It looks chaotic, but what is really happening?

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Abstract

Informal learning practices, based on Lucy Green's research into how popular musicians learn, offer students in the music classroom the opportunity to explore collaborative, aural based learning that is guided, rather than directed, by the teacher. Over a period of five years informal learning projects were included in the music curricula of two secondary schools in which I was working. While there has been commentary on the impact of informal learning practices from the student engagement and achievement perspective, little consideration has been given to the role and influence of the teacher. Here, aspects of student learning and the role of the teacher are discussed from a personal perspective.

Key words: informal learning, secondary music education, role of teacher

As a music educator, I have always believed in the importance of incorporating a range of pedagogical approaches into the curriculum. With rapid developments in communication and social media influencing the lives of young people, some of the more traditional approaches to music learning have become rather anachronistic. In light of this, I was drawn to the research of British educator Lucy Green (2008, 2002) concerning informal learning practices. Over a period of five years I incorporated informal learning projects into the music curricula in two schools in an effort to maintain student interest and engagement. Both were small, high achieving private schools in Victoria however, they were significantly different.

The typical classroom usually includes students who possess a range of musical skills and knowledge. Apart from classroom music at school some students may learn an instrument, either in a school program or privately outside the school, while others may not have the opportunity or the desire to do so. Some students may also have an understanding of theory and have highly developed musical skills, while others may have virtually no formal understanding. Music is most likely to be the only subject in the school that has this diversity of student knowledge as a starting point and this can create challenges for the teacher.

Over many years of teaching I have found that less musically experienced students often lack confidence when comparing themselves to more experienced students. This can make them feel 'not good enough' or unable to 'do' music. This was, partially, the motivation for including informal learning projects into the curriculum. The other motivation was my concern that all students should be offered activities that motivate and engage them in meaningful music learning. Through the informal learning projects I observed many interesting responses and outcomes from both the students and also from me, as teacher.

Ideas surrounding less formal learning practices have been in existence for many years. In the second half of the 20th century educational thinkers including John Paynter and Christopher Small moved away from more traditional approaches to

music education in an effort to engage all students in meaningful musical experiences. Creativity through experiential learning was the central idea, and at the time this was reflective of the bigger social picture. A creative society, it was thought, would lead to greater productivity. Finney (2012) discusses Carl Rogers 1954 ideas concerning creativity in terms of "passive use of leisure time, work seen as execution of technical tasks and the dreariness of well-ordered family life as impelling a need to understand the nature of the creative process and the realization of undiscovered human potentialities" (p. 33).

In the 1960s John Paynter led the 'creative music movement' (Burke, 2005) in which he espoused a creative music education with innovation through integrated arts programs in schools and the notion of the child as artist. Paynter believed all aspects of musical activity are essentially creative (Finney, 2012), but there were fears at the time that Paynter's ideas would lead to traditional music reading and writing techniques being neglected (Finney, 2012). Later, Christopher Small introduced the notion of musicking: literally 'to music', as in the verb, rather than 'music' as a noun. Small (1999) wrote,

To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance. That means not only to perform but to listen, to provide material for performance (what we call practicing or rehearsing), or to take part in any activity that can affect the nature of that style of human encounter which is a musical performance. (p. 12)

Innovative educator Ros McMillan, who was Director of Music at Presbyterian Ladies' College in Melbourne in the late 1970s, got hold of a copy of Small's 1977 book *Music, Education, Society: A radical examination of the prophetic function of music in western, eastern and African cultures with its impact on society and its use in education"* and circulated it amongst the music staff. At the time I was on the music staff and remember reading parts of the book and being inspired. As Ros McMillan reminded me in a recent conversation, the ideas contained in it were so radical that it almost had to be passed around in a brown paper bag!

