

The challenges of teaching composing

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Identifying the issues

It is a familiar comment from some new beginner music teachers, ‘I’m not a composer, how do I teach composition, I’m not sure about this, I don’t feel confident . . .’. Since the work of Paynter (1982), Swanwick (1979), Swanwick and Taylor (1982) and others, whose work has influenced the National Curriculum in England, classroom music-making has focused on the key musical activities of listening, performing and composing, assuming an experiential learning approach which builds on the inter-relatedness of the three activities. Visits to school music departments reveal a range of pupil music-making but often the area which is least confidently facilitated and supported (and perhaps misunderstood) is composing. Why is this and what are the challenges of teaching composing?

From composing to composition

One of the revealing factors is the way in which the word composing (a dynamic and engaging process) has been replaced by the word composition when talking to many music teachers. The change of language here is most revealing: implying that the value of this creative process, at the heart of lesson planning, has been lost to the high worth of a musical product. Why has this arisen?

From my observations as a university tutor involved in training new secondary school music teachers, as well as facilitating in-service postgraduate development, it would seem that part of the dilemma arises from the increasing pressure on schools to attend to school performativity issues. This includes providing an evidence base for school league tables, school and departmental targets and other aspects of national policy reform agendas. Perceptions of processes are difficult to measure, and so composing as process, which in my experience develops and ossifies musical skills and knowledge, has become reified into composition, the recognisable artefact with its potential for a ‘painting by numbers’ pedagogical approach. The activity in many music classrooms is often built around the teaching of musical forms and genres which contributes towards this issue.

Having identified a tension between composing as a dynamic and explorative process and the pressure to produce recognisable artefacts which can be assessed for public examination purposes (and can often work against the pursuit of creativity), how do we move forward? Perhaps our challenge as music teachers is to adopt a teaching style which facilitates growth through composing experience in a way which allows for exploration and creative investigation, and which also deepens and broadens a young person’s understanding of musical forms.

Performing skills and composing

What is the relationship between performing skills and composing activity? I have often observed that composing activities can be limited in terms of development through lack of instrumental experience and associated motor skills. However, this does not necessarily mean that only experienced instrumentalists can compose, otherwise popular music styles would not exist and the practices of informal learning would be invalidated along with the many modes of learning associated with music technologies. The emphasis for the pre-service teacher here is to encourage and support the development of motor skills and increased engagement with instrumental learning (whatever form this takes) as part of classroom musical engagement as well as outside of it. This aspect has not been over-looked by the recent Henley Review of music education.

One way of addressing the need to develop instrumental skills for all young people is to consider the activities and approaches adopted under the Wider Opportunities programme. Whole class access to instrumental learning has been popular in primary schools. Anecdotally, teachers attest to the value of the activities in terms of other composing and listening activities but this highlights the need for systematic evaluation to be established for this approach. It also calls for an increased input of whole class composing and improvising ensemble activities in pre-service teacher training, in order that beginning teachers can gain relevant experience.

Music technology

Another challenge for the teaching of composing concerns ideas surrounding the use of music technology and music software as summarised by Cain (2004). A key concern raised by music teachers at professional development events is the extent to which composing with music technologies is 'original' and/or concerned with re-forming ideas. Music technology has allowed ready access to musical activity without prior acquisition of 'traditional' music skills or conceptual understanding of music (see Crowe, 2006 for a further discussion) and it is this issue which vexes some music teachers. It is of particular concern when summative assessments are made of young learners, and it is an issue which is given much practical consideration during the PGCE training year.

However, from observations in schools, classroom practitioners constantly evaluate the prepared samples and analyse the processes demanded of the learner with the acquisition of each software package, so that they are clear what the learning outcomes will be and how this can be accommodated within the curriculum, and also the relevant assessment frameworks.

In discussing this with new beginner teachers, I am grateful to one of my students for articulating the issues for his peers using a cooking analogy, likening the use of pre-composed samples in music-making to making a meal through assembling shop-bought fresh pasta, supermarket pasta sauce, a packet of pre-grated parmesan and a bag of ready-washed salad (rather than assembling all the constituent ingredients and making each part of the meal). Now known as the Lloyd Grossman or Jamie Oliver process of composing, this has led to interesting debates concerning the place and value of each approach – the

details of which are outlined in greater depth and breadth at regular sessions throughout the course in the light of increasing school placement experience.

What does this mean for music teaching today? It means that as practitioners we need to be clear about our learning objectives in relation to music technology and its place in the lives of young people, and therefore the classroom. It means that there needs to be a balance between types of activity and a balance between different resources accessed within the curriculum. For example, being able to use acoustic instruments, personal e-technology equipment and music apps/software, as well as classroom-based music technologies.

Evaluating and assessing composing

In evaluating and assessing composing activities, what are we looking for as evidence of understanding? Is it the satisfactory completion of a task? Is it the polished performance of a composition (what is the influence of performance on the assessment of composition)? Is it what pupils say? As part of a composing pedagogy, beginner music teachers in my institution are supported to develop opportunities for learner talk (Alexander, 2005) as part of the composing activity. Pupils are encouraged to explain and discuss along the way, using informal expressions, the vernacular and generic language, and then formal terms for musical ideas (as appropriate) (Langer, 1953). Analysing the language in this way and learning how to use the approach in a seamless manner is a challenge for beginner teachers. In addition, learning to evaluate and respond to the seemingly random comments and descriptions of music by pupils is an associated skill which needs to be developed as part of learning how to teach – making sense of talk about music, however it manifests itself.

