

Robert McCormac - SCSMT (Feb, 2021)  
Presentation Script

Hello and thank you for attending this presentation. My name is Robert McCormac. This talk is entitled Challenging Pedagogical Models; Appalachian Vernacular Music Traditions in the Undergraduate Music Theory Classroom. As an early disclaimer, this talk is primarily focused on Music Theory Pedagogy and the relationship that curricula and pedagogy share. However, before discussing pedagogy, I must briefly jump through the hoops of musicology and sociology which lay the theoretical groundwork for the remainder of this discussion.

Much of this work was inspired by previous scholarship on participatory music traditions of the American geo-political South done by University of Illinois Professor Emeritus and distinguished old-time musician, Thomas Turino. In his work, Turino elaborates upon Charles Keil's theory of 'participatory discrepancies' which suggests that for music to be "personally involving" and "socially valuable" it will be to some extent imperfect and will therefore appeal to our inherent "participatory consciousness." Turino expands upon Keil's hypothesis, asserting that if all music is to be regarded as valuable, there must be some observable level of participation, or at the least, an identifiable opportunity for participation.

So how do we define musical entity? The concept of musical entity should be understood more specifically as a tradition, heritage, or act of music making "in relation to different realms or fields of artistic practice." This concept is in itself an extension of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *social field*, which Turino interprets as a "domain of activity defined by the purpose and goals of the activity." This is expanded upon in what is known as 'field theory' - a Bourdieu-ean query of how individuals, or agents, act and are acted upon given their surrounding environment. University of Chicago Professor of Sociology, John Levi Martin, asserts that according to field theory, the actions of or on agents in a given social field and the effects of these actions are largely predictable. Martin refers to these predictable characteristics of a social field as "regularities."

It is the synthesis of these two theories - Keil's theory of participatory discrepancies and Bourdieu's scholarship of social fields within the larger context of field theory - that enables broader application of Turino's work. Influenced by Bourdieu's categorization of social fields and scholarship on regularities, Turino posits that all music can be categorized within four musical domains determined by their common social structures; two of which deal exclusively with recorded music or the act of recording and two that consider live music and the act of music making. The two domains of recorded music are Studio/Audio Art and High Fidelity, and the two domains of live music and music making are Presentational and Participatory. This work focuses primarily on the last domain, and the possible pedagogical implications of incorporating structural elements from participatory music traditions in the classroom. These structural

characteristics - goals, values, agent roles, etc. - distinguish the four domains from one another based on their levels and methods of participation and extent to which the given domain's goal is achieved through said participation. Referring back to John Levi Martin's aforementioned scholarship on field theory and Bourdieu's assertions about the characteristics of social fields, these structural characteristics may be better understood as the regularities of each musical domain.

Turino asserts that the goal of any musical practice in the Participatory domain is to encourage "maximum sonic, kinesic participation" He additionally states that within this domain, collective participation functions as "social intercourse" and that through this relationship, emphasis is placed "on the *doing* among all present" as opposed to some agents *doing* and some agents *viewing* as is largely representative of the Presentational domain. Turino cites Appalachian music as one of the most representative participatory music traditions, frequently characterizing all of the identified regularities of the Participatory domain. Further, he identifies shape note or 'sacred harp' singing, the old-time string band tradition, and the informal and collaborative 'jam session' as embodying all of the regularities of the Participatory domain.

Implementing Turino's four domain categorization concept as theoretical framework, and through nearly 15 years of personal anecdotal experience as a participant in the aforementioned Appalachian music traditions, I have identified three specific and common structures, or regularities, each largely evident within Appalachian music, that emphasize the importance of collective participation. These are expected agent (participant) roles; value, success, and evaluation structures; and the overarching goal of the domain. The overarching goal of the Participatory domain is to increase access to and inclusion in music making, and to prioritize the practice of learning by doing. This is accomplished by reducing social and musical barriers to entry such as artist-audience distinctions, and by downplaying individual virtuosity and diminishing musical 'perfectionism' in efforts to encourage participation from agents with varying levels of "musical investment." Through this, the evaluation of value or success of participatory music is largely based on degree of participation and the growth of the participant population.

In so much as there are less perceived barriers to entry, there is still an ever expanding ceiling of inherent musical challenges and progress that more invested participants may strive to reach. This dichotomy ensures that both learning and participation experiences are fulfilling to all agents and in turn, will likely yield greater involvement, understood as a higher degree of participation or, according to Turino, greater socio-cultural value. This is representative of Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's theory of "optimal experience" which asserts that if an agent's participation is to be characterized by "fuller integration" or energized focus, there must be available a "proper balance between inherent challenges and the skill level of the actor [agent/participant]."

So you may ask: “How are these two things - participatory Appalachian music and music theory pedagogy - related?” I began to relate these ideas while reflecting on the current state of music theory education - primarily undergraduate - while engaged in the joint study of Appalachian Studies and Music Theory Pedagogy at Appalachian State University. I have observed a true myriad of positive changes within our field; from discussions about eurocentric cultural hegemony in the texts we teach from, to engaged dialogue about race and gender in music theory, to the expansive examinations of *how* we are teaching. As valuable as these conversations are, and in no attempt to devalue the progress that has and is being made, I reflect on bell hooks’ ideological proclamation in her publication *Teaching to Transgress*, which asserts that curriculum and pedagogy are intimately related on the most fundamental level of education - what we teach influences, if not dictates, how we teach - and that a shift in paradigm requires contemplation about both. To the extent that these educational tenets (curriculum and pedagogy) are interconnected, I worry that the aforementioned progressive movements within music theory education each only address one of these principles; either curriculum or pedagogy, but not both.

