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Escaping the Classical Canon: Changing Methods through a Change of Paradigm

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Abstract

This article explores the work of Lucy Green in terms of the application of her research to practice in music education classrooms. Three specific topics are explored including: student centered learning, teachers and formal music education, and the organic nature of music learning. The author calls for a critical examination of Greens' work in terms of application and suggests that multiple models or modes of implementation and further experimentation may led to a more viable approach to musical learning as it is found in many musical communities.

Preface

The publication of Green's text entitled *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead for Music Education* (2001) describes her research in the realm of popular musicians and music transmission. Through her more recent publication *Music Informal Learning and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy* (2008), Green has found many innovative ways in which to move from the realm of research and inquiry to practical application and examination of that application through practice – a gap that many researchers fail to traverse. I feel that as we examine her work in a critical way and seek our own unique forms of implementation of the ideas she has presented, we must keep in mind that this latest text is an attempt to bridge all to elusive gap between research and practice and that in doing so there is room for experimentation. Through this publication she has exposed her research and teaching practices in a very intimate and personal way and we are

indebted to Green for providing a model of 'research to practice' that is so greatly needed in the field of music education.

Introduction

As our time is considerably short this afternoon, I would like to focus my attention on three strands that are apparent throughout Green's work: 1) student centered learning or students as source, 2) the role of teachers in informal learning; and 3) the organic nature of music learning. Each of these areas will be discussed in relation to popular musics and classroom music education. These conversations are a mixture of my personal response to her work and examples of practical applications of her work in American music classrooms in the attempts to look beyond prior knowledge and practice towards new possibilities for the implementation of Green's work.

Student Centered Learning

Key to Green's work is the concept of student centered learning. She constructs a good argument that it may be time to experiment, or perhaps withdraw, from formal western music traditions of music teaching and learning - in which the teacher is the often thought of as the end all be all of musical knowledge and that to be successful as a teacher is to install knowledge upon the unknowing student. Green's experiment of application in *Music, Informal learning, and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy* (2008) is an in-depth acknowledgement of students as sources of knowledge. Her methodology is based on partnerships of students, shared responsibilities among student-centered groups, and acknowledgement through respect and value of students' pre-existing interests, abilities,

and preferences by the classroom teacher. In particular, student preference and knowledge become the primary starting points from which students expand outwards into different musical styles, genres and cultures.

Within the field of multicultural education the notion of culturally responsive teaching has raised awareness to students' individuality. "This approach to educational practice takes into consideration the needs, experiences, and perspectives of culturally diverse students, where its main purpose is to help students with their cultural and social identities in such a way that learning in any subject is made more relevant" (Abril 2007, 5). Culturally responsive teaching embraces constructivist views of teaching and learning, in which learning is viewed as an active process by which learners give meaning to new information, ideas, and principles and other stimuli and that teaching is viewed as inducing change in students' knowledge and belief systems (Villegas and Lucas 2002). While Green does not reference much literature regarding cultural diversity or learning practices for world musics in music education, which is rather disappointing, the practice of her evolving pedagogy is very much based on these principles. The consumption of music by youths, their musical preferences, and their musical knowledge can very easily be described as "youth culture" (or cultures), a generational and cultural grouping that is not often given serious consideration in a positive way. Youth culture, which is heavily comprised of musics and musicians, is a source that Green acknowledges their culture and musical preferences and knowledge as legitimate and worthy of study for their own merits.

The largest portion of music makers in this country cannot be found in professional or community bands, choirs, and orchestras. Instead, they are found in

basements, pubs, garages, worship teams, computer labs, dance clubs, and recording studios. One can argue that lessons learned in one musical community – for example musical lessons from band, choir, and orchestra - can be transferred to other communities, but this is not necessarily true. Teachers frequently complain about students' inability to transfer knowledge from the general music classroom to the instrumental classroom or from the elementary music classroom to the middle school music classroom. If transfer between somewhat like musical idioms is difficult at best, how can we expect students to make the connections between musical systems that to them may have little-to-nothing in common? Transfer has to be taught, and unless you are teaching how to transfer to and from in multiple musical cultures it has no lasting meaning or relevance.

