Finding the Blue Note: A Metaphor for the Practice of Teaching

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ABSTRACT: Teaching and the process of developing curriculum, have been compared to the art of jazz improvisation. While similarities between the two exist, there are important differences that make the metaphor inaccurate. It is suggested here that because of the outward simplicity of teaching, the characteristics of teacher thinking and of those who become teachers, and the nature of the relationship of the teacher and audience, a more appropriate comparison might be to blues music and musicians. The article also suggests a distinction between the source and usefulness of what is called here emergent metaphors (those that grow out of or emerge from a teacher's language and experience) and ascribed metaphors (those that are constructed by the researcher describe an idea or behavior). Finally, implications of the metaphor for professional development, the preparation of teachers, and the success of school reform are offered.

RÉSUMÉ: L'enseignement et la méthode pour construire un programme scolaire sont comparés à l'art d'improviser en jazz. Alors même que des similarités existent entre les deux, des différences importantes subsistent rendant ainsi la métaphore inexacte. A cause de la simplicité apparente de l'enseignement, de l'état d'esprit des enseignants ou de ceux qui deviennent enseignants et de la forme que revêt les relations professeur/étudiants, une comparaison au blues et aux musiciens qui pourrait être plus juste, est proposée dans l'article. A la lecture de ce papier, l'on découvre aussi une distinction entre l'origine et l'utilité de ce qui est appelé ici des métaphores émergentes (c'est-à-dire celles-là mêmes qui viennent des professeurs ou sont créées à partir de leur langage et de leur expérience) et des métaphores faisant partie intégrante du langage académique (c'est-à-dire celles-là mêmes qui ont été conçues par les spécialistes de la langue académique pour décrire une idée ou un comportement). A la fin du papier, on propose l'utilisation de métaphores comme procédés pour la recherche professionnelle, pour la préparation des professeurs et pour la réussite de la réforme scolaire.

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In one of the seminal books on the importance of metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) wrote, "If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor" (p. 3). If they are right, then there is some benefit in identifying the metaphors that both shape and are shaped by the individual or group that uses the metaphor. For the observer or researcher of teaching, metaphors can, "provide a tool for interpreting the meaning of what it is to be a teacher in American society" (Provenzo, McCloskey, Kottkamp, & Cohn, 1989, p. 551).

One performance-related metaphor for teaching that several authors have pursued (Gordan, 1984; Power, 1990) is that of the jazz musician or, more specifically, the improvisational nature of jazz. In this paper I will first examine the adequacy of that metaphor in understanding the act and art of teaching and, finding it lacking, will suggest the blues musician as a more suitable and closely related metaphor. First, however, it might be helpful to address the question, "Why is such an exercise necessary at all?"

Metaphor as a Catalyst

The power of language to interpret and shape our social practices, relationships of power, and individual identity has been established by numerous thinkers over the past few decades (Bourdieu, 1991; Fairclough, 1989,1991; Foucault, 1980; Lather, 1991). However, teacher education has been slow to use that power to transform teaching and to study how teaching transforms teachers (Vadeboncoeur & Torres, 2003). Therefore, any additional examination of the metaphors that inform teaching should prove to be helpful.

The purpose of this study of metaphors is twofold. First, it is not enough to look only at how teachers use and are shaped by their metaphors, we must also look at the nature and adequacy of the metaphors themselves, especially when we deliberately create them to explain a phenomenon like teaching (Ivie, 2003). More specifically, I will propose that when using performance-based metaphors like, "tachers are like jazz musicians" – or conductors, or gardeners, and so on – it is not sufficient to look only at the performance. It is also necessary to look at the performers involved in the performance. Jazz is not simply the act of improvisation. It is performed by musicians who share a language, a culture and, to some extent, personality traits and purposes.

A second purpose is to propose a substitute metaphor, not so much as a definitive description of the teaching act but as a catalyst for the continued examination of the teaching profession. In earlier drafts of this paper, some readers were offended, or at least, suspicious, of the image of teachers implied in the blues metaphor. While no deliberate offense was intended, the images suggested were intended to create the sense of disequilibrium that Dewey (1991) said was needed to spur critical thought and changed conceptions. The use of metaphor as gadfly is not as commonly found in the education literature as its role in explaining and guiding practice but I believe it is one worth exploring.

