

SPECIAL CURRICULUM DESIGN SEMINAR

*Curriculum Design Part 1: Demographics & Ethnography**Part 1 of a four-part series on Curriculum & Assessment for Music Education**by Patrick M. Jones**Patrick M. Jones****Introduction and Invitation***

Curriculum and assessment design and implementation are crucial educational processes teachers engage in on a regular basis. The recent emphases on government mandated standards and accountability highlight the need for music educators to be actively engaged in designing curriculum and appropriate assessment tools. We must be well versed in the language, processes, issues, and ethics of curriculum and assessment so we can engage in the process, speak coherently with colleagues and administrators, and avoid fads and misunderstandings that permeate the education industry and are too often propagated at in-service sessions, conferences and in publications.

In order to address the needs of our members in depth and avoid superficial approaches to curriculum and assessment, PMEAs is dedicating the 2006-2007 academic year to a dialogue that will involve every PMEA member interested in discussing, researching, and designing curriculum and appropriate assessment tools.

This will take place in three formats: guided self-study via a four-part article series in PMEA News; an online bulletin board at www.pmea.net for posting questions, answers and comments; and two live meetings; one at the spring conference in Hershey in April and one at the summer conference in State College in July. The end result will be a greater understanding of curriculum and assessment, documents and tools you have designed for your specific teaching situation, and a collection of those curriculum documents and tools developed by PMEA members from across the Commonwealth who teach in a variety of demographic environments and teaching situations that can serve as resources for other PMEA members.

This article is the first installment of the four-part series of articles. They are intended to serve as a seminar, not simply reading material. Use them to help you develop and refine curricula throughout the course of this school year. We will do this step-by-step with the end result being that you will have broadened and deepened your understanding of curriculum and assessment, embraced curriculum design as a modus operandi of being a teacher and will have designed a formal curriculum document to meet the needs of your students and community. I invite all members of PMEA to join in this year-long dialogue by doing the readings, fieldwork and writing developed through this seminar series; participating in the online bulletin board; and attending the designated sessions at the spring conference and summer conference. Here goes...

What Is Curriculum?

Curriculum is an active, engaging, and evolving series of interactions in teaching and learning focused on the needs of students and communities. A curriculum document is a customized blueprint for teaching and learning that meets the needs of students and communities in a specific location and time. A music curriculum keeps us focused on developing our students' independent musicianship, which is easy to overlook amidst the plethora of confusing contradictory signals we receive from administrators, government bodies and professional associations, and from reverting to rote-teaching due to the pressure of pending performances or unquestioningly following prescriptive methodologies regardless of their actual effectiveness in developing student musicianship for use in real life musicing.

The development of independent musicianship for personal musical agency in lifewide and lifelong settings is the primary purpose of music education. A well-designed and articulated music curriculum, organic to the community in which the school is located, helps keep us from getting diverted from our goal. Oddly, while nothing could be more basic and crucial to formalized schooling, nothing is so widely misunderstood and routinely overlooked within the music education profession, as is curriculum.

Some common misstatements music teachers often make regarding curriculum illustrate the confusion within our profession regarding curriculum. They in-

clude statements such as “The repertoire we’re performing is my curriculum,” “I use the (insert basal series name) curriculum,” “I teach a Dalcroze/Gordon/Kodály/Orff/Suzuki curriculum,” or “I teach the National Standards as my curriculum.” None of these statements identifies a curriculum. The repertoire and basal series books comprise materials, the various methodologies are teaching/learning strategies, and the National Standards are policy guidelines. None of them is a curriculum, but all of them are potentially parts of curricula.

Customization

A basic tenet of curriculum design is that all curricula are local. There is no “one size fits all” curriculum. Be wary of publishers, maestros and methodological prophets who try to convince you otherwise! They are interested in profits and disciples, not the musical needs of your students and community. We cannot abdicate our responsibility for the musical development of our students to those who seek to make a profit, disciples for a prescriptive method, or subscribe to the notion of curriculum as a static document filled with standards and assessment systems propagated from faceless offices as if all students are interchangeable.

No two schools/districts can have the same music curriculum because no two schools/districts have the same students, serve the same communities, or exist within the exact same musical ecology. Curricula must meet the needs and abilities of the students and community and are dependent on the available school and community resources. They must be custom designed by the music faculty
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within a school or district because they know the musical needs and abilities of their students and communities, the resources available, and the local musical ecology. A relevant music curriculum will empower students for personal musical agency and improve the community, not simply impart a list of predetermined content.¹ For thoughts on curriculum in music that are related to the real world in which we and our students live see several articles by Frank Abrahams² and a book by Tom Regelski.³

Design Approach

Many approaches to curriculum design exist. Some are extremely rigid and antithetical to developing musicianship while others are so loose as to barely resemble what one might recognize as a formal curriculum. Some are

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centralized in their approach and believe the role of the teacher is to be an instructor who imparts content, methodological strategies, and tests chosen and designed at a higher level while other approaches trust and empower teachers to make content, pedagogical, and assessment decisions at the local level. The second approach is consonant with the development of students’ musicianship and was clearly articulated for an English class context by Arthur Applebee.⁴

This article, and those that follow, will focus on the second approach because PMEA believes music teachers are professionals who are best able to make musical decisions to best meet the needs of our geographically, ethnically and socio-economically diverse communities.