It has been estimated that only 20% of high school students in the United States are participating in formal music instruction. Where are the missing 80%? The answer to this is quite simple, they're musicking (in Small's sense of the term 1998)! A visit to any local high school Battle of the Bands competition and you will see many students who may fall outside formal musical instruction but have musical skills and passion that are enviable by some of our best traditional singers and players.

How do we reach this missing 80%? Green believes that the time has come for music to be just that – *music*, unattached from our preconceived notions of 'good' and 'bad' and with an understanding that there is no hierarchy or superiority of particular genres; there is only personal preference. Music around the world is created, listened to, adapted, danced and moved to for the same reasons: it defines, represents, symbolizes, expresses, constructs, mobilizes, incites, controls, transforms, unites, and much more

(Wade 2006). If we want to draw these students in and invite them to participate in an education that will bring them into adulthood and foster continued learning beyond and outside of classroom, we must move towards pedagogies that are inclusive - and, shouldn't we pay more attention to their preferences than we do our own? It may be a balancing act, but I agree with Green that the time has come to tip the scales in their direction.

Teachers and Formal Music Education

As Green expresses her created curriculum in the text *Music, Informal Learning, and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy* (2008) we begin to witness changes in the role of 'teacher'. Throughout the *Musical Futures* program (the curricular program that is the primary focus of this text) the teachers are asked to step back and allow for student centered learning. Green indicates that this was not always an easy role for teachers adhere to. During each of the seven stages of this curriculum teachers were asked to "establish ground rules for behavior, set the task going at each stage, and then stand back and observe what the pupils were doing" (Green 2008, 74). Debbie, one of the teachers in this project framed her anxiety by stating "I'm terrified about the lesson today; just letting the students go off and jam. I'm actually scared of letting them do this..."(Green 2008, 30).

I believe much of the disconnect between formal music education and learners' preferences and knowledge can be traced to institutions of higher learning. These institutions, serving as gatekeepers to the profession, generally reserve admittance to students whose training in Western art music qualifies them to continue such pursuits.

Our institutions can be seen as an integral part of the reciprocal cycle of music teacher preparation – we only accept a portion of those for whom formal music education has ‘worked’, and only if their voice or instrument is needed in a particular ensemble or studio. It is completely the wrong way to go about selecting the next generation of education hopefuls. While NASM has begun to make acceptations for the acceptance of a broader array of students (NASM Handbook 2007), very few programs are taking advantage of these changes – again, what can we do when there are no studios or ensembles to cater to various kinds of musicians? The cycle continues.

Carlos Abril (2008) in a recent study of one teacher’s journey to create a mariachi program in her central Chicago high school strings program found that while she was willing to work for change, she felt she did not have the skills needed or perhaps even the confidence needed to risk change. While as a university musician she participated in the traditional string ensembles, she also played violin in a local Emo band (a style of emotional punk rock or heavy metal music). However, she was reluctant to even mention this band participation to the researcher as she thought he would be uninterested. Her participation in the band was a facet of her musical self that she claims did not inform her work as a university student or music educator years later. She never thought of them as being related. My own research (Clements & Campbell 2006) found similar disconnect for teachers between what was required of them for the degree program and the other musical worlds in which they reside. If we want to prepare future teachers for success in teaching all forms of musics we, along with our colleagues in musicology, theory, and performance, must acknowledge all of the musics in which we are engaged. We all

contain bi- or multi-musicality, but through formal education we begin to value some more than others and this separation must end.

While Green takes a very strong approach to the role of teacher – or the lack of the role of teacher, I would like to suggest that music teachers play a role that is more similar to facilitator and ‘sharer’ in the learning process and that their role be developed from expression of their personal multi-musicality, their understanding of their students needs, desires, knowledge and skills, and the musics and cultures that surround the school building within the community (both locally and virtually). I will address this more specifically in the next conversation.

