



The Dearth of Creativity in Music Education: Time to Shift

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Creativity is a hot topic in education these days, largely due to increasing recognition that creativity is economically valuable.

In *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) Richard Florida uses sociological and economic data to point out that a creative ethos is increasingly pervasive in our society. Florida defines the creative class as those who work in knowledge-intensive industries such as high tech sectors, financial and legal services, health-care, business management, and education. In 1999 these “knowledge workers” comprised over 30 percent of the entire U.S. workforce. In 2011, a report by the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities recognized the significance of creative work in fuelling the U.S. economy; entitled “Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America’s Future Through Creative Schools,” the report claimed: “Building capacity to create and innovate in our students is central to guaranteeing the nation’s competitiveness” (p. viii).

Music education has a strong tradition of outspoken advocacy. (This is an evolutionary necessity; if music education doesn’t effectively advocate for itself, it doesn’t survive.) It is not surprising, then, to find advocates jumping on the bandwagon to loudly proclaim that music education nurtures and develops creativity and that young people who take music will have plenty of opportunity to practice and hone creative skills and habits of mind that will enable them to thrive amidst the creative class so essential to the 21st century economy.¹

Unfortunately, there is a serious flaw in this advocacy plan. The problem is that the vast majority of formal music education experiences are not creative at all. While music education certainly has the *potential* to foster creativity, the claim that music education is inherently creative is false.

In schools across North America the predominant means of engaging young people with music is large ensemble performance preparation. Young musicians sit or stand in rows and do what the composer (via the score) and the director (via gestures and instructions) tell them to do. In studios and conservatories music learning is more likely to occur in one-to-one lessons, but the general idea is the same: young musicians prepare for performance by doing what the score in front of them and the teacher beside them tell them to do.

I am not suggesting that I do not value these models of music engagement. On the contrary, I believe they are immensely valuable for all kinds of reasons. I have regularly and consistently sung in choirs since I was eight years old, and will continue to do so as long as I can draw breath. I sing in choirs because it makes my life infinitely richer. Large ensemble music making is magnificent for building community, for connecting people to each other and to the aesthetic realm, and for enabling individuals to be part of something bigger than themselves. Studio music lessons are brilliant for enabling tangible achievement, for devel-

oping self-regulation and discipline, and of course, for the personalized nurturing of musical skill development. But when musicians learn to play pieces for conservatory exams and concert halls, or learn to perform in orchestras, choirs, bands, and other large ensembles, they are rarely learning how to be creative.

Doing what someone tells you to do is not creative. Replicating something that someone else created is not creative (Bartel, 2004). While creativity is a notoriously slippery construct, there is general consensus amongst creativity scholars that a truly ‘creative’ product must be novel, or original. The creative work required to bring such a product into existence involves imagining and generating ideas; seeking and forging connections; synthesizing; finding and solving problems; experimenting and exploring; taking risks; analyzing context; being subversive; taking time away; editing and refining; and so on. In order for music education to legitimately claim to nurture creativity, there needs to be a shift. Music-learning activities must be re-structured to provide genuine opportunities for learners to engage in truly creative work of this nature. The key is for *students* to make the musical decisions.

Creative work can happen in performance preparation activities when the teacher steps off the podium and allows students to choose repertoire, design and manage rehearsals, diagnose and explore solutions for problems, experiment with stylistic interpretation, and so on. Large ensembles can be divided into smaller ones to enable more students to meaningfully engage in this work.

Creative work can happen in listening activities when students are invited to respond in a way that allows them to consider and decide how to artfully construct representations of the music they hear. Such representations might take the form of a film or sculpture or dance inspired by the piece, or a prose report crafted to communicate what the listener noticed within the music, and the meaning she made of it.

While there is plenty of possibility for creative musical decision-making in performing and listening activities, creative work can happen most robustly when students compose and improvise.² When composing and improvising, students have the chance to meaningfully engage in the full gamut of creative work: They imagine and generate musical ideas; seek and forge connections between them; synthesize and represent their own musical experiences and understandings; identify and solve musical problems; experiment and explore with sounds and structures; take musical risks; have the chance to be subversive with the musical materials they employ and choices they make; make use of time away to incubate musical ideas; and analyze the context in which the music will be presented in order to inform the editing and refining of their new musical products. With composing and improvising, creativity is ubiquitous.

