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# A Proleptic Perspective of Music Education

## **Abstract**

By explaining the cultural mechanism of 'prolepsis' through examples of my own teaching, I posit that all too often educators' and teacher educators' (purely 'ideal') recall of our pasts and imagination of our students' futures become fundamentally materialized constraints on our students' life experiences in the present.

## **Keywords**

music education

## **Disciplines**

Music | Music Education

# 4 A Proleptic Perspective of Music Education

*Brent C. Talbot*

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural psychology and sociocultural approaches on identity formation offer great potential for music education and music teacher education—specifically a cultural mechanism known as *prolepsis* (Slattery, 2012; Cole, 1996; Stone, 1993; Stone and Wertsch, 1984). Prolepsis is “the representation of a future act or development as being presently existing” (Merriam-Webster). In this paper I argue that, like parents, we, as music educators, use information derived from our own cultural pasts to project a probable future on our students (often assuming that the world will be very much for our students as it has been for us). By explaining this cultural mechanism through examples of my own teaching, I posit that all too often educators’ and teacher educators’ (purely *ideal*) recall of our pasts and imagination of our students’ futures become fundamentally materialized constraints on our students’ life experiences in the present. This paper explores the following questions: How can understanding perspectives in cultural psychology reshape our communities of practice? What happens when projected futures are embraced, disrupted, and/or rejected? What barriers do we (un)consciously create for our students, ourselves, and our field? How can we use this knowledge to navigate the futures of our profession?

I draw upon my experience as an eighth grade general music teacher to illustrate how approaches in cultural psychology have transformed my own understanding of teaching and learning. I use a narrative form of representation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, 2012) in order to allow the reader a more intimate lens from which to view these approaches. Narrative, according to Connelly and Clandinin (2006):

... comes out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives

by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful.

(p. 477)

## NARRATIVE

In spring of 2007<sup>1</sup> I was hired to take over an eighth grade general music class in a suburban school in upstate New York in order to reduce the disciplinary conflicts a choir director had been experiencing with his large eighth grade all-boys choir. The school's administration, district music coordinator, and the middle school music teachers strategized that they could better manage the students' behavior by dividing the 70-member choir and using the eighth grade general music teacher as a second choir director. They hired me to cover the one section of eighth grade general music that met during the same period as the choir.

Coming into a classroom in mid-March posed three main challenges. First was establishing myself in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which the participants had preestablished roles, identities, routines, rituals, and governing rules for teaching, learning, and behavior in the classroom setting. Students filled out worksheets and performed tasks on instruments *for* the teacher that were evaluated *by* the teacher and measured based on completion of the tasks assigned. Therefore, a second challenge for me was trying to introduce the class to a constructivist approach with which my philosophy of teaching was more closely aligned. Like Jerome Bruner (1990), I find constructivism in cultural psychology to be a profound expression of democratic culture:

It demands that we be conscious of how we come to our knowledge and as conscious as we can be about the values that lead us to our perspectives. It asks that we be accountable for how and what we know. But it does not insist that there is only one way of constructing meaning, or one right way. It is based upon values that, I believe, fit it best to deal with the changes and disruptions that have become so much a feature of modern life.

(Bruner, 1990, p. 30)

A third challenge was trying to help the students reconstruct their class narrative and identity (Bruner, 1990; Cronon, 1992; Middleton & Brown, 2005; Mishler, 2004; Vygotsky, 1987), which they had appropriated (Rogoff, 1998; Wertsch, 1998) from various students, teachers, and administrators, as being "bad" (McDermott, 1993; O'Connor, 2003).

