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Informal Learning in Music in the Irish Secondary School Context

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Introduction

In her book *Informal Learning and the School: A new classroom pedagogy* Lucy Green notes: “The issues ... centre around the importance of listening to young people’s voices and taking their values and their culture seriously” (Green, 2008, p. 185). It can be argued that for young people, ‘their culture’ is frequently construed as the popular music culture of their time. Despite this common assumption, it is important to recognise that for many young people ‘their culture’ is multi-faceted and incorporates many different musics, often depending on national, regional and local differences. Anderson et al (1996, p. x) notes: “Contemporary music is already multicultural; it is our music education that is predominantly euro-centric.” It is thus relevant to recognise that not all students’ music culture is the popular music of their time but may incorporate traditional, folk or other music forms.

Irish traditional music remains very much part of the multifaceted popular music culture in Ireland alongside more global forms of popular music. Irish music is predominantly passed on informally through the practices of traditional musicians. Informal music learning in Ireland, then, is experienced in both Irish music and contemporary popular music. This article looks at the similarities and differences of informal learning in Irish music and the informal learning of students’ popular music making described in Green’s research. The article also considers how both forms of informal learning are and could be further integrated into music classes at second level education in Irish schools.

Irish music in society and education: A brief overview

Irish school students, who have grown up in an environment of Irish traditional music performance, commonly accept that their popular culture includes traditional music culture. Traditional music is available as an option in secondary school music and is frequently the medium used by students for compulsory musical performance in State examinations. Some

students who choose this performance option have a background in Irish traditional music prior to study, however many do not, and they enter programmes due to the influence of their peers or a music teacher who is often rooted in the music. To date, the incorporation of Irish traditional music in school music seems to be effective and the Leaving Certificate Chief Examiner's Report 2007 (State Examinations Commission, 2008) makes particular note of "the high standard [of performances] in classical and Irish traditional genres".

The commercialism of Irish music in the 21st century has resulted in an increasing number of Irish students participating in and becoming immersed in Irish music culture. Students are now proud to be associated with this culture, the manner of whose transmission continues to undergo rapid change. This was not always the case; in the past Irish traditional music did not feature as a core component of the school music curricula. Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, historian and anthropologist, writes of the low status afforded to the traditional musician in the 1940s: "Shunned by educational establishment...many traditional performers had a low self image of their role in Irish music and of its place in contemporary Ireland" (Ó hAllmhuráin, 2003, pp. 144–145). Until the late 1980s, Irish Music was an optional course of study in the National Curriculum for students of Leaving Certificate Music and was examined in the 'history of music' component of the State Examinations. Few students selected the Irish Music option, the vast majority favouring a study of Western Art Music.

Irish traditional music has undergone a revival of interest both nationally and internationally. This has been supported by a number of key individuals and organisations.

Traditional music was one aspect of Irish musical heritage that was revitalised in... the 1960s and early 70s... The international revival of interest in folk music, exposure to this music in the media, the development of organisations such as Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, and the seminal work carried out by musicians such as Seán Ó Riada in creating new social contexts and performance practices for the music, all contributed to its rise in cultural status and power. (McCarthy, 1999, p. 141)

Moreover, the influence of media and advances in technology in the later 20th century resulted in a sharing of styles and influences, and also led to fusions with musical styles such as pop and jazz. Numerous examples of fusions exist, very often tunes in the popular genre with a traditional influence. In 1995, for instance, the Corrs released their debut album *Forgiven, Not Forgotten* which skilfully combined traditional Irish music with pop (Ó Súilleabháin, 2004, p. 117).

The advent of music and dance shows such as *Riverdance* has also increased the popularity of Irish music performance (instrumental, vocal and dance) among school students. “The *Riverdance* phenomenon has been instrumental in bringing Irish traditional music and dancing to the world stage” (Ó Súilleabháin, 2004, p. 112). Moreover, O’Grady (1999, p. 262) observes: “The final movement of *Riverdance* includes a mixture of traditional Irish, Eastern European, Classical, Folk and Jazz elements” bringing a multifaceted music popular culture experience to a predominantly Irish story and sound.