Making the shift to music curricula that provide legitimately creative experiences is not only important because it satisfies the whim of a society that seeks training for creative workers. This shift is also important—I would say crucial—for music education to stay relevant to those who matter most: our students.

Music educator John Richmond points out that the longer U.S. students are enrolled in school, the less likely they are to take music. (The situation in Canada is no different.) Richmond explains:

The excellent curriculum we provide in orchestras, bands, and choral music is compelling to some, but not most, of America's young people...adolescents are engaging in music composition, vernacular music performance, song arranging, and digital media at impressively high numbers and at high levels, but they are doing so without the help of the portion of the American music education community employed in K-12 schools. (2013, p. 302)

Increasingly, students are seeking *and finding* the music learning experiences they crave beyond the realm of formal music education.

Young people today have unprecedented choice and access in terms of the kinds of music they engage with and when and how they engage with it. They are empowered by technological innovation to choose their own musical adventures from a massive range of possibilities. Young people are used to engaging with music in personally meaningful ways; they *expect* to be able to choose the music experiences that appeal to them as unique individuals. School music has some catching up to do. As Kaschub and Smith (2013) see it, “emerging individualized musical independence heralds the need for equally distinctive and personalized educational opportunities” (p. 4). Music educators need to offer students music experiences that are personally relevant and that honour and invite their individuality. For Kaschub and Smith, this means composing—an experience that enables students to “seek, find and develop their unique artistic voices by using sound expressively to construct highly personal and meaningful understandings of themselves and the world around them” (2013, p. 13).

Positioning creative work such as composing at the heart of music education curricula does far more than foster the development of important skills for the 21st century workforce; it firmly places students at the centre of their own music learning. It allows them to hear and share *their own* voices above the noisy tumult of the education environment. Such a shift transforms music education; it opens it up.

Music education lingers on the edge of a significant rupture in practice and pedagogy, a turn from a closed form concept of musical performance and score interpretation which reached its logical conclusion in the praxial pedagogy of David Elliott (1995) to a reconfigured practice of composing, where writing, playing, and sharing exist within and across open discursive fields. (Allsup, 2013, p. 57)

Randall Allsup envisions a bold new future for music education. Drawing from the work of poststructural theorist Roland Barthes (1977), Allsup suggests that the centrality and sanctity of closed forms or ‘works’ such as a Beethoven symphony must give way to open ‘Texts’ such as the offerings of open-source artist Kutiman, who lifts and splices YouTube video content into mashed-up musical collages.³ Allsup further unpacks his vision by suggesting a number of related conceptual shifts – music learning environments that make the move, for example, from tradition as master to tradition as guest; from expert-driven curricula to curiosity-driven curricula; from music learner as performer to music learner as composer-performer.

Looking to literacy specialists such as Lalitha Vasudevan (2010) and Carey Jewitt (2008), Allsup suggests the shift in language literacy that has occurred over the past thirty years can inform a new conception of music education: a plural concept of multimodal musical literacy that honours the capacities that students bring with them. To make the most of those capacities, Allsup proposes a musical pedagogy of open texts.

A musical pedagogy of open texts is one that places composing at the center of all activities. It assumes that all students come to an educational encounter equipped with multiple literacies, and that they wish to employ the largest range of modalities available to them to communicate with others and to create self-reflective musical events. (Allsup, 2013, p. 67)

In such an environment learners not only compose music; they compose selves.

Over the past 100 years human engagement with music has changed dramatically. Formal music education has not. It is time for a shift. Music education in the 21st century must enable young musicians to choose their own musical adventures, sing their own songs, and hear their own voices.

¹ While some understandably decry this utilitarian justification for music education, preferring instead that music education be valued for developing habits of arts-centered inquiry leading to positive consequences extending far beyond building cooperative or creative skills for the workplace (Logsdon, 2013), others pragmatically employ whatever arguments will serve to bend the ear in need of bending.

² The distinction between composing and improvising is fuzzy. Personally, I see composing as a form of improvising (that gets worked out beforehand) and improvising as a form of composing (that gets worked out during the performance). ‘Composing’ features much more prominently in the literature than improvising. I believe this is largely because the authors think of improvising as a subset of composing.

³ “Kutiman-Thru-you-03-I’m New,” YouTube video, 6:22, posted by “kutiman,” March 7, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsBfj6khrG4>

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