

The Teacher as Builder of music learning contexts. ®

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About the Author

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Abstract

The teacher as builder of music learning contexts.

This paper examines the role of the teacher in constructing meaningful learning experiences for students of music in the classroom. Utilising data drawn from a larger doctoral participant-observation-case-study, the research discusses the role of the teacher as 'builder' and interpreter of context, experience and reflection. It argues that the teacher can facilitate both analytic and intuitive concepts in music through attention to the process as a system of context, experience, perception in and upon action, and structured reflection. It is proposed, that the multiple role of the classroom teacher; is to act as 'gateway' to deeper musical experience in ensembles and studio learning, to provide access to a variety of musical experiences and to unify the understanding of music learning through reflection. The paper utilises both conceptual data drawn from literature, narratives, interviews and observations of students and teachers involved in making music.

The Teacher as Builder of music learning contexts

Introduction

The role of the music teacher has been discussed by many theorists, with an emphasis upon experiential learning. In this paper, I would like to focus more specifically upon the *context* of the classroom teacher and discuss the implications of this upon the role that they play. I will draw data for this discussion from a larger PhD thesis, arguing that a special role be attributed to classroom music. This role is unique and distinct from the experiences gained from studio instrumental teachers, ensemble directors and outside-school music experiences. I argue that the classroom teacher is a *builder* and interpreter of music learning *contexts*. The role of teacher as builder of music learning contexts applies both to the experiences and encounters that they provide in the classroom and the connections that they make possible for music-making and thinking outside the classroom.

I began my PhD after many years working as a classroom music teacher. My intention was to examine the meaning of music to young people in a school context and to uncover the processes that gave access to that meaning. I approached these questions with the intent to interview and observe students and teachers and make sense of the meaning of music in their lives. Through examination of this data, I reconstructed an image of the processes that facilitated this meaning. When I first began to analyse the data drawn from this study, I was initially disappointed at the responses from students who spoke slightly of classroom music compared with other music experiences. One student interviewed said that classroom music was '*a little light-on*' implying that it was not as deep or challenging as his experiences with ensembles or as intensely focused as his instrumental studio learning. As I looked deeper at the data, I began to see that this comment and my disappointment were ill founded. Classroom music certainly was not as deep or challenging as ensemble and studio experiences but there was good reason for this. I could see that there was also a need to define the role of the classroom teacher and differentiate this role from the experiences students had in other areas of music learning. My theoretical understanding of music in the classroom was influenced by Swanwick's discussion of musical knowledge, which emphasised that meaning in the classroom could be both 'taught and caught' (1994: 2). What I hoped to do in this research was to explore further, what was happening in the classroom and add descriptive flesh to the bones of theory.

The teacher as builder.

The concept of a teacher as a builder of curriculums and context has its origins in the idea of 'knowledge by design' (Perkins, 1986). In this model, the teacher builds and interprets the learning context so that music meaning and knowledge might be both 'taught and caught' (Swanwick, 1994). Teachers actively interpret a curriculum, create the psychological environment and structure and interpret the physical environment so that it is designed to facilitate learning. The teacher controls and facilitates the learning process. Swanwick (1994) argues that it is necessary for the teacher to balance the productive tension between 'analytic' and 'intuitive' knowledge and meaning. When he describes that meaning is both 'taught and caught', he is suggesting that the teacher educates as much through structuring context and how they act as makers themselves, as by formal pedagogy and syllabus. Indeed the intuitive aspects of musical knowledge and meaning are caught by 'rubbing against it' (Swanwick, 1994) whilst formal pedagogy informs analytic meaning. The teacher embodies the intuitive and aesthetic aspects of curriculum whilst the analytic aspects exist in textual form in curriculum and resources. The later can be easily structured and ordered whilst the intuitive is more nebulous and experiential. The teacher's task: is to attend to the needs of the domain of music for increased complexity of musical experience. They must attend to the needs of the student and provide a successful, relevant and intrinsically

motivated experience and the requirements of the community for art to initiate students into the culture of the times and place. These demands upon the teacher are the parameters that inform the architecture and design of what a teacher does. To begin this discussion I will examine the role of the classroom music and the qualities of the teacher.