I assert that the locus of this conflict comes from the realization that both mainstream music theory curricula and similarly conventional pedagogical models are predominantly “presentational.” Within the prevailing undergraduate music theory curriculum, the requisite educational concepts (harmony, rhythm, form etc.) are largely taught within the context of music that is performed rather than participated in. In other words, we teach within the musical framework not of the Participatory domain but of the Presentational domain. For example, I along with many other undergraduate students learned about cadences and typical cadential resolutions in the context of Mozart, Beethoven, or similar classical or symphonic composers. The inherent structure of this music is for it to be performed and observed or analysed, subsequently followed by often frivolous efforts to retain and regurgitate acquired information for a test. Paulo Friere, the Brazilian educational theorist and activist describes this as the “banking” concept of education, “in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits.” Friere, in conversation with Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Folk School, elaborates upon this stating that “without practice there is no knowledge.” Other academic leaders have echoed these sentiments, such as Noam Chomsky who stated his belief that “Instruction should reject the notion of education as pouring water into a vessel in favor of engaging students in an active quest for understanding.”

These philosophies were backed by a 2019 study led by Harvard University Director of Science Teaching and Learning, Louis Deslauriers, which was published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. This study compared two learning methods - active and passive - in efforts to identify which method “produces better educational outcome.” Harvard’s Center for Teaching and Learning defines active learning as a learning method including “instructional activity that engages students in learning, beyond listening, reading, and memorizing.” In this

study, learning methods were dictated by pedagogical structures implemented by the instructor and used as a scientific control. Traditional lecture-based classrooms supported passive learning while non-traditional, peer-group and problem-posing learning environments supported active learning. The results of this study concluded overwhelmingly that students performed better on varying forms of evaluation after participating in active learning environments, scoring roughly 15% better on all administered “tests of learning.” Cornell University’s Center for Teaching Innovation defines active learning as enabling students to “fully participate in their learning by thinking, discussing, investigating, and creating.” In addition, this Center offers select reasons for why an active learning environment is beneficial and effective. These include 1) more frequent and immediate feedback to students (participants), 2) personal connections to the material for students, which increases their motivation to learn, and 3) sense of community in the classroom through increased student-student and instructor-student interaction.

I assert that active learning in a music theory classroom may be achieved through participation and that to an extent, these two concepts - participatory pedagogy and active learning methods - may actually be synonymous. Furthermore, I believe that the stated effects of active learning, as provided by Cornell University, reflect the effects of the regularities of the Participatory domain. For example, as previously stated, active learning offers more frequent feedback to participants. This is equally evident in participatory music making. Take for instance an old-time jam session, which one would expect to be a largely homo(hetero)phonic texture with multiple participants sharing unison melody or accompaniment lines. Inherent to this musical structure, any participant will have the musical reference of their fellow participants at all times, providing immediate aural feedback. Further, it is believed that active learning generates personal connections to the educational material. Likewise, Turino also identifies this as inherent to nearly any act of participatory music making as there is no artist-audience distinction, just participants. Finally, and most importantly, active learning creates a sense of community in the classroom through increased interaction. This is tantamount to the overarching goal of the Participatory domain; to increase access and inclusion vis a vis collective participation. In this regard, I propose a dramatic but understandably gradual reframing of undergraduate music theory education based around reconceiving all aspects of what has historically been “presentational” as “participatory,” in terms of both curriculum and the pedagogical models, in order to enable and sustain active learning. In essence, I assert the paramount need for students to be engaged in the study of music theory by *doing*, not just by observing.

In short, this transformation begins with examining current curriculum for ways that it influences pedagogy. There are boundless strategies for teaching the same core concepts (harmony, rhythm, form etc.) within different musical contexts (ideally from the Participatory domain) that prioritize student participation over observation, fundamentally shifting the learning environment from passive to active. Take for example Dr. Jennifer Snodgrass’s Contemporary Musicianship class at Appalachian State University which is functionally a music theory class for music

industry students. I have enjoyed the privilege of observing and now co-teach this with her. At first glance, this classroom environment could be confused with a jam session - every student has their instrument in their hands or a microphone to their mouth, they play along with examples in efforts to investigate and comprehend concepts through application, and inherent to the success of this class is student participation.

This incredible active learning environment extends from a plethora of participatory pedagogical choices that Dr. Snodgrass has made, but this transformation does not need to be as elaborate as designing an entire music theory class around participation. I recognize that this is a tremendous task and that even our students would likely be shocked to witness this proposed dramatic transformation take place overnight. However it is as simple as consciously employing the 'regularities' of the Participatory domain in our classrooms, which are seen most clearly in the music traditions of southern Appalachia. Our goal should be to increase access and inclusion through the prioritization of participation-focused learning. Evaluation of our teaching should be in the form of examining the degree of participation we are achieving in the classroom and the extent in which participation is able to be grown through the curriculum and pedagogy we employ. And we should recognize that this is only accomplished by limiting the presence of artist-audience distinction in the classroom in favor of facilitating an active learning environment, fundamentally rooted in student participation.

Thank you so much for attending this presentation - I hope it has left you inspired to consider the ways in which we as music theory educators may improve the education environment and process for our students and ourselves by adopting principles of participatory music in our curriculum and pedagogy. For reference texts or to have further conversation which I greatly welcome, please do not hesitate to contact me. Again, thank you for your time.