The metaphors used in this study are what I will call *ascribed* metaphors – ones constructed by a researcher to either explain an educational phenomenon or describe a model of teaching or school reform. Since teaching is a complex act, if we can create a descriptive metaphor that unites various elements of that act, we might better translate what is complex and uncharted into something that is familiar (Carter, 1990; Dickmeyer, 1989; Miller & Fredericks, 1988; Petrie, 1979). Additionally, the ascribed metaphor implies an intentional data-mining process that forces the researcher to recognize the values, assumptions, and practices that he or she associates with the investigation (Dexter & LaMagdeleine, 2002). Examples of this common metaphorical tool include Freire's (1982) criticism of the "banking" model of education and Eisner's (1976) educational "connoisseurship." The first metaphor to be examined is the attempt to describe teaching and curriculum development to the performance of jazz music.

Limitations of the Jazz Metaphor

Like the jazz musician who interprets and improves on a chord sequence based on his instrument, style, mood, or rhythm, teachers reject and adapt proposed changes based on their beliefs, styles, knowledge, abilities, and students. When presented with a proposed curricula or methodologies, the teacher develops preferences and make choices among those proposals and then improvises by experimenting with different variations on those options. As his or her personal and professional life changes, a teacher will make new links to improvisation and presentations from past experience.

At first glance this appears to be an accurate interpretation of teacher thinking. Too often, however, when we carry out metaphors to their full potential or implications they either break down or reveal even

richer comparisons. For example, one of my undergraduate teacher education students, during a discussion of teaching metaphors, rejected the "teacher as gardener" metaphor since it implied a passive role on the part of the plant. He believed that all the work – planting, watering, fertilizing – was done by the teacher/gardener and left little room for the involvement of the student/plant. It was pointed out by a biology major, however, that the gardener could do all he or she wanted to the plant but if it was not for the internal activity of the plant through photosynthesis nothing would happen.

Such is the problem with the jazz metaphor as it relates to teaching. If the metaphor compared teaching or curriculum development to the act of musical improvisation in general then perhaps the metaphor would be adequate. Even then, there would be no reason to find that comparison any more useful than theatrical improvisation or the improvisation of an auto mechanic upon confronting a new and unusual engine problem. As soon as we attach another descriptor such as music, theater, or mechanical, the breadth of the metaphor must be reconsidered. The issue is especially relevant when considering performance-related metaphors where the characteristics of the performer – the jazz musician in this case – might be as important to the metaphor as the characteristics of the performance itself. What I am suggesting is that, although the idea of improvisational thinking is important to understanding teaching, the characteristics of jazz music and musicians are sufficiently different from those of teaching and teachers as to make the metaphor inappropriate, or at least limited, in understanding the teaching act.

Out of a desire to indulge personal interests, I have chosen to examine the jazz metaphor more closely, but the issue raised is applicable to all metaphorical representations. One of the values of metaphorical depiction is its ability to create a jargon-free, non-threatening, common frame of reference with which to begin a professional conversation. When we choose a diverse genre like jazz, which has no inherent definition (as Louis Armstrong once said, "If you gotta ask, then you'll never know"), it is difficult to assume that everyone is on the same page or, more appropriately, reading from the same chart. Classical musicians like Bach and Liszt were master improvisers but, despite their similarities, classical and jazz music have a different set of underlying assumptions for most people, just as the gardening metaphor had a much richer meaning for the biology major than for the average teacher.

Internal vs. External Complexity

Teaching is, from all outward appearances, a simple act. Nearly everyone has witnessed the process numerous times a day, 180 days a year, for at least 10 or 11 years. The complexity of the pedagogical act is seldom evident by simply watching the act take place. Its complexity is woven within, under, and behind the act – invisible to the casual observer, and even some teachers (Jackson, 1986; Lortie, 1975). To appreciate the nuance, the creativity, and the intricate blending of art and science that is typical of good teaching, one must know the teacher, the classroom context, the nature of the subject matter, and much more. Jazz is not like that. A jazz performance does contain subtlety and nuance, and to gain insight into individual artists you sometimes have to know something of their colorful or troubled lives. However, in all but its simplest forms, the complexity and challenging nature of jazz is apparent even to the uninitiated listener.

