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Encouraging Change: Incorporating Aural and Informal Learning Processes in an Introductory Music Education Course

By

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Abstract

This article describes an introduction to music education course that engages future teachers in two approaches to music learning that differ from the formalized notation based training most have experienced. The approaches included are systematic aural transmission, as codified by Edwin Gordon, and informal music learning as described by Lucy Green. Students are required to reflect critically on their learning experiences through journaling and discussion. The struggles students experience while engaging in aural music learning serve as an excellent forum for developing understandings about the nature of music learning. The class is not a template for teaching in an alternative manner upon entering the profession, but rather a forum to acquire understandings and dispositions that might allow them to consider creative approaches to teaching upon entering the profession.

Introduction

One of the great paradoxes of formal western music instruction is that the aural art of music is taught almost exclusively through visual musical notation. In schools, notation based instruction equips young performers with reading skills and technical abilities necessary to participate in the bands, orchestras and choirs that many view as the crowning achievement of American music education. All too often, future music teachers who are usually products of such programs expect their own professional education to prepare them to “teach exactly as they were taught” so that they might replicate their own pre-collegiate large ensemble musical experiences. Even though the music that young people identify with, consume and enjoy changed dramatically in the last half of the

twentieth century, music education majors seem to have little awareness that school music programs have not evolved to reflect these transformations. Thus, future music teachers find the idea that there might be alternative ways to teach and learn music challenging

University music education faculty members are increasingly aware that bands, orchestras and choirs appeal to only a limited number of students (Elliot 1994, Jorgensen 2003.). There is a growing interest among these faculty members in providing future teachers with strategies for developing alternatives to large ensemble programs. Teacher preparation programs might enable future teachers to break out of habitual modes of thinking and envision different possibilities by offering music making experiences that deviate from the traditional notation based model. Providing such experiences in the context of teacher preparation programs that must meet standards set by state departments of education and professional accrediting organizations remains challenging.

This paper describes a continuously evolving course that immerses music education majors in aural music learning and uses student reflections to examine how they are responding to the process. *Learning Approaches in Music Education* serves as an introductory course in music education at UCLA and challenges students to engage in modes of music learning that differ from notation based instruction. These two modes are systematic aural transmission, which is used extensively in jazz and many non-western musical traditions, and informal learning, which is the way most popular musicians acquire their performing skills. This course is also the first point in the curriculum where students are asked to critically reflect on the nature of music learning through journaling. Because most music education majors acquire their music making skills through instructional processes involving notation, the struggles our students experience while

engaging in aural music learning serve as an excellent forum for reflection about the nature of music learning. The major class activities include:

- learning the clarinet via aural transmission
- peer teaching using Gordon's learning sequences
- learning the guitar via informal processes
- reflective journaling

The purpose of the class is not to provide students with a template for teaching in an alternative manner upon entering the profession, but rather to help them acquire understandings and dispositions that might allow for creative approaches to the challenges they will encounter when working in the ever changing world of education.

Systematic Aural Transmission

The audiation based approach to music instruction developed by Edwin Gordon is well known and has been sporadically adopted in some areas of the country. One of the goals of this course is having students experience a systematic process of aural music learning by using the Gordon approach in the study of a secondary instrument, usually the clarinet. As soon as basic technique and tone production is established on the instrument, the students begin peer teaching by using Gordon's learning sequences and melodies. Peer teaching requires that students sing and play on a secondary instrument in front of their colleagues. From the instructor's point of view, this compels students to actually practice and learn the instrument in a timely manner. The process also makes future teachers reflect on the preparation required to teach as well as the organizational and presentational skills which must be acquired for fluent classroom instruction. That most find the experience "kind of scary at first" is summarized in the words of one student who states:

Teaching the song was much more difficult than I thought it would be. When I got up in front of the class, I found it difficult to prioritize and think of what to

teach first. I tried to begin through description, but soon found that I was caught in my own words and taking much too long to speak. After I got past this tendency to describe instead of actually do, the lesson flowed well and my classmates were able to learn the song easily (Student reflection. April, 2005. All reflections were conducted in confidentially, and the names of the students are withheld by mutual agreement).

Peer teaching can often seem artificial and very much contrived. Although singing and playing a secondary instrument in front of fellow students can initially produce considerable anxiety, this process allows students to discover that their colleagues share many common issues in the struggle to develop teaching skills. One reports that “It was comforting to know that we all have to learn how to overcome the same things and that we are all at different places in this journey” (Student reflection April, 2006). Most importantly, the students discover that they can learn from each other and that there are many creative ways to approach teaching.

Even though students seem to enjoy the imaginative methods their colleagues come up with to present lessons, this appreciation does not extend to methodological approaches that differ radically from the way they learned music. Because most had never experienced any kind of aural learning prior to entering the university, the music education students at UCLA tend to express considerable skepticism regarding the efficacy of the Gordon approach. Their initial reaction to this mode of instruction is always one of incredulity. The concerns of these future teachers are summarized by one student who stated:

while I think that Music Learning Theory is interesting, I'm a little wary of it. I'm not totally convinced that it is far superior to the methods I was taught when I learned music (Student reflection April, 2005).