Curriculum Design

Step 1 – Demographics & Musical Ethnography

Music pervades contemporary life. In no time in history have people had more access to music. Unfortunately, we music teachers are often unaware of the rich and vibrant musical lives of our communities and the musical lives our students bring to school with them every day. Many of us were taught in our teacher education programs to proceed as if our students are musically vacuous and only we can impart music into their otherwise musically vacant souls. A greater example of arrogance cannot be found! Our students bring a vibrant musical life to school every day. We need to figure out what it is so we can cease operating in isolation from the musical ecology of the community we

serve.

Therefore, the first stage in curriculum design is to remove the blind-

ers from our own eyes, to “go out into” the communities in which we teach, and to discover the musical ecology that surrounds our schools but too often stops at the school wall. Two inspiring books to help you frame your search in this journey are *My Music*⁵ and *Music in Everyday Life*.⁶ These two books investigate music as used by real everyday people and are a perfect start to opening our own eyes and ears to the ever-present music that surrounds us and in which our students and communities live and thrive. We will accomplish this by studying the demographics of our community and conducting a musical ethnography.

Demographics

Researching the demographics of your schools’ communities

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will help you answer basic questions such as: Just what/who is this community in which I teach? Who are the students, and what/where do they come from? To answer this you need to assemble demographic data on educational levels, income levels, property values, age distribution, etc. There is no single source that will give you all the information you need. Some of it can be gotten from the school or district office, some from the borough/township/city/county, some from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania⁷ and some from the U.S. Census Bureau.⁸

Most of this information can easily be found on the Internet. Some of what you find will surprise you, sadden you and make you happy. All of it taken together will provide you with a more comprehensive understanding of the place in which you teach. But remember, just as a house is not a home, but simply a structure, data and statistics don't tell the entire story. They are just descriptors and indicators of the "architecture" of the community (the house). The community (the home) is much harder to identify and define and cannot be done from your desk chair. It requires leaving the school walls and venturing out into the community. This is where the musical ethnography fits in.

Musical Ethnography

Many of us are unaware of the rich and varied musical offerings within our own communities. Sometimes we are guilty of peering out the school windows and seeing a vast musical wasteland

when, in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Often we just don't know where to look or what to look for. I have continuously been amazed to learn of my students who have been involved in musicing in the community with groups such as drum corps, concert bands, community choruses and musical theater shows, barber shop groups, church and synagogue based musicing, garage bands, Ceilis, square and contra-dancing, and as regular participants in Bluegrass and Folk festivals. I have had students involved in such musicing in Philadelphia, where I currently live, but also in smaller communities in which I've previously lived such as Hollidaysburg, PA, and Fredonia, NY.

Add to this the plethora of

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affordable electronics and audio equipment for home use, and computer programs for music, musically based video games, and online sites for musicing and you come to realize there is an entire musical underground in which our students participate that is completely invisible to us. It's about time we learned just what musicing is going on in our own back yards.

The following are recommended strategies to perform a musical ethnography of your community. It is not a list to be competed in a linear fashion. You should employ all four strategies simultaneously. I conducted an involved study that includes strategies 1-3 below. It is available for free and can serve as a model and/or guide in developing your own study.⁹

Strategy 1 – Computer Search. I recommend you begin with a computer search. Start to list every musical offering in the communities your school serves. Include both places where one can go as an audience member and/or dancer as well as participatory musicing such as community performing ensembles.

Strategy 2 – Media Review. Get every newspaper, flier and community bulletin in the communities your school serves and search them for musical offerings. Look for advertisements of musical offerings on bulletin boards in supermarkets, coffee shops, etc. You might also include broadcast media.

Strategy 3 – Ask People and Listen. This sounds simpler than it is. We learn more when our mouths are closed than when we are speaking. There

is a wealth of literature on strategies for asking questions to which you can refer by doing a simple Internet search. Bear in mind that the goal is to ask questions, not interview or interrogate. Let the person you are asking do the talking. Most people love to tell their story and love to talk about music. We need to ask people about music and musicing, and then we need to listen. A person who can inform you about musical practices is known in ethnographic terms as an informant. S/he is the expert in your conversation, not you. As trained musicians we often jump in and shut down the conversation without even realizing it.

Become aware of how your presence and questioning effects the person. Get them talking about music, their musical interests and activities, and the musical offer-

ings they know of in the community. Ask them to recommend other people you can ask about music. You want to interview as many informants as possible from various backgrounds and with a variety of musical interests and involvements.