Ron David (1995) explained the complexity of jazz by comparing it to the great intellectual accomplishments of all times, a comparison seldom made in reference to a teacher's work.

> Listening to a great jazz solo is the closest I will ever get to being in a room with Einstein when he flashes on his Theory of Relativity or with Sir Isaac Newton when he realizes that the apple falls down, not up. (p. 2)

Moreover, if someone was to videotape or transcribe a typical, but effective, lesson that resembled the speed, intricacy, and difficult chord progressions of a bebop performance, that person would have to make notations of how the teacher planned to address the socioeconomic context, cultural diversity, prior knowledge, learning style, and all the other factors that complicate the teaching process. Although teachers do make many of those adaptations on a regular basis, seldom are they on paper or acted out in the classroom in a way that would automatically elicit the admiration of the lay person. The external act is the relatively simple-looking expression of an intricate, internal thinking process. In that way, blues music might be a more apt metaphor for teaching and everyday curriculum planning.

In one of the definitive books on the development and impact of the blues, Palmer (1981) described the deceptive simplicity of the blues in the same way that teaching could be described.

> Delta blues ... is also significant as music. It seems simple enough – two identical lines and a third answering line make up a verse, there are no more than three chords and sometimes only one,

> melodies are circumscribed, rhythms are propulsively straightforward. ... The fact of the matter is, Delta blues is a refined, extremely subtle, and ingeniously systematic musical language. (p. 18)

I remember reading somewhere, although I no longer recall the citation, that teachers often make over 1000 professional, non-trivial decisions each day. Their decision-making, however, usually reflects a stability or predictability that seems more closely related to the subtle variations referred to by Palmer than the furious tempos of Parker or Gillespie as they improvised on chords that Gioia (1988) described as "musical obstacle courses" (p. 58). Therefore, to compare the decision-making of teachers to that of jazz musicians does not reflect what we know about teacher thinking and behaviors.

Intimidation and Respect

Intimidation is not a word that comes to mind when one thinks of the public image of teachers. The teacher's work discourages admiration and intimidation even among teaching peers. In fact, teachers are often discouraged by their peers from sharing expertise (Little, 1993). The nature of the music and the competitive, public forum in which jazz musicians operate makes admiration, sharing, and intimidation nearly inevitable as you can see in one drummer's recollection of his first encounter with modern jazz.

> As we walked in, see, these cats snatched up their horns and blew crazy stuff. ... We could never tell when a solo was supposed to begin or end. Then they all quit at once and walked off the stand. It scared us. (Stearns, 1956, p. 224-225)

This section is not about intimidating competitors. It is about the byproducts of the complexity discussed in the previous section. Jazz is outwardly impressive and potentially intimidating to the novice player and sometimes downright enigmatic to the general public. Teaching is not. Some state legislatures have said that a suitable substitute for a teacher is someone who has a high school degree and no teaching experience. Some alternative certification programs seem to make the infomercial-like claim, "Give me a few weeks and I'll make you a teacher." We all had teachers who barely stayed one page ahead of us in the textbook and needed the answer key to know if our answers were correct or not. Teaching can be that simple. *Good* teaching, of course, is much more. Blues musicians often suffer from the same misconceptions. Three chords and some repeated lyrics ... no problem.

> Harmonically, blues was – at least in the beginning – a very simple form, but one that had a trick or two in store for the performer who thought he could pick it up by reading the right notes. ... The trick in blues harmony is in the so-called 'blue notes.' (Cook, 1995, p. 24-25)

Blue notes are what makes the blues, the blues. Technically, a blue note can be defined as flatted thirds or sevenths on the musical scale. To use that limited definition, however, fails to capture the artistry in the blue note. In the playing, the blue note is, "neither A nor yet A flat, but between the two" (Tonsor, 1892-1893, pp. 119-120). Some blues scholars attribute even more power to the simple note.

> But organic man, man the irrepressible, wins a major victory in the blue note itself; for the blue note is a symbol of man's refusal to give up his unpredictable orneryness [sic], his inalienable right to be himself and nobody else's. For there is in the blue note and the improvisations based upon it a freeing of the spirit that gives full play to the creative imagination. (Gruver, 1999, p. 223)

Teaching, too, has its "blue notes." We sometimes refer to it as praxis or Henderson's (2001) professional artistry – the integration of critical reflection and engaged practice. This intricate, but hidden, blend of subject matter knowledge, careful reflection, and personal and professional blend of subject matter knowledge, careful reflection, and personal and professional idiosyncrasy makes effective teaching elusive. Even if the general public does not recognize that special something, teachers do, and, like blues musicians, they are not always tolerant of those who pretend to have it but do not. Teachers who can capture that artistry, like the bluesmen who found the blue notes, are the ones who are best able to reassert their identities as professionals even amid increasingly repressive teaching conditions.

