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Informal Learning in Music: Emerging Roles of Teachers and Students

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It was a pleasure to read Lucy Green's new book *Music, Informal Learning and the School* (2008), in which she consolidates many ideas presented in her previous writings. There is little doubt of the significance of her approach, but it raises epistemological and pedagogical issues that must be addressed to better understand where we go next with informal learning, so that we might provide more relevant, engaging public school music instruction. When we question how well we have designed music curricula, and how well we have prepared our teachers to implement them (Williams 2007), we must take into account the nature and organization of music learning as it occurs beyond the classroom, and for this perspective we are deeply indebted to Green. Her ideas resonate with the growing support for more creative thinking in the classroom. If we construe creativity as a three-part process of considering expected outcomes, rejecting them, then exploring alternatives (Ackoff & Greenberg 2008), informal learning shows great promise for revitalizing music education. However, we are yet in the infancy stage of our inquiry, with so many new questions arising from the emergent literature. Therefore, in this paper I present several problems with informal learning that I have encountered in my work—specifically, the new roles for teachers in informal learning, and providing informal learning experiences to students who have substantive skill as formal musicians. These problems are discussed in the context of my experiences with pre-service music educators at the university, and with a rock band at a local urban high school.

Informal Learning and Musicality

I cannot proceed without first addressing the issue of musicality. How one conceptualizes musicality shapes everything else one does in the profession (Rodriguez 2004). I find increasing acceptance of this term in my discussions with peer researchers and educators because it encompasses a broad range of traditional and emergent skills and sensitivities, even while there seems to be some flexibility in its use by these groups (Jaffurs 2004). What it

means when we call someone ‘musical’ is rarely the sum of the relatively few factors we can measure accurately, therefore present in the school curriculum. For example, music literacy, in the traditional sense, refers to one’s ability to see symbols and convert them into sounds, and to hear sounds and convert them into symbols. However, we expect quite a bit more from the musically literate than these decoding/encoding notational skills, such as extended vocabularies for describing music, stylistic sensitivity across historically and ethnically diverse musical cultures, ability and willingness to articulate musical preferences, understanding of the multidisciplinary nature of music, a knack for playing instruments and/or singing, some creative facility, and a well-developed conception of the place that music holds in one’s life. In the end, music literacy is probably something more than what we typically teach to, and musicality is surely quite a bit more as well.

If I may propose my own conception of musicality: it is one’s demonstration of explicit and implicit skills and understandings to communicate musical ideas. I believe Green’s proposal of a “critical musicality” (Green 2008, p.14) is consistent with my conception, in that students develop conscious awareness of their ability to express something of themselves through music. I see this as a process of extending their personalities through the music— composing and performing in such a way that it identifies the music as uniquely theirs. This process of individualization is not a typical goal of traditional music instruction, so I believe we must look beyond our current teaching practices to more fully develop musicality in students. It has been suggested that there are clear intersections in formal and informal musical learning (Jaffurs 2006), thus we might do well to explore these intersections as means of helping students more fully develop their musicality.

Teaching for Informal Learning

The more familiar I become with informal learning, the more I see formal qualities in it. The most basic learning process of listening to and copying recordings becomes more efficient with experience as musicians gradually acquire skill in predicting and remembering changes, audiating through chord progressions without having to play them, and so forth. These thinking skills culminate in the ability to hear the music once and be able to play it, which in turn strengthens the transfer and linkage between mental rehearsal and physical execution. These attainments suggest that there is a system of rules and connections that cumulatively produce sharpened perception, expanded musical memory, and improved dexterity. However,

the process is not a pre-ordinate series of steps that is understood separately from the music itself, nor deliberately taught by someone who has already mastered them— thus, perhaps, its nature as informal. It is common of musicians playing by ear, taking its shape from the collective musical materials from which it arises. Informal learning is thus aligned with critical pedagogy in so far as musical attainments are stimulated and mediated by the music itself. This is a hallmark of critical pedagogy—allowing concepts and skills to emerge from engagement in the materials themselves (Abrahams 2005).

