
Here Estelle Jorgensen of Indiana University briefly discusses the merits and shortcomings of (three out of four of) four distinct relationships between theory and practice in music education. Those models terms:

1. Dichotomy
2. Polarity
3. Fusion
4. Dialectic

The “dichotomy” model makes a clear distinction between theory and practice. This idea, she says, can be traced from Plato’s distinctions between the world of appearances and the world of ideas to Descartes’ “inversion of Platonic values and understandings” that “resulted in the ascendancy of careful and deliberate observation of the phenomenal world over philosophical reflection,” and from there through the Enlightenment and the resulting replacement of philosophical reflection as the chief way of understanding the material world by empirical science (p. 22). Jorgensen finds herself “sympathetic” to this model because it enables one to clarify matters when “something is awry and amiss and that a distinction needs to be drawn.” The drawbacks, however, are that such “hard-boundaried distinctions” have been shown to 1) be “false dichotomies and perspectives” in post-modern and feminist thought and 2) that it “excessively specializes and alienates theories and practices.”

In the second model, the one Jorgensen terms “polarity,” the “hard-boundaried distinctions” of the “dichotomy” model are softened, so that the distance between the poles of theory and practice becomes a continuum that “suggests the possibility of various sorts of theories and practices” (p. 24). In this model, while pure theory and practice may exist at the poles, in between are an infinitesimal number of positions that are a blend of both and may described in such terms. The result is that “one should not expect to find a theory perfectly translated into a particular practice or a practice drawing entirely and fully on one particular theory” (p. 26). While the strength of this model has been and remains its “ambiguity” — what many would call the “art” of teaching — this strength is also its weakness: this ambiguity lends itself to increasing layers of complexity that actually may hinder understanding and replication to a degree that it becomes near useless. Like situations ethics, it can all depend upon where you are and what your frame of reference is; it’s all, well, situational.

Jorgensen exemplifies her third model, “fusion,” by reference to “Paulo Freire’s notion of praxis in which theory and practice are purposefully transcended and forged into one.” She understands Freire’s idea of praxis as

“transformative in that it is forged with reference to ethical and moral principles of justice, inclusiveness, equality, and freedom in which the individual’s conscience is awakened to those
things that need to be changed in practice, and she or he acts in the phenomenal world in a concerted effort to change those things that need to be changed. Rather than simply transmitting practices from one generation to the next, it is avowedly liberatory and change-oriented towards realizing certain ethical principles, namely those directed towards freedom and justice” (p. 27).

Unfortunately, Jorgensen apparently sees nothing good in this third model, for, try as I may, there is not one positive aspect to this model she puts forth. Indeed, it seems more the case that she is only able to credit political goals to this implementation of this model by stating that “my own perspective is forged in terms of democratic goals” and “there needs to be room for differing points of view and negotiation among them,” seemingly considering the fusion model a Marxist undertaking. Her strongest criticism in my view is that this model could lead to what she terms “static and simplistic qualities” (p. 29).

What I think Jorgensen fails to give enough weight to is the fact that values are always being taught, both inside and outside classrooms. There is no “neutral,” or “value-free” method of teaching. The crucial questions are what are these values and are they in fact the ones we want to teach? Even democracy itself — with all its talk of freedom and representation — if not constantly redeemed from the forces of individual greed and a lack of concern for the common good can become a new tyranny; that of freedom run amok.

So, here I think Jorgensen is too quick to disregard her own desire to point to both the strengths and weaknesses of the models she defines and discusses.

The fourth model, “dialectic,” is, obviously, the one Jorgensen favors. In describing this model of the relationship between theory and practice, she uses

a dramatic metaphor in which people on the stage move about, one coming into the foreground and the other back; sometimes embracing, other times distant, sometimes speaking, other times silent. Such a dynamic view pictures the ways in which teacher sand researchers act in relation to the theories and practices they consider. Rather than an ontological view of theory and practice, my focus is epistemological and functional, on how people work their way through the theories and practices of which they are aware, how they adjudicate them, and how they decide to act in their particular lived situations” (p. 29-30).

“Such a view,” she says, “has the advantages of allowing theory and practice to co-exist more-or-less distinctly, and understanding that reapproachments between particular theories and practices are sometimes difficult to achieve” (p. 30). On the other hand, this view may “problematize the situations teachers face rather than provide a road map for them to follow” (p. 30). It also can be criticized for “not going far enough” or being “radical enough” in light of more wholistic theories to music education that are beginning to emerge.

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In this article Estelle Jorgensen has offered music educators, and, indeed, educators from all disciplines, a document worthy of discussion and reflection. Her delineations of the four models of the relationship between educational theory and practice provide starting points for educators to consider
their own approaches to theory and practice, and also offer a way to view various understandings of that relationship as discussed in contemporary professional literature. The provided bibliography is also extremely good.

While it is natural and expected that an author reveal his or her viewpoint in the course of such a discussion — and Jorgensen clearly favors what she terms the “dialectic” model — I think it her obvious discounting of “fusion” models is unfortunate, perhaps reflecting a shallow understanding of such approaches to the theoretical/practical dialectic in which educators work as well as a shortsighted view of the role education must play in securing the Earth’s future. We are living in a time a enormous change, a critical time in which the decisions made today about the values that need to be taught for the sake of the future will have enormous ramifications for the history of the world and its peoples. I would argue that, facing the critical challenges we do — unregulated nuclear proliferation, destruction of natural habitats and entire species of animals, the incredibly destructive and inevitably worthless means by which conflicts are solved, the enormous disparately between the wealthy and the poor — aiming for “value-free” educational theory or practice is not only unwise but irresponsible to future generations.

Significant as I suspect my differences with Jorgensen may be, her article is a helpful look at the present — laden with the potential to help us think about the future. And ultimately, is that not what the educational enterprise is and needs to be about?