
New Genres in the Band Classroom: Of “Cold Frosty Morning” and the 7th Grader

Kari K. Veblen

University of Western Ontario, Canada

Janice L. Waldron

University of Windsor, Canada

Abstract: This study investigates the richly textured interactions within a Texas band classroom, as related by their teacher. Three themes intersect: 1) creative and vernacular music making and musical experience, 2) teaching contemporary forms of music making (ethnic music ensembles, learning music by ear as well as by sight), and 3) new uses of technology and the Internet in instruction.¹

Keywords: music, band, middle school, technology, ear training, vernacular music, ethnic ensembles

Our collaborative study investigates the world of a Texas middle school band director through what Clandinin (2005) calls “a narrative view of teacher knowledge as experiential, embodied, emotional, moral, practical and personal.” Charles Whitmer has worked with middle schoolers in Texas schools for decades.² He particularly enjoys middle schoolers: “I like being the one to start them because I know how to break things down to the simplest level, that’s one of the things that I think I’m best at . . . I’m a teacher first, band director second, if that makes any sense.” This distinction is worth noting since he teaches within the Texas band context. Texas school band culture is unique and has produced excellent players and star high school bands.³ A continual and formal round of contests pits bands and their directors against each other, also tending to promote a competitive approach to pedagogy.

While Whitmer's situation has commonalities with many other band directors – he is a formally trained saxophonist with two degrees in Music Education – there are some unique patterns to his teaching reflecting his philosophical beliefs in the importance of cultural heritage and local community values. He is also a self-taught and highly respected autoharpist and is in high demand as performer and autoharp instructor, playing annually in Japan and other international destinations. Whitmer's autoharp pursuits inform his band room teaching as he draws upon a deep reservoir of traditional tunes from North America – certainly referencing Old Time Texas variations, as well as fiddle tunes from Scotland, Ireland, and England. Here, the repertoire is the pedagogy, the curriculum is the repertoire. Through interviews and our collective analysis of videotaped classes, we explore a narrative of teacher knowledge and praxis.

Charles Whitmer's teaching incorporates a variety of music including local and vernacular genres. He employs the latest teaching mediums for individualized learning. As well, the focus is on playing *and* community building as key for preparation for lifelong music learning and participation. Although this is one narrative of one teacher in his classroom, there is much to reflect upon in this account of an adaptable, creative teacher who finds himself surrounded by a teaching paradigm that differs markedly from his philosophical inclinations.⁴

Methodology

Narrative inquiry was employed as this study's methodology drawing upon interviews, observations, selected writings, teaching materials, and collaborative documentation. Narrative inquiry has emerged as a developing methodology in education research to expand understandings of how teaching is enacted, embodied, practiced and realized. Much literature has been devoted to creating research bases that explore teacher expertise (Atkinson, 2010, Baguley & Fullerton, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Cochran-Smith, & Lytle, 1999; Shulman, 2004; Wells, 2011). As well, theoretical writing and numerous case studies employing this mode of research have added to the richness of doing, and thinking, in the context of music education (Barrett & Stauffer

2009, 2012; Countryman, 2008; Bresler, 2006; Hoffman 2008; McCarthy, 2007; deVries, 2013)

As Hendry (2010) writes, narrative is often used synonymously with story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Witherell & Noddings, 1991) and thus is understood as interpretative or qualitative, (73). However, in this case we might best understand the story as a counter story, part of a multiple narrative. To do this, it's important to understand the context and culture of the Texas band world. According to Evans:

Schools in the state of Texas have a reputation for having the strongest performing bands in the United States. The [band] culture . . . creates a standard of excellence in performance that is not only common, but expected . . . in large part due to the competitive nature of band programs in Texas. It is not uncommon for large schools in Texas to employ three to four band directors, percussion and color-guard specialists, and private-lesson teachers for each instrument. Many band budgets total over \$100,000 per year (Evans, 2012: 29).

