

# Where is Music?: A philosophical approach inspired by Steve Dillon

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*This paper is written as a tribute to the memory of our good friend and colleague, Dr Steve Dillon (1953-2012).*

## Abstract

For pre-service music teachers it is important to develop a personal philosophy of music education before entering the teaching profession. Having a philosophy to music education enables students to clearly articulate the meaning of music not only in their own lives but also how this might impact on their practice as a teacher. Many philosophies and theories (Elliott, 1995; Reimer, 1970; Swanwick, 1999) as well as particular methods (see Dalcroze, Kodály and Suzuki for example) have been developed concerning the approaches to the teaching and learning of music. This paper will draw on some of these explorations however its main focus will be on the work of Steve Dillon. It will preface the inquiry by asking Dillon's three framing questions: Where is music in my life? Where is music in the life of a child? and Where is music in the life of a school? (Dillon, 2007). Discourse around these questions will be inspired by Steve's work in schools, universities and music communities. It will also feature interview data with Steve as well as his research publications. We dedicate this paper to him in memory of his passion and commitment to music education generally, but overall compassion and keenness for music and life.

**Key words:** Dillon, philosophy, music education

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## Prologue

Both authors have been fortunate enough to work with Steve throughout his life in various contexts. Steve was always passionate about music education but it was more than that. He was passionate about music and its importance in people's lives – how it can connect, improve, enrich, share, benefit, transcend and transform. He will be dearly missed.

## Introduction

For pre-service music teachers it is important to develop a personal philosophy to music education before entering the teaching profession as it impacts on many aspects of

teaching such as planning and assessment. Having a philosophy to music education enables students to clearly articulate the meaning of music not only in their own lives but also their students and how this might impact on their practice as a teacher. It is a way of being clear about one's own values and goals and can change over time (Combs, 2010). Many philosophies and theories to music education feature in the literature (Elliott, 1995; Reimer, 1970; Swanwick, 1999). The most prominent discourse in this area is the distinctiveness between a *praxial* or *aesthetic* approach to music teaching and learning. Reimer's (1970) philosophy lies in the notion that music has beauty and can develop a form of intelligence that affords "meaningful,

cognitive experiences unavailable in any other way" (p. 28). Essentially this approach stems from an 18<sup>th</sup> century model to learning music in that it claims to acknowledge the aesthetic nature and value in music practices. Elliott (1995) on the other hand believes music is "something that people do" (p. 39), and it is "cognitive through and through" (p. 235). This view brings together performative aspects as well as aurality, leading to the development of the practice of music. Either opinion however, ascertains the premise that more engagement in music – performance, listening, composing, analysis – directs one to a deeper understanding of its inherent meaning and value (Green, 1988).

Associated with this argument is the 'intrinsic' nature of music. Dillon (2001) notes that 'intrinsic' is used "to describe a natural attraction or engagement with music making" (p. 147). The work of John Dewey (1989) in his book *Arts as experience*, highlights that music in community is a natural phenomenon and largely significant in many societies. In this sense it helps to "define and express" (Dillon, 2001, p. 238) who we are. Further, not only is the artist a member of the community of practice but it is the process by which they engage in the artistic experience as an individual that Dewey's work considers. Dillon (2001) aptly describes Dewey's experiential theory to arts engagement:

The artist is perceptive about the process and product and dynamically responds to both experience and reflection in practice. There is also recognition of the relationship between product and perceiver independent of the process of making. (p. 25)

Understanding the complex relationship that the artist has with the artistic product through discovery and experience is extremely important for teachers of the Arts. This consequently impacts on the ways in which higher education contexts develop curriculum and approaches to the teaching and learning of pre-service teachers.

### ***Where is music? Theorising music philosophical approaches in higher education***

The three theoretical framing questions that Dillon (2007) uses in higher education contexts with students are: Where is music in my life? Where is music in the life of a child? And Where is music in the life of a school? By asking the question – Where? students are required to seriously consider the place and purpose of music in their lives, their potential students' lives, and within the community in which they will be working. It is about knowing yourself in the ecology of music education. Whether music is purely for listening pleasure or a means to an end this will impact on one's practice as a teacher. In developing a philosophy however, the first question that one must ask is – What is Music?

It has been noted that music as a concept itself can be wide and varied (Barton, 2005). Vella's (2000) statement considers the way in which context shapes cultural and social domains; the interactive relationships between musician and audience; and the capacity of music as an aural art:

[music's] definition needs to take into account variables ranging from the cultural conditioning and expectations of the participants, the social function of the music and its familiarity to the listener, to the physiological factors that affect how we listen. (p. 24)

Acknowledging this will confirm that approaches to teaching and learning are also dynamic and ever-changing (Campbell, 1991). A consistent argument entails a comparison of formal and informal methods often claiming that formal modes tend to occur in institutionalised settings such as schools while informal outside of these confines (Barton, 2004; Dunbar-Hall, 1999; Hughes & More, 1997). Observation and imitation rather than verbal instruction are more prevalent in de-institutionalised contexts and in contemporary times more and more children have experienced this mode of learning in regard to music acquisition.