Professor Fleischmann, a prolific composer, held the position of Professor of Music at University College Cork from 1934–1980. *Sources of Irish Traditional Music* (Fleischmann, 1998), published posthumously in 1998 and completed on his deathbed, took 40 years to compile and was completed in collaboration with Professor Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin at the then Irish World Music Centre (now Irish World Academy of Music and Dance) at the University of Limerick. This important collaboration contributed to a growing responsiveness to Irish music in music education. Seán Ó Riada, the renowned Irish composer, helped kindle the renaissance of traditional Irish music during the 1960s. Ó Riada’s work has in-turn influenced noted Irish composers like Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, Shaun Davey and Bill Whelan. The techniques employed by these composers “brilliantly sustain and develop the intensity of Ó Riada’s preoccupation with the traditional air, either as a means of narrative—as in Davey’s *The Brendan Voyage*—or as a means of cross-fertilisation variation—as in much of Ó Súilleabháin’s music” (White, 1999, p. 16). Professor Harry White believes that in such work, “the Irish mind represents itself not as a struggling symbol of nationalist culture, but as a distinctive voice which is clear, articulate, polished, engaging, imaginative and unmistakably Celtic” (ibid., p. 16). Traditional Irish music is now widely recognised and examples of its influence are to be found in all musical genres in Ireland.

The Transmission of Irish Music

Niall Keegan writes that “the transmission of traditional Irish music was and is considered to be primarily oral and prior to the advent of music publishing was exclusively oral.” (Keegan, 1996, p. 335). Despite the fact that traditional musicians are increasingly musically literate, the general consensus is that a musician needs to hear the music performed and to learn it by ear. Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann¹ advises that music notation may not be the best way to get a ‘feel’ for traditional music. “Unlike classical music, Irish traditional music generally cannot

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be notated exactly the way it is meant to be played, and music notation doesn't always lend itself well to the transcription of Irish ornamentation.” (Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, 2006). Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann acknowledges that the vast collections transcribed by many collectors of Irish music are a valuable resource but cautions that the transcriptions should not be the only source of a tune. The most recommended way to learn a tune is to hear it performed by a traditional musician. Many young traditional musicians learn their vast repertoire of tunes during frequent attendance at sessions². A striking similarity exists between the manner in which a traditional musician plays a traditional tune and the performance by a jazz musician of a jazz tune. Writing about this similarity O'Connor (1991, p. 10) says: “Each time a player plays a tune, he plays it as if it were for the first time. Each time he plays it, then, it will differ very subtly from the last time. In this way it is rather like jazz.”

The freedom to vary the music even as it is transmitted is important in the Irish tradition (Campbell, 1991, p. 169). The traditional musician “finds a personal challenge in refashioning the basic material, putting his own seal on it and expressing his musicality through it.” (Ó'Canainn, 1978, p. 4). Due to the nature of the performance of traditional Irish music, both formal and informal learning tends to take place during the master-apprentice solo or group music lesson and master classes. Informal learning is constant for the traditional musician and takes place at sessions, at music lessons, and while listening to recordings and traditional musicians performing in a variety of platforms, varying from less formal situations to concert performances. While informal learning takes place for both the aspiring performer and listener at every hearing of traditional Irish music, it is of particular relevance to the performer, as a performer, only when the basic skills have been acquired by the musician. Many traditional Irish musicians build their vast repertoire of tunes while attending some of the many sessions held frequently around the country. These ‘live’ experiences can be seen as informal learning, as can the learning of music ‘by ear’ from a recording. The learning which is categorised as informal is often primary learning for the young musician who attempts to replicate the performances, musical style and ornamentation of some of the more esteemed musicians in the country.

Irish Music in Education

“The musical and cultural identity of young people is formed in large part by the informal and formal music education provided.” (McCarthy, 1999, p. 14). The ‘new’ national curricula for Junior and Leaving Certificate music (the Irish State examinations taken at approximately ages 15 and 18 respectively), introduced in the 1990s, have been very well received by teachers and students. A significant factor in relation to the curricula is that a study of traditional Irish music is compulsory in the listening component of the curricula for all students and comprises 25% of the Junior and Leaving Certificate core listening examinations.

Campbell (1991, p. 169), in considering an Irish music session, writes that,

the sound of melodies that vary slightly through individual ornamentation from one to the other presents a heterophonic texture. For traditional Irish musicians, the transmission process is an aural one in which notation is seldom used. Irish music is thus clearly nonliterate, improvisatory, soloistic and personal.

The secondary school student who is already a traditional musician will be well-versed in the variations as outlined by Campbell and in the aural transmission process. This is not necessarily the case for the secondary school student whose background is in classical music or in other genres.