Classroom music

When I revisited the interview data collected from the case study, I encountered the inevitable comments about the problems of music classes. The general nature of classroom music and the variety of skill levels and understanding of music that presented in the classroom, which gave the impression of 'lightness'. Many of the tasks were not challenging for experienced music students but they were accessible to the lesser-experienced students. As I re-examined the responses, I began to notice a number of issues that participants raised about the value and potential of what they experienced in the classroom.

The themes that emerged from this analysis were quite distinctly classroom music oriented. They pointed to a differentiation between the role of the classroom teacher and other experiences with music making and suggested a profound connection between the classroom and other music experiences. The influence of classroom music teacher was felt by students in the following ways through:

- Introducing the student to a broad range of music, which enabled them to listen differently and more openly.
- Providing access to creative and broad experiences with music making than they might get with their solo instrument.
- The teacher facilitating pathways to develop their music, connecting their experiences with ensembles, solo teachers and performance.

The general music experience

The general nature of classroom music is its perceived weakness but it is also its strength. When the students interviewed discussed what classroom music added to their musical experience, they reflected thoughtfully about its role in their musical development. Here Jason, a sixteen-year-old trumpet player- guitarist and songwriter reflects upon his classroom music experiences:

It just opened-up doors to different pathways, like we just tried different styles of music. We weren't too great at the instruments at the time but still. And they [classroom teachers] just showed us some concert band pieces that we attempted to play and, yeah, studied theory and stuff a bit.

Jason is commenting upon the variety of encounters he was exposed to in classroom music. He is describing the classroom music experience as a gateway to other experiences in music making, providing his first tastes of concert band ensembles, music from other cultures, theory and instrumental music. Further information drawn from this interview revealed that it was a classroom teacher that noticed his attraction to trumpet and guitar and encouraged him to join bands and take up studio lessons. In a number of cases, students reported beginning instruments through the classroom programmes exposure to instruments. Students, who already played an instrument, often took up another instrument. The teacher acted as an 'animatuer' directing and facilitating deeper musical experience. Teresa an seventeen-year old flute player describes her feelings about classroom music:

The classroom music was fun, not year seven and eight. I mean I had fun learning bass guitar for a bit or doing the singing I was also conscious of the un-musicality of a lot of my classmates I just found it a bit frustrating. Year nine music I absolutely loved and we did all that African music and I was trying out all those different styles and experimented with these

new scales and new sounds, new feelings. I have such really, really vivid

memories of those classes. We, I think, all of us, had a real sense of

discovery, of celebrating those kinds of musical ideas African, South

American.

In this short passage, Teresa encapsulates the frustration and joy of general classroom music. Teacher's perception of the role of classroom music adds further to this understanding. James, a keyboard teacher, described the classroom as the place where students gained general aesthetic experiences, and learnt to 'respond' to music:

I think the classroom aims to develop an aesthetic sense of music. Like, be able to respond to music, to have some sort of response. That appears to be the aim and just expose students to music as an experiential thing rather than something that they're passive, that they just listen to. So I like the way they are introduced to certain elements of music making and encouraged to try those elements out for themselves.

Creative music making in the classroom

The generality of the classroom is important because it introduces students to a breadth of musical style and experiences with making music. It is necessarily accessible and achievable and that can be frustrating for the musically gifted and able, but even they acknowledge the introduction to breadth of experience as worthwhile. Students also found creative experiences rewarding, engaging and challenging. In recollecting their classroom music making experiences, they highlighted creative music making as an important part of their music learning:

I loved the creative activities I always got excited when we were given a task to do that was creative. I remember once we were to make an answering machine jingle. That was one of my first experiences, of making music for a purpose and that was really good fun. I love making my own music. I was glad that was part of the music

syllabus. (Edward seventeen-year-old guitarist and clarinet player)

Creative activity is challenging. The tasks are relative to ability, so the experienced student will often be as challenged by the task as someone with less ability. In this next narrative Brian, a senior music student, describes the openness of the task to compose a large-scale piece of electronic music.

Oh last year we had to do those pieces that were about seven

minutes or something. I got a hell of a lot out of that. Programming the

computer and things like that and there was some really interesting stuff that you can do. I mean, I was really proud of our final little piece. Like I didn't think I could compose, I mean it wasn't really any melody but it was sort of a... I don't know really, what you'd call it, but I thought I got a lot out of that. And just that free atmosphere in music where I was left on my own to create what you wanted and that's just how it's been since about year seven when I started, I noticed how good music was.

