

Non-formal learning: clarification of the concept and its application in music learning

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Abstract

The concept of non-formal learning, which falls outside the categories of informal and formal learning, has not been as widely discussed, especially in the music education literature. In order to bridge this gap and to provide supplementary framework to the discussion of informal and formal learning, therefore, this paper will first summarize various literature in this area and then an operational concept about non-formal learning which is applicable in music learning-practices will be formulated. In summary, Non-formal learning refers to a kind of learning which is relatively systematic and (but not necessarily) pre-planned, with a clear intention on the part of the learner and teacher to accomplish a particular learning task. It should be noted that assessment and the intended learning outcomes have not been clearly highlighted. The paper will then present various community music-making activities around the world which belong to this non-formal type of learning under this operational concept.

Key words: non-formal learning, transmission, community music-making

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Topics and issues around informal and formal learning/education have been widely discussed by various music educators (Campbell, 1991a, 1991b; Folkestad, 2005, 2006; Green, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2008; North & Hargreaves, 2008; Sefton-Green, 2003). Yet the concept of non-formal learning, which falls outside the categories of informal and formal learning, has not been as widely discussed as the other two types of learning, especially in the music education literature. In order to bridge this gap and to provide supplementary framework to the discussion of informal and formal learning, therefore, this paper will summarize various scholars' literature in this area and then present an operational concept which is applicable to the scenario of music learning. It is hoped that the concept of non-formal learning can help explain the diverse ways of music learning.

Non-formal learning: The history

Before discussing the concept of non-formal learning, a clarification of the terms 'education' and 'learning' is needed here first. Coombs and Ahmed (1974) were the first to use the term 'non-formal education'. They had a conviction that education can no longer be confined to time-bound and place-bound school settings or quantified by years of exposure, and concluded that education could be equated with learning, "regardless of where, how or when the learning occurs" (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8). As a result, they used the term 'education' instead of 'learning' in their discussions, in which they also referred to learning, but as something with a slightly different meaning from education. Similar situations have been found where scholars have blurred the boundary between 'education' and

'learning'. Rogers (2004) explains that the term 'non-formal learning', rather than non-formal education, is often used under the influence of the discourse of lifelong learning. According to him, "the area of discussion is exactly the same" (p. 2).

In some of the literature referred to in this section the term 'Non-formal Education' (NFE) is used, as NFE is now a well-established term which is used frequently in the literature. In light of this, I have chosen those explanations which can refer to 'learning' and are applicable in music learning scenarios. The following discussion of the concept of non-formal learning will focus on context, autonomy and intention.

Non-formal learning: The concept

Firstly, 'non-formal' learning is not a new concept. As already mentioned, the concept of non-formal education was introduced in the 1970s by Coombs and Ahmed, and it appeared in a book entitled *Attacking rural poverty: How nonformal education can help* (1974). Coombs and Ahmed defined non-formal education as:

any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children. (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8)

Therefore, the learning includes both learners (recipients) and a/some transmitter(s) and their activities were held outside the formal system, which can be understood as 'school'. However, it is not clear what is meant by 'selected types of learning', or exactly who can be included in the 'particular subgroups in the population'.

In addition to the context of this type of learning, which is outside the formal system, the autonomous nature of non-formal learning has also been referred to. According to Reddy (2003), non-formal learning consists of "activities outside the formal learning setting, characterized by voluntary as opposed to mandatory participation" (p. 21). Two points are made here: non-formal

learning takes place outside of a formal learning setting, and it is engaged in voluntarily. Reddy thus goes one step further in mentioning the issue of autonomy in learning.

In the field of music education, Morgan (2000) defines the concept of non-formal learning. In his study of the Band and Music Service world in Northern Ireland, with regard to the context of this type of learning, he described non-formal learning as:

a form of learning that takes place outside the parameters of the traditional learning structures or institutions. One could argue that 'all' learning that takes place outside organizations is, in fact, non-formal in character because it is not constrained by rules, ceremony or conventions. (Morgan, 2000, p. 95)

His idea is similar to those of the scholars referred to above, who also considered non-formal learning to take place outside a formal institution. All the above scholars appear to emphasize the fact that non-formal learning is an out-of-institution, voluntary type of learning. However, voluntary learning can also occur within a school setting as extra-curricular activities. Thus, I have reservations about this 'out-of-institution' point of view. Instead, non-formal learning should not be seen as being bound by where the learning takes place.