When pre-service teachers ask themselves: Where is music in my life? it begins a personal journey. For some, music is everywhere and for others it is a source of needed income. Whatever the answer, it is this question that frames a personal philosophy to music education. Previous learning experiences, musical involvement and overall impact of music in a student's life will certainly have an effect on what they intend to do, but also what they are capable of doing in the classroom context (Barton, 2004). Similarly, what school students bring to the teaching and learning environment in their 'backpack' will also influence teaching and learning.

Many students come to school with informal music learning experiences but often these are not taken into account by both policy and teachers. Campbell (2007) notes that children often use these prior learnings and attitudes and apply these to new settings and similarly Green (2002) notes that informal modes of learning, as adopted by popular musicians, tend to be those are less prioritised in school settings. Knowing where music is in the life of a child (or student) is very important in music education. This builds connectivity between school and community. When this does not happen students feel disengaged and find little relevance in schools' music programs and tend to find music pleasure and learning opportunities outside of school (Dillon, 2001).

A music program literally is only as good as the support provided by administration, staff, students and parents in a school context. If music is valued and its benefits understood clearly then the music teachers' job is made much easier. Many schools promote their public image often through the extra-curricular music offerings such as instrumental, choirs, musicals and other similar events. This may still occur even if the value of music has limited recognition. The notion that schools are socially situated communities aligns with Dillon's (2000) concept of 'schools are like villages'. Knowing where music is in the life of a

school is extremely important for teachers and especially beginner teachers as it allows them to personally, socially and culturally situate themselves in context. It enables multiple lenses on what we perceive to be the significance and purpose of music in our lives and others. Clearly music is a profound endeavour.

### ***Dillon's key concepts to music education*** *Meaningful Engagement Matrix*

Steve advocated an approach that begins with the intrinsic nature of music experience. He presented analytical tools for getting information about the nature of a school community and the culture and values of those who inhabit these contexts. Dillon and Brown's (2006, 2007) theoretical model – the Meaningful Engagement Matrix (MEM) (see Appendix 1) draws on personal, social and cultural impact and influence on not only performance practice but also in the role of audience. This takes on many manifestations in that an anthropological, ethnographical and ecological lens is applied to the *how* and *what* of music. Steve believed that using the MEM was an important step in shifting from colonial imposition to a bottom up approach which considers culture and people ethically and empathetically. Further, the MEM acts as a checklist for students of music that helps them examine any musical activities and the relationship that they have with these (Brown & Dillon, 2011, p. 7). He then moves to observing the interaction between the music maker and the creative process and examines the presence of meaningful engagement. Using the matrix also provides a way of evaluating the effectiveness of a program or approach.

In a recent interview Steve highlights the importance and inherent meaning around the MEM:

*Reaching into my own theory, the theory with Andrew Brown, the 'meaningful engagement' theory music has three contexts according to*

*us – we've got at least three - maybe a fourth, one might be spirituality. The first is the personal so it connects us with ourselves; it activates another kind of side of the brain...It connects us with others so within ceremonies, within choirs and bands and things like that we are with someone else and, apparently humans are the only animals that have that kind of synchronization of action like in doing something together like that... there's a neurological term for it –synchrosis. And then there's the cultural aspects of it, that we use music to represent stuff in ways that are quite powerfully symbolic...So it's a very concise form of memory and, of course like societies that have used song as a means of communication not only with themselves and each other but communication with some kind of other absolute or spirituality or to bring themselves together. So it's powerful in that personal, social and cultural ways and perhaps, you know like in societies where it actually frames their whole belief system (Interview, 5 March 2012).*

### *Technology in music education*

Steve (in collaboration) with Andrew Brown was at the forefront on the use of technology in music education. Together they designed *Save to Disc* and *Jam2Jam*.

<http://www.savetodisc.net/>

<http://explodingart.com/jam2jam/jam2jam/Home/Home.html>

Steve and Andrew engaged music students in music making using the tools that are familiar to, and of everyday use to the 21st century students. However, Steve argued that we need to move beyond the limitations of 'technology as a tool'. Technology is a partner in the creative process: "because the partner, the technology actually becomes the partner not a tool you actually scaffold a higher level of expressive outcome so they can actually make much better music" (Interview 5 March 2012).

He believed that we need to view the modes of engagement with technology as multiple and "then we can both develop the boundaries of creative music making and enhance our access

to meaningful and expressive music making experiences" (2000, p. 29). By this he meant that within a school context, music making could be truly creative and not merely re-creative.

### *The student as maker, the teacher as builder and the school is a village*

The three tenets of Steve's philosophy include: the student as maker, the teacher as builder and the school is a village.