However, because informal learning is not algorithmic does not mean that it is not structured. While use of the term “formal” implies that the learning contains hierarchically-organized levels of mastery, and is overseen by more experienced participants, these two features may be present in informal learning as well. In formal instructional settings, a pre-ordinate series of instructional steps allows teachers to control learning and efficiently identify problems in the process. In informal learning, the teacher relinquishes this control and enters into a more flexible and dynamic relationship with the learner, yet a plan for instruction must still be negotiated between teachers and students. The activities of copying recordings, improvising, composing, and performing on an instrument (or singing) each invoke steps, even if they happen to be material-, context-, and learner-specific, and even if they are mostly hidden. Experienced teachers naturally desire to bring these steps to the fore. From their standpoint, what does it mean to understand informal learning in music? I believe it means they are cognizant of its sequence of competencies, and are able to re-organize or re-frame these competencies to promote learning. This is what we otherwise train teachers to do, and what we expect them to believe they can do. To repeat a question asked of me by one of my pre-service music education students, why bring informal learning into a classroom if you do not want a teacher to direct the process?

To use a familiar example in children’s musical development, we do not really teach children how to learn songs, but we can document what naturally occurs in learning songs by first systematically observing, then describing, then accounting for stages in song acquisition (Davidson, McKemon, & Gardner 1981; Welch, Sargent, & White 1998). We then use these findings to formulate an instructional sequence that teachers use to teach songs to children. This is the functional relationship between research and practice, and what permits music educators to believe that they can control and maximize learning, two responsibilities that characterize the American educational system.

But teachers must make a substantial shift in informal learning, such that they must become experts in helping students make things happen for themselves. Even if this scenario of music teachers and students interacting as co-teachers and co-learners is the hallmark of critical pedagogy (Abrahams 2005), it does drastically redefine what it means to prepare music teachers. When my students are introduced to the concept of informal learning through a series of readings, asked to identify possible points of interaction with formal learning, and then required to present a sample lesson in class, approximately half of them do so with extreme awkwardness, and some even with hostility. These students feel very threatened by the idea that their own education, which has shaped their high musical standards and made them who they are, has somehow been devalued. In my experience, this is a common reaction for in-service teachers as well, even if they do acknowledge the importance of meeting their students' ever-changing needs for musical knowledge and skills. Frustration arises when teachers are not able to accommodate something presumptively a "best practice" into their existing teaching schemas.

Informal Learning with Formally-Trained Students

Recently I have experienced joys and concerns observing and assisting a rock band at a local high school. They have "curricular music," meaning that one entire period per day is devoted to practicing to provide accompaniment for the pop vocal ensemble that meets at the same time in a different rehearsal room. The line-up is guitar, bass, keyboard, and drums, and the players are male. We have been working on four new songs. My comments here are pertain to the students learning pre-composed music rather than composing their own.

Each member has been playing violin, cello, or double bass since junior high school, making this group different than others I have observed in an informal learning context. This formal study has been accompanied by their interest in popular music, and while they have each been developing skills in playing by ear on electric guitar, bass, keyboard, and drums, this is the first time any of them has played in a group. I began by asking the music teacher to provide me with CD recordings and scores for each piece. I passed along the recordings to the band members early one week, and then met with them several days later to check on their progress. I was quite surprised to find that they had not even listened to the recordings, but had used the scores to block out their parts. As the bass player, "Josh", described it when I questioned him: "It's so much easier to get the basic part down ...you know, we just look at

the music ...you can check the key ...or find out where any changes are ...then try to remember them as you play.” As for the chord progression, Josh was not interested in working on the fingering until he heard the recording, since “... the recording tells you how it sounds ...it’s not the same as the music[al score] ...” So then, what was the score for? “It’s just a way to find out how many verses ...and to look at the cues ...” Upon further investigation I determined that each player had gone through roughly this same process. In fact, they did it together. We discussed as a group if they could obtain the same information by simply listening to the recording. The guitarist, “David”, replied: “It’s just too slow ...you end up listening so many times, and then the song gets really ...boring ...”¹

I watched and listened as the band members copied the CD recordings over several rehearsal sessions. The drummer, “Austen”, appeared to have the least experience on his new instrument, and took the most time learning his part. He was less able to develop a sense of how the music went by looking at the score—in his defense, it contained less information for drums than for the pitched instruments—and began listening to the CD recordings before the other members. He even complained that he resented the score-reading stage, but did so because it was something everyone else in the group was doing. I sensed that he complied because he didn’t want to fall behind in the learning of the music, and because, for the reason band members are often compelled to act (Inglis 2006), it reinforced his identification with the band.

