Informal Learning in the Collegiate Music Classroom

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Abstract

American music education has remained closely tied to the Western art music tradition. For many students, band, orchestra and choir are the only musical offerings in secondary schools. Large ensemble participation does not meet the needs of all students. Music teacher education programs must better prepare students beyond directing the traditional large ensembles that only involve a small minority of high school students nationwide. The study of music through informal learning practices used by popular musicians may be one way in which to make music-education-for-all a reality.

It is currently common for teachers to use popular music as a means to gain students' attention when the ultimate goal is to teach the elements of classical music. The actual learning practices of popular musicians were the focus of this study. The researcher sought to investigate the potential for successful music making when students work together to create music of their own choosing. Though the use of popular music plays an important role, student-led group work and peer-directed learning are crucial aims of informal music education.

This qualitative study employed surveys using open-ended items, semi-structured journals and interviews as forms of inquiry. A convenience sample of 19 students who registered for an elective course called *Garage Band* served as subjects. By interviewing and observing students with differing majors and varied experiences regarding music participation, negative and positive attributes of informal learning was gauged from a

variety of perspectives.

The responses to the course and to informal learning methods were almost exclusively positive. A majority of subjects reported gaining confidence in their musical abilities. One mentioned that having to work together and teach one another carried over into her other coursework. Negative comments were largely related to a lack of direction in the beginning of the course. The class was so successful that a *Garage Band Ensemble* course was recently added to the curriculum at this small, private liberal arts college. Students can choose this course instead of a large ensemble or taking a music appreciation course to fulfill a liberal arts requirement. Incorporating experiences with informal learning practices may not only provide an opportunity for students who would not otherwise have an opportunity to grow musically, but may also serve as a vehicle to better prepare pre-service music educators to be able to afford a similar experiences for their students.

Introduction

Recent decades have seen an increase in the number of musical styles to which students are exposed, but American music education has remained entrenched in the tradition of Western art music. It is currently common for teachers to use popular music as a means to gain students' attention when the ultimate goal is to teach about the elements of classical music. The main purpose of popular music in performing ensembles is entertainment, not necessarily education (marching and pep bands, show choir, etc.). This model does not necessarily fit with a philosophy of music-for-all. According to Small (1998), schools fail because music educators decide what music is "real" music; if students do not enjoy or are not proficient in this particular style, they are not considered musical.

Elliott (1995) suggested the aim of music education in our schools was not to create professional musicians but to nurture music making, a human activity that is attainable by all. This idea provides a challenge for the majority of music educators who are classically trained musicians. The apprenticeship model has long provided the standard for learning and teaching music. In this process, the teacher has the specific goals in mind and sets out to deliver instruction so that these goals may be obtained. The teacher serves as the critic and possessor of knowledge. Folkestad (2006) explained that a strong belief exists that "musical learning results from a sequenced, methodological exposure to music within a formal setting" (135). The author called for a shift in focus from away from a concern for

how to teach toward consideration for *what* and *how* to learn. Thinking about teaching using non-traditional methods simply may not be considered.

According to Green (2005), the product of informal learning is musicality rather than a focus on technique. It is the students' ability to participate in "real-life" tasks that becomes the motivation; it is the value of the participation, and not necessarily the musical knowledge or ability, that takes the spotlight (Westerlund 2006). Vakëvä (2006) reminded that much music education takes place without instructor intervention and critique.

Green (2006) listed five characteristics of informal learning practice: (1) the students are able to choose the music they learn and perform; (2) there is time devoted to listening to recordings and imitating what is heard without the use of notation; (3) students are self-taught and learning takes place in small groups; (4) skills are acquired in "personal, haphazard ways"; and (5) there is an "emphasis on creativity" through the "integration of listening, performing, improvising and composing" (106). The process does not always progress from simple to increasingly difficult tasks.