At the core of Texas competitive band school culture is the University Interscholastic League, or U.I.L., which oversees and dominates every single school competition in Texas, including sports, drama, debate, as well as music. For the great majority of Texas band directors, the school year revolves around U.I.L. competitions of all kinds. "Preparation for band contests is the prime activity of bandmasters and [other music] associations in Texas" (Shoop, 2000, 29).

Therefore, it is not surprising that Texas Band Directors' reputations rise and fall based on their students performance at competitions and it is not uncommon for Band Directors to be "re-assigned" the following year if their U.I.L. ratings are less than desired. Charles Pennington, Head Band Director at Allen High School, Allen, Texas – which has the largest band program in Texas (and the U.S.) with 650 + students, and eight full time band directors - explains that:

Texas is known for having outstanding competitive marching and concert bands. And I think competition brought us there. It's that competition, and of course, excellent teaching and leadership skills, that has created so many well-respected band programs in Texas (Sussman, 2011: 30).

Here are two current samples of high school Texas marching bands in competitive performance. [Click the URLs to view the videos in your web browser]



Flower Mound High School Band, 2014 Texas U. I. L. State Band 6A Marching Band Finals
(https://youtu.be/fFOXnQY_gR0, retrieved July 31, 2015)



Allen High School Band, 2014 Texas U. I. L. Area Marching Band 6A Finals
(<https://youtu.be/F32RjcaENN4>, retrieved July 31, 2015)

While other parts of the world may not maintain or even understand this genre and phenomenon, in the United States the marching band which accompanies athletic events and competitions frequently drives the rest of the school instrumental programs. Much of the band world dialogue in and outside of Texas centers around logistics, preparation,

music, pedagogy and competition. However, there has been much critique within the music education field as to this approach to the “school band experience” (Allsup & Benedict, 2008; Kratus, 2011; Mantie, 2012; Carter, 2013).

In the narrative explored through this research, one might argue that this singular story can be emblematic of stories which confront the meta-narrative.⁵ Charles Whitmer finds a place both within and outside that stereotypical framework. Although he doesn't



Texas Band Director Mr. Charles Whitmer and his autoharp

stress competition, the program is successful in comparison with other programs from an individual competitive perspective; although the school is one of the smallest in the region, a disproportionately large number of students win “chairs” in the All-Region Junior High Band and receive multiple First Division medals at Solo and Ensemble contests.

Interestingly (and more tellingly), Mr. Whitmer does not take his bands to Texas U.I.L. competitions – and which is a purposive philosophical choice on his part. Mr. Whitmer's “pedagogical syncretism” (Waldron, 2013) melds “traditional,”⁶ standard band methods and instruction with holistic informal approaches to reach deeper and more complex musical opportunities for these

middle schoolers than is usual. To hear a musical example of what part of his pedagogical and philosophical approach to band teaching comes from, listen to the YouTube video of Charles playing autoharp on his own composed tune, “Autoharp Breakdown” here:

<https://youtu.be/Dnj3rGOUz4A> (retrieved from YouTube, December 14, 2015).

Coldspring Junior High, the school where Mr. Whitmer currently teaches, has 400 students in the school, of whom one-third elect to be in band. A small rural school with “no pockets of affluence,” 85% of the student population eats lunch free or for reduced rates. The school music program is the “only game in town,” besides family and church ensembles, since private music lessons are a luxury. Middle schoolers at this school come from varied

heritages: 30% are African-American, 10% Hispanic, and the rest are Anglo-American with a handful of Asian students.



The 2013 Coldspring Junior High School Concert Band, Director Charles Whitmer

This narrative begins in Charles' classroom.

It's a sunny day in late September. The seventh graders, all noisy and exuberant, burst into the detached "Band Hall," a short walkway from the main school. To call it a "room" is a misnomer, both because of its size and the contents within. At 3000 square feet, with high raised ceilings, sound-proof practice rooms, office space and storage rooms, and well-equipped with percussion equipment, instruments, stands, chairs, and technology – computers, TV, stereo system – at the back of the room and around the room's parameters, it is a facility that many University directors outside of the state of Texas would envy. But in Texas, it is a stereotypical Band Hall, the facility itself being an indication of the status accorded to "Band" in the state, even in poor rural school districts like Coldspring.

