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Whom Does It Concern? A Reflection on Issues Relating to Quality, Accountability, and Relevance in Music Education's Journals (An Essay)

By
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Abstract

This essay examines components of the critique process used for American music education journals. Issues of criticism and critique are explored from three perspectives: those who oversee, those who contribute to, and those who constitute the audiences for these journals. This analysis concerns both implicit and explicit aspects of critique as they relate to peer review, journal rankings, the rise of digital academic journals, and tenure decisions. These are individually and collectively examined for indicators of quality, accountability, and relevance.

Keywords: critique, criticism, journals, peer review, promotion and tenure

Note

A shortened version of this paper was presented for the Philosophy SRIG at the 2010 Biennial Music Educators National Conference in Anaheim, CA.

Scholarship in American music education currently reflects such pressures as increased academic and methodological rigor, heightened publication requirements for university faculty, and multiplying venues for print and online dissemination. The purpose of this essay is to examine components of the critique process pertaining to music education's journals. This discussion of critique is situated within the culture, values, and traditions of music education scholarship with views toward the larger venture of academic publishing. Issues of critique and criticism are examined from three perspectives: those who oversee, those who contribute to, and those who form the audiences for these journals. American music education's journals have long served as primary communication vehicles within the profession and, as such, can be viewed as a form of social practice, which according to Alasdair MacIntyre, involves "standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods" (2007, p. 190). For authors in particular, the processes of anonymous peer review potentially obscure the "social" component of this practice, yet reviewers, editors, authors, and readers all interact in ways that influence the future of individual people, their journals, and the professional structures that support them. This analysis of the field's journals consists of considerations, ambiguities, and questions concerning quality (excellence), accountability (obedience to rules), and relevance (the achievement of goods).

I write this essay from two perspectives. First, I am the current academic editor of the *Music Educators Journal (MEJ)*. The MEJ is commemorating its centennial year as the flagship journal of the National Association for Music Education and it is now the most widely disseminated journal in the field. The *MEJ* has always served the broadest possible population of those working in music education. In the middle years of its first century, the journal often published twenty full articles in each of twelve yearly issues, or approximately 240 articles per

volume. An ensuing perception was that article selection lacked rigor. This has changed dramatically during the past two decades as increasing publication costs, a reduction in yearly issues, and changes in editorial direction have limited the number of annual articles to less than 30. This has created two primary results: 1) a very low acceptance rate of manuscripts (18.4% in 2012), and 2) an increase in the academic scholarship and reputation of the *MEJ*. Consequently, considerations of editorial process and philosophy have become central to discussions about how the *MEJ* moves toward its second century; the intended audience has not changed, but the breadth and depth of the content have shifted markedly.

The second perspective from which I write is as a faculty mentor to colleagues moving through the tenure process. As in many research universities, the criteria for tenure are heavily weighted toward publication; some of our department faculty members have been successful and productive authors, while others have not. I was appointed to rewrite and strengthen our School of Music guidelines for promotion and tenure, and this process raised the matters considered in this brief essay. Central to this discussion is a view that a primary responsibility of editors and faculty mentors is to assist authors along the process of writing for publication. The reputation of journals and university departments is secondary and follows from the successes of the people involved.

There are many available resources regarding the ethics of editing and publishing scholarship. One set of guidelines begins with the phrase, “Good publication practices do not develop by chance, and will become established only if they are actively promoted” (Graf et al., 2007, p. 1). An extended process of critique sets in motion the publication practices that culminate in the presentation of materials within the physical and digital pages of our professional journals. The process commences when an author submits a manuscript for

consideration by a journal's editorial team, a step no doubt undertaken with optimistic hopes for a positive outcome. Whereas the terms "critique" and "criticism" are rooted in concepts of taste, cultivation and learned analysis, the usage of the words has come to connote judgment and censure (Williams, 1976). Though the two terms have been conflated and used interchangeably for centuries, some writers and etymologists maintain that criticism is primarily concerned with the discovery of error while critique is oriented toward revision and refinement (e.g. Reeves, 2002). Butler (2001) holds that in order for it to be productive, criticism (or academic critique in this instance) needs to be thought of as a practice—an ongoing growth process—that extends beyond whatever judgment must be rendered about a unique manuscript at a specific point in time.