Following in the footsteps of Coombs and Ahmed, La Bella (1982) further developed the concept and characteristics and states that non-formal learning can take place in schools in the form of extra-curricular activities. In contrast to the views of the scholars mentioned above, he goes on to say that the non-formal mode of learning can take place in formal, non-formal and informal educational settings. Concerning the autonomous nature of non-formal learning, La Bella confirms the view of other scholars that it is non-mandatory in nature, yet both teacher and learner have the intention to work towards a pre-planned goal.

Taking into account the above views on non-formal learning and its applicability to music learning scenarios, the following operational

definition was developed. Non-formal learning is relatively systematic and (but not necessarily) pre-planned with an explicit intention on the part of both learner and mentor to accomplish a/some specific learning task(s). It is clear that non-formal learning involves some kind of guidance from a mentor. As this type of learning is voluntary, it is not like the compulsory education which is given at school, but this does not mean that the learning cannot take place in a school. In fact, non-formal learning can occur in any learning context. Many extra-curricular activities in schools can be regarded as non-formal learning. It should be noted that modes of assessment and intended learning outcomes have not been clearly outlined in non-formal learning. This indicates that measurable learning outcomes are not the main concern of non-formal learning, as they are in formal learning and formal education.

Non-formal learning: Methods of transmission

The method of transmission in non-formal learning may be both aural-oral and by means of musical notation. In the aural-oral method, it is usual for traditional musicians to learn by following mentors' oral instructions and demonstrations. Yet the use of notation for learning is also possible when notation is used as a supplement to guidance by mentors. Notation is also used in other learning contexts, such as church and extra-curricular school music. However, a musician may begin by using an aural approach to copying music, or start by reading a score and later switch to the aural approach. A shift from reading a score to an aural approach is common. Bennett (1980) mentions the case of a piano player who first took classical piano lessons, but later joined a band in college. Being unable to play without a written score because of his previous training in music, the player started by using sheet music. However, he was soon able to convert to using an aural approach to learning: those transcriptions are so bad—they never match the record—so I stopped doing the sheet

music trip really quick. It's so simple just to get things off the record, sheet music is just for people who can't hear. (Bennett, 1980, p. 139)

Non-formal learning: Community music-making

Using the above definition, it appears that in fact many community music-makers learn in a non-formal way. An enormous variety of community music takes place using non-formal methods of learning. For example, in traditional music, if a child wants to become a specialist musician, he/she may start with a non-formal kind of training which involves learning from a master-mentor. In this case, the non-formal method is more systematic and pre-planned, with both learner and mentor having the explicit intention of accomplishing particular learning goals. Mentors may include family members, established musicians, a ceremonial practitioner or other children. The learning method may involve individual teaching sessions in the manner of an apprenticeship (Merriam, 1964). The non-formal mode is also demonstrated in Dunbar-Hall's studies (2005) of gamelan learning in Bali. A child begins to learn the instrument by consciously observing and imitating the playing of an adult. However, more structured learning occurs when a mentor is employed to teach a group of children a repertoire. The non-formal strategy of learning from the example of older people or instrumental mentors prevails in both traditional and popular music. This learning is relatively systematic when compared with informal learning, but does not involve a formal assessment or the obtaining of a certificate, as in the formal instrumental learning.

In a non-formal method of learning traditional music employed in Japan, Japanese teachers teach the learners rhythmic and melodic patterns aurally by giving a demonstration, which the learners then copy. The learners thus try to imitate the teacher's position and sound. Verbal explanations are rare, and observation of the teachers' demonstration and other students' lessons in progress are of the utmost importance. Since the

students sit opposite their teacher during the learning process, they are required to assume a position of reverence, which makes the learning challenging (Campbell, 1991a). This is an example of learning which uses an entirely aural-oral approach.