The class we describe had about 25 students, but they might as well be ten fold for

the amount of gusto with which they go for their instruments. In this particular mixed class, ten are in 7th grade and 14 in 8th. Half are girls, half are boys. A class monitor hands out books. As they take out their instruments, brief pandemonium ensues with initial testing, improvised solos, various forays into acoustic space. Then Mr. Whitmer at the piano begins the scales, majors, relative minors, chromatics. The class clicks into gear and they know what to do. Charles Whitmer quietly directs “7th grade”, “8th grade” etc. as they warm up.

Students continue their preparations by checking their tuning to G, one by one. Next they review a favorite waltz in E Dorian “Farewell to Glasgow,” one of the many tunes their teacher has collected and transcribed. The intonation is even as the entire class listens hard to be in tune. “I love that song,” says one sax player. At this point, Mr. Whitmer stops and gets the class to analyze what’s happening in the music. “It has a steady beat and low minor sound, yes?” He goes over and fixes a stuck key on a flute. “Make it smooth like the recording” he offers.⁷ The class plays it again. Several flute players note that they especially like to play these “tunes” because they are “different,” “don’t wear out the tongue,” and are “soft and cool.”

The class finishes with “Cold Frosty Morning.”⁸ They put copies of the fiddle tune transcribed by their teacher on their stands. They’ve heard this but don’t know it yet. The tune is played to refresh their memory. They clap out and say the rhythm, then sight read sections piece by piece. Then a little faster, clearly enjoying the challenge. Whitmer asserts that it’s essential to train both aural and sight-reading skills together for balanced musicianship. Here is Whitmer’s class playing the tune; note how “Old Time” genre and style – Charles comping “Old Time” style on piano while everyone gets to play the tune, including the tubas and trombones – is combined with “band” pedagogy – the students sit up straight, playing with “proper” breathing technique and hand/body position:



Coldspring Jr. High Band Class, "Cold Frosty Morning."
(<https://youtu.be/2hSrcd-jjUo>, retrieved July 31 2015)

Class ends and they leave.

Charles Whitmer relates why he uses fiddle tunes in this class: "Some are upbeat and go real fast. They are a break from the book and many people heard the tunes when they were small." Whitmer first began to incorporate traditional tunes perhaps 15 years ago, beginning with his percussionists. They all played the melody on the marimbas very successfully. He began with simple folk tunes in their methods books but noted that "it never seemed like it was enough. Then whenever the books started getting more complicated music, it was all composed music. But I like the fiddle tunes cause, like for the mallets, it's teaching them the reading skills, dexterity; their technical skills are so much better."

Here is a video of Charles' percussion students playing the Scottish fiddle tune "Flowers of Edinburgh." Notice what is different about how Charles' percussion class is playing when contrasted with the 7th grade band:



Coldspring Jr. High Percussion Class, "Flowers of Edinburgh."

(https://youtu.be/AFZRQd_Msp0, retrieved July 31, 2015).

Classes meet in mixed ability groups from age 11 -13, depending on their other schedules. Percussionists meet as a group set apart from the rest of the band every day for special instruction. When students come to band to become "drummers" they are told: "if they want to be a drummer they need to go take lessons somewhere, they're going to be percussionists if they're here." Accordingly, the class alternates between drum pad and mallets. The students much prefer playing mallets over snare and other percussion, because, as Charles explains, they enjoy playing fiddle tunes on mallet instruments much more than playing rhythms on snare lines.

As Mr. Whitmer reflects upon being a band director, he notes that his emphasis is on comprehensive musicianship over specialization. When asked about the inspiration for his teaching strategies, Charles Whitmer stated: "I have to do everything. There's no other music program, there's not orchestra, there's no choir cause the school's district is not big

enough to support that.”

