

# From the Guest Editor

## Creating a Third Record for Music Education

by Brent C. Talbot



Photo of Brent C. Talbot by Shawna Sherrell

I told my friend Melisa, “There is no way I can do that. I don’t play by ear. Plus, I have no idea how to play piano *that way!*” It was the summer of 2000, and I was enrolled in some general education courses at Indiana University. Melisa was the lead singer of a ten-piece Latin rock band that had gained tremendous popularity in Bloomington and the surrounding region. The band had agreed to perform at a dozen or so summer festivals and bars, and their pianist had to return to Spain for a couple of months. Convinced that this sight-based

classically trained musician would be a good addition to the group, Melisa offered to teach me the basic musical concepts of salsa and merengue. She brought over a stack of cassette tapes of the band’s sets and introduced me to the pianist of the band, who gave me a fifteen-minute crash course on how to play a *montuno*, a kind of syncopated stylistic vamp used in many types of Latin music. It was my first experience learning by ear, and I was struggling. Melisa opened a folder full of pieces of scrap paper peppered with letters that were separated by lines. During my formal music training as a classical pianist, I had not been introduced to how chord symbols work. Melisa took the time to explain how the information on her scratch pads corresponded to my hands. Interestingly, these “new to me” musical styles and this form of notation suddenly helped synthesize and bring to light what my professors had tried to explain to me over many semesters of music theory.

The first rehearsal with the band was *rough*—to put it mildly. My playing was like putting an awkwardly jagged and misshapen peg into a beautifully smooth and colorfully designed round hole. I was utterly embarrassed—not only because I felt like the confidence that I had in my musicianship was immediately

deflated in this new setting but also because my whiteness and upper-class background was on full display in ways I had not experienced before. The interactions and discourse I had encountered throughout my musical development had led me to believe that the formal ways in which I had been trained were superior to other forms of musicianship and learning. I naïvely assumed that the codes I had learned would travel easily, translate smoothly, and serve me well in any musical setting. It was at this moment that I first came to understand not only the importance of fluency and adaptation in learning and in teaching but also the complexity involved in navigating culturally, linguistically, and musically different landscapes. It was not enough to merely acquire the codes for how to play a *montuno*; I also needed to acquire the linguistic and cultural codes from which the music was created and the musical codes that translate to form, style, metric pulse, and accented rhythmic feel. Those hot summer days opened a world previously unknown to me. Each rehearsal and performance revealed something new, and after many weeks of awkward struggle, I learned how to adapt my playing to match the styles of the tunes we played and—perhaps equally important—the identities, energy, and communicative styles of the musicians in the band.

One of the unforeseen issues of working with a ten-piece band was

---

Brent C. Talbot ([btalbot@uic.edu](mailto:btalbot@uic.edu)) is a professor and the head of the Department of Music at the University of Illinois Chicago (<https://theatreandmusic.uic.edu>). The innovative music programming he helps lead at Chicago’s largest and most diverse university develops practical knowledge, cultural sensitivity, intellectual resourcefulness, and imaginative daring among emerging musical artists and scholars. Talbot has been a leading voice for change in the field of music education. A prolific author and frequent presenter, he has produced work that examines power, discourse, and issues of justice in varied settings for music learning around the globe. Learn more about his creative endeavors by visiting his website ([www.brentctalbot.com](http://www.brentctalbot.com)).

---

Copyright © 2023 National Association  
for Music Education  
DOI: 10.1177/00274321231152743  
<http://journals.sagepub.com/home/mej>

that at the end of most nights, I walked away with less than ten dollars and a free drink (if I was lucky). Not only did we have to split compensation among our own group, but we often shared a portion with the band that opened for us. As a club kid obsessed with DJing at the time, I proposed to the band that we could all earn a few more bucks if I performed as the opening act. Motivated by this solution, I taught myself how to *really* mix records rather than just quickly transitioning from one track to the other. It took much longer than expected—just ask my housemates—but then, with lots of practice, I figured out how to create *the third record*.

Creating the third record is a conceptual approach to mixing, where a DJ selects two different tracks and identifies similarities among a variety of musical elements that can be aligned to create a new work in the moment. DJs use elements from both records to draw on a whole palette of sounds, bringing out the bass line or underlying beat of one record over the other or using the composite of both to develop a new rhythmic feel that can extend for many minutes. This process starts by aligning the tempo of one record to the one already in play. To do this, the DJ must locate the downbeat of the new record and match it to a downbeat of the record already being played to the room. This may seem like a relatively easy and perhaps obvious process—and it certainly is on digital devices that automatically match beats per minute—but with mixing records on analog turntables, a different set of challenges is presented.

