

ARTICLE

The significance of formative assessment for pupils' spiral progression in English lower secondary school group composing

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Abstract

The notion of the spiral for progression and development is familiar both in general educational discourse and in the domain of music education. This brief article considers the spiral within the context of lower secondary school group composing in England. Through the use of examples taken from two schools in the English midlands, it argues that formative assessment is a key process for enhancing spiral-like musical learning.

Keywords: formative assessment; group composing; lower-secondary school; spiral

Introduction

Formative assessment, when used effectively, improves learning (Scriven, 1967; Bloom, Hasting & Madaus, 1971; Crooks, 1988; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Broadfoot, 1998; Gipps, 1999; Gardner et al., 2010; Wiliam, 2016; Andrade and Heritage, 2018). It has particular significance within teachers' pedagogical practices because, without it, educators cannot 'elicit information which will be of use to the pupil and the teacher in deciding what ought to be done next in order to develop learning' (Fautley, 2010, p. 9). Formative assessment, therefore, has the potential to support long-term spiral development. In relation to Swanwick and Tillman's (1986) sequence of musical development, students' musical thinking can develop from a focus on exploring materials, through a phase of personal expression, to centring on structure and form (Young, 2021). It can also support progression on a short-term basis, lesson-by-lesson.

Drawing on two examples from recent, group composing research conducted in the English lower-secondary school setting (Key Stage 3 – ages 11–14 – in English schools), this article discusses the significance of formative assessment, lesson-by-lesson, in the context of musical progress.

Spiral models within music education

The notion of the spiral is familiar both in general educational discourse and in the domain of music education (Bruner 1960, 1975; Swanwick & Tillman, 1986; Charanga, 2015; Daubney & Fautley, 2019).

Within the context of composing, Swanwick and Tillman's (1986) spiral describes population-generated information on children's freely composed pieces between the ages of 3 and 11. Of particular interest are the 'speculative' and 'idiomatic' labels; the indicated ages (10–15) correspond to

the age range spanning England's Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14), the focus of this article. The characteristics of these two labels are described below:

Speculative: This is when 'imaginative deviation' (ibid., p. 333) occurs. Experimentation and contrast are key features of this label. In addition, the control of pulse and phrase becomes less fixed (compared to before) and novices attempt to find the 'right' note 'or attempt to introduce a deviation which doesn't quite work' (ibid. p. 333). It is a time when 'there is a musical formulation in the mind of the child that is not quite realised' (ibid., p. 333).

Idiomatic: At this stage, the music is more regarded as 'grown up' (ibid., p. 333) where '[t]echnical, expressive and musical control begins to be established reliably over longer periods of time' (ibid., p. 333). It is also noted that popular music is particularly influential in this stage as students 'seek to enter recognisable musical communities' (ibid., p. 333).

Although the original article stated that the researchers were 'observing relatively undirected musical *processes* rather than the *products* of polished performances' (ibid., p. 311, italics in original), there is no discussion of the role formative assessment, as a process for improving learning, or a consideration of the influence this might have had on the children's compositions. This article discusses the role of formative assessment within the group composing context, an area not addressed in the Swanwick/Tillman spiral.

Defining 'formative assessment'

In England, the use of the term 'formative assessment' tends to be built upon the work of Black and Wiliam (1998) who defined it as

all those activities undertaken by teachers and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged (pp. 7–8).

This modality of assessment can be considered different to that of summative assessment which is usually more concerned with the finished composition (or compositional *product*). Instead, formative assessment focuses on the *process* for 'what the next [musical] steps are on an individual [whether 'individual' is defined as a sole pupil or a group of pupils] and personal level' (Booth, 2017, cited in Kinsella and Fautley, 2021, p. 73) *in order to arrive* at the finished product. As such, when formative assessment is considered, the visualisation of the spiral becomes an important metaphor where it is quite possible for 'pupils [to] go back and forth, up and down . . . over time' (Fautley and Daubney, 2019, p. 8). This consideration is key for music educators because, as Fautley and Daubney (2019) continue:

Often as learners encounter a new situation their apparent attainment can be perceived as dipping, but by invoking the notion of a spiral does not mean that their actual attainment has worsened, merely that in the specific instance in question the pupils have shifted location on the spiral (p. 8).

Spiral assessment and the music classroom

Two examples drawn from recent research conducted in two English schools are now presented. These instances are used to discuss the notion of short-term, lesson-by-lesson spiral progress and how formative assessment was a process for supporting this.