As expectations for scholarly work seem to have increased, those who write for music education's journals confront potential conflicts between objectivity and subjectivity, much as these conflicts are central to any discussion of art criticism (Subotnik, 2002). Editors and review boards oversee the quality of materials accepted to the journals. Authors may wish for clear, quantitative guidelines yet rail against them as un-artful when they lack subjectivity. Conversely, when reviewer responses are regarded as subjective, authors may see them as non-quantifiable and unjustified (Turner 2003b). Readers of the journals ultimately interpret and critique content according to their own needs and interests. These implicit and explicit facets of critique can be viewed through the lenses of quality, accountability, and relevance.

A caveat must be added before proceeding. Editors and members of editorial boards are almost always volunteers who work diligently to offer fair judgments about manuscripts with only limited opportunity for personal interaction and conversation with authors who remain anonymous. Review procedures, editorial philosophies, and mission statements are as varied as

the journals themselves. This essay offers one set of lenses through which to view the processes of authorship and editorial work, and the political implications that result from their interaction.

Quality

If the peer-review process is primarily concerned with the quality of the journal and its articles, the definition of quality will reside within parameters set by editorial teams of the various journals. Standards may be explicitly stated as formal guidelines or implicitly held by the reviewers. Contradictions may arise when both explicit and implicit standards are applied, though only the explicit standards are known. Other factors affecting quality are attributes of the review process itself, the fitness of reviewers for the task they are assigned, and the guiding principles established to ensure that the printed journal reflects its mission.

One definition of quality is the degree to which something serves its intended purpose (Winch, 1996). Other definitions of quality vary in their reference to such ideals as excellence, value, conformance to specifications, and the degree to which they meet or exceed expectations (see Reeves & Bednar, 1994). Despite the chosen definition of quality, there is potential that “quality” is a backward reference toward convention, instead of a forward orientation toward innovation. A journal’s mission and its chief editor’s intent may be to mold a publication that encourages new thinking. Yet, an editorial team of reviewers with unarticulated or unknown philosophical orientations may stifle this intent, sending mixed messages to authors and readers. When reviewers are selected for editorial teams because of their past accomplishments but without a sense of how they philosophically align with a journal’s mission, the result may be a set of “theme and variations” on topics and article formats that have appeared numerous times in the past. It may be for this reason that music education is fairly conservative toward innovation.

Instead of building upon previous efforts, work is redone and ideas are offered again as new, wasting time and stifling opportunities for innovation and advancement, especially in pedagogy and philosophy (see Woodford, 2005).

The last two decades have seen remarkable change in how information is conveyed through our profession, raising issues of quality at every turn. Large conferences no longer serve the communicative and political purposes that they once did, and our journals no longer serve those purposes, either. Or do they? If journals exist to provide in-depth documentation and exploration of currently important topics, then our journals remain critical contributors to the historical record of our profession. It may be that rapidly expanding means of electronic communication render printed and/or subscription-based journal articles less suited than other modes of media for audiences of practicing music teachers seeking immediacy. Rather, our traditionally formatted journals may be best viewed as both documentary records, for eventual consumption by historians and academics, and future-oriented platforms for the in-depth exploration of complex ideas and scholarly work.

It might be that the definition of “quality” will need to be flexible and responsive to newly varied types of journals and other to-be-developed print resources. If, as noted earlier, quality can be assessed by varying standards, it is the responsibility of an editorial team to define and publicize the standards. And, it is important that mentors who are asked to provide guidance to younger faculty members are aware of how the various platforms and their definitions of quality conform to the expectations for promotion and tenure at the university level. In the case of the *Music Educators Journal*, the shift toward defining quality in terms of academic scholarship has presented challenges to an editorial team charged with selecting material applicable to the panoply of potential readers, from primary school music teachers to graduate

students and university faculty. This represents a departure from how quality was defined for the *MEJ* in past decades when, at some points, articles were largely philosophical in nature, and at others when articles were almost exclusively focused on the practical tasks of teaching. One former *MEJ* Editorial Committee member from the 1970s recently wrote to express his displeasure at this redefinition of quality, stating a fear that the journal will abandon its previously informal, conversational tone.

