Book Review

Revisiting Music Education Research

Richard Colwell and Carol Richardson, eds.
The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning
New York: Oxford University Press
1222 pp. $175.00

The practice of publishing handbooks of research in education began nearly forty years ago, when the American Educational Research Association published its first Handbook of Research on Teaching (1963) under the editorship of Nathaniel Gage. Scholars and writers in other disciplines compiled their own volumes, and in 1992 the music education research community issued its first handbook under the editorship of Richard Colwell. Now, ten years later, the profession once again adds to its reference collection with the publication of the New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning, edited by Richard Colwell and Carol Richardson.

One might infer from the title of The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning that it differs substantively from its 1992 counterpart. The editors of the 2002 publication note that it “is not an update . . . rather, it complements and extends” (i) the earlier work. Although various themes of music education scholarship do indeed connect the two reference texts and both provide readers with reviews of research literature, the first handbook and the new handbook were conceived with and are likely to serve different purposes for those who use them.

One of the aims of the first handbook was to provide a “primary reference [for] music teaching and learning” (x), to place in a single volume reviews summarizing the first four decades of music education research, as well as chapters outlining the various research methods in which scholars engage. The new handbook also includes the literature reviews readers have come to expect from research reference texts. However, the general editors and section editors made a conscious effort to situate music education scholarship within cultural, political, educational, and research contexts—a larger conceptual mission than the first handbook. To accomplish this, they recruited chapter authors not only from music education but also from the disciplines of ethnomusicology, sociology, medicine, curriculum, administration, art education, general education, science education, public policy, and psychology, as well as executives of various arts organizations. The varying perspectives this group of authors brings to the new handbook constitute one of its strengths.

A work of this magnitude requires some organizational scheme. The sixty-one chapters of the new handbook are arranged in ten sections: Policy and Philosophy; Educational Context and the Curriculum; Musical Development and Learning; Musical Cognition and Development; Social and Cultural Contexts; Music Teacher Education; Music Education Connections; Neuroscience, Medicine, and Music; Outcomes in General Education; and Research Design, Criticism, and Assessment in Music Education. Fortunately for readers, the section and chapter titles mark conceptual chunks and provide starting points for investigating topics of choice. But those who limit their reading to particular chapters or only certain sections will miss the richness of thinking to be found in a more labyrinthine journey through the pages.

For example, literature related to partnerships between public and private agencies can be found not only in section 7 (Music Education Connections), but also in chapters related to policy (section 1), curriculum (section 2), teacher preparation (Section 6), and outcomes (section 9). Similarly one must read in more than the curriculum section to capture all that various authors have to offer on this topic. Neurobiology literature appears prominently in the cognition and development section (3), with a reprise from a different perspective in the medicine and music section (8). Although following the threads that
weave from chapter to chapter and section to section may seem as untidy as the fuzzy logic and chaos theories to which some authors refer, the reward will be well worth the effort. The diverse presentations of similar ideas and conflicting points of view about similar topics will certainly challenge thinking and foster discussion.

Although commentary about each chapter and section is beyond the scope of this review, several broad themes and a few particular strengths of the book deserve mention. Several authors and editors summarize and critique the theoretical frameworks upon which scholarly inquiry in music education either has been or could be constructed. The repeated emphasis on connecting theory and scholarship may be a consequence of what the authors and editors perceive as a lack of rigor, weak assumptions, inappropriate conclusions, and unsupported implications in specific studies and in the profession's research literature in general.

Interestingly, the debate about theory within the pages of the new handbook is a multifaceted one, with some authors insisting that research be theory-driven while others suggest that research can generate theory. The two positions are neither poles of a continuum nor mutually exclusive ideas, but rather representations of the diverse thinking that characterizes the new handbook contents. Because methodological chapters have been excluded from the volume, readers will have to look elsewhere for advice, if it is needed, about the "how to" of constructing inquiry from theoretical underpinnings. Citing theory is not the same as investigating from a theoretical base or building a theoretical case from a rigorously conducted inquiry. It remains to be seen whether and how the call for stronger theory in the new handbook will emerge in the literature cited in future publications.