Much of the basis for the standards by which both teachers and blues musicians judge the credibility of a colleague seems to be based on a sort of reverse elitism – a pride in the guttural or instinctual nature of the task, the performer, and the audience. Both sets of professionals are aware and proud of their working class roots and the common people to and for whom they speak. In something of a paradox, while, as mentioned earlier, teachers do tend to discourage recognition that sets one above another, they are more likely to initiate change or, try new ideas if the source of those ideas is another teacher (Fullan, w. Steigelbauer, 1991). At times, teachers use terms like *ivory tower*, *top-down*, and *theory* in an almost derogatory fashion when it comes to

sources of school reform. Davis (1995) notes a similar reaction among blues performers.

> They [early bluesmen] were impatient with men they considered pretenders, and critical even of some they recognized as peers ... men this ready to criticize one another wouldn't have taken kindly to the implication that any black field hand with a guitar could have sung their songs. (p. 3)

Jazz, more like much of higher education, often almost prides itself on its separation from the masses. David (1995) characterizes bebop as "jazz that gave its audience the Finger" (p. 41) and, as jazz began incorporating elements of classical and international music, it intrigued some listeners but created an arid and intellectual music that led to increasingly smaller audiences. Unlike teachers, jazz musicians have seldom worried about alienating their audiences.

> People ask me why don't you play this. Go buy the record. It's still there. ... Like me for what we're doing now. ... 'Cause my colleagues say, 'Yeah, you know what I mean,' and that's enough for me to keep doing what I do. (Miles Davis, cited in Sidran, 1992, p. 15)

The earthy subject matter and environs of the blues and the relatively easy life led by its practitioners – in comparison to the backbreaking work of sharecropping – did alienate some. Similarly, the seemingly easy life – three months off in the summer, plenty of holidays – modest intellectual requirements, and easy entry into the field lead many policy-makers to see teachers as relatively interchangeable and easy to replace. Again, witness those districts that view anyone with a few years of college (or even a high school diploma in some cases) to be adequate substitutes for veteran teachers or the teacher preparation programs that require just a few weeks of professional course-work. This perception of blues singers might sound familiar to anyone who follows hiring practices in the schools. "Much like the field hands who bought their records, blues singers were assumed to be in plentiful supply, virtually interchangeable, and willing to work cheap. They were the record industry's equivalent of unskilled labor" (Davis, 1995, p. 31).

Experience and Individuality

All artists, technicians, and professionals learn from each other and from their predecessors, but few practitioners rely on those sources so completely as do bluesmen and teachers. Jazz, by its rhythmic nature and dependence on underlying chord structures that support its

improvisations has always relied heavily on the ensemble. Blues, throughout its early history was a solo endeavor. Likewise, only recently have some teachers begun to open their doors to work and learn in teams.

Teachers have long viewed their jobs as an extended form of parenting and relied more on instinct, personal experience, informal conversation with colleagues, and trial-and-error to learn their craft than on formalized procedures (Bliss & Mazur, 1997; Conle, 1996; Buchmann & Schwille, 1983; Cuban, 1984; Giebelhaus & Bowman, 1996; Levine, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Powell & McGowan, 1995). Any given act of teaching, therefore, is actually a combination of years of experience, many personalities, folklore, and gut reaction filtered through the individual personality of the teacher and the context of the moment. The same could be said for most blues singers who often mixed and matched lyrics from different songs and singers and tailored performances for particular audiences. Paul Garon (1996), in *Blues and the Poetic Spirit,* describes the process of "writing" a blues song.

> Still other singers maintain that their songs are autobiographical .... Prefacing a song with a comment like, 'Well, I made up this one back some years ago when my woman come home and said she was gonna pack up her trunk and go,' they proceed to sing a lyric that was actually written and made popular by another singer, often of an earlier decade. (p. 52)

Perhaps because of those ties to the past, to tradition, and to one's mentors, neither blues nor the teaching profession has changed as radically as the world around them. This is probably even more true of teaching, which has been notoriously unresponsive to change and reform.

