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Creating an Educational Framework for Popular Music in Public Schools: Anticipating the Second-Wave

By

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Abstract

As part of a panel presentation at the 2008 AERA Conference, this paper seeks to advance a critical examination of research on the informal learning practices that are associated with the way so-called popular musicians learn. A call for a “second-wave” of research studies on the teaching of popular music in schools is made. Contra instructional practices that adopt informal learning wholesale, the author argues that a sound educational framework must be in place should teachers and teacher educators wish to “operationalize” the practices of popular musicians. Arguing that there is a distinction between “informal learning” and “informalism,” and critiquing the disappearance of the teacher in Lucy Green’s new book *Music, Informal Learning and the School* (2008), the concept of democracy – in the form of a laboratory school – is offered as a way of locating *education* in the practice of teaching and learning popular music.

Creating an Educational Framework for Popular Music in Public Schools: Anticipating the Second-Wave

This panel seeks to advance a critical examination of research on the informal learning practices that are associated with the way so-called popular musicians learn. It is our intention to theorize this practice with illustrations, seeking not to advance a particular operational platform or method, but to introduce responses to an ethical mandate grounded in our profession’s obligations to diversify our curricula in an increasingly pluralistic and ever-changing world. My presentation will begin with an appreciation of the pioneering work of Lucy Green. It can be argued that her seminal

text, *How Popular Musicians Learn*, helped to legitimize popular music as a field of education research and smoothed the way for its inclusion in schools (Green 2001). Next, I will briefly outline new problems facing researchers as they move beyond a “first-wave” body of literature to a burgeoning “second wave,” where studies on popular music intersect with public education. Early studies of popular music, from the fields of cultural studies (Frith 1996; McClary 1991), empirical research (Finnegan 1989; Fornas, Lindberg & Sernhede 1995) and sociology (Frith 1988; Leblanc 1999) were rich in scope, but lacked grounding in educational theory or a strong interest in public school music education. A new “second-wave,” anticipated by the panelists collected, calls for research studies that locate and problematize methods of teaching of popular music. Finally, in the short time left I will sketch my own model of teacher preparation based on the democratic potential of mutual learning communities, or garage bands.

§ § §

How Popular Musicians Learn came out just as I was putting the finishing touches my own 405-page ethnography on the workings of high school band members in after-school garage bands (Allsup 2002). Upon discovering Green’s text, I felt suddenly un-alone. At that time, I had found only one other music education researcher who looked at popular music from the standpoint of teachers, schools, and applied instruction: that was Patricia Shehan-Campbell (1995) in a hard-to-find article called “Of Garage Bands and Song-getting”. Now, this was not 1950 – this was not 1985 – this was five years ago. Today, an expanding field of scholarship is flourishing around the importance

of popular music and the manner in which it is taught and learned (Green 2006, 2008; Folkestad 2005; Rodriguez, et al 2004; Soderman & Folkestad 2004; Vakeva 2006; Westerlund 2006; Wiggins 2006). Indeed, growth has been rapid. In five short years, the paradigm has shifted from descriptive research on what popular musicians are actually doing (Allsup 2002, 2003; Byrne & Sheridan 2000; Hebert & Campbell, 2000; Green 2001) to heuristic investigations into the *whys* and *hows* of popular music and informal learning, especially as these domains intersect with schools, schools of education, methods of instruction, and our profession's efforts to diversify curricula (Allsup 2004; Davis 2005; Green 2006, 2008; Vakeva 2006; Westerlund 2006). I turn now to a critical appreciation of Lucy Green's new book *Music, Informal Learning and the School* (2008), the contents of which frame increasingly complicated problems for researchers in this field. Time prevents me from addressing more than four general concerns.

First, researchers must be careful not to make equivalent the notion of informal learning *ipso facto* with that of popular music.¹ Conflating informal learning with a genre-specific art form, as Green does when she designed her Musical Futures curriculum around the practices of "Anglo-American guitar-based music makers" (2001, 12) may lead to the unintended consequence of narrowing of musical possibilities rather than expanding them.² It deserves asking whether pedagogical inspiration from this mostly male, mostly white genre represents a step forward in our efforts to diversify classroom offerings. Are music lessons designed around "Anglo-American guitar-based music" – Mike Huckabee's favored form of music-making – a culturally responsive choice for all

¹ Of course, not all popular music is learned informally; nor is informal learning solely derived from or derivative of popular musicians.

² For information on the Musical Futures project, go to: www.musicalfutures.org.uk

students? And if, as Green is quoted as saying, the learning practices adopted “were based, not on a theory of child-centeredness or discovery-learning, but on an empirical investigation and analysis of the real-life, informal practices of popular musicians as they operate outside the educational environment” (2008 110), it is worth recalling that the empirical investigations referred to come from data she collected from a sample of fourteen all-white participants, twelve of whom were male, all of whom played what can be loosely described as white-ethnic rock (Green 2001).

Second, how will research studies inspired by the informal practices of popular musicians instruct the training of future music educators? What will changing approaches to teacher preparation look like? What new certification requirements will be asked of our student teachers? Second-wave research must empirically describe and philosophically justify that which it seeks to replace or modify. Importantly, we must not conflate the term “school” with “schooling” or use them interchangeably. Should researchers fail, furthermore, to distinguish between “formal learning” and “*formalism*” and “informal learning” and “*informalism*,” teacher educators will be left ill-equipped to imagine a role for teachers in which they do the business of educating, or schools as social laboratories in which students interact with all walks of life (Dewey 1916).³

Third, what constitutes teacher quality in informal or popular settings? To outside observers, music teachers who apply informal processes in informal settings may appear to be doing very little. The children in Green’s Musical Futures project decide the friends they wish to study with and the music they wish to learn. They spend most of their time

³ In this context, I define formalism as a teacher directed doctrine in which students are trained to achieve predetermined outcomes. The doctrine of informalism is equally dogmatic; it is a form of self-directed learning that takes place solely through social intercourse, outside the school and without an assigned teacher.

copying what they hear from CDs. In Green's curriculum, where professional educators are prohibited from setting explicit educational targets and learning objectives, even a friendly critic is left wondering just how a music educator is trained in informalist teaching, to what uses are put a teacher's content expertise, and the degree to which an acquaintance with instructional theory is even necessary.