The district curriculum I inherited mandated that I cover a musical theatre unit, explore the “Star-Spangled Banner,” and continue with performance tasks on various instruments before the end of the year. I did not feel comfortable continuing with the previous teacher’s agenda before having the opportunity to get to know the students with whom I would be working and decided—with permission from the district coordinator—to put the curriculum on hold for a few weeks to better understand the individuals in the class. After our initial introductions I asked the students to participate in a music identity project (Talbot, 2013), where we explored various genres of music and their relationships to the students’ identities. I wanted to find out the students’ musical preference(s), explore what role(s) music played in their lives and identities, and provide them an opportunity to articulate and perhaps reconstruct their class narrative away from one that was “bad.” From this project we explored stereotypes, identities, and narratives, applying them to larger constructs like group, class, and nation. We extended this thinking through a world music unit that turned our focus to the music of the Caribbean and Latin America, looking specifically at how musical practices, including dance and musical styles and performance, in the Caribbean and Latin American countries are used to define whole nations (Austerlitz, 1997; Averill, 1997; Duany, 1994; Hobsbawm, 1990).

At the beginning of May, the eighth grade general music class and I had a significant transformative moment, in which myself, the participants, and the physical space dramatically changed as a result of a series of events. After six weeks of being off the curriculum, I decided a nice transition would be to take our discussion of group, national, and ethnic identity and show how these concepts were represented in musicals like *West Side Story*. Not only were the students able to draw upon the mambo and salsa stylistic features and dance steps from the Caribbean music unit, they also began to see musicals as a genre in which our nation tells its own narrative (Cronon, 1992). The next time we met, the class made an extensive list of all of the musicals we could recall, naming about forty ranging from *South Pacific* to *Wicked*. We then looked at this list and tried to identify various categories in which the titles could be placed. The students categorized them into five genres: religious oriented (*Jesus Christ Superstar*), gang related (*West Side Story*), rock musicals (*Hair*), period pieces (*Ragtime*), and movie musicals (*High School Musical*).

During our brainstorming session someone suggested that we make our own musical. To begin the process, we brainstormed what defined a musical (storyline, music, acting, dancing, singing, staging, etc.) and all of the various roles needed to develop and execute a musical production (script writer, lyricist, composer/arranger, choreographer, director, music director, set-designer, costumer, make-up specialist, lighting designer, sound engineer, actors, dancers, and musicians). Each one of us chose and encouraged each other into roles which we were most skilled in or interested in learning. In the end there were two screenplay writers, one composer/arranger, one pianist, one guitarist, two percussionists, a sound engineer, a lighting designer,

a person to operate the camera, a director, a critic, a set and poster designer, and nine actors—one of whom requested adamantly that his character have a dramatic death scene. Many types of leaders emerged and I found myself most useful in facilitating equipment needs or mediating creative disputes among group members.

Once the roles had been established, we grouped ourselves in different areas of the room. The creative and organic nature of this lesson changed both the atmosphere and the physical space of the classroom. The screenwriters got together at a table in the back of the room. The actors moved a table to create more space for the nine members of that group. The composer went to the piano and started playing a familiar piece by Mozart; she then deconstructed the piece and began changing the meter and arpeggiating the chords to make it her own. The percussionists pulled out chairs and began playing along with congas and auxiliary percussion.

The director, who was encouraged into that role by the group because he was “the loudest,” pulled me aside and said, “I think this is cool.” The group in charge of lighting, sound, and video asked what they should be doing. I asked, “Who is in charge of the audio/visual equipment in the building?” They responded, “Mr. Jones.” I replied, “Guess you need to go find Mr. Jones.” One of the three said, “I think he’s in room 120.” They checked the directory on the wall and hurried out the door, returning ten minutes later with a boom poll, mics, headphones, and a video camera.

I went to check on the writers to see how they were doing with their plot. They said, “OK. All we’ve got so far is that there’s a henchman who is paid by one mob family to take out the son of another mob family’s boss. The cops are tipped off by someone close to the henchman, and it all goes down at a warehouse on the outskirts of town.” “Good,” I replied. “Now start writing for nine characters. We’ll need at least one page by Monday.” “Yeah,” one of them said, “we can get together over the weekend and write a ton.” One student, who had not spoken all term, was sketching a horse on some notepaper. The director came up and said, “Hey T-Bot, look at Amy’s drawing. It’s awesome.” I suggested to Amy—who had initially not wanted any role—that she consider creating the poster for the show. She smiled and said, “OK.” The bell rang and the students reluctantly gathered their belongings. A sense of disappointment was felt in the air.

