

Participation Theory

Alienation from body, labor, society, nature is bad.

Participation in body, labor, society, nature is good.

Participation = consubstantiation = sacrament = pre-symbolic merging of consciousness and matter = the feeling that you are in the music and the music is in you = groove = the happiness and health (mental-and-physical) of all this “joyous science” as a foundation for imagination and creativity.

Participation theorists posit these equivalences as “how we are in the world,” our being, our ontology, our humans-in-nature, our ecology of mind when we are most whole and at our best in action, participating. Participation theorists encourage synthetic thinking more than analytic thinking, or better yet, synthetic doing-as-thinking, being-as-knowing in place of analytic thinking-about from some hypothetical inactive non-location. We are more interested in similarities, overlaps, consubstantiations, the merging of words/concepts/ understandings than in making ever sharper distinctions, differences, pulling things apart. There are certainly times when analysis – careful, painstaking, looking closely and following the rules of established scientific disciplines – is necessary and life-affirming, but participation theorists sense that we have done: 1) a lot of scientific work in the service of technology, control, taking nature apart, extracting “resources,” seeking profit, and 2) very little scientific play or “joyous science” in the service of synthesis/participation/pulling-the-findings-of-analyses-together-and-dancing-the-result.

Participation is rational and our best hope for a continuing co-evolution of humans with other life forms. It is rational to merge with the world, to identify with other life forms that sustain us, to worship totems and observe certain taboos. It is very rational, the very basis of good science, to admit and celebrate ignorance, to say we don't know and may never know how the 300 to 400 micro-organisms in our own gut are interacting and co-evolving to nourish us, feed us, any more than we know how the complex mix of microflora in the forest floor supports the best possible tree growth. For most people “rational” simply means logical, analytic, scientific, a constant search for more precise distinctions and differences, more precise descriptions and predictions, more control. For me, there is a broader "rational" or rationale that includes these simple analytic and descriptive meanings and weighs them on scales of humility, compassion, paleoconservative tradition, and an "ignorance-based worldview" (Wes Jackson and Wendell Berry).

Humility and ignorance-based worldview: we don't know enough about how evolution keeps us alive to be meddling with it.

Compassion: science and technology in the service of profit may now be causing more suffering than they alleviate.

Tradition: what are now “the arts” used to be integrated in life-affirming rituals and we had better get back into that groove soon.

Pat Campbell:

Isn't participation “the American way”? Providing equal opportunity for all voices to be heard, all children to be recognized for the various gifts they bear and can bring forth? Isn't music a performance art, with room a-plenty for all interested singers, players, and dancers to join in? Long before contemporary debates within music education circles about balancing performance with listening, analysis, and creative composition, there was plainly and simply performance. Lowell Mason, historic founder of American music education, gave convincing testimony to the intellectual, moral, and physical benefits of vocal performance in schools, and so ushered in music as a subject for study in the Boston schools in 1838. Ideally, in the spirit of the American common school, music was intended for all to study and experience and was not just for the select, auditioned few. The least likely outcome of our educational system should be the message that some are privileged insiders while others are left out, alienated. (putting words in your mouth? It is crucial, then, that at ages 4, 5 and 6 (or much earlier in life if possible) children be given many, many opportunities to learn the synchronizing skills – keeping together in time as dancers and drummers, singing and reciting and gesturing together in choruses – so that everyone is recognized as “being talented” or “gifted.” Later, children will select each other for their own ensembles, figure out which instruments they want to apply their timing and tuning skills to, teachers will select from the many talented who they most need for this ensemble or that seasonal performance. “Many are called, few are chosen” could come to mean, “everyone is able, some want more of it” or “ _____ ” or “ _____ ”.

As schools go, however, music (even in the time of Lowell Mason) was distinguished, alongside math, reading, history, and science, as a separated—and not integrated—subject. The room and space was made for music as “the art”, singular, and apart from other subjects. Any evidence of music as ritual, or as one of many threads within the weave of the cultural life of the school and community, is even now mostly left in the hands of individual teachers to devise.

- What is the extent of musical participation in your local schools and communities? Is musical study exclusive and “by audition-only,” or is music all-inclusive and open to all who have an interest in making music? What can be done to open the doors wide enough for all to join in?
- Where auditions are common practice, careful consideration can be given to the contributions and interests of children and youth. Read what practiced teachers have to say about auditions: Hollenburg, Julie, 1996, Auditioning elementary choruses, Teaching Music 4:1, 36-37; Haworth, Janice L., 1992, Elementary school choirs and auditions, Music Educators Journal 79:4, 44-46; Workinger, William, 1993, Setting up an honors program, Music Educators Journal, 79:8, 29-32; Snyder, J.R., 1980, “Critique: The development of a procedural model for choral auditioning based upon the practice of selected directors in the state of Florida”, Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education 64, 44-47.