A sense of history also pervades the book. It is certainly product of its time—a portrait of music education, teacher preparation, policy, and research in the recent past. This is not surprising, for according to the editors, the chapters and topics were "identified by a survey of music education researchers as important issues in music teaching and learning in the 21st century" (vii). In this sense, future readers may glean from the new handbook the history of ideas about music teaching and learning as well as a summary of education practices, policies, and politics at the turn of the century.

For current readers, the theme of history emerges in the new handbook in other ways, however. Apart from a compelling analysis of historical research in music education in one chapter, readers can find brief historical accounts of music teacher education, arts funding agencies, curriculum initiatives, the school reform movement, assessment practices, qualitative research, lines of inquiry in psychology, and more. Whether compiled by the authors to place literature reviews in context, to illuminate policy decisions, or to demonstrate shifts in thinking, these historical summaries were a bit of serendipity for this reader.

Social and cultural contexts appear as other grand themes not only in the nine-chapter section that bears the title but also in other chapters and sections throughout. Section editor Marie McCarthy calls readers' attention to "the importance of context in accessing and understanding the meanings and values embedded in the teaching-learning process" (564), and the authors writing in the philosophy, curriculum, teacher education, and policy sections as well as those in the section that McCarthy shepherded give prominent place to social and cultural contexts. Their discussions include matters of social justice; the role of education in a social democracy; issues of power and policy; the influence of social and cultural dynamics and even economics on the construction of knowledge; and more. Writers trace lines of thinking to Dewey and Vygotsky as well as Bourdieu, Freire, Giroux, and Greene, linking the scholarship of music education to ongoing conversations in journals of the American Educational Research Association as well as dialogue in other sources not frequently visited by music education scholars until recent years.

Although, as McCarthy notes, social and cultural themes have not been absent from the profession's literature in the past century, they have certainly been largely "underdeveloped" until the last decade. The authors and editors of the new handbook place them at the fore.

The commitment to interdisciplinary and crossdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration in the shaping of some sections also locates the music education research literature in relation to broader frames of inquiry. Whether one begins reading about brain research, curriculum, cognitive development, or outcomes, the discourse leads to thinking derived from a web of perspectives that will, one hopes, prompt critical reflection. Although abundant throughout the book, these types of connections are particularly rich in the teacher education section, where authors place the tensions of reform and reflection, numbers and narratives, and individuals and institution squarely before readers. The complexity that readers will encounter here and elsewhere calls into question how, why, and for what we are preparing the next generations of music teachers, music teacher educators, and researchers.

Just as each reader will approach the contents of the new handbook through the lenses of his or her lines of inquiry and preconceived notions of what should be stressed and what can be overlooked, the writers too approach their tasks differently and choose to present their work in different ways. The chapters are a fascinating study in modes of interpretation and forms of presentation. The writing styles vary from highly technical to artistic; most writing is thoughtful and focused; some passages are powerful; and a few are simply beautiful. The divergence of styles, modes, and forms suggests a maturity in the music education research community—a maturity that implies both acceptance of diversity and recognition that interpretation is to some extent a function of both writer and reader.

Readers will find much more to commend in the more than 1,200 pages of
the new handbook. They will also encounter disappointments. Although one can hardly wish for a lengthier volume, the editors acknowledge gaps that are certain to draw criticism. The chapters are uneven in places. The emphasis on theoretical framework that drives the writing of some chapters is underdeveloped or absent in others. Some authors project a research agenda based on chapter content; others do not. Some crossdisciplinary coauthorships appear to work well while others seem a less-than-comfortable fit. A majority of chapters comprise well-organized and detailed critiques of studies as well as insightful commentary about both accomplishments and shortcomings in the literature, but a few seem to present a specific point of view or perspective related to the biases or agendas of the author or authors. Although these approaches to the assigned chapter topics may have been intentional, it is not always obviously so.

Astute readers will find a few technical problems. Several author biographies are missing from the preface pages. One will want to keep a pencil in hand to write in references that were omitted from an otherwise thorough index.

Finally, a curiosity, at least to me, is the choice of the word “new” in the title The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning. Why “new”? One might guess that the editors’ stated intention to depart from the topics of the 1992 volume and to place the body of music education research in larger contextual frames in the 2002 work provides at least some justification. Still, handbooks in other disciplines are published in editions that bear the same title, even when departures from previous volumes are substantial. No clear explanation can be found, and one wonders what the title of a possible 2012 volume might be.