The Organic Nature of Music Learning

Green has created a fairly strict concept of how her research may be applied in classroom settings (2008). The objectives and learning outcomes are created by the students with little to no involvement by the music teacher other than to set them on their way. While I fully support student centered learning, I can’t help but have great faith in the intuitiveness, creativity, and ability level of music educators. To me ... any musical project + a music educator = a better musical project for ‘those musicians who can – teach’. I know it’s cliché but it’s true.

The master - apprentice model is prevalent throughout most of the world cultures, yet, it is strangely missing in Greens’ approach. While my own research on community musicians (Clements 2008; Clements & Gibbs 2007; Jones & Clements 2006) has shown me that music making among the popular realms may be constructed in solitude at times – a point that Green takes to extremes - the recordings they use are not the main

instrument of teaching and learning. Musicians gather - it's what we do, the inexperienced along side the more experienced. Even when recordings are used, the music is often brought to fruition not when it's copied or replicated but when it is arranged or created anew through organic means.

Another issue that I continue to struggle with the very term 'popular music and musicians'. While I certainly don't mean to squabble, and defining terms is always a challenge, popular musics are individual, multidimensional, dynamic, and culturally and genre specific, not a large grouping. There is no such thing as 'pan popular'. A general term attached to a specific pedagogy would never fly in world music circles, for example, if someone were to develop a 'Pacific island pedagogy' – it just doesn't work and it isn't appropriate. Everything should be taught within its own terms. We also must keep in mind that popular musics are often popular because someone has paid big bucks for it to be that way, and often, popular musics, at least in a teen culture sense, are not fully organic. They are a deliberate attempt at profiteering and are frequently composed by professional, often non-recording or performing musicians, in a very traditional western way. While this is not universal, it is quickly becoming the norm.

The term pedagogy scares me and I am not completely sure where pedagogy ends and methodology begins. My research in community music making has led me to believe that the real beauty in the process is the ways in which individuals engage in musical practices within the time, space, and location in which they find and develop their groove (in the full Charlie Kiel sense of the term, 1994). I believe that on multiple occasions Green becomes too prescriptive – boarding on becoming a 'the right way and the wrong way' curricular model, which is simply replacing traditional methods with a new one –

one 'soap box' to another. My wish for formal music education is to work to capture the freshness – the soul of the organic ways in which music is taught and learned in multiple avenues. These should be created based on a combination of student *and teacher* 'know how' and should be instigated through personalized exploration and experimentation. The teacher, being an extremely knowledgeable resource or musical knowledge and for understanding their students, should create learning opportunities that will best meet the needs of students in their particular classrooms. Even with a base of student centered learning, it can't be one-program fits all model as prescribed by Green (2008).

What the field of music education needs is a closer examination of what is out there happening in music classrooms at the grassroots level; an investigation of the kinds of programs innovated teachers found to draw in the multitudes of musicians within their school buildings. We need multiple single-case studies of these innovated programs to serve as models for future exploration and experimentation by the masses, both in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade and higher education.

Some teachers remain unaware or simply do not care to think about formal music education's relevancy in the lives of children and Green does much to bring this topic to the table. But, in my opinion, many educators have already moved beyond Lucy Green and have found ways in which to keep the organic nature of music learning alive within the classroom. These organic forms of learning - deeply rooted in individual students and their preferences - intertwined with the musical skills and educational knowledge of teachers will lead us into the new frontier of music education.

I would like to play for you a quick audio track¹ that demonstrates what happens when music educators think outside the box to provide alternative approaches for

students. These short musical examples support the notions that students are musical beings capable of much more than we often give them credit for. Each example is from actual school music programs at the high school level from across the country. Because of time I will end here, but am happy to give you additional information regarding these programs after the presentation should you be interested.

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ⁱ This track is a compilation of student composed musical examples from Nathan Hale High School in Seattle, WA, State College Area High School in State College, PA, a community music program in Stockton, CA, and Hiram Johnson High School in Sacramento, CA.