Higher level Leaving Certificate students who have studied music for five years in the Irish secondary school are required to have sufficient experience of listening to Irish music to enable them to:

Understand, identify and describe from aural and visual perception:

- the range and variety of Irish music heard today;
- Irish musical idioms and influences;
- traditional and modern-day performing styles;
- the contribution Irish music has made to folk music in other countries, especially in North America.

(An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta, 1996, p. 11)

In recent years an increasing number of students present as traditional Irish music vocal/instrumental performers, either solo or group performance. Performances of traditional Irish music in the state examinations require “proficiency in the use of appropriate ornamentation” (An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta, 1996, p. 6). Furthermore, students

who opt to present a composition portfolio may use “conventional (or) traditional ... approaches; a combination of more than one approach is also acceptable” (ibid., p. 9).

Green’s research indicates, “by far the overriding learning practice for most popular musicians... is to copy recordings by ear” (Green, 2008, p. 6). The Irish traditional musician today frequently adopts a similar practice in relation to learning new repertoire. This was not possible prior to the existence of the multiplicity of recordings which are in existence today. McCarthy (1999) cites Feldman and O’Doherty who state that “personalised oral transmission of the musical tradition from members of one generation to another was a crucial process in the life of a rural community” (Feldman and O’Doherty, 1979, pp. 24–25). However, the use of recordings has become more widespread. While most traditional Irish musicians today continue to learn how to sing a song or play their instrument in the master-apprentice style of tuition, an increasing number of young singers and musicians, once they have mastered the skill of performance, build their repertoire by listening to and learning from recordings rather than from notated music.

The informal session occurs in an environment where music learning and sharing places high value on friendship and enjoyment:

Walk into an Irish pub anywhere in the world today and you might well be treated to an informal ‘session’—musicians playing for their own pleasure and that of their listeners. It might start with a fiddle player pulling an instrument from a battered case. Maybe a button accordion emerges from under a chair. A flute is pulled from a bag, and the music continues with the haunting sounds that were once the preserve of the rural country kitchen. (Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, 2006)

This central role of music making experienced by the traditional musician is replicated by Green in relation to popular musicians placing “high value on friendship amongst themselves, tolerance, shared taste and commitment ... commitment and responsibility highly valued by the musicians.” (Green, 2008, pp. 8–9). Green notes that “all popular musicians unfailingly report...the extremely high levels of enjoyment that accompany their music-making and music-learning activities” (Green, 2008, p. 9). McCarthy also highlights the fact that “personal investment in music for the traditional musician (brings) many intrinsic delights and rewards” (McCarthy, 1999, p. 102). These intrinsic delights are valued to the extent that ‘enjoyment’ of music making is deemed important enough to be included in the Irish Leaving Certificate Music Syllabus which states the aim “to develop an informed interest in music and

the enjoyment of music-making” (An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta, 1996, p. 1), as part of its list of general aims.

The success of the project, initiated by Green, in relation to informal learning and the school would suggest that a similar project could be undertaken in Irish schools. Given the similarities of the curricula in Ireland and in England and the historical similarities in relation to the teaching methodologies used, it would be interesting to explore and document the findings within the context of the Irish secondary school system. Green makes two very valid points when she states that the project is “challenging for curriculum content” and also that it is “challenging to keep up-to-date with pupils’ ‘own’ music” (Green, 2008, p. 12). A significant challenge for the Irish secondary school music teacher would be the initial teaching of the basic skills of traditional Irish music performance in order to ensure that informal learning could take place. This would be a particularly significant challenge for the Irish secondary school music teacher whose background is in classical music performance; such teachers have been very successful to date in teaching students to recognise the intricacies of Irish traditional music in a listening class. Music teachers have always welcomed challenge and I believe that they would welcome the opportunity to introduce their students to traditional Irish music performance and subsequently to the associated ‘informal’ learning practices.

It is interesting to note that Green highlights the fact that “popular music in the curriculum (in England)... has tended to centre mainly on ‘classic’ songs and bands... such as The Beatles and Queen” (Green, 2008, p. 12). Green acknowledges, “the inclusion of ‘classic’ popular music is often, from pupils’ perspectives, as far removed from their lives and identities as mainstream classical music or twentieth-century atonal music” (Green, 2008, pp. 12–13). This is also the case in relation to the Irish curriculum, the Leaving Certificate curriculum (including ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ by Queen and songs by the Beatles) and the Junior Certificate curriculum including songs by Paul Simon, Lennon & McCartney and Ralph McTell. I would tend to concur with Green that it can be challenging for second level teachers to maintain a connection with pupils’ ‘own music’.