Non-formal learning with a master teacher is also the norm in traditional *qin* (a long thin zither) learning in China. The master teacher will demonstrate the rhythm, phrasing, hand position as well as posture to the learners. Although there does exist written notation for the *qin*, by observing the teachers, learners can learn some aspects of the music and performance practices which are not shown on paper (Campbell, 1991a). Therefore, although written notation is available, the main method of learning is aural, since what is written down on paper is not exactly the same as the actual playing. The idiom of traditional Chinese music is best learned aurally.

Apart from the above-mentioned oral-aural methods of learning, non-formal learning from a master player is also common. A Chinese musician playing Chaozhou *xianshi* music (a form of string ensemble folk music) expressed that in his teens, he entered a new phase of learning the music as he was then able to learn under his uncle, an expert musician in the *xiyue* tradition (Ng, 2005). *Xiyue* is a small chamber version of *xianshi* which represents the high culture of *xianshi* music. The fingering of the core instruments used in *xiyue* was more difficult and therefore could not be learnt simply by watching elders play. He spent most evenings learning from his uncle the techniques of these instruments, as well as the structures, style and aesthetics of the music. In addition to this formal instruction, he had ample opportunities to listen to the performances given by a famous sextet at their musical gatherings, which occurred frequently at that time before the Second World War (Ng, 2005).

The Korean *sanjo*, a type of music which is based on the development of one monophonic melody line with an accompaniment, is learnt in a non-formal way. The music is acquired in a traditional aural-oral manner, in which a student has to rely completely on a teacher who transmits the music

individually and directly. The student learns the pattern of the music by imitation until he or she feels free to improvise. It takes at least ten years of constant work and practice to reach a high level of achievement in *sanjo* (Song, 1982). Therefore, the learning is highly structured.

In addition to the traditional music mentioned above, non-formal learning methods are also used in church music. Although at first glance church music may not seem to fit the type, throughout the centuries the church has had the responsibility of training choristers and other musicians, including organists, pianists and other instrumentalists (Finnegan, 2007). These are active community music-making groups which contribute to the community music scene.

The weekly practice sessions of choristers normally involve singing from notated music. Their musical learning should not be taken for granted, and Finnegan (2007) points out that, "membership of church choirs not only gave local musicians an occasion to practise their art, but also provided the development of musical skills and interests" (p. 213). Instrumental groups are as important as choristers in a church service. They practise less often than choristers and are organized on an *ad hoc* basis according to the needs of the church and the availability of the instrumentalists. Besides offering learning opportunities for choir members, the Christian Church also nurtures musicianship among its congregation by means of its singing tradition (Finnegan, 2007).

On the whole, the educative power of the church in music should not be underestimated. Finnegan (2007) concludes that, "(t)he churches therefore (rather like the schools) provided *locales* for music-making and, to an extent, its necessary material equipment" (p. 217). She stipulates that although the importance of musical education in the churches is often overlooked, in practice the church helps to supplement school music teaching. The church's musical group at the same time takes responsibility for the musical development of its members. This kind of systematic non-formal learning is comparable to school music learning.

Conclusion

Whilst the informal way of learning is neither sequential nor orderly and can occur anywhere, non-formal learning refers to a kind of learning which is relatively systematic and (but not necessarily) pre-planned, with a clear intention on the part of the learner and teacher to accomplish a particular learning task. Unlike formal learning which has a clear and highly structured curriculum, an instruction plan, a sequential learning process, a clear assessment plan, and a person in charge, in non-formal learning, the assessment and the intended learning outcomes have not been clearly highlighted.

As mentioned in the beginning, the discussion of non-formal learning can provide supplementary framework to the discussion of the well-established concepts of informal and formal ways of learning in the music education field. It is hoped that the concept of non-formal learning discussed above can be found useful in explaining and to differentiate the diverse ways of music learning-practices prevailing in the world.

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