Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

The refereed journal of the

Volume 8, No. 2
October 2009

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Electronic Article

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ISSN 1545-4517

Exploring the Contexts of Informal Learning

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Building on from her previous work on how popular musicians learn (Green, 2001), Lucy Green's recent book, *Music, Informal Learning and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy* (Green, 2008), outlines the background, methods, strategies and outcomes of a practical research project undertaken in secondary schools in the United Kingdom in the years immediately preceding the book's publication. The project initially targets a particular approach to music making and learning common in popular music settings: informal group music making using contemporary popular/rock band instruments. It tracks the experiences of school students who engage in learning experiences designed to maximize the qualities and characteristics of 'informal' music making within the 'formal', institutional settings of the school. The project is interesting in that it seeks to recover music learning practices and skills that are meaningful to young people by consciously incorporating and valuing what is important to them in the first instance, rather than as a consequence of some arbitrary curriculum expectation, music teacher goal or established classroom method.

Implicit in Green's approach is a 'hands-off' music education practice; one where teachers—initially at least—let students find their own musical voices and impulses on their own and in collaboration with each other, before intervening in the learning process. Students are thus free to discover what they find musically interesting within the confines of their immediate informal, unstructured music environment rather than from what a teacher might judge and decide what is best for them to learn on their behalf. In this sense, Green's informal learning project is critical pedagogical action in music that seeks to restore and recover school music learning from pedagogies of compliance, coercion and control embedded in institutional music education.

Music education is often determined through organised learning leading to successful music skill development. However, having a system that 'works' does not necessarily mean that music education is in a healthy state overall. Established, traditional or 'formal' practices of music teaching and learning may reach certain kinds of music students, but exclude others

Lines, D. (2009). Exploring the contexts of informal learning. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 8/2: 1–6. http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Lines8_2.pdf

whose musical backgrounds or interests don't conform to what music teachers, schools or music interest groups expect of them. Formal music education commonly found in schools and other music institutions may overlook strategies and styles that don't appear to conform to the music world-views held by a specific local community of influential musicians and teachers. For example, Green employs simple strategies like learning a piece chosen by students by 'ear' through listening to a recording, without the aid of pre-figured notation or teacher intervention. While such a practice is common in rock band explorations, it is rare in more formal orchestra or choir settings.

Green's project is an interesting model of democratic intervention for music education. It holds up the view that music education is a potential learning area for all students regardless of their musical background, class or privilege. It affirms the idea that participation in music through self-initiated study and peer-group music activity is fundamental to what music learning is all about. By affirming student-centered aspects of the music learning process, Green's research seeks to restore inadequacies in institutional music education, in particular its failure to capture the broader education demographic by becoming increasingly distant from the way certain forms of music culture are received, communicated and learnt. On the one hand, school music has embraced 'other' music styles and forms by expanding the curriculum, but on the other, it has not widely accepted or utilised the communicative and pedagogical processes that make those forms what they are in a living music culture.

This issue of ACT continues the tradition of dialogue the journal's editors have sought to foster by inviting a series of essays and responses based on a recent book of relevance and importance to music education. Green's book *Music, Informal Learning and the School* was chosen because of the important themes the book presented contemporary music education and for its critical focus on change in school music at a time when pedagogical reform is pressing and necessary. An international team of writers from Namibia, Ireland, Canada, USA, Australia and Finland was invited to participate in the issue in order to open up responses to the notion of informal learning in diverse and different global settings. Writers were encouraged to enter into dialogue with Lucy Green's research and the theme of informal learning through the perspectives of their own practical music education environments, research interests and directions. Consequently, while some articles address

informal learning issues and concepts within popular music, other articles go further and explore the idea of informal learning in different contexts[1].

The Essays

In the first essay, Lauri Väkevä interrogates some key concepts that underpin Green's project, in particular, the notions of authenticity, 'real' music, and intrinsic motivation. Using a pragmatist interpretive lens, Väkevä problematises the idea of how informal learning captures "naturally arising learning practices" in music and what this means for student motivation and pedagogical insight. Väkevä tracks some interesting pathways of thought in Green's work, including discussion on how the "locus of [student] interest" holds potential to shift from informal to formal learning situations or across genres. Green's research phase on informal learning of classical music is also unpacked and considered as is the potential to reconsider digital and IT-based music learning in the light of her work.

