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Response to Krista Riggs' "Foundations for Flow: A Philosophical Model for Studio Instruction"

Patrick K. Freer, Georgia State University

Krista Riggs has written a provocative paper examining the relationship between psychology and pedagogy within the applied music studio. The sources Riggs employs as the basis for her arguments reflect some of the most enduring voices in educational psychology and philosophy (including music), and performance practice/preparation in music. Riggs draws important connections between these occasionally disparate fields. I appreciate this opportunity to add to the discussion.

As the foundation of this model, Riggs employs the study of optimal experience, known as 'flow theory', as researched by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi¹ over the past three decades. The flow experience is only possible when an individual's personal capacities are congruent with the opportunities and goals afforded by the environment.² When coupled with the necessary congruency between challenges and skills inherent in the flow model, Riggs' analysis raises questions concerning the definition of success within applied studio instruction, the position of studio instruction within the totality of a student's experience, and the ways in which teachers and students negotiate learning within applied music instruction.

Three Questions

Is the definition of success different for students than it is for teachers?

At first blush, this paper concerns the "how" of music education—how we teach and how we encourage student motivation. Oftentimes, "how" we teach is dependent upon "why" we teach and "what" we teach. This becomes clear in the paper's introduction when success is

defined as an outcome of education. Is the purpose of music education to build toward success using a very narrow, career-specific definition or is the purpose of music education to build toward broader success in many facets of musical knowledge and skill?

Of course, this paper is contextualized to teaching within the applied studio and it may be that success in studio teaching is somewhat narrowly defined. But, at core is a potential conflict in the definition of success as defined by the teacher and the definition of success as appropriate for the student. In the model presented here, the definition of success is clearly student-centered and the success of the instructor is measured by the degree to which the student is supported on that pathway toward success. This is not to say that the instructional content of the studio experience becomes less rigorous in any way, but rather that the instruction itself is modified to better ensure the success of students in learning and applying that content. Riggs implies, and Csikszentmihalyi would agree, that teachers cannot create flow experiences in students, but can create the conditions within which flow experiences can occur. The question is: What are those conditions and are they in conflict with the definition of success used by many studio teachers?

The conditions necessary for flow experience have been identified through research and are embedded throughout Riggs' paper. The conditions are stated here in a purely student-centered manner. But, there are two players in this scene and it is the relationship between the student and teacher that most determines the experience of each. I am an unabashed proponent of attempts to optimize the quality of experience for students. However, the needs of the instructor seem to be missing from this discussion. It might be argued that this model is purely about studio instruction itself and an exploration of the instructor's needs is better suited for a different paper. Even so, the instructor's experiences, both in the past and in the present, do have bearing upon the student experience of the present. For example, it is probably a fair assumption

that each instructor has, at some point, been a student in a studio. Might there be substantial value in a process of reflective analysis of that experience? Riggs does invoke the roles of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action from the student viewpoint, but it might be illuminating to discern the instructor's reflections as well—and for these to be selectively shared with the student. In this way, studio teachers would be closer to fulfilling another necessary exemplar role: that of “master” teacher (or “mentor” teacher). If, as Riggs implies, less-than-optimal studio teaching begets less-than-optimal studio teaching, then models that break the cycle need to be made evident to the students who will one day teach in studios themselves.

A related topic, the subject of only one research study of which I am aware, concerns the effect on students when the teacher experiences flow while teaching.³ An intriguing research project might be to investigate the quality of experience of both instructor and student during applied studio work.

What is the relationship between music education that occurs in classrooms and that which occurs in studios?

The instructor's role in facilitating student flow experiences can be planned for with research-supported implications for teacher language use and design of instruction.⁴ Indeed, existing research indicates that the relationship between teacher and student is one of the key factors in the emergence of flow experiences during musical instruction.⁵ Riggs suggests that applied studio instructors move away from the master-apprentice model (an “authoritarian” approach) to a mentoring model (an “authoritative” approach). This suggestion also implies that this model could be easily situated within a constructivist paradigm where instructional scaffolding becomes a dominant component of the teaching and learning process.