Strategy 4 – Survey Students (not just those in music classes). To take the pulse of the musical interests and activities of our students we need to ask them. And, we need to reach all students in our schools, not just those involved in school music offerings. We may be surprised to learn that some of the most active student musicians are not involved in school offerings.

Develop a survey and a distribution strategy. Some of my

university students in the past have done things such as have a social studies teacher distribute them to all her students, or have students within performing ensembles distribute them to three of their friends not in a school group.

On the survey ask four types of questions:

1. What are their musical interests (genres, groups, etc.)?
2. What musical offerings do they know of outside of school?
3. What musicing do they do outside of school?
4. What types of musical offerings would they be interested in having at school?

In addition to surveys/questionnaires, you could have your students conduct interviews with friends or siblings modeled after those conducted for the book *My Music*.¹⁰

As you assemble your data you will find that categories present themselves. For example, you might want to list them in categories such as: music learning opportunities, performance opportunities, dancing opportunities and audience opportunities. In addition, you will want to group them by genres. This is not as easy as one would assume. I recommend you look at my article *Returning Music Education to the Mainstream: Reconnecting with the Community*¹¹, which is
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Recommended Reading

- Abrahams, Frank. “Critical Pedagogy for Music Education: A Best Practice to Prepare Future Music Educators.” *Visions of Research in Music Education* 7 (2006).
[Available for free at <http://www.rider.edu/~vrme/>]
- Abrahams, Frank. “The Application of Critical Pedagogy to Music Teaching and Learning.” *Visions of Research in Music Education* 6 (2005).
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- Abrahams, Frank. “The Application of Critical Pedagogy to Music Teaching and Learning: A Literature Review.” *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 23, no. 2 (2005): 12-22 [Available for free under “publications/journals” at www.menc.org]
- Applebee, Arthur N. *Curriculum as Conversation: Transforming Traditions of Teaching and Learning*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Crafts, Susan D., Daniel Cavicchi, and Charles Keil. *My Music*. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993.
- DeNora, Tia. *Music in Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Jones, Patrick M. “Music Education and the Knowledge Economy: Developing Creativity, Strengthening Communities.” *Arts Education Policy Review* 106, no. 4 (2005): 5-12.
- Jones, Patrick M. “Returning Music Education to the Mainstream: Reconnecting with the Community.” *Visions of Research in Music Education* 7 (2006). [Available for free at <http://www.rider.edu/~vrme/>]
- Regelski, Thomas. *Teaching General Music in Grades 4-8: A Musicianship Approach*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004.

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available online and will provide a model for grouping by genre using the Arbitron categories.

Closing

This first stage of curriculum design, demographics and musical ethnography, will provide you with powerful insights into the musical environment in which you work. There are serious implications for the musics we choose to introduce into the musical ecology of communities as well as what work is necessary in supporting, sustaining, and reviving the musical eco-system in which our students live. We will address this in a later issue, but for now, keep that in the back of your mind.

Enjoy getting to know your community and its musical ecology better. Please feel free to contact me via email and on our bulletin board at www.pmea.net if you have any questions or comments during the next few months as we embark on this journey. The seminar will continue with Part 2 in two months with the winter issue.

References

¹Patrick M. Jones, "Music Education and the Knowledge Economy: Developing Creativity, Strengthening Communities," *Arts Education Policy Review*

106, no. 4 (2005), Mark Stern, Susan Seifert, "Social Impact of the Arts Project: Summary of Findings," (Philadelphia, PA: The University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, 2001). [Available free at <http://www.ssw.upenn.edu/SIAP>]

²Frank Abrahams, "Critical Pedagogy for Music Education: A Best Practice to Prepare Future Music Educators," *Visions of Research in Music Education* 7 (2006), Frank Abrahams, "The Application of Critical Pedagogy to Music Teaching and Learning" *Visions of Research in Music Education* 6 (2005), Frank Abrahams, "The Application of Critical Pedagogy to Music Teaching and Learning: A Literature Review," *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 23, no. 2 (2005). [Available for free under "publications/journals" at www.menc.org]

³Thomas Regelski, *Teaching General Music in Grades 4-8: A Musicianship Approach* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴Arthur N. Applebee, *Curriculum as Conversation: Transforming Traditions of Teaching and Learning* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁵Susan D. Crafts, Daniel Cavicchi, and Charles Keil, *My Music* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).

⁶Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁷Sources such as the Pennsylvania State Data Center h,

⁸www.census.gov

⁹Patrick M. Jones, "Returning Music Education to the Mainstream: Reconnecting with the Community," *Visions of Research in Music Education* 7 (2006). [Available for free at <http://www.rider.edu/~vrme/>]

¹⁰Crafts, *My Music*.

¹¹Jones, "Returning Music Education to the Mainstream: Reconnecting with the Community." [Available for free at <http://www.rider.edu/~vrme/>]