## INTERPRETATION

The beliefs and philosophies exposed in this music-learning environment reveal two approaches towards transmission in the field of music education. The first approach, which I label *direct teaching*, orientates individuals and the world as fundamentally separate, viewing the world as objective and knowable. Knowledge about music is acquired through learning an objectively knowable repertoire and taken to underlie and enable behavior in

concrete contexts, which are assumed to have a determinate character apart from human activity and interpretation. In this view, learning is a matter of building up “standard knowledge” in the minds of individuals, which can then be transferred to other times and other contexts to be “applied.” This view replaces learning with teaching, one where transmission of knowledge is paramount, where creativity and exploration are restricted, where identity is moved to the margins, and where hierarchical stratifications reign supreme.

The second approach, called *situated learning* (Lave & Wenger, 1991), orientates individuals in a fluctuating world. In this view, people flexibly and contingently contextualize their ongoing activity (Lave, 1993; Miller & Goodnow, 1995). “Activity is partially structured through the use of material and semiotic resources that have evolved within and are associated with particular practices” (O’Connor, 2003, p. 71). Meaning is therefore not determined by the use of objectively knowable resources associated with particular practices or methodologies, but instead is indeterminate, situated, and co-constructed, requiring an evaluative process of ongoing reflexive judgments in which all participants position themselves in the activity and the broader forms of social organization.

Lave and Wenger (1991) challenge us to rethink what it means to learn and understand. The common element they use is the premise that meaning, understanding, and learning are all defined relative to actional contexts, not to self-contained structures. William Hanks, in his forward for Lave and Wenger’s *Situated Learning*, offers this interpretation:

Learning for Lave and Wenger is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind. This means, among other things, that it is mediated by the differences of perspective among the co-participants. It is the community, or at least those participating in the learning context, who “learn” under this definition. Learning is, as it were, distributed among co-participants, not an action of one person. . . . [Similarly], understanding is not something a person does in his or her head, nor does it ultimately involve the mental representations of individuals. Understanding is not seen to arise out of the mental operations of a subject on objective structures. Instead, Lave and Wenger locate learning [and understanding] not in the acquisition of structure, but in the increased access of learners to participating roles in expert performances.

(p. 15)

## Learning and Teaching Curricula

With this understanding of learning and teaching, I want to return to the transformative experience in the general music class. As mentioned in my narrative, one of the challenges the class and I faced was orienting

our group to a learning curriculum from a teaching curriculum (Lave & Wenger, 2002):

A learning curriculum consists of situated opportunities (thus including exemplars of various sorts often thought of as “goals”) for the improvisational development of new practice. A learning curriculum is a field of learning resources in everyday practice *viewed from the perspective of learners* [italics in original]. A teaching curriculum, by contrast, is constructed for the instruction of newcomers. When a teaching curriculum supplies—and thereby limits—structuring resources for learning, the meaning of what is learned (and control of access to it, both in its peripheral forms and its subsequently more complex and intensified, though possibly more fragmented, forms) is mediated through an instructor’s participation, by an external view of what knowing is about. The learning curriculum in didactic situations, then, evolves out of participation in a specific community of practice engendered by pedagogical relations and by a prescriptive view of the target practice as a subject matter, as well as out of the many and various relations that tie participants to their own and to other institutions.

(pp. 114–5)

A learning curriculum, therefore, is one that acknowledges, values, and finds use for the experiences, the histories, and the cultural, linguistic, and musical tools and resources each participant brings to the classroom. A learning curriculum uses the “funds of knowledge” each participant brings from outside the classroom to develop a “participatory partnership” within the classroom (Moll et al., 1992, p. 139).