The protocol described here is quite different from that used by informal learners who do not have developed notational skills. These band members use notation to learn music quickly and efficiently, and are advantaged by very sharp musical ears, no doubt the result of intensive music involvement. Further, their enjoyment of the music, obviously regulated by their familiarity with it (Sluckin, Hargreaves, & Colman 1982), is short-lived. Allowed to choose their own path, they attempt to learn the music at a macro-level as quickly as possible, and attend to the various micro-levels later. This trend is the reverse of how Lucy Green and others have observed self-regulated novices approach similar musical tasks, and on this point, Green invokes the developmental theory of Swanwick and Tillman (1986) who support her contention that novice learners are initially “primarily immersed in the immediate sonic qualities of musical materials” (p. 71, footnote).

If the sophistication of one’s notational skills mediates one’s initial selection of surface or structural aspects to learn music, then informal learning environments are perhaps

even more diverse with respect to peer learning and cooperation than it is tempting to assume. We should be prepared for informal learning opportunities to attract former and current band, choir, or orchestra students looking for more creative and flexible music making, as well as students who do not participate in performance ensembles or take private lessons because they dislike the repertory that accompanies these traditions. How might these groups interact, particularly if the pace, style, and organization of learning are determined by students?

The keyboardist, “Julian”, is the most accomplished musician in the group, but he is highly introverted, and I question whether he even enjoys playing the raucous pop classics the group was assigned. Considering his behavior, he is a textbook case of an introvert with a lower threshold of arousal, compared to the remaining members, who are all extroverts (Kemp 1996). They actually look up to him, perhaps because of his musical skills, but I suspect in part owing to his freedom or courage to be highly individual in dress, hairstyle, and mannerisms. He certainly does not desire a leadership role.

The song ‘Do You Want to Dance?’ begins with narration as the group, minus drums, plays chords in rhythmic unison. Because they were not together with their timing, I asked Julian to nod his head as he played the chords on the keyboard, for David and Josh to follow. He did so, but with little assertiveness, and it did not bring them together. I demonstrated. He tried again and it really got no better. He was very frustrated since it seemed like it should be an easy task. Julian and I practiced jumping forward from a standing position, in order to feel the anacrusis of the downbeat. He then tried to transfer this feeling to the “head up” motion. The head nodding seemed to work a bit better, but I think he felt self-conscious over the amount of effort it expended. I am continually surprised by how poorly I can predict what tasks will be easy or difficult for us as a working group.

I try to divide my efforts between helping where and how I think they need help, and listening to how they would like me to help them. Josh and David are the best at articulating how they want me to help them. Josh plays me licks he has worked out as embellishments, ostensibly to obtain approval to use them, but I suspect he really just enjoys playing and having me listen. David has very good chops on the guitar, but lacks confidence, so wants me to create solos for him to imitate. Austen, a bit younger than the rest, continually talks and is not really sure how I might best assist him or the group. Working with all of them at once is exhausting. The foregoing observations demonstrate that my interactions with the group can

be unsettling if, despite our best efforts to communicate with each other, my mentoring efforts do not coincide with their mentoring needs.

Preferences and Technique

Differences in personal taste create obstacles that we must navigate through. One of the songs features a highly syncopated bass line pattern, in the style of “electric funk.” In the first run-through, Austen was not playing the kick drum in time with the bass, rather, kicking on the downbeat, which is a quite natural way for novice drummers to play. The result was a muddy bottom to the sound, with the kick drum and the bass guitar just a sixteenth note apart. I asked Austen to try aligning his right foot with the bass guitar part. He asked why, and I replied that it created a cleaner-sounding bottom and also resolved some tempo problems, i.e., his tendency to drag. He replied that he didn’t know what I meant about the “cleaner-sounding bottom” and didn’t think he was slowing down while playing. I was tempted to suggest using a click track or strobe to prevail my point, but understood that this was not the best direction to go. To my relief, Josh suggested a click track, which solved the tempo problem but not the muddiness. This episode brought back a memory from several years ago of my daughter playing Zwan’s *Mary Star of the Sea*, whose opening song featured a drumming part that I found ludicrous. Using frenetic cymbal and drum combinations in a grandiose style I might have expected in the final few bars, the drummer played in this way relentlessly through the entire song. My daughter commented that the drums were her favorite aspect, because he played with so much passion. I understood that what I had experienced then, and what I was experiencing now, was a difference in what we considered good. I was thus happy to have amended the tempo problem, and let Austen play his drums in the manner he thought best.