Several issues emerge from an analysis of Brian's description of creative music making in the classroom. Firstly, the task was challenging. Secondly, he felt that he gained something from the encounter but most importantly he comments upon the affect of the context, the environment upon this experience. He describes the *'free atmosphere to create what [he] wanted'*. This is directly related to the focus of this discussion. The teacher designed the task and created the context in which Brian had his music making experience. Brian recalled that he felt a sense of pride in what he had made and achieved. He reflected warmly upon the outcomes of his experiences with creative music making. The experience was significant to him and meaningful enough to recall.

Reflection in the classroom

Perhaps the most surprising theme that emerged from the examination of data about classroom music, was the idea that students had learnt to listen perceptively and reflect upon all of their music practice in the classroom. In this extract, Edward, a clarinet player/guitarist, describes what reflection in the classroom had taught him, and how it had acted to draw together his musical experiences:

It's just good to have the ear to pick up on that kind of stuff [musical elements] and to be able to talk about it and know what's happening and that's definitely, what the discussions have brought along. It's really interesting to see how all these do fit into what I do today.

Classroom music teachers were also conscious of the importance of reflection at all year levels. Peter, a junior music teacher discusses how he approached it:

Reflection was going on all the time in discussion. The classes are

really small so you could have whole class discussions that were quite intimate and effective at any age level. More formal reflection occurred later on, where they actually had books to record things and write things. We didn't do that with the little ones so much. If we had big projects or big performances we would make sure there was time to debrief them afterwards. Reflect on what occurred, How can it be

better next time? All the good things, the things that could be improved,

we got kids to talk about them and write about them. I remember we kept journals at year eight level when we were doing some team teaching. And we followed various approaches to do that but a lot of that was informal.

In the classroom unlike instrumental and ensemble experiences, reflection and perceptive activity were a formal and developmental activity as well as an informal part of music problem solving. Not only does the teacher enact reflective practice but also in the classroom it became a conscious activity of evaluation, discussion, criticism and aesthetics. This alerted me to the possibility that the combination of exposing students to a broad range of general activity in music making and structured reflection potentially armed students with critical tools they could use in other areas of music making. I felt that this was the connecting factor amongst the musical experiences. The classroom was where there was time to reflect and provide a context that could be manipulated to include broad general experiences at a level all students could access successfully. The 'lightness' made the experiences achievable and accessible, whilst the breadth and range of experience increased the opportunity for experience and reflection to facilitate knowledge and gaining meaning. The essential factor in all of this is the relationship with the teacher.

The characteristics of the teacher

'His love of music just spilled on to me..... He inspired me to learn to enjoy and appreciate jazz music.'

The teacher in this case is sharing or involving the students, in their own 'love of music'. The student is not talking about learning music pedagogy but about 'catching intuitive' understanding.

Students interviewed, placed a high value upon the teacher recognising and valuing their own music. They valued the teacher's openness to a broad range of listening and performance music. The teachers interviewed were aware of the affect that their 'attitudes and values' had upon their students. James, a keyboard teacher, describes what openness means to him in music learning:

The 'music is music' approach seems to affect adolescents even with quite strong one band or style approaches. They can see that it is OK to like music that might not fit their peer groups ideas, but through playing a variety of stuff and that open attitude they tend to develop a broader listening base.

The 'music is music' approach values all styles, periods and locations, for what they contribute to the knowledge of musical elements and human culture. It creates an environment of openness that allows students to move safely beyond the confines of youth culture to experience music in a much broader context. This is not to say that the music that youth culture holds is not musically valuable. Within this approach to music, the teacher needs to acknowledge the child's intrinsic interest in this music, be open to diversity of musical style and build an open environment. Jessica, a drama teacher describes this approach:

Even if they don't value the music but value the child's interest in that music that's what it's all about. As long as you are open, and say that, that's not something that I'm particularly interested in, but if you are interested in this then why don't you.... And still do the facilitating and advising that you normally would do.

The important issue here for teachers is the modelling or embodiment of a curriculum and the notion of perception on, and in action, and reflection. Problem solving is a large part of learning music. Initially the teacher solves the student's problems with performance but increasingly the student should be encouraged to be perceptive about their own performance and share in solutions. Self-evaluation and criticism was highly valued by students and teachers interviewed. This suggests that teachers need to consistently model behaviour and encourage students to talk, demonstrate and be perceptive about their music making. This is an important factor in musical development and contributes to the gaining of understanding and personal meaning.