As the topic of teacher expertise bumps up against the values of informal learning, Green's research may have the unintended effect of fueling right-wing critics of education schools whose efforts to dismantle teacher certification – and public education in general – are advanced by arguing against the utility of training teachers, given the inherent ineffectiveness of teacher education programs on the one hand, and the inherent ineffectiveness of pedagogical theory on the other (Cochran-Smith 2002a; Kozol 2005; Will 2006). If music education researchers are now finding new favor in informalist learning as a reaction to a history of poorly trained music educators (Kratus 2007; Williams 2007), or if a profession's collective loss of faith in teachers and their capacity to educate is engendered, we may be sowing the seeds of our own demise. The music teachers in Green's new book could easily be outsourced in favor of cheaper, less experienced, and under-educated labor. If the tenets of informal musical learning are to be adapted, second-wave research needs to provide broad and self-critical illustrations of what constitutes a qualified, indeed *highly* qualified, music teacher (Cochran-Smith 2002b; Darling-Hammond & Berry 2006).

Finally, are the methods and processes of informal learning equal to the unique problems that popular music brings to the classroom? How do students become media literate in informal settings (Richards 1998; Buckingham 2003)? Green worries, like

many of us, that children are insufficiently equipped to defend against market exploitation. She claims, however, that children develop a “critical musicality” by learning the music they like (Green 2008, 83-85). Because they hear more, they will see more. I fear, in spite of this, that a curriculum based on the copying of CD recordings apart from adult interaction is educationally naïve, especially when faced off against the sophistication of the predatory capitalism. No matter how beneficial investigations of popular music are, or how rewarding the processes of informal learning turn out to be, it seems prudent to provide formal spaces in which dialogue and critique can occur.

To this point, I turn to John Dewey, who like Green viewed informal learning as spirited and natural, but worried that its gains were too random, and its outcomes too narrow. Dewey imagined the school as a place of social experimentation, where the problems of home and neighborhood, or the musical problems of the garage, are worked out in common. In the following quote by Dewey, I have substituted a few words, garage for home, musical life for social life – but you will get what I mean. “The ideal *garage* [home] has to be enlarged. The child must be brought into contact with more grown people and with more children in order that there may be the freest and richest *musical life* [social life]. Moreover, the occupations and relationships of the *garage* [home] environment are not especially selected for the growth of the child; the main objective is something else, and what the child can get out of them is incidental” (Dewey 1915/2001, 24-25). We know that young adults in informal learning environments, whether alone at a computer or with friends in a garage, are likely to work in isolation (Finnegan 1985; Putnam 2000). I believe that the classroom – the band room – is the ideal location for a

critical sharing of values and perspectives, a community of diverse talents and powers, arguing and debating – indeed laughing and smiling – across differences.

This is the realm that I am most interested in working in. Purposeful, democratic spaces where teachers and students come together, not through the casualties of formalist or informalist ideologies, but through methods of living and learning where plausible human interests intersect with shared desires. These are humble aspirations, not grand. But because they take many forms, they are not linked to a singular genre or method of instruction; they do not focus wholly on the teacher or exclusively on the student. Determinations of value – dare I say standards – are worked out in common. And growth – incidental and intentional – comes from interaction, not isolation. Concerning this panel, I would have to say that I don't actually operationalize informal learning, or formal learning either. Rather, pressed, I would say that I operationalize democracy in the hope that by bringing the graduate students I work with to reach beyond narrow specializations to greater openness, they will do this for their own students in turn.

The problem, of course, is how to prepare teachers to comfortably interact in this arguably “idealized,” always evolving classroom community. Older models of music teacher preparation focused primarily on mechanical skills like baton technique and woodwind fingerings, with the expectation of placing these *a priori* skills without reference into faceless schools in faceless neighborhoods. Today's music educator is often called upon to work in partnership with the particulars of location and context (Abrahams 2005; Custodero & Williams 2000). Looking outward, this is an interesting inversion of formal learning, where the teacher places skill at the service of student

needs, rather than personal expertise. But neither should teacher expertise be hard to locate, only redirected or refocused toward a common good.

I am no more or less inspired by the music that garage band musicians make than I am by the music of jazz, folk, classical, or hip hop musicians. Resisting literal understandings of how garage bands are operationalized, I am inspired, rather, by how garage bands communities are made and negotiated, the way problems get solved, and above all, the manner in which the music practiced and composed is personally meaningful and self-reflective. Congruent with the aims of Lucy Green's research, but not the means, the garage bands rehearsing weekly at Teachers College are not really garage bands after all, I'm afraid. As part of a required teacher preparation course, they are what Jerome Bruner calls "mutual learning communities" but this academic nomenclature belies their dynamic character (Bruner 1995). Music of all styles and genres are explored and students are asked to consider critically their various roles as performers, composers, learners, teachers, and community members.

In closing, this panel makes clear that the learning practices associated with popular musicians are sure to be operationalized through a multiplicity of means. I am convinced that the teachers best capable of managing such a task will be those music educators with a practiced democratic outlook. The foundation of democratic education rests on a diversity of ideas and their practical connection to a changing world. We can thank Lucy Green for bringing this topic to our profession's full attention, just as we anticipate a new wave of expansive research in this area.

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