Like a highly skilled teacher who knows the identities and backgrounds of their students, a highly skilled turntablist must know their records. DJs have to listen deeply to each LP. They must locate when the vocals come in and where and when the buildup occurs and assess the arc of energy. They need to identify which records match with little to no effort, while others, no matter how hard one tries, just will not work well together. DJs also need to know how to read the room. They challenge

listeners to interpret things from different angles by bringing out parts that may not have typically been featured, extend play when something important might need repeating, or cut to something new when what is being played has lost its effectiveness. And of course, they have to do all this seamlessly without losing momentum or skipping a beat.

These two stories of learning music outside the context of my formal musical training continue to guide my approach to teaching. They represent for me lessons about *intersectionality* and *dialogic practice*, two central themes of this journal issue. What became apparent from my time in the Latin rock band was that we all hold multiple forms of identity. I learned that parts of my identity that may have held privilege in one space did not hold the same power when placed in a new and unfamiliar context. Similarly, the codes of meaning that I had used in previous spaces were often ineffective in the new one, requiring a great deal of translation and transformation of both my musicianship and cultural competence. In essence, learning an unfamiliar type of music helped me become acutely aware of the ways my race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, language, religion, and nationality operate in the world. My development as a DJ taught me how to listen deeply for these identity markers, how to locate similarities among seemingly disparate sources, how to challenge people to hear things differently, and how to bring different voices together to dialogue and thus create something new.

When I was invited by the *Music Educators Journal* Editorial Committee to curate a Special Focus Issue on diversity, equity, and inclusion, I thought deeply about what types of stories and experiences might resonate with our field and further our work together. I chose *intersectionality* and *dialogic practice: intersectionality* as a lens for seeing how forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other and *dialogic practice* as an interchange and conversation among people that results in greater understanding of

difference and mutually shared goals toward justice. I started out by inviting contributors I knew would be willing to share their positionalities and whose stories of music learning and teaching could broaden our profession's thinking. I charged the authors to consider the notion of intersectionality within their respective spaces and brought contributors together to coauthor as a way to display dialogic practice in action.

With this Special Focus Issue, I wanted to point to dialogic practice as one model for dismantling forms of oppression in our field. Dialogic practice requires vulnerability. It requires us to interrogate our positionality within our spaces and consider how that positionality holds differences and similarities to the people with whom we interact and the spaces in which we interact. It displays our privilege and helps reveal oppression. Dialogic practice in one-on-one interactions or small-group activities, for me, has always been an opportunity to listen, to plant seeds for growth, to be challenged, to learn. In essence, if we want to enact change in our field, we have to be willing to listen and talk to one another. Therefore, you will note that each article in this issue is coauthored as a way to inextricably interweave theory and practice.

As Brazilian philosopher and critical pedagogue Paulo Freire reminds us, "Dialogue is the encounter between [people], mediated by the world, in order to name the [conditions of the] world . . . [thus] dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person 'depositing' ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the discussants."<sup>1</sup> Instead, dialogue happens when we engage in love, humility, faith, trust, hope, and critical thinking with the drive to transform ourselves as well as our reality—an act of creation.

Each contributor to this journal issue teaches at varied institutional settings, approaches practices in culturally responsive and respectful ways, and through their work, centers minoritized voices. In short, they were selected

because they live teaching philosophies of justice and equity and use music to enact positive change. As you engage with their stories, I ask you to take pause at the possibilities for transformation in you, in your classroom, in your school, in your community, and in our field. Consider your identities, your experiences, in relation to and with others. As activist and writer Audre Lorde reminds us, “It is not our differences that

divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.”<sup>2</sup> Let us celebrate our differences by drawing on our skills as DJs of our own classrooms to align the disparate tempi, to bring out voices that often get overlooked, to extend play when something might be worth repeating, and to find similarities and differences to mix together. Let us also enter into dialogic practice together so that out of

our different records, we bring out our best to generate something powerfully new: a third record for music education.

## NOTES

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018): 88–89.
2. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007).