To what degree is it beneficial for teachers to attempt to influence the students’ personal musical preferences? Perhaps to the degree that they are willing to have their own preferences changed. This perspective is challenging for teachers who believe they are competent by virtue of possessing highly evolved standards for musical thinking and behavior. For now, I am content to let my standards float about the rehearsal space, sneaking them into student-initiated discussions as needed. For example, David could not find out how to get a “1960’s rock and roll” sound out of his chording and strumming, primarily because he was playing barred chords in such a way that he was dampening the highest strings,

strumming only the inner four strings of the guitar using a mix of neck and bridge pickups, and filtering his signal through an impressively complex maze of compressors, distortion boxes, and master volumes. The resulting sound was characteristic of a style that developed in the 1990's—a very mid-rangy, sustained sound. Together we worked to achieve what guitarist Todd Rundgren called “that kind of dry, upfront, unembellished sound from the pre-pedal days [to] get the effect of being plugged directly into the amp” (Gress 2008, p. 122). In this case, David was less concerned that I preferred the new sound for the song style, and more interested in the various technical adjustments needed to produce exactly the sound we were searching for.

As a corollary to the previous point, an essential component of an electric musician's craft is tone. I have always worked on my tone as hard as I have worked on my right and left hand technique. So when I, in effect, deconstruct someone else's tone, I consider it a highly personal matter. David's current set-up represents his progress searching for his sound. Josh appears even more conscious of his choices, typically bringing three basses to practice. Julian has an electronic keyboard that has sampling capabilities, and I hear him exploring its endless possibilities between songs, but he prefers one basic electric piano sound, as if to proclaim that he does not want to orchestrate the music with instruments the group doesn't actually have. Austen is quite impressionable and is searching for his own “voice” on the drums. He is sensitive about his abilities and claims he needs to practice outside of band rehearsal. He currently does not have a favorite drummer. We are collectively quite keen on helping him find one.

Final Reflection

My experiences with pre-service music educators and high school students generate questions about my future role as an advocate for informal learning. As the primary source of my information and inspiration, Lucy Green makes informal learning seem attractive, timely, and meaningful to our larger aims as music educators. While I am mostly encouraged by the reactions of my students to informal learning experiences, they give rise to the instructional problems I have addressed in this paper. I find that students engaged in informal learning focus much of their attention on testing and evaluating ways to communicate musical ideas, and while I believe this practice is essential to musicality, it represents a dramatic departure from the purposes and processes of formal music education, so much so that I find myself

struggling with the intricacies of moment-to-moment interactions, while I question my role in the formation and appreciation of student preferences. I understand how critical it is to provide the right type of guidance at the right time so as not to constrain their progress. I believe teachers need more concise recommendations on how to provide freedom and direction while remaining compassionate and resourceful leaders, even as longstanding rules for teaching are replaced with newer, mostly untested ones.

My exchanges with high school musicians who have strong formal music backgrounds suggests that informal learning pedagogy requires more flexibility and intensiveness than I had previously imagined. While informal learning environments may provide more accessible and varied musical experiences than traditional music ensembles, students with significant prior notational and practicing abilities tend to bring those skills with them, reducing the informality of the environment. However, because creative decision-making is not a significant part of formal music education, formally-trained students display a heavy reliance on guidelines. They are conditioned to being told what to do, and adopting someone else's ideas of how the music should go, such that they are often not adequately prepared for the individual freedoms informal learning provides. When they are confronted with problems to solve, they often resort to strategies acquired from formal music training, since this is what they know. In this sense, my formally trained students and I share a similar challenge—to develop new ways to address new problems. One area for future research would be to study the give-and-take of informal and formal learning systems to determine how they can be mutually supportive. To be sure, if we empower students and teachers with greater decision-making power in the content and procedures of learning, we must better prepare them for this challenge and responsibility, suggesting educational changes that reach far beyond music.

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