The affects of modelling behaviour

During the field study, I observed a teacher working with a large group of student musicians.

She divided the class into sections, led by advanced and senior students. What took place when I wandered these smaller units rehearsing, was that each of the sections ran their rehearsals in the same manner [as the teacher]. Using metaphor, clapping, singing through parts, solving technical problems through reference to their understanding of fixing the problem. Fundamentally, all groups observed were imitating the reflective problem finding and problem solving behaviour of the teacher. (Field note observations of a large instrumental class)

The students were 'imitating' and adopting the approach to self-criticism, problem solving and analysis used by their teacher. They used the same 'multi-media' approach to communication, one that involved singing, clapping, demonstrating and verbal analogy. This kind of transfer (Perkins, 1988) of 'reflective practice' from teacher to student was quite universally observed within classrooms and ensemble rehearsals. In this case, the focus was upon making a good sound as a group. The experience becomes educative when the teacher involves the students in being perceptive about their music making and sharing her own perceptions with the students. The student learns by both doing and experiencing through the teacher's construction of experience. The teacher in this case has built a psychological environment that values open discussion, reflection and perceptive listening, as well as modelling behaviour that is self critical. The student's imitated her behaviour and learnt through immersion in an environment of her design.

The teacher as builder and interpreter of music-learning contexts.

The teacher both interprets and structures the learning environment. As the interviews suggest, teachers need to create a psychological environment that is open and welcoming and accepting of what the student brings to the lesson. A teacher can interpret existing culture or simulate other cultures and times to give students an experience with music making and reflection so that the student encounters and gains an understanding of that encounter. The teacher can alter or interpret the physical environment and the resources available in it so that the focus is upon the task and facilitates understanding of it. The teacher interprets curriculum and pedagogy and uses it as a framework for how the ideas and concepts are reflected upon, evaluated and presented. The teacher can interpret a historical or traditional idea and utilise it to show the role of music within the functional aspects of music making. So too, with ceremonial music making. The teacher draws aesthetics and philosophy from curriculum and their own values. Students participate in discussions about music making and product and experience making in an environment constructed by the teacher. Herein lies the key to understanding the role of teacher as builder and interpreter of contexts. The context is malleable, and able to be manipulated and interpreted in such a way that the student who enters it is motivated intrinsically to

participate in the activity and challenged by the aspects of analytical knowledge. Music meaning and knowledge can be both caught and taught in such an environment. This idea is important for teacher education. We need to educate music teachers to deliver the analytic pedagogy, embody the intuitive, and design, build and interpret contexts so that they facilitate learning and give access to a range of meaningful encounters.

Conclusion

What I am advocating here, is a need to recognise the role of the teacher as builder and interpreter of contexts. This involves redefining the roles and responsibilities of the classroom music teacher or at very least making the role more clearly delineated from that of other music teachers.

The classroom music teacher:

- act as an 'animatuer' or gateway to more complex and challenging musical experiences in the instrumental studio and ensemble,
- needs to provide access to broad general musical experiences in composing, performing and listening and exposure to the richness of repertoire of our own culture and to a diverse range of other cultural and historical contexts.
- should employ the use of structured reflective activity that educates the aesthetic sensibility of the students. It is through the gaining of these meta-cognitive skills, that students will gain the ability to be self-contained and self-reflective musicians. This ability can allow them to make sense of all of their music making experiences.

The teacher's role is to build and interpret the context in such a way that they can shape an environment in which students have access to intrinsic and satisfying music experiences and reflection that results in meaningful learning. In the same way that we are creative in our organisation and manipulation of the elements of music and music materials to make music, so must the process of music education unfold. Art sequestered into a museum culture becomes history, art that interacts with community and context has the means of its own growth. As the teacher/conductor Jane in this research remarked: *'It's that feeling, and you can't create that, you can only create the situation that makes it possible.'* This is the essence of the teacher as builder and interpreter of context. It suggests that the teacher can construct an environment where meaning can be both 'taught' and 'caught' (Swanwick, 1994) and the student experiences music making through immersion in a context that is simultaneously intrinsic, engaging and challenging.

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