

Introduction

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Socrates told us that “an unexamined life is not worth living.” In more contemporary times, Maxine Greene has reminded us that our lives are “narratives in the making,” requiring constant attention to and examination of the new ideas that shape the direction of our lives. We planned *Education, Art, and Freedom* as a symposium in the spirit of Socrates, to ask questions, to explore ideas, and to inform the educational practice of Community MusicWorks and our colleagues concerned about freedom.

Community MusicWorks has, at its core, the question of how to create an educational experience in music for young people growing up in urban communities that leads them to a greater experience of freedom. What kind of freedom? The ability, as Paulo Freire describes, to understand oneself to be free to imagine what kind of life you want to lead, and to feel the agency to be able to live up to the possibilities you imagine.

In his own work with rural poor communities in Brazil, Freire realized that literacy was the most important vehicle for people to become free. Without being able to, even at the most basic level, participate in the running of government through reading and writing, people had no agency to change their society and therefore their life condition.

In many ways, the role Maxine Greene gives to the experience of art is parallel to the role Freire gives to literacy. Maxine talks about moments in experiencing art that take you outside the normal “rules” of society and of your experience in it. Suddenly, as she calls it, you have an “opening,” or a vista of a completely different way of living life, of life having a set of parameters very different than the one you experience. Maxine argues that these openings are an essential ingredient in a young person’s path toward understanding themselves as free.

In our exploration of these ideas, Community MusicWorks has been experimenting with how to develop a “curriculum” of discussions, performances, and weekly instrument lessons that leads young people to the “openings” and the experience that Ted and Nancy Sizer call the “*ah-ha!* moments” – the experience of greater freedom in their lives.

And in so doing, we’re not simply teaching kids to play music, but we’re working with them in music so that they’ll have experiences that are bigger than their existing world, and they’ll reflect on these experiences as they imagine their futures.

We organized the May 2004 Symposium to stimulate a discussion about Freire, and the ever-current idea of changing society through education. I am so grateful to Ted Sizer, my mentor and advisor as I developed the ideas for starting Community MusicWorks, and to Deborah Meier for sharing their experiences and ideas. Both Ted and Debby are people who have lived and worked in the ideas of freedom as educators and writers for many decades, and we are lucky to have their musings on the subject.

It is in Community MusicWorks’ spirit of experimentation and reflection that we present this transcript, with the hope that it inspires further ideas in your educational practice!

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