Despite these historical forays into less formal and experiential learning practices by some educators, traditional methods appear to have maintained their central position as the mainstay of school music curricula. In her 2002 book, *How Popular Musicians Learn*, Lucy Green investigated informal learning outside the school setting, commenting that

Within these traditions, young musicians largely teach themselves or 'pick up' skills and knowledge, usually with the help and encouragement of their family and peers, by watching and imitating the musicians around them and by making reference to recordings or performances and other live events involving their chosen music. (2002, p. 5)

In her next book *Music, Informal Learning and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy,* Green researched the implementation of informal learning practices in the classroom. She discusses informal learning in relation to the 'creative music movement' of the 1960s and 1970s, noting the similarities of a creative approach and students working in groups. However, she points out that the central musical choices in the 'creative music movement' were teacher driven and were derived from "the world of 'serious' or classical music" (Green, 2008, p. 12). Stemming from Green's work, the Musical Futures program (2012) was devised, led by David Price and supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. The program was developed in response to research that found a majority of secondary school students in Britain were disengaged in school music learning. Musical Futures has been used with much success in school across Britain and other parts of the world including Australia.

In my own work with informal learning projects in the classroom I initially drew heavily on the Musical Futures model. Later, I went back to Green's book *Music, Informal Learning and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy* as the main source. Although the students in my two schools did not have any particular issues with engagement in music classes, I felt that through using informal learning

approaches they could explore independent learning and, perhaps, find more enriching ways to develop their own musical skills. Although informal learning projects are experiential in nature, they do need to be scaffolded so that students have some idea of where they are headed. How scaffolded is a question that I grappled with over the five years that I used the approach. I did find that given the varied experience levels of students, consideration of Vygotsky's theories of identifying student 'zones of proximal development' and 'zones of actual development' (O'Donnell, 2012) were both useful tools, especially in considering assessment approaches.

The two school settings

As head of department in both of the schools I was able to incorporate the informal learning projects without any objections, although I am sure there were a few raised eyebrows at times. In School One, I delivered the projects in conjunction with a colleague who was like-minded and terrific to work with. We used team-teaching as part of our educational strategy across the curriculum, because in doing this we felt more able to draw on our individual strengths to deliver a more diverse and interesting music program. In School Two I worked alone, devising projects that suited the Year 8 cohort.

School One was an international school with a floating population of about 450 students in a rural setting, deemed to be in a low socio-economic area. It is co-educational, offering Years 5 to 12 with the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program at Years 11 and 12. The school is privately owned and run, and has no affiliations. At the time I was working there approximately 50% of the student population were from a range of local rural and urban backgrounds, and the remainder of the students were international boarders, mainly from high socio-economic Asian backgrounds. The student population were mostly engaged in learning and generally co-operative, although

there were some exceptions. A majority of the local students had not learned an instrument prior to attending the school, but many of the overseas students had learned a musical instrument and some had high-level performance skills.

School Two was a non-selective school for girls in a high socio-economic area in Melbourne. It has very strong academic results for VCE and has had excellent National Assessment Program – Language and Literacy (NAPLAN) results for a number of years (ACARA, 2013). The school is a non-denominational Christian school with an ethos of inclusion and aims to instil a social conscience in its students. The student body comes from a range of cultural backgrounds and offers a diverse curriculum for its size, with the Victorian Certificate of Education being offered at Years 11 and 12. The vast majority of students are highly engaged and display a very positive attitude in class. Many of the students have learned a musical instrument, either in an instrumental program at the school or privately. Music is seen as an important part of the school curriculum, and co-curricular musical activities and opportunities abound.

The ability range in the students from School One was more diverse than School Two. Some students had never participated in any form of music prior to attending School One, and in some cases students had never even sung. My colleague and I were astounded when we realised that these children had only ever droned along to songs like Happy Birthday and our first task was to get all the students singing. I believe that there is at least a singing musician inside every person just waiting to emerge, and this was borne out by the participation levels in singing by previously inexperienced students. We found that it took about six months to get them to start singing with confidence. The international students in School One had a very positive attitude towards singing, especially the Korean boys who constantly sang as they moved around the school, and this influenced the local students to participate more enthusiastically in singing and see it as 'cool' and acceptable. This was

influential because singing was an important part of the informal learning projects.

