

Considering the Nature of Change

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Abstract:

Music education scholar and researcher Peter Webster (2017) offers a scenario in which a doctor, an engineer, and a music educator living in the year 1917 enter a time machine and are transported to their workplaces 100 years into the future. The doctor and the engineer are taken aback by the advances in their respective disciplines and realize that if they want to continue practicing their professions, they each will need to be retrained. On the other hand, apart from a few new technological devices like televisions, computers, and smartphones, the music educator concludes that music teaching hasn't changed very much in 100 years and promptly decides to apply for a teaching position.

Keywords: Music education | Change

Article:

Music education scholar and researcher Peter Webster (2017) offers a scenario in which a doctor, an engineer, and a music educator living in the year 1917 enter a time machine and are transported to their workplaces 100 years into the future. The doctor and the engineer are taken aback by the advances in their respective disciplines and realize that if they want to continue practicing their professions, they each will need to be retrained. On the other hand, apart from a few new technological devices like televisions, computers, and smartphones, the music educator concludes that music teaching hasn't changed very much in 100 years and promptly decides to apply for a teaching position.

This scenario emphasizes one of the questions our profession has been grappling with recently: Can a music education program that adheres to an early twentieth century instructional (and philosophical) paradigm still be effective, relevant, and sustainable some 100 years later? Most of us are now well acquainted with the tendency to draw on the phrase "21st century" when we want to emphasize a focus on more modern structures and ideas or to challenge the notion that if what we've always done is still working, then there's no need to consider changing it.

For the past decade or more, the Society for Music Teacher Education has been engaging with the question of how music teaching and learning can remain viable in a rapidly changing world. We observe that with each passing year, what have been termed *traditional* forms of music study have become increasingly disconnected from many of the ways in which people engage with music not only in the United States but also around the world. The themes of our past two Symposia on Music Teacher Education, *Toward a Stronger, Richer Community* and *Imagining Possible Futures*, have encouraged thoughtful dialogue about how we might move closer to the kind of change in music education that our profession continually touts as necessary and/or desirable but that remains persistently elusive. As I mentioned in a previous Chair's column, one factor impeding the ability of public schools to respond effectively to societal changes is the shifting educational policy priorities of changing governing administrations. However, on a more individual level, the slow pace of change in educational institutions and systems is also related to the extent to which we can tolerate the discomfort of the unknown and the unfamiliar, and how willing and prepared we are to give up our natural inclinations toward the assurance, security, and sometimes the rewards associated with doing "what we've always done."

It is perhaps this latter issue that is reflected in the results of a recent study of the status of music education in American schools conducted by the Give a Note Foundation (2017). Among other findings, the study indicates that public school music programs are, by and large, still comprised of the same curricular offerings available a century ago, along with the instructional paradigms that framed them. The study revealed that of other curricular options such as guitar, music appreciation, music theory, and keyboard, none were offered at more than 25% of schools across the United States. By all appearances, music programs continue to conform to the status quo, even though in many schools, students do not have access to music programs, and in schools where music programs are available, their content does not often reflect the interests or musical goals of the students.

One of the purposes of the 2017 Symposium on Music Teacher Education was to interrogate the specific structures and processes that foster or impede change in music teacher education and ultimately in music education. Having been inspired by the document, *Transforming Music Study From Its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors* (written by the College Music Society's Taskforce on the Undergraduate Music Major; Campbell et al., 2014), I saw an opportunity to generate further dialogue. Indeed, the authors of the manifesto intended it to be the starting point for further discussion about possibilities for change within all aspects of music study, including music teacher preparation. Another focus of the Symposium was to try to address some of the practical "nuts and bolts" considerations involved in disturbing the stasis that has characterized music education for so long. Our profession has generated several documents that purport to cast a critical eye toward the way we "do" music education (and indeed music teacher education) in the United States; yet in 2017, we find our profession looking much the same as it always has. Thinking about Peter Webster's scenario, I was prompted to wonder how it is that change seems to be an essential facet of certain professions but so difficult to achieve in music education. And if those of us in music teacher education recognize a need for change, and are indeed incorporating change in the way we prepare music teachers, how is it that K-12 music education programs are, by and large, failing to reflect that change?

My questioning led me to a 2013 article in *Music Education Research*, in which Clint Randles proposed a theory of curricular change in music education. In establishing the foundation for his theory, Randles drew an analogy between the self-hood of individuals and the self-hood of groups of individuals, such as those who comprise a profession.

The music education profession, considered as a meta-collective of sorts, is made up of individuals who are who they are based in large part on how they got where they are now, their history. (p. 475)

Randles (2013) conceptualized the self as multidimensional with some facets that are perceptual and changeable (e.g., self-efficacy, self-concept, and self-esteem) and others that are more stable (e.g., identity). In explaining how these aspects of the self are influenced, Randles offered a rainstorm as a metaphor for “the events, circumstances and encounters with music, music making and music education that an individual experiences” (p. 476). As the rain saturates the individual, the self-efficacy, self-concept, and self-esteem dimensions of the self are affected first. According to Randles, because identity is a more stable dimension of the self, it is the least susceptible to the immediate influence of experience and heavy saturation is required if change is to occur at the level of identity.

By the time music education majors reach the college level, the ‘who am I as a music maker’ questions have been answered in the minds of students to a large extent. These questions can certainly still be approached by music teacher education faculty, however, given that they were developed over time, resulting beliefs regarding these important questions must morph over time. (p. 479)

While a complete explanation of Randles’s (2013) model is beyond the scope of this column, I was intrigued by what he had to say about the nature of change and how the model he proposed might address some of the common barriers to change in our profession. In the conclusion of the article, Randles observed:

The future can be bright if we recognise that (1) change is articulated locally, (2) change is the product of imagination in conjunction with a lot of hard work and (3) change is the result of the work of people whose histories and culture impact the community, divisions of labour, rules, tools and signs as they relate to the process. Change in identity begins with changes in particular self-efficacies. Music education can change. Let us think about the process, and then take action. (p. 483)

Randles’s (2013) model is certainly not the only one available that seeks to explain the nature of institutional/organizational change. There are others in our profession who have very different ideas about how change can be implemented. But whether on a grand or small scale, whether by theory or by practice, the need for change in our profession has become critically apparent. I believe as music teacher educators, we would do well to continue to investigate both theories and implementation models that have the capacity to engender the kind of substantive curricular change in both music teacher education, and consequently music education that would truly be worthy of the 21st century and beyond.

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