Given these minor concerns, and others that different reviewers are certain to find, there is still much to celebrate and commend in The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning. In the introduction to the Music Teacher Education section (part 6), James Raths comments that, even given the richness of the chapters, “what we know is dwarfed by what we don’t know” (757). Practicing researchers with well-developed lines of inquiry and novices seeking research topics will find plenty of grist for intellectual mills here. One can also hope that sympathetic others, including scholars and policy-makers, who may be drawn to different pages, will also consider the arguments put forth in the chapter entitled “The ‘Use and Abuse’ of Arts Advocacy and Its Consequences for Music Education” by Constance Bumgarner Gee.

At the very least, the book will no doubt become another well-worn volume in personal and institutional libraries. Its greatest contribution may be in the contradictions found between its covers (even in the preface). Positivist approaches to the construction and critique of research appear in close proximity to chapters unfolding very different views of scholarship. Conflicts between institutional practices and innovative initiatives in music teaching and learning abound. Tensions between local and global perspectives of education and music and between traditional and contemporary research and practice paradigms emerge as one turns the pages. These and other paradoxes are born of the multiple voices and perspectives of the authors and editors who crafted the volume and thus defined spaces for dialogue and debate. We owe them a resounding ovation. What occurs in the research community between now and the publication of a future handbook will be, in some part, the measure of their success.

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A Thing of Beauty Is a Joy Forever?

David Kenneth Holt
The Search for Aesthetic Meaning in the Visual Arts: The Need for the Aesthetic Tradition in Contemporary Art Theory and Education
Bergin & Garvey Publishers
148 pp. $62.50

In this new work, David Holt reviews the aesthetic philosophies of the Western world as the proper context to assess postmodernism. Holt’s main achievement is to provide the reader with a useful summary of those philosophies as a way of demonstrating that postmodernism fails to follow the logic of art history.

In Holt’s view, “Post-modern art theory is an anomaly in the history of art theory” (3). Holt’s principal objection is that postmodern theory has made “an arbitrary separation . . . between content and form” (3), so that “art education in particular runs the risk of being taught superficially,” with teachers “failing to take into consideration the aesthetic tradition of the visual arts” (4). Postmodernism, Holt asserts, is “an art theory overly influenced by the subjectivity of analytical philosophy and linguistic symbolism,” which renders it “unsuitable for understanding the revelatory, mysterious, and spiritual nature of art and the creative experience” (8). Midway in his historical survey of aesthetic philosophy, Holt laments that “Diderot’s requirement that the visual arts transport us to an aesthetic experience is largely absent in today’s critical theory” (70). He concludes, “It is the antiaesthetic nature of Post-modernism that has threatened to trivialize art education by assuming that aesthetic experience is outdated or nonexistent” (116).

Because postmodernism’s principal target for criticism is modernism, Holt also takes pains to bring the aesthetic tradition of the Western world to the latter’s defense. He provides us with a positive definition: “Modernism was to a large extent a product of the romantic movement . . . [with its] emphasis on originality and the free use of imagination” (89). It was led by the arch-romantic “avant-garde artist, separate and aloof from society” (89). Modernist artwork involved an “evolutionary movement toward abstraction and away from mimesis” (89). The use of art for “moral or instructive use . . . was largely ignored” (89) as experimentation with formal and abstract imagery increased. Much of modernism’s quest was to achieve “significant form . . . first introduced by . . . Clive Bell” (92), the English aesthetician of the early twentieth century.

Holt’s position for modernism and against postmodernism draws on aesthetic history, which he traces to the present from Baumgarten’s separation in the 18th century of aesthetics into a distinct branch of philosophy. This survey shows how mainstream art was concerned, despite some differences, with the kind of aesthetics that are consistent with the values of modernism. Holt also goes further back and selects strands of thought from the Renaissance to recruit Leon Battista Alberti, Giorgio Vasari, Giordano Bruno, and Giovanni Bellori to bolster his contention that once derived pleasure from art because of, among other things, its “indefinable quality” (445). Holt notes that Alberti held that art had “transcendent and universal” qualities (22). Vasari “establish[ed] transcendent and universal criteria for beauty” (29). Bruno emphasized originality, “individual self-expression, . . . creative imagination and the uniqueness of the individual” (38). Holt also notes that Bellori observed that “the visual arts were often distinct from literature” (41), a point stressed to refute postmodern borrowing of deconstruction from literary criticism.