School music is often associated only with singing in choir or being able to play an instrument. There is a tendency for students to think of themselves as non-musicians and think that classical music is of more value than popular music (Stålhammer 2000). In Australia, popular music has been part of the school curriculum since the 1970's. The study of popular music is both a course and a recurring presence throughout music teacher

education programs as a "source of content for study of strategies for teaching in general" (Dunbar-Hall and Wemyss, 2000, 51). Burnard (2008) pointed to the need for "developing inclusive pedagogies in music education" in order to reach all learners, believing that music has the potential to serve as a "unifying force" (109). Allsup (2003) agreed that in an informal learning environment, students and teachers exist as more equal partners. Green (2001) suggested that students who engaged in informal learning practices were more likely to continue making music later in life.

Review of Literature

Three main topics were explored in relation to this study. These include the incorporation of popular music in the classroom, a comparison of formal and informal learning practices and the role of this type of learning in the pre-service teacher education program.

Use of Popular Music

Jaffurs (2004) desired to explore whether musicality was the same in formal and informal settings. While formal music education is validated in our society, the informal model relies on the imitation of other musicians. The author found that peer learning and peer critiques were even more productive than predicted. Unexpectedly, there was almost no positive feedback recorded during rehearsals. The term "incidental learning" was used to describe what takes place when a student is not necessarily trying to commit something to memory but almost learns accidentally, able to remember because the context itself was meaningful.

Byrne and Sheridan (2000) pointed to an emphasis on collaboration and active learning as the reasons for increased participation in Scotland's schools. In the curriculum used in this study, teachers supplied a framework and students were given more responsibility for their own learning. The authors pointed to a need for observation of an expert as well a greater frequency of feedback in the beginning. Only three of the 21 music educators involved in the study claimed expertise in the area of rock music.

Seifried (2006) found that what the students experienced was a different type of learning that was more hands-on. The author's guitar class subjects were motivated to sign up for the class for an "easy A"; they believed it would be easy and fun - less pressure than their other classes. It contrasted with their "academic" classes in that they were given freedom and the goal of learning for mere fun rather than learning because it is something they needed to learn or memorize for use later in life. They found the classroom to be a place where they could relax and learn something they enjoyed.

Informal Learning Practices

Westerlund (2006) reported that informal learning in music education can serve to "develop knowledge building communities" and is a valid way to advance musical expertise. Group members learn through interactions with each other and by observing and imitating one another. Learning is self and peer-directed rather than prescribed by a teacher. The author discussed this type of teamwork as an "important part of knowledge-building communities" (122). Students participating in Westerlund's study described classical music

as "alienating," stating, "music was broken down into elements that were meant to ease the learning but which at the same time did not mean anything" (122). In the case of informal learning, the teacher helped students to further their musical proficiency by providing the tools and an environment in which each could fully participate.

Green (2006) cautioned that too much emphasis could be placed on the final product, which might lessen the authenticity of the learning experience. The most progress was made during this course aimed at young pupils regarding the skill of listening. The author supposed the process of informal learning led to more independence, which provided the student with the skills and passion to continue make music beyond their school careers. Because learning is based on music of the students' choice, Green suggested they experienced greater enjoyment and were more motivated and committed to their craft than they would have been if faced with teacher-assigned materials.

Rusinek (2008) also found that when students were engaged in work that was self-regulated, motivation was increased. Short-term goals, responsibility, and the social aspect of collaboration were cited as possible reasons for the change. The goal of the small performing groups in this study was the concert and the expectations for success were high. In this case, the teacher's background knowledge derived from a formal music education was found to be helpful, but a better understanding of this style of learning was needed to make this experience a success.

Lindgren and Ericsson (2010), too, believed "the influence of authentic learning that occurs in everyday musical contexts" should influence school music programs (35). This type of learning was described as "collective," "creative," "spontaneous," "open," and "informal." The current type of music education was portrayed as "teacher-governed," "rule-controlled," "disciplined," "formal," and "closed." In addition, authors described the study of music as more about the process than the product. Concern was expressed that the focus on process and teamwork this might lead to the neglect of teaching musical skills. Lindgren and Ericsson saw this informal learning style as only being valuable for students who already had sufficient instrumental skills.