Jazz, in contrast, has long deliberately drawn on theory, formal training, and intellectual rigor and has shown a commitment to experimentation and stretching the definition of the genre (Gioia, 1988). A teacher from 1904 could travel through time and not be entirely baffled by what she or he saw happening in classrooms in 2004 (Cuban, 1984). In the case of the blues, the electric guitar and contemporary musical tastes have had an impact on the sophistication and energy of the music, but its basic form is much the same as it was at the beginning of the century as witnessed by the many contemporary rock musicians who transplant decades old blues songs almost intact onto their recordings. On the contrary, free jazz, bop, and fusion efforts by artists like Sun Ra, who David (1995) describes as "trying his damndest [sic] to

fuse the Twelve Apostles with the Three Stooges" (p. 92), might be unrecognizable to Bix Beiderbecke if he was to visit from the 1920s.

Expression and Content

As one might expect from the individualistic nature and the emphasis on personal experience that both teaching and the blues place on their respective arts, the forms of expression and the content of the music/curriculum are also more intensely personal. Jazz, too, can be a very personal expression on the part of the artist. However, it is most often mediated through and limited by the performer's technical proficiency. There have been important jazz singers, but the genre is most often characterized by instrumentalists. As noted earlier, the ensemble has a more important role in jazz than in the blues. The appeal and technical wonder of jazz often relies on the blending of intricate rhythms and harmonic structures among several musicians.

Teaching, like blues, is primarily a vocal art. Teachers have, usually reluctantly, added various forms of technology to their repertoire and have long used textbooks to communicate their lessons, but ultimately over the years, teachers have talked to their audiences. And what they say and how it is received by their students is key to their self-concept. Teachers can be considered effective without being able to demonstrate technical proficiency at the computer or even the VCR, but we are not as tolerant of teachers who cannot speak effectively to their students or do not bring something of themselves into the classroom. Fans of the blues will often overlook average guitar playing, but the singer better bring his or her life to the song and sing that life with the best of them. This standard relates far more to blues artists than to jazz musicians who, as noted earlier, often deliberately set themselves off from mainstream audiences. "The blues was the chronicle of black suffering and black strength, of black heroism and black humiliation, and black spiritual rage and grace. ... Maybe that's why blues singers have such stature" (David, 1995, p. 18).

Teachers only seldom deal with or represent the broader human context such as societal injustice and rage (Buchmann, 1987; Howey & Zimpher, 1996), but they do receive the products of that context and must address their needs on a daily basis. They also help or fail to help shape how future generations will address those problems. Teachers may not be activists in social causes for their own sake, but their curriculum and pedagogy is often a practical application or expression

of those causes. Or, more accurately, teachers help give students the practical tools that will allow them to address social causes more effectively in the future. Likewise, blues grew out of work songs and field hollers. It was not originally music for its own sake as much as a form of communicating relief, anger, love, or frustration. The blues, although sometimes overtly political, mostly provided a release for people whose life situations were largely out of their control. Most teachers also make no pretense as to trying to change the world, expect maybe one child at a time. Whatever rebellion takes place is behind the classroom door, like the blues singer in a small juke joint. Teachers want their students to make something of their individual lives and, if in the bargain they change the world, so be it.

Jazz was also affected by and confronted social issues, especially racism. Although seldom overtly politically active, the music and its musicians were simultaneously more blatantly radical and more subtle than teachers or blues musicians. Their social messages, by virtue of being delivered via musical instruments, were more subtle. Musicians like Max Roach, Coleman Hawkins, and Archie Shepp used the free and passionate nature of jazz to support the struggle of black Americans during the civil rights era. But there was probably less direct power in those statements than in blues lyrics like these from Auburn "Pat" Hare's, *Cotton Crop Blues.*

> Well, like raisin' a good cotton crop's just like a lucky man shootin' dice,
> Work all the summer to make your cotton, the fall come, still ain't no price
> I have plowed so hard, baby, corns have got all in my hands
> I want to tell you people, it ain' nothin' for a poor farmin' man.