The project directed by Green investigated the possibility of implementing some of the informal popular music learning practices into the school classroom. It would be possible to implement similar practices in a selection of Irish school classrooms and to consider and review the findings in relation to those of Green’s project. I would like to propose a twin-track

approach within the context of the Irish classroom. This approach would include an introduction of informal learning in popular music learning practices, as outlined by Green, in selected schools, compared and contrasted with the introduction of informal learning practices in keeping with those experienced by traditional Irish musicians in others. If such a project is to be implemented in Irish schools the selection of music classes and teachers would be significant. It would be important not to include bias in the selection of participating music classes (i.e. not to select classes based on their teachers' musical backgrounds while recognising that the teacher's musical background can have already shaped a student's musical disposition which could be a factor in the findings of the project). It is possible that the findings will be similar as the informal learning practices of both, while not identical, demonstrate a number of parallels:

Popular music learning practices in the classroom (Green, 2008, p. 10)	Traditional Irish Music Learning Practices
1. Informal learning always starts with music which the learners choose for themselves.	1. Informal learning usually starts with music which the learners choose for themselves.
2. The main method of skill-acquisition ...involves copying recordings by ear, rather than learning through notation or some other form of written or verbal instruction.	2. The main method of skill-acquisition for many traditional musicians involves group tuition until competence is attained in the instrument/voice. At this point copying of recordings or of music heard at live performances/sessions by ear is frequently undertaken.
3. Learning takes place... through self-directed learning, peer-directed learning and group learning.	3. Learning takes place through master apprentice model, self-directed learning, peer-directed learning and group learning.
4. Skills and knowledge...tend to be assimilated...in holistic ways...starting with 'whole' ...pieces of music	4. Skills and knowledge, once musical competence is attained, are assimilated in a holistic way by performing and arranging whole pieces of music.
5. Integration of listening, performing, improvising and composing takes place with the emphasis on personal creativity	5. Integration of listening, performing, improvising, arranging and composing takes place.

Just as Green documents difficulties experienced by the teachers, similar difficulties would be anticipated with the introduction of informal learning in the Irish music classroom. In order to successfully introduce informal music making as it applies to traditional Irish music, the music teacher would need to be supported and up-skilled in this regard. An exciting possibility would be the inclusion of a traditional musician from the locality in the classroom who would work with the music teacher and with the students towards the outcome of providing basic musical skills as traditional musicians³ for the teacher and the students and introducing informal music making.

Green notes that world music was introduced into education in the 1990s and has outlined some of the difficulties which this posed for teachers and pupils (Green, 2008, p. 13). The 1990s saw the introduction of the new music curricula in Irish secondary schools. Prior to this, Irish students did not have to present a musical performance and the study of traditional Irish music was optional. The new curricula included a compulsory study of traditional Irish music by all students, the introduction of a study of popular music into the curricula and the presentation of compulsory musical performances by all students. Students may chose any particular genre within which to perform and teachers had to adapt their teaching techniques in order to be able to direct and facilitate their students performing in a variety of genres including classical, popular, jazz, traditional and ethnic among others.

Green refers to the fact that the role of the teacher in the project was “rather different from a normal, formal educational role, and was particularly challenging for all of the teachers involved” (Green, 2008, p. 25). The music teacher in the Irish secondary school has had to adapt skills in relation to directing students who often had previous knowledge of traditional Irish music performance. The challenge in the proposed project would be enabling all students in a classroom to become involved in traditional Irish music performance (a very worthwhile challenge as this would enable students to have a greater understanding of all aspects of traditional Irish music in relation to the curriculum).

The results of Green’s project could potentially be mirrored through an analysis of the use of informal popular music making practices in Ireland. Considering the similarities of the informal learning practices, in popular music making and traditional Irish music making, it would be interesting to monitor the results of the introduction of both practices into the school classroom and to consider the findings. It would also be interesting to ascertain whether informal music practices as defined for the purpose of this paper have already been

implemented in the classroom by teachers with a background and expertise in the relevant genre; these teachers could provide a lot of insight in relation to the design and delivery of any proposed project.