In fact, the immediacy of online and social networking media allows them to fill roles our journals once filled, while print and subscription-based electronic journals may now primarily serve backward and forward-looking functions. As our established journals continue to address the temporal parameters of past and future, other publications are stepping forward to embrace new technologies and new conceptions of communication intended to address the present and immediate needs of practicing teachers. These differing purposes prompt questions about whether the same standards of quality should apply within each of these time-oriented functions. For example, the material published on our professional associations' web pages might need to be edited according to definable yet flexible sets of quality standards. It will be incumbent on the profession's leaders to assist our constituent and preservice teachers in recognizing distinctions between idiomatic quality parameters for evanescent online content, articles published long ago but now available through electronic databases, and currently published scholarly journal articles.

I have found that my college students are often unaware of this temporal differentiation when they read online journal articles that were first published decades ago. In most electronic databases, these historical documents look the same as articles published yesterday. We have largely lost the tactile experience of holding printed journals, of locating them on shelves in

libraries, of physically placing them in a chronology (Ratliff, 2012). When I visit the library stacks and hold original copies of *Music Educators Journal* from, say, the World War I era, I have a different reading experience than when I view the same materials online. I get a sense of the care, dedication, urgency, and passion that accompanied the creation of that issue of the journal. In those moments, quality means more than academic scholarship; it involves interpretation of time, context, and intent. Online viewing of the same material facilitates a rapid determination of academic quality yet inhibits the possibility that we might learn even more if we were to slow the process and consider other contributors to quality. The same principle holds when assessing the quality of reviews for manuscripts submitted to our journals. Though reviewers may necessarily focus attention on one or another dimension of academic quality, authors may have held a much richer contextual image that became muted when their thoughts were reduced to written form. It is the editorial team's responsibility to suggest ways that an author's revision can convey more of the richness that drew them to write in the first place.

Accountability

The scrutiny of quality standards is a process customarily overseen by a panel of peers who serve on journal editorial boards. In one sense, authors are accountable to these panels for both the quality of their article's content and how it is communicated. It is critical that the peer panelists be chosen for their ability to represent domain-specific authority, adhere to the journal's mission, and discern the impact of articles on the field. The implicit dialogue that occurs between a peer editorial board and an author is a socio-political conversation, where the interests of one party will largely either agree or disagree with the interests of the other (see Winch,

1996). This can be seen when the conversation harbors unseen agendas or ignores the support and mentoring needed by emerging scholars.

Measures of accountability are designed to establish and perpetuate quality, yet beneath this egalitarian system's surface is a veiled conversation between members of a professional society. The extent to which the veil of anonymity enhances the assessment of quality standards depends upon which standards are applied and how the interested parties view those standards (Gross, 1993). One topic of vigorous conversation among editors of academic journals has been that of confidentiality in the review process. One argument in favor of open or semi-open review procedures is that they would raise the level of professional accountability for those whose identities are made known. For instance, this is the position of the American Economic Association, having discontinued double-anonymous reviewing (where both authors and reviewers are unknown to each other) for its flagship journal, instead implementing a process wherein reviewers remain anonymous yet author names are disclosed (single-anonymous reviewing). Others offer a different perspective, suggesting that author identities should be withheld while reviewer identities are known (e.g. Brown, 2007). Whether there would be a commensurate chilling effect on the willingness of qualified peers to serve as reviewers is another question, particularly in an academic community as closely-knit as music education.

In a further sense of accountability, authors and editorial boards are simultaneously answerable to the journal's circulation (the intended audience) and its readership (the actual audience). The quality standards to which editors and reviewers are held accountable will likely vary for these different audiences and their myriad sub-audiences. When standards move out of alignment with the expectations of an audience, the result will be resistance from those who previously valued the journal because of its aforementioned standards. Or, they may simply stop

reading altogether. Other measures of accountability are the semi-regular analyses of journal content that occasionally appear within the music education profession's journals. Again, though, these are backward looking analyses that enumerate what has been rather than what could or should be contained within our journal's pages.

With an understanding of these various accountability measures comes responsibility to emerging scholars as they begin to contribute to the profession. Members of editorial boards have an ethical obligation to guide the development of promising writers toward reflection of the quality parameters of their journals. It is an inaccurate assumption that these young professors know how to differentiate writing styles to meet the distinctive norms of dissimilar journals, though they can find the explicit standards within the journal's official guidelines for authors. The implicit standards, by definition, are not written down and are only known by the small cadre of authors whose work is accepted for publication enough times that their writing style or proclivities become these unstated standards.

