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‘Putting on a show’: Engaging and authentic learning in experiential music education

Dr Jane Southcott, Monash University

Abstract

Advocacy for music in schools is imperative in the current educational climate. Recently various arguments have had degrees of popularity – music to engender creativity, ‘music makes you smarter’, music for social enrichment, and so forth. The frequent calls for ‘real life’ or ‘authentic’ experiences in education in which students gain ‘deep understanding’ of ‘essential learning’, offer music educators another avenue for advocacy. In secondary schools, many music educators are responsible for all or part of major school music theatre productions. These productions seem to function in similar ways to both amateur and professional theatre in the wider community. These experiences can be understood as both a form deep ‘essential learning’ and of authentic-context experience. The introduction of such activity in teacher education can also emulate real life experiences of both the future professional settings of music educators and musicians. For the past decade, the creation, preparation and presentation of a major music theatre work has been a significant component of the fourth year pre-service secondary teacher education programmes at Monash University, Victoria, Australia. The music and drama methodology classes are the core of these productions but volunteers from across the wider student teacher education cohort are also welcomed. This paper considers such music theatre productions as experiential education and articulates the potential benefits and pitfalls. Past students were interviewed about their perceptions of the experience and its influence on their later teaching. Their comments will be used to illustrate experiential facets of the programme. Such critical reflection demonstrates change which is, in experiential education termed ‘transfer’. This completes the experiential learning cycle. This discussion will demonstrate that such a programme and its equivalent activities in schools are experiential learning. This, then, becomes another advocacy position we can take in arguing the presence of music in schools.

Current curricular change in Australian music education

Throughout Australia major curriculum changes are occurring with moves to ‘essential learnings’ in which students gain deep understanding of key areas of human experience. In 2006 in Victoria the Essential Learning Standards (‘the Standards’) will be implemented. The Arts is one of the eleven essential ‘domains’ of learning. Music is one of the Arts (Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority VCAA, 2005b). A governmental position paper offers rationales for the inclusion of arts education in schools: to “engage us in personal and collaborative endeavours and opportunities to consider the exploration of art forms as a journey” and to “teach us to discover and appreciate our own and others’ strengths and weaknesses and to develop self-discipline” (VCAA, 2005a, p. 4). Integral to the Arts “is learning from and interacting with others, and working effectively in teams to manage and resolve challenge” (VCAA, 2005a, p. 5). As is common in such statements, the first section is entitled ‘Why the Arts?’

‘Why the Arts?’: The currency of advocacy

The recent special focus edition of the *International Journal of Music Education* demonstrates the currency of advocacy for school music. It is a charge of the International Society for Music Education to identify and create advocacy opportunities in international fora to emphasise the importance of including music in education in the life of every person (Lindeman, 2005). Mark (2005) notes: “Advocacy for music education has become a major professional activity” (p. 95). He continues to state that: “We music educators ... know inherently the importance and value of music ... if policy makers who have the authority to control education do not know these things, then we must not only tell them, but persuade them as well” (Mark, 2005, p.95). Olsson (2005) states that music education involves “active participation in music making” (p. 121). Such engagement uses “a great many skills and elicits a wide range of responses ... [it] requires the development of aural, intellectual, physical, emotional, communication and musical skills in addition to high levels of commitment, motivation and organization” (Hallam, 2005, p. 145). None of the included

advocacy positions employ arguments that cite the principles of experiential education, an established and well-respected philosophical and practical approach to holistic education in which teachers “purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection ... to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values” (Association for Experiential Education, 2004). Aland (2005) notes that “everyday we are involved, either directly or indirectly in arts-based experiences” which demonstrate that the arts are an “integral, important and significant component of our daily lives” through which “we are helped to ‘know’ about our world”.