Riggs uses the image of the “legendary maestro or master teacher” to represent the iconic authoritarian studio teacher. I am not sure that is quite fair. Certainly, some master artists are authoritarian, but a good many master artists are also master teachers. It seems to me that a master teacher is an artist who performs many of the pedagogical techniques implied in this paper, whether through instinct, experience, or cultivated through the study of human development and motivation. Many classroom music teachers could learn quite a bit by watching these master teachers at work in their studios. Rather, I think we are talking about the adage that good teaching is simply good teaching, regardless of the setting.

More than that, however, we are interested in the *qualities* of good teaching; have we really taught if the students have not learned? Riggs positions many qualities of good teaching within four focus areas: identity, experience, insight, and inspiration. We would be failing in our jobs if we did not continually adjust the content of our courses to ensure that future music teachers are equipped with the basic pedagogical knowledge and skills that underlie good teaching. Might it be that schools of music routinely fail in the job of fully preparing future studio teachers for their role as master teachers? Do performance majors in our schools ever have the chance to engage in inquiry about human growth, development, and motivation? A related question, and one that is beyond the limits of this response, is how do studio teachers and those who teach performance pedagogy classes become interested and invested in this way of approaching instruction?

This speaks to a broader vision of music education, one that demands that faculties of music education and performance complement and coordinate their instruction. Perhaps entry-level “Introduction to Music Education” courses should be re-envisioned for all those

considering careers in music teaching and learning, from classroom music teachers to performance majors and conductors.

What is the role of negotiation in this model?

When discussing the role of the studio teacher as mentor, Riggs speaks of a dialogical approach to instruction that asks “questions to prompt the student to defend expressive choices or relate specific concepts” and allows the teacher to “gauge the individual’s comprehension of materials and adjust the path of study accordingly.” What we have here is, potentially, an example of what Jorgensen calls a dialectic⁶ where the optimal experience involves full awareness of the experiences of both instructor and student. This will require constant negotiation between both participants about the expectations, processes, outcomes, and purposes of learning within the applied studio environment. What is apparent in this paper is that the path of student learning in the studio is, optimally, a negotiated, deliberative process that invites continual balancing. L. Bartel and L. **Do you have first names for these writers?** Cameron present this balance between opposites as a series of “dilemmas,” with many examples of negotiation drawn from the applied studio.⁷ Their model of the “conditions of learning” has much to offer any discussion of instruction within the applied studio.

Riggs refers to the concept of “reflection-in-action” as a fundamental characteristic of flow experiences; this is a skill that needs to be modeled by the instructor. During flow experiences, action and awareness merge, resulting in a reflective process that instantly informs behavior. When self-consciousness interferes, the merger of action and awareness is interrupted, the reflective process is slowed or halted and the potential for flow experience is negated.

Flow experience becomes possible only when the student has been able to meet an appropriate musical challenge through the application of his or her musical skill. The instructor

becomes a negotiator between the challenges presented within the studio setting and the student's abilities to meet those challenges. What we would ideally like to have students develop is a characteristic that Csikszentmihalyi describes as 'autotelic', that is, becoming someone who does whatever necessary to achieve flow experiences. Students who actively seek flow experiences may indeed be more effective both on stage and in the practice room.

Comments on the Model

I applaud Riggs for furthering the discussion concerning flow experience within music education. There is a paucity of literature specific to music education that addresses Csikszentmihalyi and flow theory in anything more than broad generalizations and superficial applications. Papers like this are sorely needed.

Identity, experience, insight, and inspiration

Riggs lists the most prominent characteristics of flow as identified by Csikszentmihalyi's research. However, I am not clear on how her use of the aspects of identity, experience, insight, and inspiration are related to Csikszentmihalyi's work. For instance, when discussing identity as a component area of flow, Riggs describes a number of tendencies of creative artists that have been shown to be antithetical to flow experience, namely extreme sensitivity (if that is to be interpreted as self-consciousness), high anxiety levels, and introversion. Some explicit statements regarding the relationship between Riggs' four aspects and Csikszentmihalyi's work would assist the reader throughout the paper.