While my colleague and I experimented with the approach at Year 10 level in School One, in School Two I was interested in looking at the impact of informal learning on a group of highly engaged Year 8 students. Almost all of these students were musically literate and either learned or had previously learned voice or an instrument. There were just a few girls who had little musical experience. Mostly, these students had come into the school in Year 7 and had experienced one year of classroom music, but there were a few girls who had just never really comprehended musical literacy and found the more traditional aspects of learning music quite daunting. Again, all of the students sang and this was the basis of many class activities and was considered very acceptable.

Informal leaning in the music classroom

The one resource that is essential for informal learning projects is space. Students need to have enough space to be able to work in groups without disturbing each other too much. It is ideal if there are breakout spaces or smaller rooms available in addition to the main classroom, but sometimes groups need to share spaces and equipment. I found that students negotiated, almost without exception, in a fair and equitable way concerning this. If viewed from the outside, the main feature of the informal classroom is the apparent chaos in the room. The informal classroom is not neat and orderly. There may be students lying on the floor, sitting on desks or making a great deal of noise in their attempt to play instruments that they do not necessarily know anything about, or helping each other and sharing knowledge. In the traditional school environment this can be perceived as anarchic and the antithesis to what a 'proper' educational environment should look like. However, I found that this chaotic state is where most of the work and learning takes place.

As teacher I was always a little wary of what my colleagues or senior management would make of these informal learning projects. In School One the principal was completely supportive of any innovations in learning and given that the music building was quite removed from the rest of the school there were no problems. School Two was quite innovative in many aspects, however there was a culture of fairly impeccable behaviour throughout the student body and so I was more concerned about perceptions of the informal classroom. I did ask the girls to be able to explain what learning they were engaged in if anyone asked. They understood exactly and were terrific in their responses when the occasion arose – which it did, several times. This is one important reason for preparing curricular documentation that justifies the educational value of these activities.

What happened?

In School One informal learning activities were used over four years in the Year 10 music elective. Many students had a great interest in playing in rock and pop bands while others were drawn to more classical styles of music. The students had to form groups and select a song or piece of music to recreate over a period of several weeks and perform on a set date. Most of musical selections were firmly placed in the pop genre although some were acoustic and included a range of instruments. As many members of the class were international students they were familiar with songs from the Cantopop, J-pop and K-pop repertoires and chose to work in these rather than western style pop music. Students worked together in groups of their own choosing and these often included a mix of cultural backgrounds, which seemed to occur for musical reasons rather than personal ones. There was much negotiation in some of the groups while others ran very smoothly. At times my colleague and I intervened but the students mainly sorted things out themselves. In some cases the musical interactions actually helped students to navigate some of the murkier waters of their personal interactions.

The outcomes of these earlier informal learning projects were variable. I am not sure that I understood enough about working in this way to create strong enough scaffolding for the work the first time informal projects were included in the curriculum, but this developed over successive years. The groups who worked cohesively and independently generally devised strong performances while other less organised and less independent groups barely managed to produce cohesive musical outcomes. I think that the probable reason for this was the encultured learning styles of some international students who tended not to speak in class, even when asked questions. These students had never worked in groups, let alone in directing their own learning. My colleague and I found that we became much more involved in the evolution of projects from the less confident groups. As we refined our approach the performance outcomes became more evenly matched and students became progressively happier with their outcomes, gaining confidence in aural and independent learning.

The two informal learning projects in School Two were quite different for a combination of reasons. As previously stated, the students at this school were virtually all motivated, experienced and engaged in music learning and the few exceptions were still co-operative, and participated in all activities. The year level was lower, and the student population here was more homogenous than in School One. Most importantly, as their teacher I had a much clearer idea of how to organise and scaffold the activities. Groups still self-selected, but recognised quite quickly that their initial friendship groupings were not always the best 'fit' and negotiated changes accordingly.

The first project took 10 lessons and each involved groups each choosing a song to replicate as closely as they could to the original. The stipulation was that no written music or chord charts were to be used but that lyrics could be sourced. Initially, many students felt unsure and were worried that they could not produce a performance without a score. The class had already done quite a lot of listening analysis and had developed aural skills that assisted in the work. Although I did give advice in the early stages, I did not intervene unless they were really stuck. There was a great deal of self-regulation in the groups. At times nothing seemed to be happening, whereas at other times there was enormous productivity. The advice I gave was really just a guide on how to kick start things and enable confidence in the students, otherwise I avoided the urge to intervene and left the students alone to work independently. As they settled into the work I witnessed strongly collaborative learning in all of the groups. Some students taught themselves how to play the drum kit, while others taught each other guitar chords and lines on the piano. Other instruments were used when students could not replicate the original and the glockenspiel became a very popular as a substitute. This project culminated in performances by all of the groups, which were recorded.

