

Practitioner challenges working with informal learning pedagogies

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Introduction

Early in my career as a music teacher I was very focused on providing my students with what I believed at the time were a range of musical experiences that broadened their understanding and appreciation of music from a variety of cultures and traditions. However, as I gained more experience, I was able to spend a greater amount of time reflecting on *how* the pupils were learning as well as *what* they were learning. Through my engagement in practitioner research I also became more aware of the musical experiences my pupils were having away from school and this led me to realise that an increasingly large number of pupils were already passionate about music but this interest was not necessarily transferring to music within a classroom context. For example, students who were often self-critical about their abilities during classroom music tasks were actually able to demonstrate an increasing level of knowledge and understanding of the music that they were involved in as listeners or performers away from school.

Having made the conscious decision to look at how my students were learning I wanted to use the reflections I had made to develop a curriculum that supported my students' out of school musical interests. It was around this time that I became aware of Lucy Green's work through the Musical Futures Hertfordshire action research project which explores Green's pedagogical approach based on the learning practices in popular music and its application in the school music classroom. I found that Green's (2008) development of a classroom pedagogy based on the informal way that pop musicians learn goes some way to explain the gap between pupils' musical learning in and out of school that I had identified within my own students. This led me to explore her ideas further and examine in more detail what exactly informal learning entails and ultimately to adopt some of her ideas in my own teaching.

It is these aspects of my professional journey that serve to frame the key points in this essay on the challenges of informal learning in the secondary music classroom.

Real music

Within the formal setting of the music classroom teachers are generally responsible for making decisions over the content of the curriculum. However, choosing music that students will engage with can be a minefield as pupils are surrounded every day with music that is of a high quality within any genre that they choose to listen to. For example, within my own school I frequently encounter classes that contain students with a diverse

range of musical tastes. Green (2008) identifies choice of music as a prime factor when examining the fundamental principles that define 'informal learning'. She points out that this tends to mean that, if pupils, rather than their teachers, are deciding on the music, they will choose popular music which they can already identify with and are engaging with on a regular basis away from the classroom. The actual style of popular music will vary depending on the cohort of students and the popular trends of the time but allowing pupils to choose the music they are learning does go some way to addressing the problem that teachers have of staying up to date with current trends whilst also giving students a level of autonomy that is not usually experienced in the music classroom. I therefore think that, even though pupils will make choices based on what they perceive as 'real' music, it is of secondary importance to the fact that their voices are heard and the teacher acknowledges their music choices as valid.

The integration of skills

The National Curriculum for music is designed to give teachers guidance as to the musical development of young people and information on what they should have learnt and by when. It is possible to interpret this guidance as a checklist of skills that each child has to demonstrate and this can result in an emphasis on reproduction rather than open-ended creativity but it does sit comfortably within the formal setting of a school music lesson (Green, 2008). In their paper on informal learning and meta-pedagogy in initial teacher education in England, Finney and Philpott state that music education has typically privileged the formal at the expense of the informal (Finney & Philpott, 2010). This can lead to teachers compartmentalising the skills of listening, composing and performing whereas, in reality, these skills are inextricably linked. If we are to look towards pop musicians as a way of defining informal learning, as Green suggests, then it is important to acknowledge that they tend to approach the acquisition of skills in a more holistic way. The informal learning model enables pupils to do just that with an emphasis on integrating all the key musical skills at all stages of the learning process. Ruth Wright (2008), in her detailed case study of a high school music department, highlights that the standard of written work improves when it is linked to activities that integrate listening to music with performing and composing, especially for boys. She also states that flexibility in the methods of work builds upon the strengths that pupils have already developed when learning informally away from the classroom setting. I have frequently found that this has had a significant impact on my pupils' perception of listening to music as they can now see that listening enables them to understand their song more thoroughly and helps them replicate it. It has also changed their attitude towards the more theoretical side of music learning. Chords, key signatures, rhythm and other aspects of music theory are now being tackled at the point when pupils encounter something in their song that they don't understand. Although this behaviour can be adopted within a formal learning environment, the informal learning model allows students to make decisions over when new skills or knowledge needs to be acquired. In my experience, this means the pupils are more motivated to learn as it is a stepping-stone towards becoming a better performer.