The primary sources of data concerning flow experience are variants on a survey called the Experience Sampling Form (ESF). The ESF is constructed with questions intended to measure four "affective dimensions" of an individual's experience: affect, activation, cognitive

efficiency, and motivation.⁸ I propose that Riggs' use of 'inspiration' has much in common with Csikszentmihalyi's use of 'affect'. Riggs' 'experience' seems closely aligned with Csikszentmihalyi's 'motivation'. Much of Riggs' aspect of 'identity' might be related to 'cognitive efficiency'. Finally, a case might be made that Riggs' description of 'insight' is not unlike Csikszentmihalyi's dimension of 'activation', although I admit that this match seems less a fit than the other pairings. I do think, however, that the items that seem to affect Riggs' concept of 'insight' (especially issues related to perception, emotion, sensory stimulation, and the ability to analyze) logically have an influence on the agility of cognitive function in any learning circumstance.

The model as tool

This response is to the combined paper and presentation at a major symposium. During the presentation, Riggs displayed a graphic representation of her model that readers of this journal are not able to view. In the graphic representation, the four aspects of inspiration, insight, experience, and identity are represented by a series of circles, much like the common visual representation of our solar system. In Riggs' model, flow is at the center, taking the position of the sun. The inspiration circle is closest to flow, followed by insight, experience, and identity (taking up Pluto's position). As presented, the view of five concentric circles with multidirectional arrows seems to imply that flow experiences are only possible when the contents of each circle are addressed within any given situation. Riggs, however, states that studio teachers may begin at any circle (aspect) within the model and adjust instruction to meet the needs of their students, so long as each circle is ultimately addressed.

In my view, there are two problems with this representation of the model. First, the outer circles of the model (Riggs' aspects of inspiration insight, experience, and identity) contain

descriptive elements that do not support flow experiences. Could it be that these circles might better be stated as representing areas of awareness' that teachers need to have about their students? Second, if I was a studio teacher, I am not sure what I would do with this model, whether in visual or textual form. Riggs correctly states that this model needs to be verified by empirical research, but the research would likely begin with the characteristics of flow experiences that have already been identified through research. I am not sure how Riggs' four aspects or their applications would be researched without reducing her broad vision to a few demonstrable characteristics. This would be unfortunate. However, empirical research extending the application of the existing 'flow' knowledge base to applied studio instruction would be fascinating.

And, therein lies my final observation: this appears to be less of a new philosophical or theoretical model than it is a re-positioning of Csikszentmihalyi's work within the studio setting. It would be an overstatement, I believe, to suggest that flow represents a meta-theory uniting the many writers and thinkers referenced in this paper. But, whether this truly establishes a new model or lays the foundation for an enhanced discussion of flow theory within music education, Riggs has drawn important, even vital, links between the ideas, theories, and approaches of a great many individuals. This may provide further justification for a broader view of music education, one that encompasses music teaching and/or learning whenever and wherever it takes place.

Notes

¹ E.g., Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

² Csikszentmihalyi and J. Nakamura, J. “The Dynamics of Intrinsic Motivation: A Study of Adolescents,” in C. Ames and R. Ames, eds., *Research on Motivation in Education*, vol. 3 (New York: Academic Press, 1989), 45-71.

³ N. Q. Zhu, “The Effects of Teachers' Flow Experiences on the Cognitive Engagement of Students,” Doctoral dissertation, University of San Diego, 2003.

⁴ P. K. Freer, *Rehearsal Discourse of Choral Conductors: Meeting the Needs of Young Adolescents*,” Doctoral dissertation, Teachers College Columbia University, 2003.

⁵ L. A. Custodero, “Seeking Challenge, Finding Skill: Flow Experience and Music Education,” *Arts Education Policy Review*, vol. 103, no. 3 (2002): 3-10.

⁶ Estelle R. Jorgensen, *Transforming Music Education* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003).

⁷ L. Bartel, and L. Cameron, “From Dilemmas to Experience: Shaping the Conditions of Learning,” in L. Bartel, ed., *Questioning the Music Education Paradigm* (Waterloo, ON: Canadian Music Educators' Association, 2004).

⁸ Csikszentmihalyi and R. Larson, “Validity and Reliability of the Experience-sampling Method,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, vol. 175, (1987): 526-536.