Moving from one structure of understanding to another required the participants and myself to unlearn part of our previous socialization and to begin recreating a new classroom culture and narrative. This required providing the opportunity to explore identity so that the participants and I could reconstruct our personal and group narratives. Reconstruction involves the active sequencing and appropriation of past events to recreate our past in order to fit our current situation. As Middleton and Brown (2005) point out, memory is a socially constructed experience and a key site where questions of personal identity and social order are negotiated. Middleton and Brown draw upon the work of William James (1890/1950), who suggests that memory:

is to be approached in terms of the ability to connect together aspects of our experience as they appear in the ongoing flow of awareness. This implies some form of selectivity, we must exercise choice in relation to the nature of the connections to be made in order that our recollections can be best fitted to our current concerns and activities. Hence “in the practical use of our intellect, forgetting is as important a function as recollecting.”

(p. 679)



## NARRATIVE PRODUCTION AND A NEW CONCEPTUALIZATION FOR TEACHING

By exploring their musical identities, I had asked the participants of the class to produce their own narratives by drawing upon the cultural resources and tools they draw upon in and out of school. As other writers, anthropologists, philosophers, and psychologists have pointed out (Bakhtin, 1981; Bruner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1987), our cultural resources and tools invariably have a history of use by others; they are always half someone else's. This lead to questions about how our identities and narratives in and of the classroom are built into the very cultural resources and tools we employ as learners and teachers. I began to wonder how we could coordinate these resources and tools to help shape our learning environment.

In order for our class to shift from a teaching curriculum to a learning curriculum, I—as the teacher—had to first critically examine and reconstruct my own understanding of learning and teaching and (re)interpret what it means to be a teacher, a learner, and part of a classroom culture. I began by recalling what Bruner (1990) offers about participation in culture and our ability as humans to construct individual and group understanding:

It is man's participation *in* culture and the realization of his mental powers *through* culture that make it impossible to construct a human psychology on the basis of the individual alone. . . . To treat the world as an indifferent flow of information to be processed by individuals each on his or her own terms is to lose sight of how individuals are formed and how they function. Or to quote Geertz, "there is no such thing as human nature independent of culture." . . . Given that psychology is so immersed in culture, it must be organized around those meaning-making and meaning-using processes that connect man to culture. This does *not* commit us to more subjectivity in psychology; it is just the reverse. By virtue of participation in culture, meaning is rendered *public* and *shared* [italics in original]. Our culturally adapted way of life depends upon shared meanings and shared concepts and depends as well upon shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation.

(pp. 12–13)

Drawing upon this view of culture, I attempted to conceptualize teaching in a way that could infuse Lave & Wenger's ideas on learning. This view makes room for both transmission and transformation (Heath, 2004) and bridges the dichotomous gap between teaching curricula and learning curricula to accommodate the need for teachers to adhere to curricular demands while at the same time providing opportunities for flexible, situated, and transformative moments of learning. This reflection process helped me expand my view of teaching as a relationship created through

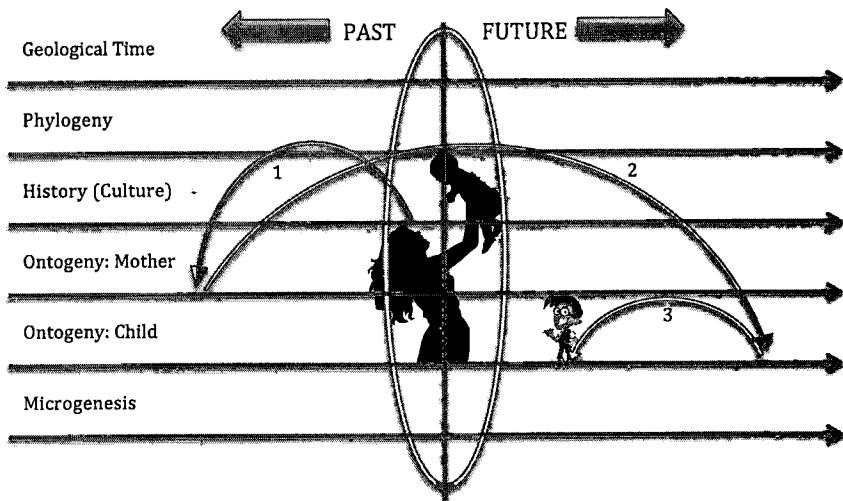
active partnership with a group of participants in a community of practice—in a sense it views each classroom as its own culture.