The challenge for the music teaching community in this respect is to devise and facilitate scenarios and activities which enable beginner music teachers to develop their questioning and commentary skills alongside the skills of analysis. In reality, beginner music teachers start to show flair for this aspect of practice during their extended school placement as they gradually become acclimatised to the music classroom.

Pre-service teacher identity

Behind the previously identified challenges for teaching composing lies many pre-service teachers' lack of confidence with their identity as a composer, as implied at the beginning of this article. This carries on into professional practice if it is not addressed during initial teacher training. Most prospective music teachers will have a performance background: a high level of instrumental skill is still the background for most ITE secondary music students and this gives rise to the predominance of teacher identity as a performer rather than a composer. This becomes an issue for pre-service music teachers as it seems that an initial understanding of 'composing pedagogy' is,

You can either do it or you can't, I don't know how you help children become composers . . .

The research of Paynter (1982), Odam (1995) and Glover (2000) emphasises that composing activities underpin the development of musical skills and understanding. Therefore the place of composing is at the heart of music pedagogy. It is this which pre-service music

teachers need to explore and develop for themselves (it is the processes of creating, shaping, forming and re-forming which trainees are learning together) in order to develop their confidence, and will form the spine of their own music teaching practice. It is a challenge for music educators as we seek to reveal how to facilitate growth in composing activity in the classroom as well as outside of it. In the light of this, perhaps we should place composing at the heart of pre-service music teacher training.

Composing as process

Central tenets

It would seem that a clear pedagogy for the development of growth in composing needs to be mapped, articulated and rehearsed (and therefore refined) within circles of experienced practitioners in order to support the growth and confidence of new entrants to the profession. The research of Swanwick (1999), Glover (2000), Burnard (2000) and Green (2002) together with the experiences of many subsequent teachers and researchers is rich with examples of practice from which pedagogies emerge. However, drawn from my varied music teaching experiences, I would like to reiterate and argue here for a focus around three central tenets in developing the growth of composing skills and understanding for young people and therefore a skeletal pedagogy for the beginner music teacher.

From the work of Dewey (1934) and Bruner (1966), I would like to suggest that *exploration and rehearsal* of ideas, sounds and samples is the starting point for musical activity and the development of small compositions (artefacts). The value of *exploration* from/with any source is self-evident but the importance of *rehearsal* is necessary to develop related conceptions of *intention* and editorial ability (or *reasoned choice*). This moves learners away from random acts and 'accidents with sound' and into a further cognitive engagement with musical ideas which, in being committed to memory, leads to the *internalising of ideas*. From this basis, the development of musical skills and concepts can be facilitated and supported (I believe this is what we mean by progression!).

Pedagogy

As a young learner's tool bag of musical ideas and understanding grows, the role of the teacher becomes that of a guide who allows room for the *co-construction of learning* to take place, both within the classroom and through acknowledging and valuing the music-making which takes place outside of school through informal learning. In other words the monopoly position of teachers has evolved into one which acknowledges the students' interests and starting places for musical learning. The work of the Musical Futures researchers and practitioners has articulated the role of the teacher within an informal learning model: facilitate, stand back, observe, diagnose, guide, suggest, model, take on students' perspectives, help students achieve the objectives they set for themselves. These aspects of the informal learning model are not incompatible with the classroom context once positive learning relationships with pupils have been established, as identified by the work of the Musical Futures group (D'Amore, 2009).

Composing pedagogy

Whether learning takes place within a more structured classroom context or within an informal peer-led model, new teachers grapple with achieving an appropriate balance between group activities and solo activities. My observations and discussions with fellow music teachers have led me to believe that often this is tied up with resource issues. The number and size of music rooms, the amount and range of instruments can often dictate the medium through which music is created, albeit that the overriding concern is ultimately in terms of pupil learning. Furthermore, new teachers often need to deconstruct composing within a group context in order to identify the key learning issues and explore the situated nature of the composing activity in general (whether formal or informal). Without this, assessment of learning cannot begin to be identified and discussed.

Summary

Throughout this article I have attempted to highlight a range of issues concerning the development of composing activities which are still valid for many classroom teachers, and therefore important to address for pre-service music teachers. The challenges concern refining music teaching pedagogy to achieve:

1. a more equal balance between the exploratory purposes of composing and the teaching of defined compositional forms within the classroom;
2. a greater degree of instrumental skill for all pupils in the belief that this supports greater depth, breadth and confidence in pupil composing work;
3. a clear and developed professional discourse concerning the values and learning outcomes associated with the full range of music technologies;
4. a greater emphasis on developing awareness of the language used by pupils and dialogic language skills with beginner music teachers, in order to deepen and broaden both the potential for pupil progression and assessment of learning (what types of language do pupils use during composing work which may indicate musical learning?);
5. a way of addressing pre-service teacher identity to include confidence in composing ability and the facilitation of composing ability for young people.

This discussion is based on the belief, supported by the many researchers in the field of music education, that composing activities underpin the development of musical skills and understanding, and is inextricably linked to other areas of musical activity. I have outlined an approach which is valid for a range of teaching practices and provides a skeleton pedagogy of ideas for growth. It is on this foundation that pre-service music teachers can build their own classroom practice and develop their confidence in terms of facilitating the composing process.

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