The second activity was negotiated with the class and they chose to reproduce Beatles songs, which surprised me. The students asked if they could use sheet music for this project and so I agreed, but stipulated that the songs had to be reinterpreted. Some groups needed direction when choosing a style, but otherwise they needed little help. The resulting performances included a rap version of "Octopuses Garden" and a country style version of "Hey Jude" and other songs were in techno and classical styles. The students used skills developed in the previous work to enhance their arrangements. Some of the groups incorporated drum kit, guitars, piano and voice, while others included flutes, clarinets, trumpets, violins and cellos. Not all groups chose to include voices. I found that there was more inclusion of complimentary musical lines and musical embellishment in these performances. Generally, the students found this project easier and took less time to complete it, but they appeared less engaging than they had with previous task.

For both projects the personal investment of the students in the performances at the end of the

project was fascinating. I observed quite different behaviours to those I had witnessed prior to the informal learning projects. Some of the more experienced performers who were usually very comfortable playing in concerts or for the class were incredibly nervous for these performances and these performances were considered to be really important. Interestingly, outcomes for the whole group far outweighed any individual achievement and perfection in the performances was not seen to be as important as a credible rendition of the music. Students tended not to self-criticise at the end, which was quite a change in behaviour, and without exception the groups were happy with their performance outcomes, despite any imperfections.

Reflections

Informal learning projects reflect both social constructivist and experiential learning aspects (O'Donnell, 2012), but one important aspect that gradually emerged concerned my own teaching approach. As acknowledged, the informal learning projects in School One were delivered in a team-teaching situation and my colleague was researching creativity in the secondary classroom at the time. Her belief is that students learn more about themselves by 'doing' music in an exploratory way as this allows them to discover more about themselves. We had many discussions about what was happening with the students during the projects, but did not really consider our own part in the process. Over time, I realised that the more traditional role of 'teacher as instructor' was not so appropriate in informal learning, rather, 'teacher as facilitator' was the key.

Perhaps the biggest realisation for me, however, was the degree to which I, as teacher, have been programmed to intervene in student learning. As stated earlier, there is a need to scaffold informal work so that the students have an idea of where they are headed and I did steer the groups quite deliberately in School One. However, in School Two I became more aware of my interventionist

nature, realising that I was actually interfering with the discovery learning processes of the students. I had to let go of my almost obsessive need to shape and control student learning to allow the groups to pursue their own pathways. What I did observe about these projects was that learning developed quite differently for each group, that success for the whole was paramount, and that each group approached the tasks individually to achieve successful outcomes.

Upon reflection, I wonder whether aspects of the informal process could be wound into other activities within the music curriculum. Could this, perhaps, change perceptions of being 'good' or 'bad' at music, and might competitive behaviours be subdued? According to Walker (2007) musical development is difficult to define, but I can honestly say that I observed development in the aural skills and increased confidence and collaborative skills in all students. Students who were more natural aural learners thrived and became leaders in their groups. One part of the assessment for these tasks was through reflective journals. These revealed that the students felt the first task was more difficult but that it was rewarding, that working out music aurally was not as hard as they had first imagined, and that equality in the group process is very important. There was also much comment on the success of the performances, how rewarding the outcomes were, how much they learned and how well the groups worked together.

As McMillan says, "the arts encourage young people to take risks and explore alternative solutions" (2003, p. 186). I thought a great deal about this statement in relation to the learning that took place, deciding that there were more avenues that could be explored through these practices that might enhance both student learning and teaching practice. What emerged for me was the power of humans as social creatures and that perhaps this kind of negotiated learning taps into innate behaviours that require creative exploration and peaceful negotiation to produce successful outcomes for the good of the whole, rather than those of the individual.

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