Example 1

The first example comes from forthcoming work (Booth & Kinsella, [n.d.](#)) focusing on Threshold Concepts. According to Meyer and Land ([2003](#)), who are credited with doing the original work on Threshold Concepts, it:

can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress (p. 1).

In relation to Fautley and Daubney's ([2019](#)) comment above, a 'new situation' may cause a pupil (or group of pupils) to 'get stuck' (Meyer & Land, [2006](#), p. i) and, therefore, require some sort of knowledge in order to progress up the spiral.

In our Threshold Concepts research (Booth & Kinsella, [n.d.](#)), we discuss how formative assessment was an important process for supporting a Year 9 pupil ('Student 3') to cross the sequential Threshold Concepts of knowing, and then being able to play, a chord sequence within an 'idiomatic' (Swanwick & Tillman, [1986](#)) group composition. During composing session 1, we identified that 'Student 3' was having difficulty with knowing the notes of a chord sequence which had been created by the other pupils as part of their collective pop-inspired group composition. As such, because of this lack of knowledge, 'Student 3' was not able to play the chord sequence on the piano along with his peers and so became redundant. To cross this barrier, 'Student 3' sought the expertise from a fellow group member ('Student 1' – the guitarist within the group, who also received keyboard lessons) who modelled the chord sequence on the piano for him several times. After several minutes of dialogue and imitated modelling ('Student 1' would play the chord sequence on the piano and 'Student 3' would then play it back to him), 'Student 3' was then able to play along with his peers and continued to make a valuable contribution to the group's work. As such, it can be said that, in this example, formative assessment (through exchanges of dialogue and imitated modelling between the two students) was an important process to help 'Student 3' move up his own individual spiral during the group composing session. It should be noted, however, that in the following composing sessions which took place one week and then four weeks later from session 1, 'Student 3' was still seeking some help, albeit less than before, from 'Student 1' with the same chord sequence. Spirally speaking, then, this suggests that although formative assessment was an important process to support 'Student 3' in changing his location on his own individual spiral during session 1, he appeared to have slipped backwards at the start of the subsequent composing sessions and, therefore, needed the help of 'Student 1' in order to reposition himself at his prior spiral location.

Example 2

The second example is taken from a case-study for my PhD research (Booth, [forthcoming](#)). In this research, I am investigating how students use audio recorders during group composing processes. Each lesson, students make at least one recording of their work-in-progress composition. A week later, they begin their composing session by listening back to these work-in-progress compositions from the previous week.

In one Year 8 case-study focus group, students reported that it was usual for them to forget what music they composed from one lesson to another. This was because, in this school, creative ideas and useful information (for example, who was doing what and in what order this would appear in the composition) were hardly ever written down. Spirally speaking, difficulties with remembering their work-in-progress composition meant that pupils were beginning each session from a significantly lower place on their spiral than where they were a week previously. At the end of case-study, however, I found that allowing these pupils to record part of their composition and

listen back to it a week later provided valuable opportunities for formative assessment to take place and support spiral progression.

For example, when students listened back to their previously recorded work at the beginning of a new composing session (a week later), I observed them reminding themselves through imitating, miming and working out their individual notes and rhythms. This occurred both whilst they were listening and after. The audio recorder, therefore, can be said to have served as an *aide memoire* and thus provided valuable opportunities for formative assessment to take place. As a result, I found that this impacted positively on the group's composing processes because, according to both the students and their music teacher, the use of the audio recorder in this way helped speed up the composing process from one music lesson to another. It should be pointed out, however, that although pupils were still starting from a lower point on their spiral compared to the previous week, this was unproblematic because the use of the audio recorder enabled the pupils to quickly return to their previous spiral position and continue composing as a group.

Discussion and conclusion

Mills (2009) commented that the prospect of a general spiral model, in relation to assessment, can be seen to be 'fraught with difficult[ies]' (p. 103). This brief article has suggested that this is not the case with formative assessment. Instead, as shown in the examples above, it was found to be a key aspect in allowing pupils to move forward with their composing as well as providing them with opportunities to progress as musicians.

This article also suggests that the notion of the spiral still has relevance for musical teaching and learning today. As shown in example 1, individual pupils within a group may well be at a lower (or higher) place on their own spiral than some of their peers. Similarly, as shown in example 2, pupils can begin a music lesson at a lower place on the spiral than in a previous lesson. Neither of these examples present insurmountable problems, as discussed in this article. The different places pupils occupy in their own spirals of development were unproblematic because there was a clear investment of time and space to allow formative assessment to take place. As this article has suggested, when this takes place effectively, it can help drive spiral, as well as musical, learning forward.

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