Impact on Music Teacher Education

Lebler (2007) found that criticism given by friends and audience members outweighed that given by teachers. According to the researcher, providing an opportunity for pre-service music teachers to participate in this type of educational experience served to "produce multi-skilled and adaptable graduates who are self-monitoring and self-directing" (p. 205). In this type of learning atmosphere, students not only made decisions regarding the musical repertoire, but also in the direction and assessment of the work itself.

According to Kratus (2007), "music educators have been most successful when they satisfied the prevailing musical desires of the public" (42). The author reported that adolescents listen to two to four hours of music every day, but rarely performed any of the music they hear in "real life." Still, we continue to use *solfege* to teach sight singing skills, a

practice drawn from the conservatory model created 200 years ago.

Davis and Blair (2011) discussed the long-standing dependency on notation that exists in many of our pre-service teacher programs. Music education majors served as subject for this study. Their discussions from their secondary methods course, performance experiences, online discussions and journals served as data. They had been taught how to perform art music, which requires formal training unlike folk and pop styles that are often learned informally. Popular music was often viewed as being intended for "everyday people in everyday life" and is seen as requiring "little intellectual effort to understand" (126). The authors argued, "Informal processes may be the primary vehicle for musical meaning-making among students" (129). Many pre-service teachers had not been exposed to informal learning practices and therefore had not considered them as a pedagogical tool.

Similarly, Strand and Sumner (2010) used a general music methods class in which to launch their action research project. Students participated in popular music making. They worked together to create "assessment criteria" in the form of rubrics; each addressed creativity, performing competence, and musical skill. Students also examined observations about the music learning process including the collaborative element. The actual song performance/instrumental skill portion of the grade was only weighted 15% as there was speculation that performers would be unwilling to take chances if the stakes had been higher. Students saw it as more important for the participants to enjoy learning process and

the opportunity to play in an ensemble than to gain performance skills. Students were asked what kinds of musical learning took place and how it was different from traditional instruction. Then, each described how they would imagine assisting in this type of music-making in their own classrooms, including what obstacles there might be and how these could be overcome.

This researcher sought to investigate the potential for successful music making when students work together to create music of their own choosing. The use of popular music played a role, but student-led group work and peer-directed learning were truly the focus. Could students make music with skills acquired through informal learning practices?

Methodology

This qualitative study employed journals, surveys using open-ended items, semi-structured interviews and rehearsal recordings as forms of inquiry. Green (2005) provided a model, borrowing many of the same questions in a discussion of how popular musicians learn. Rather than middle school students, the researcher employed 19 college students enrolled in a new May Term course called "Garage Band" as subjects. Each participant completed a consent form. By interviewing students with differing majors and varied experiences regarding music participation, I was able to gauge the negative and positive attributes of informal learning from a variety of perspectives.

Participants in the course were divided into four bands and provided with an electric guitar,

a bass guitar, a keyboard, and a drum set. Each student was required to choose either guitar or bass and, during the second half of the class, learn either keyboard or drums. On days two and three, a guest drummer and guest guitarist, respectively, each gave a one-hour clinic to demonstrate beginning technique on those instruments. All met for a brief music theory "lecture" each day at which time making music, not learning to read musical notation, was the focus.

Students were given a new small group project every three days, each progressively more challenging than the next in terms of the number of chords used or, later, the addition of singing. At the conclusion of each phase, students were asked to respond to several questions in a semi-structured journal format. One-on-one, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews took place in the first week and again at the conclusion of the course. A hand held recorder was used to record each interview. In addition, the rehearsal process was examined by requiring students to audio record 10 hours of rehearsal throughout the course. All recordings were downloaded and rehearsal data was transcribed manually. Performance rubrics created by students and feedback provided through the peer evaluation process served to provide further insight into the perceived value of informal music education.

Interview and journal questions included but were not limited to the following: (1) What made you sign up for this class?; (2) What did you enjoy most about this stage of the project? Least?; (3) Did you learn as much being left on your own as you would have with

more input from a teacher?; (4) How did being left on your own affect the relationships within your group?; (5) What worked well? What didn't work?; (6) How was it the same as music learning you have experienced in the past? How was it different?; and (7) Do you feel that you grew as a musician in this phase of the project?