For young professors, their primary academic writing product is the dissertation, and that conservative format becomes the default format for each article, no matter the audience (Harley, Acord, Earl-Novell, Lawrence & King, 2010). This becomes problematic when, instead of any intended or actual journal audience, articles are essentially produced for a very real but very limited audience comprising the author's tenure and promotion committee. Again, status quo is maintained as the author seeks to satisfy the unique requirements of the tenure application at the possible expense of generating articles that might more broadly affect the practices of music teaching and learning. In these instances, the political conversation is reduced to a professor and her committee, with consideration of peer-reviewed articles the central focus of assessment. Such publications are often labeled "professional development," as though they portray how the

young scholar has developed over time. However, a more accurate measure may be consideration of how the scholarly writing has contributed to the development *of the profession*. If this were the case, the accountability measures now used by some faculty evaluation committees would shift from enumerated lists of articles to the impact of those articles, leading toward discussions of the articles' relevance. Before committing time and energy to writing, potential authors—junior faculty, especially—need access to mentoring that clearly establishes the current professional capital earned for articles appearing in different journals.

These high-stakes promotion and tenure discussions reflect conceptions of our journals that may be fluid. There is an (often) tacitly enforced ranking system of academic journals in music education. More accurately, there are categories of journals and tiers or rankings within the categories. But the entire notion of journal ranking has been upended by the emergence of credible digital-only outlets for the publication of research and ideas (Wheeler, 2011). The ubiquity of information afforded by digital publishing may prompt changes in the peer review process where the function transforms from one of gate-keeping toward one of filtering, or helping consumers of media make sense of the vast array of available information. In this sense, journal rankings might actually take on increased prominence as indicators of quality and accountability. A more radical idea is to move toward open publication of all materials, with a process of peer review occurring *after* publication through the multiplicity of online blogs and other commentary forums (Fitzpatrick, 2010; O'Donnell, 2010).

However, perhaps the chief measure of accountability for our journals is the product of the journal itself. The roles of an editorial team are not only to measure the suitability of individual manuscripts according to a set of predetermined qualities, but also to accept for publication those that are of sufficient quality and that fit within the current editorial directions,

aims, and needs of the journal. In this sense, reviewers serve as acquisition editors who carefully craft the publically accountable content of their journals.

One reason that journals such as the *CRME Bulletin* or *Philosophy of Music Education Review* are held in high regard results from carefully developed processes of peer review. These journals have created a cyclical system of accountability reinforced with each newly published issue. Whether serving as gate-keepers or filterers, scholarly societies such as professional organizations and editorial boards have three main responsibilities: to identify good scholarly work (validate), to connect the intellectual work with the best new technologies of investigation and communication (innovate), and to recognize the importance of disseminating excellent scholarly work to the widest possible audience (communicate) (O'Donnell, 2010). In contrast to the role of the 'weak editor' espoused by Lee Higgins at the *International Journal of Community Music* (2012, p. 92; 2010), there are occasions when the editor needs to exert strength in order to make a decision as when reviewers disagree, when a reviewer offers a manuscript evaluation far afield from those of his or her colleagues, or when reviewers are slow to respond to deadlines. The editor's decision becomes the mentoring advice offered to authors about how to proceed toward a successful revision. In an ethical sense, the editor must assume a mentoring role toward the development of both content and potential authors. The rhetorical framing of reviewer comments can be just as important for authors as the comments themselves.

The issue of communication's burgeoning expanse returns us to the earlier topic of how quality and accountability are to be established and maintained given the recent proliferation of both print and digital journals in music education. This can be extended beyond journals of academic scholarship to the ubiquitous industry-sponsored publications that are, in many respects, convincing facsimiles of the journals produced by our professional organizations.