Experiential Education: Principles and practices

Arguably experiential education has always underpinned effective pedagogy and was succinctly defined by Confucius (ca. 450BCE): “Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand.” (Pickles, 2004). Dewey (1916), an early advocate of the approach, stated that “an ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that theory has vital and verifiable significance” (p. 144). The quality of the experience is crucial. However, education only becomes truly experiential when elements of reflection and transfer are added (Prest, 2005). Reflection should be purposeful and lead to cognitive, affective and behavioural change. When change influences future behaviour, there is said to be transfer.

Kolb provides a model of experiential learning – a repetitive cycle comprised of four adaptive learning modes – the experience, reflection on the experience, assimilation of the experience and reflection into a theory, and, finally, testing the theory in new situations when the cycle begins again (Kolb, p. 42). The tenets of experiential education are pervasive, but often implicit and unacknowledged. It is useful to recognise this powerful theoretical model. Carver (1996) identifies four salient pedagogical principles that are features of experiential education. These are authenticity, active learning, drawing on student experience and providing mechanisms for connecting experience to future opportunity. Southcott (2004) has already described the efficacy of experiential education in tertiary music education programmes. This paper will describe and discuss an experiential programme for fourth year pre-service secondary teacher education students.

‘Putting on a show’: Music theatre in schools

From 1995 music methodology students in the fourth year of pre-service teacher education at Monash University have formed the core of a musical theatre production team. From 1999, drama methodology students have been similarly involved. From the outset the creation, preparation, and presentation of the annual show was designed to replicate the processes undertaken in schools. It was reasoned that, as music and drama teachers, their future professional role would include the presentation of music theatre events. Maintaining the tenets of experiential education, it was argued that the best way to learn was to do. The production has always been open to volunteers from across the fourth-year student cohort. Any person wanting an on-stage named role has to audition. Now, so many audition that we name the chorus. The annual cast is approximately fifty. As the show is original it is also very flexible. If a student does not wish to sing, their character will not have a song. We design a show to present student performers in their best light.

We create, from scratch, an original two-act musical comedy with approximately fourteen musical numbers for soloists, ensembles, chorus, and/or dancers. As the students are completing teacher training, the theme is always education. The Director (the music methodology lecturer) chooses a setting. In the past ten years the shows have been: *Mob School* (1995), *Education Impossible* (1996), *The Roswell Players Present...* (1997), *Night School* (1998), *Bananas Split!* (1999), *Much Ado about Teaching* (2000), *Lucky Strike* (2001), *Unteachables* (2002), *Ye Gods!* (2003), *Teachalot at Camelot* (2004), *Papyrus Rubric* (2005) and *Robin Hoodwinked* (2006). Students can take on a variety of roles – actor, singer, dancer, musician, stage manager, costumer, script writer, composer, arranger, auditioner, lyricist, sound technician, painter and designer of scenery, publicist, programme editor and so on. Many students take on more than one role. Engagement is flexible but expected. The show is presented on three consecutive nights at the conclusion of the academic year. Ticket sales must cover the costs incurred – as is often the case in schools.

Active learner engagement is a basic tenet of experiential education that requires “the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results” (Luckmann, 1996, p. 7). Such learning, combined with academic learning, results in more accurate and persistent learning as it “engages the whole

person with the intellectual content of the course” (Jernstedt, 1995, p. 369). To ascertain the effectiveness of the programme, a number of past students were interviewed; all of who now teach in schools, responsible for concerts and music theatre performances. Their comments will be used to illustrate the four pedagogical principles of experiential education. Interview data was sorted by emergent themes to facilitate this process.

Authenticity

Authentic experiences are: “understood by participants as relevant to their lives... students can identify reasons for participating” (Carver, 1996, p. 10). Paul et al (2001) recommend that authentic-context learning activities should occur in “an environment that resembles actual professional practice” (pp. 136-7). The students recognised the authenticity of the musical, some more than others. Those who gained most reflected on how it related to prior experiences, academic study and future professional contexts. One student clearly identified this:

It was more of an experience thing. We’ve done a lot of research, and a lot of teaching in class about preparing ourselves as music teachers, for ... when we’re actually in the field. This sort of activity was able to give us ... [the opportunity] to concrete those learnings through practical application. All the theories we had discussed were suddenly put into practice.