Holt surveys the period from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century to establish a consistent and logical stream...
in the history of art. For example, he shows that David Hume advocated a “consensus regarding artistic judgment” based on having good taste, a standard “most individuals could reach” (53). Johann Winckelmann asserted beauty as “one of the great mysteries of nature” which is “indiscoverable” (56). Especially important to Holt’s view of the history of aesthetic philosophy is Theophile Gautier’s invention of the phrase, “art for art’s sake” (81), which was developed by Charles Baudelaire to support artists in their search for beauty “without having their work serve moral functions” (81).

Accordingly, Holt takes contemporary critics to task for being lured into the postmodern moralism about art so at odds with aesthetic tradition. He quotes Harold Rosenberg, for example, declaring “that art was about ideas and not necessarily an artifact, that craft was an outmoded concept, and that aesthetic experience was either nonexistent or at best of dubious value” (125). Holt asserts that this kind of postmodernism does not fit the logical flow of the history of art and is potentially damaging to art education. In his view, “Post-modern art theory has become oddly nonrepresentative of the artistic process both past and present.” It asks us to dispense, at a stroke, with at least five hundred years of thinking about art, and perhaps even more (this, from theorists who call themselves skeptics!)

Holt is also concerned with harmful effects of postmodernism on art education in view of its lack of connection with artistic tradition. He is critical of “many M.F.A. programs currently at American universities where the fundamental drawing instruction is considered unimportant and the ideas or meaning implied in a student’s work is exclusively emphasized” (41). As a result, “Art education in particular runs the risk of being taught superficially, failing to take into consideration the aesthetic tradition of the visual arts” (4). Holt fears that the relativism of postmodernism will unduly narrow the focus of art instruction. “It has made this art gender, race, and politically specific instead of universal in its appeal” (104).

Holt is especially severe with the political rhetoric of postmodern feminism. He cites Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party as an example of how visual art is misused to communicate ideas that could be presented “more clearly and effectively by writing a manifesto than producing a persuasive sculpture, painting, photograph, or poem” (106). He sharply criticizes feminists for not recognizing that postmodern theory is characterized “by an emphasis on the impersonal and possessing a paternalistic and antifeminist avant-garde” (118). Holt notes that, “By narrowing the scope of what women artists should create, they are also inhibiting the potential for their art” (120).

In short, Holt attempts to prove that postmodernism is outside of the mainstream of the history of art and, consequently, is not a useful paradigm for the design of art education. There is merit to his argument, but also only half-truth. His implication that art as political statement is not part of the mainstream of art seems questionable given all the examples of art through the ages that were emphatically political. In addition to the vast amounts of religious art intended to instruct and persuade, we can think of Goya, Gericault, and Picasso as having very specific political and moral messages. Indeed, Holt is forced to admit the existence of past aestheticians that espoused such purposes. John Ruskin “categorically linked art with religion and morality . . . . [T]he notion of ‘art for art’s sake’ was diametrically opposed to his ideas on art and its purposes” (84).

Nevertheless, Holt is right in part about the peril of postmodernism. Noting the presence of politics in art (or music, poetry, fiction, or drama) is a legitimate critical practice and is part of the grand tradition of which Ruskin was a part. It is not the same thing, however, as reducing all art to politics or mere sociology, which is one end of postmodernism.

In spite of his sharp criticisms of postmodernism, Holt seems to reach out for a compromise position. As he says, A new methodology for thinking about artworks is in order, one that necessarily eliminates the possibility of subjective dominance by allowing for multiple worldviews with regard to the ontological status of art. But it is clear that conceiving of art as being only about the subjective and personal fails to adequately describe and explain the tradition of thought on the subject, as well as the ongoing creative experience of artists and those who enjoy and aesthetically perceive their art. This trivializes the importance of art for mankind. (126)

Perhaps Holt would take comfort in statements by postmodernists such as Paul Duncum. In spite of his exhortation to use popular culture as art models to study unequal power relationships, Duncum is compelled to state, “While developments in our field over the past few decades have emphasized the value of critique, making images remains central to art education and for good reason” (2002, 7). If only such compromise went beyond hope and became fact.

Reference
Duncum, P. 2002. Clarifying visual culture art education. Art Education 55 (3): 6–11.

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