Both styles of music worked to describe and change a bad situation, one using a direct approach, one an indirect approach. To understand the message of the jazz pieces, one had to understand the messenger and the medium. The message was embedded in them. The blues lyrics need little interpretation. Those living the situation understood the message. They have stripped away the jargon and the academic arguments and identified what their kids need at this moment. The social conscience of jazz music is perhaps more like the reform efforts of critical theorists. They, too, want to change a bad situation but their enigmatic vocabulary, their obscure references and avoidance of prescriptive, practical applications have little to offer to the people they are trying to help and the teachers they are trying to empower.

As subtle as its messages might be, jazz musician's commitment to "reform" is much more radical than that of the typical teacher. David (1995) concluded that, "If there is one constant impulse that characterizes jazz, it is the need to break the rules – even if they're your own. *Especially* if they're your own" [italics added] (p. 39). Teachers, unlike those who mandate reform, are not amenable to change for its own sake (Fullan, w. Steigelbauer, 1991; Gibboney, 1994; Sarason, 1990; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). When change comes it is slow and evolutionary or inevitable in nature. It is incorporated into the existing conditions rather than trying to radically alter the existing conditions. Musically, blues is much closer to the teacher's style.

Much ado About Nothing

Maybe this is a good place to stop. Despite the connections between blues and teaching that have been identified here, there is a risk of falling into the same trap described at the beginning. A knowledgeable blues fan could easily extend the metaphor and point out that:

> Teaching is made up largely of white middle class women. Not the typical profile of a Delta blues musician. The blues have their roots in the seedier aspects of life – sex, alcohol, cheating lovers, violence, oppression ... sex. Again, not the image of the typical teacher.

Blues musicians were often illiterate and poorly educated. Although some of the profession's critics probably agree with that as an apt image of teaching, it is probably not one we want to portray.

Most of my comparisons came from an example of the Delta blues, which are somewhat different than West Coast blues, Texas blues, or urban blues. Does this bring up the issue raised earlier regarding the need for shared assumptions when using metaphor as a tool?

Is there any basis for a jazz or blues metaphor when both musical genres and the teaching profession are so diverse in their composition? Have I conveniently stopped before too many inconsistencies begin to emerge?

Perhaps the most important question that arises, might be, "Why bother with a lengthy examination of a blues metaphor in the first place?" Does it serve any purpose or is it just another intellectual exercise?

There is always the possibility that, to borrow from Sigmund Freud, sometimes a metaphor is just a metaphor. Perhaps teachers choose a metaphor simply because it is a current or common phrase, or because

of its colorful imagery. The teacher who refers to him or herself as being "in the trenches" might do so to portray that person as someone who is doing the work of teaching and does not intend any militaristic allusion to doing battle. Assuming, for now, however, that metaphor is a valuable tool and that the blues metaphor is a valid, two answers to the relevance question are possible – one more limiting and one more freeing – depending on the user's perspective.

Half-Empty or Half-Full

From the more limiting perspective, the blues metaphor portrays teachers as artists who are capable of effective improvisation but from a relatively limited knowledge base – three chords or less. They do not stray far from tradition and are bound so closely to their audience that they tend not to experiment too much or risk the breaking of conventions. They are not overly academic or well-educated, but have a good knowledge of their audience and can use that effectively. There is less of a science to what they do than an instinct and personal experience and the experiences of a few admired peers are the prime source of decision-making. Those who enter the profession, like the early blues musicians, are often considered people who have chosen not to do real work or, in fact, may not be capable of it (bluesmen were often blind or lame). If we hold to the metaphor, it would support critics who charge that people who become teachers are those who were not intellectually capable of doing more difficult work.

From that perspective, some current reform efforts would have to be rethought. The top-down, training model of professional development, rather than a collaborative, site-based model is probably appropriate since teachers would not have much inherent expertise from which to draw, at least not of the academic or theoretical kind. The teaching of critical thinking skills does not hold much promise. Idealism and vision might be difficult to nurture, and convincing teachers of the need for change would be unlikely. Raising the status of the profession and drawing highly intelligent and well-qualified people into teaching would be difficult since the current practitioners are not held in high esteem. Those often affluent, academically successful students from Ivy League schools that take on a two year commitment to teaching through programs like Teach for America may well be viewing the profession like the affluent suburbanites used to view driving to the south side of Chicago to hear the blues. It was a chance to go "slumming" to see how

the other half lives and appreciate their ability to entertain us, but heaven forbid that we live like or with them.