This view of classroom culture acknowledges that:

1. The appropriation and establishment of roles, routines, rituals, and rules for the individual and group shift over time, as members join or leave the group.
2. Participants place expectations upon themselves from both outside sources and internalized beliefs, and that these beliefs influence the potential one believes he or she possesses within and across various settings.
3. The ongoing (re)interpretation, (re)negotiation and action upon/reaction to these expectations informs behavior(s).
4. Future projections in terms of relationships and aspirations lend significance to past and current events and their interpretations; and
5. This complex intersection of past, present, and future plays a significant part in informing the ways in which both teachers and students simultaneously facilitate and limit potential pathways for themselves and others.

### Prolepsis

I draw upon Michael Cole's (1996) cultural approach to viewing ontogeny and the idea of prolepsis to get at this idea of past, present, and future pathways.



Cole (1996) explains:

[That on this illustration,] the horizontal lines represent time scales corresponding to the history of the physical universe, the history of life on earth, (cultural-historical time), the life of the individual (ontogeny), and the history of moment-to-moment lived experience (microgenesis). The vertical ellipse represents the event of a child's birth. The distribution of cognition in time is traced sequentially into (1) the mother's memory of her past, (2) the mother's imagination of the future of the child, and (3) the mother's subsequent behavior.

(p. 185)

Cole suggests in this sequence that the ideal aspect of culture is transformed into its material form as the mother and other adults structure the child's experience to be consistent with what they imagine to be the child's future identity.

This is easier to understand through an exercise I do with students in their first year on campus. At the beginning of each year, I ask them to close their eyes and ponder the following questions about themselves:

1. Who am I? How did I come to be in this particular place, in this particular time?
2. Was the decision entirely mine?
3. What factors, what individuals, what groups helped shape who I am and how I came to be in this particular place and time?
4. Is how I see myself the same as how others see me? Is this who I want to be?

To illustrate the point that our projected pathways may not be our own, I discuss my own experiences as an emerging adult (Arnett, 2000).

Throughout my childhood, my parents' future projection for me was to become a businessman and marry a woman. This was experienced through conversations, questions, and suggestions my relatives would make as to where I should attend college and about whom I should find sexually desirable. I discovered somewhere along my ontogeny/lifespan that I possessed a great interest in music and teaching and I also came to understand my sexuality differently. Because these projections of my identity conflicted with my parents', it was inevitable that a disruption of these projections would occur; and as such, I forged a new identity and a new narrative for myself and my family.

Cole (1996) argues that prolepsis is an important process of socialization/enculturation, and is based upon the mediation of cultural values and norms that are grounded in both the transmitter's past experiences and the expectations for the receiver's future roles. The assumption that the world will remain similar for future generations greatly informs the

developmental experiences to which adults expose youth (Wyn, 2005). By being aware of prolepsis, music teachers can better understand the role we play in projecting and mapping our own past, present, and future onto our students.

The combination of the teacher's past personal experience(s) coupled with their future expectations set forth by adult role model(s) serves as possible catalysts for the constriction of the activities, knowledge, language, beliefs, and behavior(s) used in the classroom setting (Cole 1996; Erikson, 1968). For example, as Slattery (2012) points out:

One of the most irritating comments that I often hear spoken at graduations . . . and other ceremonies of passage is "You are the future of the community" or "the future of the country." It should not be surprising that many young people refuse to engage in the social, cultural, religious, and political life of the community or to work for justice. The language of adults tells them to delay their participation until they are adults in the future. But we need the insights and energy of our young people now. It should also come as no surprise, then, that most students are bored in classrooms, and many drop out of school when subject matter is not meaningfully connected to current events, life experiences, and personal autobiographies.

(p. 86)

Teachers diminish meaningful learning when they tell students to study aspects of music not because they are interesting or applicable at the present moment, but because they may need it for classes or work in the future. It is counterproductive to separate the future from the present. I posit we might be better off engaging our students in a learning process that (1) draws upon the cultural, musical, and linguistic resources of the participants in our classrooms, (2) is flexible and contingent, and (3) situated in the moment and context. In this way, every classroom construction can become an opportunity for all participants, both youth and adult, to create new learning and understanding of not only the academic content, but also one's self and group narrative and identity.