In the second essay, Carlos Rodriguez seeks to develop the notion of musicality through informal learning in music. Rodriguez sees musicality as something that is closely aligned with a musician's [student's] personality and its extension through the making of music. A closer inspection of informal learning, to Rodriguez, also reveals formal (recognisable/structured) learning qualities, be they distinct processes of listening to and copying recordings or the adapted facility to remember chord changes initiated by another peer-group member. It is the relinquishing of teacher control that perhaps best defines Green's notion of informal learning. Rodriguez sets out to narrate a series of teaching and learning situations in popular music making with his own students, bringing out the subtle shifts and retreats that emanate in and through teacher instruction and the students' own music learning processes. In these learning situations, which combine both formal and informal processes, the students' own preferences and offerings of participation form a vital part of the experience and learning as a whole. Rodriguez considers the instructional issues and sensitivities that arise—the ebbs and flows—in popular/rock band music making sessions involving both teachers and students.

Jean Downey presents a practical view of informal learning from an Irish perspective in the third essay, coming from a local culture and school system immersed in a flourishing traditional music. Downey reports on the recent resurgence of Irish music and she explores some of the informal characteristics of music in the Irish traditional context and the way

informal practices such as learning by ear and playing in ‘sessions’ are an integral part of the development of the Irish traditional musician. Noting that the performance of Irish traditional music is now embedded in the school curriculum, Downey considers how Green’s research might be replicated in Ireland in a situation where the informal learning of popular music is fostered alongside informal learning in traditional music forms in existence.

In the fourth essay Peter Dunbar-Hall describes the experiences of his music education students in tertiary study as part of their pedagogical training in a Balinese gamelan ensemble. The music education students learn through active involvement in ‘informal’ gamelan performances. His notion of ‘ethnopedagogy’—the realisation of music learning through cultural contexts—provides an interesting corollary to Green’s notion of informal learning through popular music. While the gamelan ensemble provides students with an unfamiliar ‘out of culture’ experience, as opposed to the familiar involvement with popular music in Green’s research, Dunbar-Hall highlights some interesting parallels with Green’s research. Music education, Dunbar-Hall maintains, is closely aligned with its contextualized transmission, and a better understanding of this alignment would help find a way to “a new classroom pedagogy”.

In the fifth essay Minette Mans discusses the importance of affirming cultural values in music education and of the necessity for teachers to engage in an “interactive pedagogy where student-centeredness is applied in its full sense”. Writing from an African (Namibian) perspective, Mans highlights her discussion with vignettes describing instances where music making resonates with immediate social-cultural concerns and meanings. In her reflective discussion, Mans points to both the restraints of the school music curriculum and the need to engage more convincingly with the meanings of the surrounding world taking into account the necessity for individual choice and the needs and limitations of society at large. Her discussion calls for a greater teacher awareness of learners’ values in music and the immediate cultural environment.

In the sixth essay Greg Gatien discusses the history of jazz education in the academy, which he sees as a process where jazz pedagogy has become increasingly formalized. Noting parallels and links between jazz and popular music, Gatien draws connections between the institutionalization of jazz and Green’s research project with popular music learning in schools. While Gatien recognizes and unpacks both positive and negative aspects in jazz education’s historical development, he finds that there is a strong relationship between our

changing concepts of musical ‘categories’ (conceptions and renditions of music style/genre) and the way in which music is taught and learnt. He calls for a broader understanding of musical categories in music education so that pedagogical practice can draw more closely from the meanings those practices embody.

In the final essay, Lucy Green provides a thoughtful and dialogical response to the contributing authors. She reiterates the position she took in her research and provides some thoughts towards future directions in the area of informal learning and music education.

References

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Notes

[1] As does Green (2008) in Chapter 7 on informal learning with classical music.

About the Author

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