The student as maker suggests that through making music and reflecting and responding to these experiences that the outcome will be self-formative - it will lead to transformation. He suggests that the student needs to have readily access to the creative process – of making music in a relevant and reverent way and in a context which replicates or simulates how music is made in the world (2007, p. 225).

The music teacher as builder understands the student as maker of meaning through making and reflecting. The teacher as builder then seeks to enable a student to become a self-actuated and expressive music maker. Steve suggests that teachers model and engender values of openness to music from across cultures and times. He states that "the teacher as builder then engenders an approach to teaching music that allows students to encounter knowledge in the environment on one hand and a process of direct modeling of intuitive and embodied knowledge to and with students on the other" (p. 228).

The school is a village with its own culture and values and recognition of this makes it a cultural site for learning. The school environment enables a flexible space where new ideas can be realised and old ideas experienced as imaginative play or simulation that replicate 'real world' practice (p. 228). Steve advocates that our own contexts and environments have the capacity to contribute to ours and others knowledge of music.

### *Music, spirituality and well-being*

More recently Steve's work has been in the areas of spirituality and well-being (see Dillon,

2006 for example). A series of lectures on *Music and Spirituality* at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) marked a new, holistic approach for Steve and his research on music and meaningful engagement. Similarly his involvement in *Sweet Freedom* and *Downs' Syndrome Queensland* were not only research endeavours but complete personal passions for Steve. In a sense Steve's life reached full circle in that valuing and understanding the profound effect that music has on life became his transformational mantra. "Music is all around us and we need to be aware of its purpose and effect on us and there is no better way to do this than through direct experiences of making music and critiquing reflecting and responding to these experiences in words, writing, visual representation and sound. Hence, it is making music that is at the core of this philosophy and practice of music, which leads to transformation" (Dillon, 2007, p. 225).

### **Implications for pre-service teacher education programs**

Developing a personal philosophy to music education as a pre-service teacher is essential before entering the teaching profession. This can however, be a complicated cognitive task. Asking the 'big' questions such as "what is music?" and "what will be my approaches to teaching music?" can be difficult questions to answer for higher education students. Using Dillon's holistic approach in asking "why?" enables students to begin their journey towards philosophical inquiry into music education practices.

Music as an art form is inherently a social and cultural endeavour. As a musician one is often performing with or for others. Students of music learn to develop a sense of teamwork and interact positively with their peers. Participating in music making reinforces our cultural identity. In this sense music teachers and policy makers would benefit from aligning their foundational

philosophies with the many and diverse music practices which are more evidently present in contemporary educational contexts.

Approaching music education these ways make it more meaningful and engaging for students. Dillon and Brown's "Meaningful Engagement Matrix" allows pre-service teachers to consider not only the benefits of music education but supports them in developing their own personal approach to the teaching and learning of music. It enables reflective inquiry that is dynamic not static, evolving not contracting. Pre-service teachers are asked to consider what their students' learning needs are and what their opinion is on their own learning and participation in it. It invites them to contribute to theoretical discourse about the nature and value of music education – something that will ultimately move music education practices into the future.

### **Epilogue**

Music has the power to heal, communicate and affirm our self. It also has the power to transform self and our understanding of our self in relation to other people and cultures. All this is intrinsic. For music experience to be meaningful and for it to lead to transformation in these kinds of positive ways and to education character at the core of this is simply recognition of this idea. Music is intrinsically motivated – if I have a child in a room with a drum, the child will hit the drum. If we do nothing else then we should not get in the way of the child's desire for playfulness with sonic materials. If we do however decide to initiate the student into a musical discourse, then perhaps we can consider first the student as maker. We can then build an environment for them to be playful in so that they can encounter musical knowledge. Second, we can consciously recognise our context as a village where we can provide a safe and encouraging environment for students to understand where music is in their lives. Perhaps then, we can realise music as meaning and transformation and give access to meaningful music making for life. (Dillon, 2007, p. 230)

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### Appendix 1: Meaningful Engagement Matrix.

|                 | <b>Attend</b>      | <b>Evaluate</b> | <b>Direct</b>     | <b>Explore</b> | <b>Embody</b> |
|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------|---------------|
| <b>Personal</b> | Listening          | Analysing       | Composing         | Improvising    | Practicing    |
|                 | Reading            | Selecting       | Mixing            | Experimenting  | Playing       |
|                 | Watching           |                 |                   |                |               |
| <b>Social</b>   | File sharing       | Discussing      | Conducting        | Jamming        | Rehearsing    |
|                 | Shared earbuds     |                 |                   |                | Recording     |
| <b>Cultural</b> | Concert attendance | Curating        | Patronage         | Researching    | Performing    |
|                 |                    |                 | Promotion         |                |               |
|                 |                    |                 | Instrument making |                |               |

*Personal: the activity is intrinsically enjoyable.*

*Social: the activity connects the student with others and these relationships are valued.*

*Cultural: the activity is regarded as valuable by the community and, by participating (or succeeding) in it; the student achieves a sense that they too are important (Dillon, 2007, p. 232)*

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