still, the resulting process would seem to be well worth our collective and individual effort.

Notes:

- (1.) On communities and music education, see Estelle R. Jorgensen, "Music Education as Community," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 29(3) (autumn 1995), pp. 71–84, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3333542>; Estelle R. Jorgensen, *Pictures of Music Education*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011, chap. 3. Also see Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 17.
- (2.) On social processes, see Henry Zentner, *Prelude to Administrative Theory: Essays in Social Structure and Social Process* (Calgary: Ontario: Strayer, 1973), chap. 7.
- (3.) On Aristotle's concept of virtue, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. and ed. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), sec. 1107a, 31.
- (4.) On "milieu cultures," see Peter Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

Estelle R. Jorgensen

Estelle R. Jorgensen is Professor of Music at the Jacobs School of Music, Indiana University, Bloomington, where she teaches courses in the foundations of music education. She serves as editor for *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, general editor for *Counterpoints: Music and Education* series at Indiana University Press, is the founding chair of the Philosophy Special Research Interest Group of MENC—the National Association for Music Education, and is the founding cochair of the International Society for the Philosophy of Music Education. She is the author of *In Search of Music Education* (University of Illinois Press, 1997), *Transforming Music Education* (Indiana University Press, 2003), *The Art of Teaching Music* (Indiana University Press, 2008), the *Pictures of Music Education* (Indiana University Press, 2011), and is a frequent contributor to leading research journals in music education internationally.