Opportunities should be created for learners to examine their values. Another student recognised the importance of commitment and determination: “failure is not an option... it will be a good show if you put everything into it.”

Active learning

In active learning “students are physically and/or mentally engaged in the active process of learning ... to address social, physical and emotional as well as cognitive development” (Carver, 1996, p. 10). Active learning may occur through: “posing questions, investigating, experimenting ... solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning” (Association for Experiential Education, 2004). This involves intellectual and aesthetic risk taking with students moving beyond past experience. Often students took on more than one task. One student stated:

I composed four different charts for the play, I did some arranging of other people’s charts ... did administration duties ... like programmes ... I played in the band, guitar, and ... I sang on stage, acted on stage, performed on stage.

This student acknowledged that some tasks were new, such as composition, arranging and administration. He felt that he was both developing new skills and consolidating old ones.

Part of an active learning process is unpredictability of outcomes. Spontaneity is important (Luckmann, 1996). Teachers “must recognize that they do not have ultimate control over the outcome. The learner is actively engaged in ... knowledge construction” (DeLay, 1996, p. 80). It could be argued that the very process of collaboration removes some of the predictability for individuals. In the process of writing and composing it was stressed that this would be a collaborative process and, more than likely, individual contributions would be modified.

Drawing on student experience

By drawing on experience, “students are guided in the process of building understandings of phenomena ... educators create activities that provide opportunities for students to ... interact with specific situations” (Carver, 1996, p.10). Many of the students had a wealth of past experience in music and theatre performances. One recalled that she was in her first production when:

I was four years old when I played the princess in ‘The Princess and the Moon’ ... during my secondary years I was involved in a major college production every single year in which I had the lead role in all six of those including the role of Music Director for the last two.

When asked to reflect on the experience of taking part in the fourth year performance, this student identified the idea of “complete conceptual development” as new. As a future professional she realised that she would be responsible for such events: “there were no wonderful magic adults to make everything happen.”

In experiential education the development of relationships, “learner to self, learner to others, and learner to the world at large” is important (Association for Experiential Education 2004). This was evident in reflective comments about taking responsibility and dealing with challenging individuals, for example, a student commented on a fellow cast member:

who came in and decided that her eight lines were not suitable and overnight it became four pages of dialogue ... That was very frustrating. Also ... is people not turning up to rehearsals ... it's still a reality that must be ... allowed for and it shows you as a performer and also as the person who would ... coordinate such an event what kinds of things you can do to prevent those kinds of people from basically closing down your show.

Another student identified the challenge of working with others but constructively suggested that this could have some benefits:

The task is put there ... for us to develop these skills and to further our learning into a more practical situation that ... we're going to find ourselves in the teaching force. I was disappointed ... by peoples' commitment and dedication to the task. I thought they would see the value in it ... that put pressure on everyone else...I feel I took on a lot more than everyone else ... because I wanted to get the most out of it ... that's a positive thing.

Another student echoed this:

Some people didn't step up to the bar and that responsibility fell on other people ... but yet again that's still reflective of what its like out in the industry and I know where I teach there are some people who act the same way and other people have to step in to pick up their slack. So, in turn, the negative was the fact that I was disappointed ... is a positive thing because it prepared me for the same situation.

Providing mechanisms for connecting experience to future opportunity

By providing mechanisms for connecting experience to future opportunity “students develop habits, memories, skills and knowledge that will be useful to them in the future” (Carver 1996, p. 10). As students preparing to enter the teaching profession they were expected to reflect on present and future practices. One student identified this:

Its something we've done before, we've learnt through that task and we're able to reflect on it and then when we go into the school situation where we're not in a learning environment *per se* for ourselves – we are the ones who are the experts now ... we've got something to reflect on ... a foundation learning to base our skills upon so we can take what we've learnt and adapt it.