Pupil autonomy

Although giving pupils the opportunity to make decisions over the curriculum is integral to the success of the informal learning model, I also think that the degree to which they are involved in musical decision making is critical. Green (2008) emphasises this point by saying that it is not just the autonomy to select equipment and curriculum content that is valued by the pupils but also the opportunity to direct their own learning in relation to the pace, progression and structure. This type of decision making is more closely linked to the style of learning that pupils experience away from the classroom and therefore it gives the pupils another opportunity of viewing music as a real-world subject rather than just something that is school based. Folkestad (2006) refers to pupil autonomy as 'ownership'. Who decides what to do, how to do it as well as where and when, 'owns' the decisions of that activity. This is a move towards open, self-regulated learning and it fits perfectly with the factors present in informal learning discussed above. By reflecting on the learning in my classroom I have also realised that a significant proportion of the most meaningful learning that takes place is away from my direct control. For my pupils, allowing them to access the curriculum through tasks that involve a high level of small group work where they are left to work unsupervised for short periods of the lesson is one of the main strengths of the informal learning model, as it seems to raise pupils' motivation whilst also helping them develop skills that can be used beyond the music classroom.

The role of the teacher

There is no doubt that my role in the classroom has had to change in order to embrace the informal learning model and for this to happen I have had to acknowledge the influence I have over students' experiences and make a conscious decision to give more of the 'power' to the pupils. Wright and Kanellopoulos (2010) state that it is important that the teacher is not removed completely from the learning process and, for me, this has meant that I have taken the role as facilitator rather than teacher whilst being aware of the need to give the pupils autonomy. To begin with, this usually means I am acting as technical support but, as the tasks progress, I am asked to work out bass lines, chords and other more complicated aspects of the chosen songs. In most cases the students want me to listen to them and offer advice but whilst doing this it is important to be mindful of the informal learning model, and I concentrate on giving the students suggestions to think about rather than solving their problems. Green (2008) believes that it is this approach that helps maintain momentum and I definitely agree that a small amount of support at the right time can enable the pupils to stay motivated towards achieving their chosen goal whilst still maintaining the sense of ownership they have over their work.

Pupil progress

One of the main responsibilities of classroom teachers is to ensure that the students in their care are making progress. However, as a teacher following an informal learning model, I have continually had to address the issue of regular assessment and the monitoring of progression. My main concern has been that if pupils are choosing the curriculum and the

instruments that they feel comfortable with then I could be giving them the opportunity to practise what they already know. In their paper on music education in Sweden, Georgii-Hemming and Westvall (2010) warn that a curriculum model could emerge that only offers pupils the opportunity to engage with easy to play pop and rock songs that they already know well. Even though I believe that adopting the informal learning approach has had a positive effect on the outcomes my students achieve, I still feel that it is my duty to broaden their horizons, and this means introducing them to new and sometimes challenging musical experiences. I think that the best illustration of this is the transition between music in the first years of high school and the more formal curriculum offered by the GCSE music courses, especially those that contain set works. To ensure that the pupils are properly prepared for the final assessments it is inevitable that I have to choose a fair amount of the music that is studied and this erodes the level of pupil autonomy that I am able to offer. However, I think that the approach to the music is more significant than the genre and even when the teaching becomes slightly more formal it is important to allow the pupils to engage in the task of learning in a way that replicates the informal learning model. For example, I use informal learning practices that were adapted for classical music in the original Musical Futures Herefordshire action research as a method of delivery when the pupils are learning the set works prescribed by the EDEXCEL GCSE syllabus. Wright (2008) believes that teachers have to find the balance between pupil autonomy and progression. To me, this implies that the teacher can increase motivation and interest by allowing the production and development of musical knowledge to rest firmly with the pupils themselves and by doing this, students will then be willing to try and engage with new genres and musical concepts.

Conclusion

The reason that popular music is so closely associated with informal learning is because of the way that pop musicians tend to approach learning. However, just because popular music might be present in the curriculum does not mean the learning can be called 'informal' and to take this view would be a far too simplistic way of viewing this approach to gaining musical skills and understanding. Harnessing interest in certain styles and genres and using them in the classroom could potentially have a positive effect on music in schools but it is too narrow minded to think that incorporating current popular music trends into the curriculum is enough to guarantee that pupils will engage with the subject. For the majority of pupils, out of school musical experiences are positive ones as they are not only listening to a different style of music than they are exposed to in school but they are also engaging in more group learning alongside friends and peers with similar interests. To me, it seems critical to acknowledge this way of learning informally and give the pupils opportunities to integrate a variety of musical skills into each task whilst giving them a level of autonomy not normally associated with the formal setting of the music classroom.

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