

PAPER: Playful Spaces for Musical Expression and Creativity: An Ethnodrama

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Introduction

Although musical expression is possible in most music education settings, there are situations and conditions where expression is discouraged, repressed, or too risky for the learner to engage. In an artistic presentation of research we conducted, we demonstrate situations in which music learners report inhibited expression. These situations call to question the following issues: (a) the influence of competition and fear-based motivation upon expressive performance, (b) the impact of a climate of judgment among music professionals, and (c) teaching methods that discourage personal self-expression.

Ethnodrama (in this case the reporting of qualitative research findings in the form of a reader's theatre) is a type of performative arts-based representation that allows the human condition to be portrayed symbolically and aesthetically to facilitate spectator engagement and reflection (Saldaña, 2005). This form of representation allows for emotional content to be more deeply understood as it is situated in relevant dialogue, and therefore creates an appropriate container in which to present divergent or conflicting voices. Ethnodrama is often associated with critical ethnography (Madison, 2005) and "theatre of the oppressed" (Boal, 1979), both of which have social justice aims. In the case of the ethnodrama presented here, we intended to bring forward the voices of music students in order to critique current practices in music education that may inhibit or oppress the development of musicians' abilities to freely express themselves. This critique provides the basis for a discussion and creation of a utopian counternarrative that "offers hope, a politics of possibility, showing others how to engage in actions that decolonize, heal, and transform" (Denzin, 2009, p. 196).

Method

The ethnodrama was written in three scenes, each created from different data sets (Hendricks, 2009 and Hendricks, Legutki, Smith, & King, in preparation; Hendricks & Smith, in preparation; Legutki, Smith, & Breaux, 2010). Care was taken to situate quotations from the data in accurate ways, and to maintain the same ratio of recurring comments as in the data sets. To create an easily understandable dialogue the quotations were altered by changing tense or other minor details, but every effort was made to preserve the content and context of the quotations.

We performed the ethnodrama at the Leading Music Education (LME) conference in May 2011 in order to determine the usefulness and import of this form of representation to an audience of music educators. The ethnodrama, constructed from qualitative data, was presented in the form of a three-scene reader's theatre that was performed by us and several volunteers from the audience. We invited audience critique by presenting this ethnodrama based on research in which individuals expressed a desire for (or lack of) a playful space in which to express themselves musically. The ending of the ethnodrama was purposely left unwritten so that we could invite audience members to collaboratively discuss these issues and to derive their own implications from the research.

Our approach was two-fold: Not only did we present research in which individuals failed to experience playful spaces, but we also created a playful space for our audience so that they could assist in creating utopian counternarratives. Following the performance of the reader's theater, audience members were given an opportunity to participate in one of three discussion groups (i.e., one for each scene), where they were able to reflect upon the ethnodrama, make a critique, and create a utopian counternarrative.

Ethnodrama

SCENE 1

Seating Auditions at a Competitive High School Festival

- Violin Student: Oh no, we don't stand a chance! Listen to all of these talented people....it will be HARD to match *their* level.
- Cello Student: I KNOW, I'm not NEARLY as good as the people around me. The other people practiced more than I did and they play it A LOT better than I do.
- Violin Student: The level that everyone is playing at is inTIMidating.
- Cello Student: AND it is nerve-wracking having to go in and listen to everyone warm up.
- Violin Student: Yes! It's intimidating, you know, it's like sticking people in a fishbowl. I mean, you look across the room and you hear people practicing. It's very, very, intimidating!
- Cello Student: I know, the warm-up room is really huge and there are tons of people, AND it doesn't really help when you can hear through the walls of the audition room from the hallway.
- Violin Student: Right! Hearing others playing flawlessly is pretty overwhelming.
- Cello Student: Yes, and I heard someone play their piece a totally different way than how I have practiced... I wonder if I should be playing it the same way as them...

The example above is a short excerpt from Scene One. This first scene was constructed from research observing high school honor orchestra festivals in the United States (Hendricks, 2009; Hendricks, Legutki, Smith, & King, in preparation). This scene describes how the audition process and competitive climate at these festivals impeded self-expression and caused emotional distress in some of the participants.

The LME discussion group that selected this scene expressed a general disregard for competitive festivals, and recommended a seating rotation system rather than ranking by audition. They also suggested taking the common literature prepared for the festival and using it as a seed for activities that encouraged student creativity and improvisation. Finally, the group proposed that students might bring to the festival repertoire that was meaningful to them personally and share it with others in a teaching and mentoring fashion.

Scene 2

Doctoral Students Considering Whether or Not to Participate
in a Non-Competitive Community Benefit Recital

Narrator: Teresa walks back to her office and asks her officemate Charles if he would be interested in playing on the recital.

Charles: *Are you kidding?* I haven't played my instrument in... how long has it been... in 13 years. I'm in not shape to play my instrument in a way that I would be satisfied. I think it would take me a very long time to get my chops back. It could take years, and the time I would have to devote to it... that's not going to happen. I don't have an interest in doing that. I have an interest in playing the trombone well. I don't have an interest in playing the trombone poorly.