Reflective practice and authentic-context learning “helps prospective music teachers begin to think like teachers and take on the teaching role” (Paul et al, 2001, p. 137). This was a recurring theme in the interviews. As established teachers holding positions of responsibility, the experience was crystallised for the respondents. One stated that:

This event or part of the course I think is invaluable ... obviously in a school you've done shows before but you never see the organizational side of it, you've never seen behind the scenes, all the cogs that make the actual show work... I took on as much as I could because I was preparing for ... what I would have to do as a teacher out in the 'real world.'

Another student confirmed that in her first two schools in (one in Victoria, one at an international school) “doing a revue certainly helped me”. In both schools she found she had no resources and had to create

music theatre performances from scratch. Having done the revue gave her “a far better understanding of the time lines you are working with and the limitations of the performers and expected line delivery on stage and how to equally share the parts out”. It is a basic principle of the fourth year musical that it is an ensemble piece with many comparatively equal roles. The cast is intentionally large to allow for the maximum number be involved in an inclusive educational experience.

The interviewees stated that, as established teachers, they undertake original music theatre productions with their students. One teacher runs a Year 9 elective programme:

a three day you start with nothing, you have a concept you develop into a one hour show ... the students write their own scripts and write their own music, to completely rehearse and also perform their piece. They also had to publicise ... It was extremely successful. It was absolutely frantic but couldn't have been done if we didn't have it mapped out very, very clearly.

When asked to identify the potential benefits of an original production over a purchased work, both positive and negative features were noted. Generally, a published work was used because of time constraints. Original works were considered more flexible and able to cater for different abilities. One respondent stated that providing students with the opportunity to be creative would focus on both process and product, and give students “real ownership.”

The presentation of school concerts and music theatre performances are often an expected component of the duties of a music educator. Often music teachers feel pressured to perform to gain recognition and resources. But, school productions also have a role in advocacy. It was interesting how interviewees saw school performances aligning with the views of school administrators. A respondent realistically commented:

Value to the school would come first because regardless of what schools say ... if you've got some form of showcase where you can show the work of students in any kind of public domain that's going to be a selling point for the school, particularly if it's a really successful one... In terms of the kids it offers students that may not normally get the opportunity to show their skill ... an outlet where they can actually be appreciated and admired and in terms of the curriculum it's the complete all-round delivery.

As Boyd (2005) points out: “caution is needed when the Arts are seen as only accepted for their role in improving the ‘tone’ of the school, but otherwise are marginalised as part of the regular curriculum” (Boyd, 2005). ‘Putting on a show’ can have both benefits and pitfalls.

Conclusion

One student noted that school productions, as experiential learning, meshed with current curriculum developments in which: “they’re asking students to become independent learners and independent thinkers.” The Standards state that students learn best in supportive, productive learning environments that “promotes independence, interdependence and self motivation” and where teachers use strategies to “promote students’ self-confidence and willingness to take risks with their learning” (Blueprint for Government Schools, 2005). The new curricular frameworks also identify the acquisition of life-long learning skills. Aland (2005) confirms that the arts have: “an important and significant part to play in life beyond school.” Boyd (2005) agrees that both schools and arts educators recognise that: “the arts teach the life-skills of team spirit, character building, cultural benefits and the opportunity to express feelings and mix with other people.”

Demonstrably, undertaking music theatre productions with pre-service teacher education students is authentic learning that replicates community practices, anticipates future career roles and are effective experiential learning. The principles and practices of which are articulated in programmes such as this and those constantly undertaken by school music educators. When asked whether she would continue to do school shows, one interviewee stated: “You have to. I mean its like having a kid learning an instrument and they never do an exam and they never play in a concert – what are they working towards?” As advocates for school music, the tenets of experiential education provide us with a powerful argument.

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