



Playing with Fire

by Benjamin Bolden

You should let your kids play with fire.

“We live in an over-protected world” says computer scientist Gever Tulley, in his provocatively titled TED (Technology Entertainment Design) talk: *5 Dangerous Things You Should Let Your Children Do*. “...when kids *do* encounter dangerous things, they are unprepared.”

The premise behind the talk is that young people, far too often, are deprived of the chance to interact with and therefore learn from and about ‘dangerous’ phenomena. Tulley runs a “Tinkering School” in order to counter the prevalent contemporary ethos of over protectiveness. (He offers the example of the ubiquitous take-away coffee cup warning: “Caution! This beverage is hot.”) The school is designed to engage young people in valuable real-life experiences, even those that are potentially hazardous. Tulley’s goal is to “raise kids to be creative, confident, and in control of the environment around them.”

First on Tulley’s list of encouraged dangerous activities is playing with fire. He explains: “Learning to control one of the most elemental forces in nature is pivotal in any child’s personal history...the mystery is only revealed to those who get the opportunity to play with it.” Tulley points out that one never knows what children will learn from the laboratory of an open pit fire, especially if they have the chance to play and experiment with it on their own terms.

Next on the list: owning a pocketknife. “A powerful and empowering tool...in a lot of cultures as soon as they are toddlers they are given knives.” Tulley shows a powerpoint slide—a still from a Canadian Film Board film—depicting two Inuit toddlers merrily slicing and eating whale blubber with knives longer than their chubby forearms. One of the principal resulting benefits of using a knife, Tulley suggests, is that children can develop through a tool an extended sense of self.

And then it’s time to throw a spear. A very natural and important physical skill, says Tulley. “Our brains are hardwired to throw...analytical and physical skills combine...if you don’t use these parts of your brain, they atrophy.”

Number four: children should be deconstructing appliances. “Puzzling out what the parts might be for is a really good practice...a sense of knowability [results], that something is knowable...complex things made by other people and you can understand them!”

Number five: break the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. “There are laws, beyond safety regulations, that attempt to limit how we interact with things that we own...buy a song on itunes, write it to a cd, rip the cd to an mp3, play it on your very same

computer: you’ve just broken a law...it’s important for kids to learn that laws can be broken accidentally and that laws need to be interpreted.”

And finally, number six in the list of five...children should be encouraged to drive a car. “Getting in a car and driving it gives a young child a handle on the world that they don’t normally have access to. Find a big empty lot, [sit the child on your lap,] and let them drive the car.”

How does this connect to music education? What might be transferred?

The most prevalent emergent theme in Tulley’s message, as I hear it, is empowerment. Young people are empowered when teachers, parents, and caregivers demonstrate trust and confidence by permitting and even encouraging engagement in potentially dangerous experiences. The theme of experiential or discovery learning—its immense value and power—is prominent also. Rich learning results from rich engagement in rich experiences; when such experiences are denied, learning is inhibited.

Such learning, evidently, is a risky business. Learning through engagement in potentially dangerous experiences is risky not only for the young people themselves, but also for the teachers, parents, and caregivers who facilitate the learning. We live in litigious times.

Fortunately, within the realm of music education, physical dangers (other than the very real risk of hearing loss that stems from arming our young people with individual sound blasters) do not often arise. Social, psychological, and emotional dangers, however, lurk around every corner. Music educators actively engage learners in high risk experiences all the time: when we encourage a student to make music in front of others (to fling a little bit of themselves out in front of critical peers, friends, family, teachers); when we introduce musical works (drunk in like poison or wine) and souls are laid bare to the ravages of their emotional impact; when we make young musicians aware of the ecstasy of musical possibility, but also the torturous difficulty and frustration so often necessary in attaining it.

Nevertheless, perhaps it’s time to up the ante: to promote greater and increasingly diverse risk taking, and so to empower even more. What might they be, the perilous yet valuable experiences in which music learners might engage? What are the music education derivatives of five dangerous things we should let our children do? Well aware that music educators encourage empowering risk taking all the time, often with the very ideas I am about to suggest, I humbly offer the following musical translation of the activities on Tulley’s list, presented in retrograde order:

Drive a Car

The obvious parallel here is to invite students to conduct the ensemble. To keep the risk relatively low, a student might lead the ensemble once or twice during rehearsal. For increased risk, and corresponding empowerment, the learner might select (or compose) the repertoire herself, then rehearse and lead the ensemble all the way through to public concert performance.

Break the Digital Millennium Copyright Act

This suggestion needs no translation. But music educators might extend this illegal activity, for example, learners could convert a youtube video to mp3 and download, then embed the music in a movie file as a soundtrack. Alternatively, learners could use an audio editor (such as Audacity) to digitally manipulate the mp3 (or multiple mp3s) to create a new composition or re-mix.

Deconstruct Appliances

Music learners, naturally, could take apart and explore the various components of musical instruments. For a low-risk scenario, a few old instruments might be identified as suitable for demolition; for a high-risk alternative, brave educators might encourage students to take apart their regular class/ensemble performance instruments—or the teacher's!

Throw a Spear

(?) The music education parallel is not obvious here. Throw an instrument? Dubious educational value, in my opinion. A more suitable possibility: throwing *music* out into the world—compositions that are sharper, more dangerous, than those usually offered. Or perhaps throwing a spear might be interpreted as the throwing of ideas... Educators might encourage learners to throw musical ideas into a group or individual improvisation, or composition. Students might throw (offer up) ideas for interpretation of individual or ensemble performance pieces, or for the

programming of concerts. Learners could be invited to throw ideas into the design of class assignments or evaluation schemes.

Own a Pocket Knife

The musical version of a pocketknife should be something useful but dangerous...a really loud amplifier? (Maybe just a dangerously loud instrument—wait, music educators do this all the time!) How about the opportunity for learners to *cut* music? To cut out certain sections from a piece, or from a program entirely? To cut out certain lines, instruments, or notes? Might this be somehow valuable and empowering for learners?

Play with Fire

One of my colleagues (trembling just slightly) described to me a plan (still in the works) to have the ensemble's final concert entirely student composed, organized, programmed, rehearsed, and conducted. Playing with fire, indeed! Yes, there is the chance of going down in flames...but also the potential for a magnificent, exciting, glorious blaze.

Journal Issues

You will notice a new look to the journal this year as we work to redesign the publication. The typography is more inline now with the recently modified CMEA logo. As always, your feedback is very much appreciated. Please email benbolden@gmail.com to let us know your thoughts.

Please send us photos! We are always keen to have photo submissions. If you have suitable photos please consider sending them to us for inclusion in the journal. They need to be high-resolution jpegs - 300 dpi 5x7 or 8x10.

Reference

Tulley, G. (2007, March). 5 dangerous things you should let your children do. Presentation at TED Conference, Monterey, CA. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/gever_tulley_on_5_dangerous_things_for_kids.html



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