Whitmer plays all of his students’ accompaniments, recording them for teaching purposes on digital tracks:

I like to have these programs cause that way I can kind of control what these kids are learning, and how they learn it. Because . . . they might not remember the way you taught it. But . . . if I’ve got it down in a hard drive and [the students] can pull it out, it’s like me having an assistant for every kid in the room. Sometimes . . . I’ll just split the room up, and they all go to the computers and practice on their track music.

He elaborates on the merits of this mode of teaching for personal instruction and evaluation:

I’ll work with [low brass] on their part . . . then I’ll call in the flutes while the brass go back to the computers. . . . It allows me to monitor them with everybody staying on task, not having one group wait while I come to this group, like you do in a band arrangement. But I also do the same thing with band arrangement, I take my scores and I scan them in and I create sound files of the scores.

As well, Whitmer teaches his students how to use Sibelius notation software so that they can pull up and play the entire score or just play their individual part.

This more personalized approach to learning began when this teacher was playing his autoharp in the folk music world:

I started using this Amazing Slow Downer program⁹ so I could hear the notes of fiddle and pipe tunes, they go too fast, I write a lot of that out for autoharp. So I use that and that’s where I first started using it, . . . and that’s when I thought . . . there’s no reason why I can’t have my kids do it.

As Whitmer became more knowledgeable with the Sibelius program, “I started learning how I can manipulate the sound files, then I started using Photoscore which allows you to scan in anything. I scanned in the piano accompaniments for the solos, the band scores, anything.”

When asked he chose traditional fiddle tunes as band repertoire, Charles Whitmer replied: “Because that’s what I do outside of school, for one thing. For two, there’s no copyright problems. Three, . . . if it’s survived to our generation, it’s probably pretty good

quality.” He adds: “Only about 10% of the music from each time period, actually survives its time period that’s still played.” When asked why he thinks his students enjoy playing these melodies, Whitmer smiles:

I think cause it’s . . . music of the people . . . carried down through the generations. . . . Even if these kids haven’t been exposed to it before, there’s something innate about this music that they find interesting.

Reflection, Final Threads . . .

Although this study poses one account of one teacher in his classroom, there is much to reflect upon in this narration of an adaptable, creative teacher who finds his place within a seemingly inflexible teaching paradigm. Such successes reflect the commitment and philosophy of an engaged individual as well as a supporting and/or benign administration. Whitmer’s narrative is one of reflective practice and of social critique (Preskill, 1998) in that his shaping of his band program relies on continual evaluation of everyday practice as well as the ability to examine and recognize possibilities and limitations of the school music context.

Charles Whitmer finds the space to adapt to the curriculum he receives by adapting some of the latest technologies for individualized learning. As shown, he also employs an expanded palette of musics that will serve his students in years to come. In addition to the usual band skills of note reading, there is a deliberate focus on learning by ear. By intertwining various modes of learning and instruction, students have more chances to be successful. As well, the class dynamics are constantly shifting between whole group direction with a structured teacher role, small group work that allows for peer interaction, and individual work. The work of the music class doesn’t finish when the allotted class time is over. Students have access to recordings, assignments, and practices to do either in school during free time or at home. Significant elements of Charles Whitmer’s successful program include these factors:

- Combining informal and formal learning which employ aural and visual skills, and ear training with note reading.
- Incorporating new technologies and individualized teaching and assessment while

playing music rooted in familiar traditions.

- Playing a variety of musical genres and creating a community of successful music making and makers.
- In the process, preparing students for lifelong music participation and learning.

Since all these components work holistically, they reinforce each other. Although this program and this teacher's narrative are unique, they have implications for other settings and other teachers. The value of teaching narratives such as this lie not in the specifics but in the larger story of transformative and empowering music education.