I would consider the greatest challenge to be that which would be experienced by the classroom music teachers. Music teachers in Ireland have traditionally adapted well to changes in the curriculum and in the classroom. As outlined by McCarthy (1999, pp. 154–156), in the 20th century a number of international methods of music education were introduced successfully into the classroom including the Ward method, the Kodály method and the Suzuki method—the Orff method not being implemented to the same degree probably due to prohibitive costs. In the 21st century the profile of the Irish secondary school teacher entering the profession is changing due in no small measure to the changing content of the undergraduate music degree and to the teacher training experience. The Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick, offers a BA in Irish Music and Dance, designed for traditional musicians and dancers. Graduates from the first two cohorts of this degree programme have also successfully undertaken a post-graduate teacher training programme and are now teaching music in Irish secondary schools. I believe that this is a very interesting development for music education in Ireland in the 21st century. It would appear that these new teachers, who are well versed in informal music making practices, are introducing these practices readily and with ease in their schools alongside the regular formal music learning practices. It will be interesting to see how these practices will mature and develop in future years.

McCarthy refers to the fact that “developments in post-primary school music in the late 1990s indicate a strong commitment to an authentic representation of traditional music in the curriculum” (McCarthy, 1999, p. 159). She also notes the quality of the in-service training and curriculum materials provided for music teachers. Research undertaken by Devereux presented findings which indicated “a very positive response by secondary school students, the vast majority of whom expressed a desire to play a traditional instrument and to have teachers who are accomplished traditional musicians” (Devereux, 1979, pp. 23–26). The introduction of the current Leaving Certificate Curriculum (assessed for the first time in 1999) heralded a new era for music education in Ireland at second level. In 1998, less than 1000 candidates selected Leaving Certificate music in the state examinations while in 2008 the numbers taking Leaving Certificate music have risen to 5280. Many factors have

contributed to the significant rise in candidature, including the more student friendly, school based curriculum and also the variety of genres which students can explore in the performing section of the curriculum.

Green supports the widely acknowledged view that “musicians in the ‘community music’ realm are much more accustomed to informal ways of working with groups of teenagers than school teachers are” (Green, 2008, p. 27). Green also acknowledges the potential difference between the role of the music teacher and of the community musician. I would concur with Green that the community musician frequently uses a different approach in the school to the one normally used in the community music workshop outside of the school structure. An increasing number of music teachers are returning to third level education⁴ in order to achieve a further qualification in Community Music, and other disciplines, which they ultimately believe will further enhance their own teaching.

The secondary school music curriculum in Ireland includes a full time 3-year curriculum for Junior Certificate students and a further 2 years for Leaving Certificate students. In order to implement the proposed project it would be necessary for teachers and students to be well versed in the basic skills of the particular genre, poplar music making/traditional Irish music making, before venturing into the realm of informal music making. A little more flexibility regarding implementation of the proposed project would be possible with Transition Year⁵ students due to the nature of their course of study. Transition year students, as is the case with all other student year groups, would need to be well versed in the basic skills of the particular genre before embarking on informal music-making.

Once the necessary structures have been put into place, Green’s research could be used as a stimulus to investigate informal learning practices in Irish second level schools. *Music, Informal Learning and the School: A new classroom pedagogy* should be a stimulus to encourage such practices where they do not exist and to further encourage and support them where they are already in existence. Perhaps the greatest value of Green’s research, one which may be unquantifiable, is her observation of how young people “learn... when they are enjoying learning” and her encouragement to teachers to “bring some of the flavour of that enjoyment, and the learning that goes along with it, into the school” (Green 2008, p. 185).

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Notes

- ¹ Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann is an organisation which promotes traditional Irish music and culture around the world.
- ² A session is a gathering of musicians at which all (experienced and less experienced) are welcome. The purpose of the session is to play traditional Irish tunes. Many musicians build their vast repertoire at these events.
- ³ The tin whistle (often used in school classes) could be played initially, subsequently leading to other instruments used in the performance of traditional Irish music.
- ⁴ A suite of Masters Degrees, including the Masters Degree in Community Music, has been offered at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick since 1999. Each cohort of students includes a number of school teachers, some of whom continue their professional studies by enrolling in relevant Ph.D programmes.
- ⁵ Transition Year is a year in which students follow a curriculum designed by the school and in which alternative forms of learning are possible. Transition Year is an optional course of study in most Irish secondary schools and takes place in the year following Junior Certificate and prior to the first year of study for Leaving Certificate.

About the Author

Jean Downey is Course Director for Music Education and Community Music at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick. She is also chairperson of the Community Music Board. Her current research is specifically related to the early professional development of the music teacher.