The second scene depicts an underlying issue of performance anxiety experienced by music teachers and music education doctoral students (Legutki, Smith, & Breaux, 2010). Subjects in this study expressed feelings of inadequacy and fear of judgment because they were not able to devote the same amount of time for practice as they did when performing more regularly (prior to taking a teaching job or beginning full-time doctoral study). Subjects expressed concerns ranging from mild fear of judgment to an outright refusal to perform.

Recommendations made by the LME discussion group for this scene included (a) considering a higher education requirement that doctoral students perform in a school ensemble or in some community group, and (b) suggesting that music education faculty should also be encouraged to regularly demonstrate performance skills. One discussion group member remarked that he was actually discouraged from performing before receiving tenure so as to not be distracted from writing. Another group member offered a positive alternative by describing an informal performance that was given by faculty and staff from her institution. Our observation of data from this study has led us to believe that the fear reflected in this scene was related to competitive and fear-based motivation experienced during subjects' earlier performance study, a fear which resulted in the stifling of musical expression for many music educators who once relied upon music as a primary means of self-expression. We suggest that regular performing might actually be a point of health and well-being for music teachers, doctoral students, and music education faculty; and that the encouragement of continued performance therefore warrants more attention in music education programs.

Scene 3

An Adult Student Conversing with a Friend over Coffee

Carla: Well, I have found a new music teacher who teaches the Suzuki method and I am improving faster than I thought I could.

Grace: Wow, I didn't even know you liked music.

Carla: Yes, I have always loved music. In school I played the flute but I could never go much beyond what was written on the page. I always coveted cellists playing without music. I tried taking a string class at a community college, but it was taught in the same traditional way and I got frustrated just like the flute. I didn't understand the fingerings and the written music and I stopped after one semester.

In this final scene, an adult woman in her early forties describes how learning to decode music with notation never made sense to her and how she always longed to be able to play by ear (Hendricks & Smith, in preparation). Specifically, she mentions her desire to create music spontaneously or to be able to “play by heart.” For her, playing with notation limited her ability to express herself as she was mired down in decoding and devoting time to “getting it right.”

The LME discussion group that selected this scene became locked in a debate over the advantages of note reading versus playing by ear. While this debate should not have surprised us (it is, after all, a pervasive debate in the profession and was perhaps foddered by the mention of a specific and often controversial rote pedagogy), we noted particular weaknesses in our presentation of this final scene. First, the problem was not as clearly defined in this scene as it was for the first two. While the issues of competition and estrangement from performance in prior scenes were linked to the inhibition of play, this third scene lacked the same kind of depth in demonstrating how the traditional encoding or sight-to-sound approach left Carla without an avenue for personal expression. Second, our analysis of this case, which is incidentally still in progress, requires a more careful observation of the specific ways in which Carla's prior note learning education may have failed her, and a deeper investigation into her desires for music engagement. For instance, did Carla's difficulty with note reading have to do with deficits in her educational experience, or did she lack the motivation to learn a sight-to-sound system because her personal interest and motivation were to play by ear and engage in a more creative and self-expressive form of music making?

Implications

By presenting a reader's theater followed by discussion groups, we were able to illuminate aspects of our analysis and presentation of findings that need more clarification. This was especially true in the third scene, where the issue of personal expression was buried underneath a politically charged issue that diverted the discussion from the research topic. Furthermore, the second scene discussion group focused on treating the symptoms of performance anxiety rather than focusing on the cause of the problem. Because of the limited time we had to devote to this discussion, it is uncertain whether the ethnodrama itself was inadequate to set up an examination of the causes of the problem, or whether we should have provided a clearer prompt to focus discussion on this particular issue.

Based upon the level of engagement of the readers and the audience, it was clear that we successfully created a space in which the audience could enter a virtual representation and become, in a sense, real-time ethnographers. Several readers took the opportunity to engage in *ad lib* dialogue based on their own experiences. While some might question the embellishment of interview data in this way, we suggest that this improvisation was possible in the first place because the script “rang true” to the readers, in a way that we found to be consistent with the original interview data.

Inviting the audience to serve as readers in the ethnodrama provided those involved with an opportunity to step into the subjects' shoes and empathetically relate to the subjects. The discussion that followed provided those present with an opportunity to bring their voice to the research and derive implications for their own practice. We see this approach as a valuable tool for sharing findings with practitioners who might not be familiar with research methodologies but whose experience could lend important implications to other music educators.

Avenues for the Future

In reflecting on our presentation, we have determined that featuring fewer examples in more depth would be beneficial to facilitate a more meaningful and focused group discussion, as the amount of time that we were allotted was not nearly enough for the amount of material we covered. We also recognize the need to better contextualize the studies, either with a more detailed explanation of the

research beforehand or by discussing the research after piquing the audience's interest through the ethnodrama. One approach that we intend to use in the future will be to introduce concepts through an ethnodrama performance, and then to show related statistics, supplemental information, and additional quotations to help audience members gain deeper understanding of the research prior to entering discussion. We are grateful to our LME audience for helping us create a "playful space" in which we could develop these ideas.

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