There is promise in the metaphor, though, if we choose to see it that way. Teachers do know their audiences and, in teaching, that is crucial. Channeling that knowledge through action research and reflective discussion could lead to powerful, grounded theory. That love for and knowledge of the audience can also be an effective motivation for change if teachers are convinced that the change will be best for their students. Teachers respect the experts among their colleagues and that bodes well for collegial, school-based professional development. And, even if it is true that teachers initial preparation lacks the academic rigor of some other professions, teachers can model their metaphorical counterparts and become highly motivated, lifelong learners. Good blues musicians continued learning all their lives. The best "stole" ideas, listened to other musicians every chance they got, practiced their craft for hours on end when they were not performing, and lived the lives they were singing. This might be the most persuasive lesson to arise from the metaphor.

Whatever formal schooling or training blues musicians might have lacked they made up for in a voracious love for the learning of their craft. As young musicians, many served informal apprenticeships by traveling with the masters and listening to older musicians play in person or on recordings whenever they had the chance. Even as the novices became the masters, they continued to listen to the new singers and learn their riffs. They knew the past, present, and future of their profession. Too often, other than the periodic inservice offering, teachers end their intensive learning when they graduate from college. They spend their professional lives in one classroom or school. The often heard complaint that theory is irrelevant practice or immediate classroom needs do not fit either the blues or the jazz metaphors. Jazz musicians grew consciously from seemingly unrelated types of music like classical and international music. Blues musicians have not only contributed to rock and roll but have drawn from it. It was the creativity of the musicians that found the connections between what until that time had been different genres. No one had to make it practical for them. The metaphor suggests that teachers not simply discount certain sources of knowledge but actively assimilate them into their existing practice.

Practice is another thing that can emerge as a positive implication of the blues metaphor. Seldom do teachers practice their pedagogy in the way that musicians practice their performances. They may grade papers or plan lessons during their non-teaching time, but do not *practice* new

techniques. Despite the difficult lives and demanding schedules of blues singers, most practiced intensively when not performing. Robert Johnson, contrary to the self-promoted myth that his talent was received in a bargain with the devil, practiced up to ten hours or more a day to develop his formidable skills. This would be the equivalent of a teacher who does her "set" for the children everyday and and then after school or during breaks, attends classes, reviews videotapes of her teaching, reads professional literature, or meets with professional discussion groups.

There is one more aspect of the metaphor from which teaching could draw an important lesson. Blues singers often felt what they did was a *calling* of sorts. Many teachers feel that same sense of calling in their work. That sense of calling should imply a high standard for those who accept the call and an intolerance of those who do not respect the calling. Right now, our tolerance of those who do little justice to the call to teach is probably much higher than blues musicians would have had among their peers. We need to learn their lesson. I would like to believe that teaching is a higher, more noble calling than performing the blues or jazz. Charlie Parker, one of the great saxophonists and jazz innovators of all time, was laughed off the stage by his peers early in his career. Robert Johnson was a mediocre talent and was pushed off the scene until he reappeared several years later with newly developed and nearly unmatched skills as a singer and guitarist. They were not ready to take their places on the stage. Maybe it is time that teacher educators who feel everyone has the right to teach, administrators who hire uncertified or poorly qualified teachers, and colleagues who are too willing to just stay in their own classrooms, learn to figuratively laugh off the classroom stage anyone who really should not be on it.

The exploration of the blues metaphor does not come down just to weeding out our profession more successfully. If we were to look more extensively at the genre, we might see that there is also much to be learned about bringing new teachers into the profession. Laughing a would-be blues singer off the stage was not intended simply to get rid of pretenders. Instead, it was a sign of pride in the profession and a sort of test to see just how determined the young musician was and how willing to learn they were. The mentor/protégé relationship was vital in the early blues world. The most loyal followers of a great bluesman were other bluesmen because learning the craft was everything and the craft was learned best at the feet of a master craftsman. As teacher preparation becomes increasingly involved in partnerships and the

definition of teacher educator is broadened in the process, maybe the bluesmen can teach us something of what it means to respect both the craft of the expert practitioner and the desire and intensity of the those who want to learn that craft.

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