Whereas standards of quality and accountability for our long-standing professional journals are well-established, there may be legitimate disagreements about whether our time-honored journals should continue to represent these standards and/or whether they need to be, at least, supplemented with other journals representing different standards of quality and accountability. As electronic media continues to lower barriers to the publication of periodical and journal-type documents, the proliferation of these emerging journals, both scholarly and otherwise, can be viewed as responsive to the accountability demands of the marketplace. Some journals and related digital communication forms will specifically exist to address immediate needs, while others will continue to influence the profession over time through the cumulative effect of sustained scholarly attention. Questions for all types of editorial teams may, then, be newly phrased as “accountability to whom” and “accountability for what?” The deliberative responses to those questions would firmly position all types of journals within the diverse social landscape of our profession and allow the development of quality and accountability standards relevant to each as unique political enterprises.

Relevance

Relevance depends upon the audiences being considered for music education’s professional journals. Research journals are relevant to researchers, applications of research are purposed for relevance to both researchers and practitioners, and practitioner-oriented journals are primarily relevant to teachers. Standards of quality and measures of accountability must reflect these varying points of relevance for a journal and its leadership to achieve the intended aims. Problems arise when the standards and objectives of editorial boards, whether explicit or implicit, do not match those perceived as relevant by their various audiences. For the *Music*

Educators Journal, as an example, the recent increase in scholarly standards largely resulted from the 1993 creation of *Teaching Music* to contain material that would have previously appeared in the *MEJ*. *Teaching Music* now includes the NAFME news and practical teaching information deemed most relevant for practitioners, with emphasis on immediacy and brevity. The removal of this content has posed a significant problem of relevancy for the *Music Educators Journal*, especially in the past few years. Recent efforts to maintain relevance for the *MEJ*'s practitioner readers have included the creation of several columns designed for well-reasoned content that does not conform to either the research-grounded parameters for *MEJ* articles or the immediacy of pieces appearing in *Teaching Music*. It remains to be seen how these efforts will resonate with the *MEJ*'s varied constituencies.

Alternately, a journal's intended audience may not be the one that could, in actuality, most benefit from the content. Practitioner articles should be research-based, and research articles should be cognizant of the practitioner, thereby enhancing connection and relevance between different types of scholarship. Finally, our journals must reflect consideration of the individuals for whom they might, ultimately, have the most relevance: the children in our music classrooms and those engaged in music experiences across the lifespan. Nothing else really matters if our journals do not publish research relevant to the experience of music in the lives of our students and how that experience translates into their interactions with music (see Winch, 1996). The explicit relevance of our journals is proclaimed in their mission statements, yet the implicit relevance is for students of all ages who might never see our journals and the teachers who work with those individuals in music classrooms.

We must, in some measure define the quality of our journals by the manner in which they address the thoughts and acts of teachers and students. We should hold our journals accountable

for this relevance by examining them as for how they ultimately affect a student's experience of music. Philip Jackson described the need for a "tight resemblance" (2004, p. 1) between teaching and art, and we might consider a similar resemblance for the relationship between music education's journals, the music teaching and learning they support, and the increasingly global readership they ultimately serve.

Controversy and Challenge

But, the society of music educators is diverse and fragmented. At their best, our profession's journals provide opportunities to advance, congratulate, cajole, report, theorize, and reflect. These are socio-political acts, evidenced most vividly when controversial topics appear within our journals and question the generalizations by which we define ourselves as music educators. The relationships between quality, accountability and relevance test editors when dealing with difficult subject matter, much as the editorial team of the *Music Educators Journal* handled recent articles about LGBT-related topics and the reactions they provoked from readers (Bergonzi, 2009; Carter, 2011; Freer, 2013). An understanding of how quality, accountability and relevance interact provides a framework within which editors can begin to discriminate between reader comments that are simply the rhetoric of objection and others that are epistemological interrogations of an article's content. Such controversies are often presented as binaries that cover more than they reveal. Editorial teams that have proactively considered these three issues will be better able to analyze controversial manuscript submissions, fully aware that they privilege selected viewpoints by virtue of publication, and fully cognizant of how each issue's uniquely crafted set of articles relates to the composite view created by multiple issues of that journal over time.

Readers must be assured that journal content both represents the highest scholarly standards and presents information that is current, relevant, and challenging. Authors deserve unambiguous style and content guidelines, and editorial teams must use each step in the review process to encourage and improve the efforts of well-intentioned contributors. This will assist in the negotiation of explicit and implicit standards of quality, measures of accountability, and relevance to music education's diverse audiences.

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