Postscript 2015

Unfortunately for the students in the Coldspring Junior High Band, Charles recently resigned his position as band director, leaving his native Texas to re-locate to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he began teaching middle school band starting in August 2015. He did leave Texas with reluctance however; Coldspring High School (into which his students "feed") hired a new band director this year, whose traditional Texas U. I. L. band directing style and methods Charles felt were incompatible with his own pedagogical methods and philosophy. We are unfortunately unable to continue to gather data on the program and students since our access to the school is now limited – thus unable to determine the changes in the program.

Charles remains committed to teaching band in his own pedagogically synchronous way – and it is encouraging to know that it was precisely because of his philosophy and the implementation of that into practice that he was hired as a middle school band director in Santa Fe. He has also put his knowledge of and experiences as an avid collector of "tunes" – American Traditional, Old Time as well as others – and expertise in arranging for school bands to good use, as he has recently published (from J. W. Pepper) a collection of chorales for Concert Band based on the same (<http://www.jwpepper.com/52-Hymns-and-Chorales-for-Winds/10512896.item#.VbuQQniZ5UQ>, retrieved July 31, 2015).

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¹ An earlier version of this research was presented at the Narratives Conference in Helsinki, Finland, 2012.

² Charles Whitmer has worked in a rural Texas school for ten years, previously he worked in large suburban middle schools near Houston.

³ This is a contested notion among band directors in other localities.

⁴ Charles Whitmer finds himself situated in a teaching paradigm that is sometimes at odds with his personal philosophical inclinations.

⁵ Although this music teaching situation is, of course, specific and un-generalizable to other settings.

⁶ “Traditional” in the sense that there is a widely accepted approach to teaching school band based on decades of practice in Texas and greater North America.

⁷ Whitmer performs and records the tunes for the class to listen to before beginning to play. Students have access to this material on computer listening stations in the school. Charles does this because in real life contexts, musicians learn traditional tunes aurally. He also uses standard notation for his classes as he wants them to read music.

⁸ For sheet music, abc notation, midi recordings, historical information and complete discographies of “Cold Frosty Morning” and “Flowers of Edinburgh” go to <https://thesession.org/tunes/6467> and <https://thesession.org/tunes/2549> (both retrieved July 31, 2015). There are also thousands of traditional Old Time, Irish, Scottish, and Bluegrass tunes available at thesession.org well.

⁹ Here is a link to the Amazing Slow Downer program:
<http://www.ronimusic.com/slowdown.htm>

About the Authors:

Musician and educator, Kari K. Veblen is Professor of Music Education at Western University in London, Ontario, Canada where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses. Over the past thirty-five years she has worked as an elementary music teacher, curriculum consultant to orchestras and schools, and as a community musician with people of all ages. Current research interests includes music in 1) community music networks f2f and online, 2) lifespan learning, 3) Irish/Celtic traditional transmission, and 4) vernacular genres. Thus far, Veblen has written over seventy peer-reviewed works and presented over two hundred and sixty invited lectures and conference presentations worldwide. Her fourth book is *Community Music Today* (with Messenger, Silverman, and Elliott). Veblen serves on editorial and professional boards such as the ISME Board. She is associate editor of the *International Journal of Community Music*.

Dr. Janice Waldron is an Associate Professor of Music Education at the University of Windsor; research interests include informal music learning practices, online music communities, vernacular musics, and participatory cultures. Dr. Waldron is published in *Music Education Research*, *The International Journal of Music Education*, *Action*, *Criticism*,

and Theory in Music Education, The Journal of Music, Education and Technology, and The Philosophy of Music Education Review. She also serves on the Editorial Boards of the *Journal of Music, Education, and Technology*, the *International Journal of Music Education (Research)*, *TOPICS*, and is a reviewer for *Music Education Research*. Dr. Waldron has upcoming chapters in the *Oxford Handbook of Music, Education, and Technology*, the *Routledge Companion of Music Education and Technology*, the *Oxford Handbook of Community Music*, and was named the 2012 “Outstanding Researcher: Emerging Scholar” at the University of Windsor.