Results

The course was popular and had a waiting list the first time it was ever offered. Both subjects and the researcher came in with some reservations and were not necessarily sure what to expect. Learning took place without feeling like work. The final performance was a success. In addition to the musical skills gained, students reported growth in their beliefs about their musical abilities, increased collaboration skills and positive changes in views on their role in their own learning. These themes, as well as student frustrations, are summarized below.

Identity as a Musician

Subjects reported positive feeling toward the freedom to learn at their own pace and of their own fruition. One reported, "Learned a lot about music, specifically drums and guitar. I feel like now I could teach myself just about any song to play."

Another student, with no prior experience playing a musical instrument, stated, "I learned that to play the drums you need to be able to multi-task to the extreme. It is easy to get sidetracked so I have to fixate on one person or place to keep myself from losing the beat."

Yet another appreciated the collective creation of art: "I think the biggest difference was collaborating musically as a group. It was new to me for the most part and very exciting

and fun." When asked whether or not the student would describe themselves as musicians at the end of the course, one finally replied, "Yes I am! To be able to pick up different instruments and learn them is a sign of a musician.

Group Work

Students expressed pride at having musical knowledge and being able to teach each other. Several discussed not having a score and having to communicate "a lot" to make it sound like it was supposed to sound. Leaders rose to the challenge and were largely appreciated by group members. Many students also mentioned being grateful for the compliments and encouragement delivered by their band mates.

Frustrations

The few negative comments were aimed toward the lack of ability and knowing what to do in the beginning of the course. "We needed more direction in the beginning." Several mentioned how awful and "off beat" their groups sounded in the beginning. "I was definitely out of my comfort zone!" One felt his group was doing too much sitting around and not enough practicing. Another felt as though all they were doing were "being mimics" while others disagreed, stating, "I have a new found respect for musicians and I know how to look up notes." We did have one band with "artistic differences" and had to move one of its member to a different ensemble late in the course.

Changes as a Learner

Several students cited changes in how they regarded themselves as learners. "Now I feel like I enjoy learning on my own. I'm definitely a person who likes structure and taught new info, but this taught me to teach myself." Another went so far as to say, "Due to how the course was set up I had to rely on myself and others to learn. This helped me in other courses."

A female shared insights on a comparison of informal learning to her experience with school music: "Through the school it was a much slower learning process and very step-by-step." Another mentioned, "The things I'm picking up from the other people in the band are just as important as the things I learned individually." Solidarity was a theme: "It challenged people to work together and teach one another for a common cause." Finally, one student came to the conclusion, "I think I learned how to be a successful collaborator."

Implications for Music Educators

It was indeed difficult for the researcher/instructor not to step in and direct the learning experience for the students. It was a challenge to break free from reverting back to comfortable methods and re-creating what I experienced as a learner. In this case, peers teach and even provide models for one another. Educators must be open to the idea of learning from students who are working together to solve "real life" problems. As was evidenced by several participants and existing research, collaboration is key.

Also central to the experience was student choice. The subjects, although "covering"

existing tunes, created the form of each song, determined what would sound most like the recording and decided who would play which instruments. Several of the National Standards were met by the informal learning approach. Students must perform, listen, often improvise and essentially compose as they explore this process. These tasks likely do not regularly occur in the large ensemble setting in which the conductor makes most, if not all, of the interpretive decisions and students follow directions. Informal learning concepts could be employed in this setting through the asking of open-ended evaluative questions, through the implementation of small group work, and by creating a framework in which students self-assess and must create solutions for musical problems together.

Following the "pilot" course described in this study, *Garage Band Ensemble* was accepted as a regular course offering for which students can complete the same general education requirement as is fulfilled through participation in traditional large ensembles. Music education students will be involved in action research in this course and will be participants in a "garage band" as part of a continuing weekly lab experience. It is hoped that all students involved will begin broaden their view of themselves as musicians as well as their view of music education.

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