### **Narrative and Identity Shifts**

To understand how Cole's idea of prolepsis can be applied to classroom contexts, let us return to the narrative of the eighth grade general music class and look at how the classroom narrative changed when a new teacher/adult model entered the group dynamic. Before I arrived at the middle school, the eighth grade boys' choir at the school had developed a reputation for being "bad." The students in the choir appropriated and internalized (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995) this label, drawing power from it

as a result. For the choir to re-center and relocate power in the teacher, the adults in the community divided the group. This action sent clear messages to all the students of the eighth grade. First it acknowledged that students, especially adolescents, have power (Giroux, 2003), and second it indicated to students that when they resist, adults will do as much as possible to regain and maintain the power. Because such a large group of eighth graders were in the choir, the entire grade appeared to have appropriated and internalized this label, such that when I replaced the former eighth grade general music teacher, the class told me within the first few minutes that they were “bad” and that I was “not going to be able to manage” them. After our introductions, one of the students asked me to tell them more about the various contexts in which I participated outside of our class. At that time I was a PhD. student in music education and a teacher in the city school district. I explained that I performed in a community gamelan, conducted different generational community choirs, and taught music technology and production at a local community music school. The context that generated the most interest among the students was my city school teaching. When they learned I was a teacher for a different population of students their age, their perception of themselves dramatically changed. Because of my identity and participation in a different context that they saw as “really bad,” their own identity and narrative shifted.

We can see in this example how learning implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by the systems of relations within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; O'Connor, 2003); and that the introduction of one context into another can change perspective. As O'Connor (2003) suggests:

Participants bring with them a history of participation in different contexts, and they will participate in still other contexts in the future. Actions performed and words spoken by a participant in the past, and identities adopted by or ascribed to them, can be made relevant in the present interaction, and the present interaction can in turn be made relevant in the future. It is important to note, furthermore, that these various contexts are not necessarily easily embedded within one another, and this introduces potentially destabilizing elements into social practice. This makes close attention to the dynamics of contextualization and identification important.

(p. 71)

The revelation that I taught in different school environments was a catalyst that enabled us to explore our identities and narratives in relation to each other. It was through this moment that I became hyper-aware of the importance each persons' identity—enabled through their historical, cultural, linguistic, and musical resources—plays in all the learning processes of each music classroom. All too often our identities as musicians, improvisers, composers, performers, listeners, learners, and teachers are

pushed to the side due to an emphasis on objectively knowable material and methods of efficient content delivery in our music classrooms. Instead, we may want to share and promote our identities and draw upon the cultural, linguistic, and musical resources and tools we all bring to the table. Perhaps then our classrooms can become sites of transformation as we share and co-construct knowledge and engage in participatory practice tied to our current contexts.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I suggest through this paper that we draw from approaches and tools in cultural psychology (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Cole, 1996; Keith, 2011; Kirshner & Whitson, 1998) and identity research (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968; Mishler, 2004; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Rymes, 2001; Vygotsky 1987) to help examine how we learn and teach music in order to shape a new future for music education. By providing space for identity formation and narrative reconstruction in our music classrooms and music teacher education programs, stakeholders have agency and opportunity to create new narratives of ourselves and our musicking practices as individuals, as groups, and as a profession. When we acknowledge that power, knowledge, identity, and narratives are not objects bestowed on others, but are shared, shaped, and distributed through activity with each other and with our world, we are given agency to disrupt the projections that may not fit how we want to see ourselves, and instead we open ourselves and our profession up to projecting new futures and sharing new narratives. In this way, music education can become creative, collaborative, and responsive to our identities, to our communities, and to our current contexts.

## NOTE

1. During this time, I was also employed in the Rochester (NY) City School District and found teaching in both settings to be significantly different in terms of demographics as well as approaches to curriculum and teaching. To help understand the changes in my teaching and in my own identity, I journaled regularly and kept video and audio of my classrooms.

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