Research to Practice Column


Another Way to Justify Music Education? A Look at The Rise of the Creative Class by Richard Florida
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Advocacy efforts of the past ten years or so have focused heavily on the transfer effects of music education – increased spatial ability, raised IQ, better math and reading scores and so on. Some of these effects seem to be standing up to research replication and others are not. Whether teachers have succeeded in keeping programs alive with these often questionable research results is hard to tell. What is clear is that music teachers continue to look for ways to convince cost-conscious administrators to support music programs. An experienced music teacher recently wrote asking “can [you] point me in the direction of some materials I can use as support to help convince the powers that be in my school board to improve the status of Music Education in our school division?” I pointed her to Richard Florida.

The research in the book The Rise of the Creative Class (Basic Books, 2002) by Richard Florida has been garnering much attention in the past year. A conference in Ottawa this spring, with representatives from cities across Canada, focused on Florida’s research and how Canadian cities can become more “creative.” The data are essentially sociological and economic with the conclusion that the creative ethos is increasingly dominant in our society. More than 30 percent of the workforce now is engaged in creating for a living, hence, the rise of the creative class.

As educators we may see this as more of the “economic justification” for music education – we create artists who make products sold as concerts or recordings and so we contribute to the economy. Although we want to take credit for that, in fact what we do in music class often has very little to do with the popular music industry that is the lion’s share of the arts economy. Fortunately Florida’s argument is not this at all. He looks at the kind of person who creates, the values such a person holds, how one becomes such a person, and the environment in which creative activity flourishes. To this we can and do contribute.

The “creative class” in general is described by some writers as “knowledge workers” (coined by Peter Drucker) – people who work in knowledge-intensive industries such as high tech sectors, financial services, legal and health-care professions, education, and business management. Florida includes these but identifies the “super creative core” which produces “new forms or designs that are readily transferable and widely useful—such as …. composing music that can be performed again and again.” This creative core
includes scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers.

Florida maintains that changes in industry, commerce, and the general economy have led to dramatic changes in class structure and specifically in the percentage of the workforce in agriculture, the service class, the working class, and the creative class. According to his research the creative class now includes about 38.3 million in the U.S, about 30% of the entire U.S workforce. It has grown from the 10% of the work force it was from 1900 to 1950, to about 20% of the workforce in the 70’s and 80’s, to 25% in 1991, and to 30% in 1999.

What this means is that the values and attitudes of this group are becoming highly influential, crossing over to other classes. It also means that our society as a whole relies heavily on this class and must take its values into account. One application is the geography of creativity, a means to rate cities on a creativity index, thereby indicating preferred locations for enterprises that draw on creative people (interestingly, Florida’s recent rating of major Canadian cities found most rating high). The reality is that it is advantageous for business to go where the creative people are, and they are in interesting places, where there are places to go, things to do, people to mingle with – where there is street-level culture – and especially where there is diversity and tolerance.

Florida argues that pervasive in our culture now is a “creativity ethos” that assumes that creativity is essential to the way we live and work today, that human creativity is multifaceted and multidimensional…. creativity involves distinct kinds of thinking and habits that must be cultivated both in the individual and in the surrounding society, and that the creative process is social, not just individual, and thus forms of organization are necessary.

According to Florida creativity:

- Involves the ability to synthesize
- Requires self-assurance and the ability to take risks
- Creative work in fact is often downright subversive since it disrupts existing patterns of thought and life.
- is not the province of a few select geniuses
- is multidimensional and experiential. He quotes psychologist Dean Keith Simonton, “creativity is favored by an intellect that has been enriched with diverse experiences and perspectives.”
- can take a long time
- is largely driven by intrinsic rewards .. he quotes Teresa Amabile ..”extrinsic motivation is detrimental.”
- flourishes best in a unique kind of social environment: one that is stable enough to allow continuity of effort, yet diverse and broad-minded enough to nourish creativity in all its subversive forms.

The values of the Creative class are:
Individuality – they do not want to conform to organizational or institutional directives – creativity comes from individuals working in small groups
- Meritocracy – favors hard work, challenge, and stimulation. A propensity for goal-setting and achievement
- Diversity and openness - diversity of peoples, “many highly creative people, regardless of ethnic background or sexual orientation, grew up feeling like outsiders”
- spiritually oriented, though rejecting mainstream religious beliefs
- a bohemian- bourgeois synthesis – the co-opting of bohemian hedonism by the work-ethic driven capitalist bourgeois leading to pairings like Jimi Hendrix and Microsoft, Seattle and grunge.

Traditionally the arts have provided the cultural entertainment for the establishment – after a week of work in the corporate offices the executives go out for dinner and an opera, the symphony, a ballet, or to a gala at the art gallery. Is that the culture for which we are essentially training our students? In one sense the arts still play a role in providing the cultural “atmosphere” for other creatives, but this atmosphere is more pervasive, and much more diverse in style or type and busking on the street may be as valuable as the jazz band in the club or Yo Yo Ma’s fusion of the silk road. But there is more than that. An article in the Globe and Mail on August 18, 2004 observed that “many professionals are turning into after-hours rock stars by forming bands with colleagues. It is not only fun but good for their careers, too.”

Implications for music education

The first implication is related to the advocacy agenda – what programs are most likely to be supported by the Creative Class? My answer is partly conjecture, but probably programs that make creativity central to the curriculum and that are based on the values held by the creatives. In most programs we now mainly pay lip-service to creativity, or argue that filling silence with sound is “creating” music” even though it is entirely a matter of perfect replication of existing musical prescriptions. The second implication is that music education may develop and promote the general values of the creative class and contribute to the development of the requisite abilities and habits to be creative. What a student experiences and learns in music may develop creative abilities in other areas.

If we were to make creativity central, we would need to recognize that all children have creative potential, not just a few geniuses. We would encourage and provide diverse experiences and perspectives, and the ability to synthesize these into creative possibilities. We would make class richly experiential and multidimensional. We would allow time – not expect time-limited, behaviouristic outcomes. We would allow and even encourage divergent and subversive patterns of thought. We would conceptualize meaningful and relevant projects so that rewards of achievement would be intrinsic. And most importantly, we would create a social learning environment that is stable yet flexible and diverse, that is so safe and caring that it develops self-assurance and the ability to take risks.
Pedagogically we would provide more opportunity for individuality and small group work, and avoid an emphasis on conformity to the stricture of large organizations (creatives have abandoned the factory model of employment for the freely formed project task force – the orchestra for the chamber ensemble). We would give recognition to meritorious work flowing from individual goals and achievement. We would value and promote diversity and openness – diversity of peoples, ethnic background, sexual orientation, musical means, style, genre, and expression. We would value the soulfulness and the inner expressiveness of musical experience. We would encourage bohemian sensual delight in sounds and sonics of all types.

We need to recreate music education so that we are not only part of the general creative delivery system but take our place in the “super creative core” that produces “transferable, widely usable new forms” of music and contributes richly to the development of transferable creative ability in all our students.