A few did find that transposing simple exercises and melodies became relatively easy because the Gordon method stresses functional relationships. However, most

undergraduate music education majors express genuine concern that teaching aural skills in large, especially instrumental, ensembles and that introducing concepts such as tonic and dominant might be too advanced for pre-collegiate students in these school ensembles

Informal Learning

In addition to the challenges posed by peer teaching and learning the clarinet without music, the students also learn how to play guitar using the informal “listen-copy-play” approach of the popular musician. This way of learning music emerged over the last 80 years and involves the acquisition of performing skills through the purposive listening to and active copying of music from recordings without reference to notated music or engagement in formally mentored individual lessons. Lucy Green (2002) extensively describes this informal mode of music learning in her book *How Popular Musicians Learn* and the idea for including an informal learning experience in the course was inspired by her work. Green reports that the distinguishing characteristics of informal learning include 1) allowing students to choose the music they will learn, 2) learning by listening and imitating the recordings, 3) learning in friendship groups, 4) learning without structured guidance, and 5) mixing listening, performing, improvising and composing throughout the learning process. At the current time, this course employs three of these aspects (2, 3 and 4) of the described informal learning process (Green 2008).

In the class, students are provided with a guitar, a CD recording and a description of informal music learning. Asked “to think like a 13 year old” who wants to play guitar, they are encouraged to work alone and with friends in the same manner as aspiring young popular musicians. The one learning technique that is out of bounds is seeking formal instruction. Realizing that pushing notation-based, traditionally-trained music education

students into a project of this nature creates at least some discomfort, this class uses a specially created CD with carefully sequenced materials. Each song is presented in three versions: 1) the entire song, 2) just guitar, 3) vocals and accompaniment without the guitar (like music minus one). Songs on the CD include:

- He's Got the Whole World
- Free Fallen
- Peggy Sue
- Let It Be
- Temptation
- Sleepwalk
- What a Wonderful World

The major difference between the procedures adopted for this class and the learning processes of popular musicians described by Green (2002, 2008) is that the university students are not given a choice of the songs they learn on the guitar. This is done so that the students can begin immediately with a song requiring only two chords and progress through pieces of increasing difficulty that build upon previously learned techniques. Pre-selection of the music avoids a lengthy decision making process as well as the possibility of choosing songs that might present insurmountable technical challenges. Time is provided at each class meeting for students to practice alone and in groups.

Students reported a wide range of reactions toward informal learning. That most find the “listen-copy-play” approach to be more challenging than the structured method employed with the clarinet is reflected in the words of a junior who stated:

We were asked in this class to learn guitar in this way, and I must say it felt so much more difficult than it was to learn clarinet in the classroom. Thus this may be a positive way to learn music for some, but for others, like me, it's difficult (Student reflection May, 2007).

Unlike the learners in Green's work in school settings who did not come to music with highly structured listening skills, these college students found that they could rely on the skills acquired in theory classes to help them in this project. As one student reports:

Listening to the bass part also helped me figure out the harmonic progression for the piece. I figured out that it was a I-V relationship, so all I had to do was determine the key of the piece. That was not too difficult either, as I used a trial and error method on the guitar...I then confirmed the chords with another classmate (Student reflection May, 2006).

For some, discovering that they could learn to play by ear became a "triumph" that they really relished. In this regard, students adopted a variety of strategies to cope with the required informal learning. Almost all reported using the Internet to find chord sheets, tuning information and strumming ideas. Others admitted that they consulted with friends who were experienced guitar players and a few turned to method books to get basic technical information. The design of the CD that presented each song in three different formats seemed to facilitate learning. One student found that:

The CD was really helpful since I could play along with everything the first time, sing the melody while playing the chords the second time, and then double check to see if I could actually play it all by myself without any other guitar players helping me the third time (Student reflection April, 2007).

Even though students found that the different tracks on the CD provided made the learning process somewhat easier than they had feared and they eventually began to enjoy the process, most still needed to overcome a variety of obstacles in order to actually complete the work. A very accomplished brass player stated:

My biggest struggle is now trying to figure out which chords are used for the second song. My limited ability to play chords on the guitar has made it very difficult to figure out what key it is in and therefore which set of chords makes the most sense to play. However, despite these difficulties I still find it very fun to learn how to play the guitar. It is definitely a completely different experience of learning music than that which I went through to learn how to play trumpet (Student reflection April, 2007).

Importantly, the music education majors formed small groups for support in this project. This is of course, similar to the friendship groups that Green reports are a central part of informal learning among teenagers. This is confirmed in comments such as:

Music teaches people to work as a team. The group learning style is what really helps. When children help each other, they learn how to communicate effectively (Student reflection June 2007).

Most unexpectedly, a few students admitted that their musical roots actually are in the popular idiom. Their initial engagements with music making were through informal process and they were excited that the process through which they first learned was actually being validated in a university setting.

Conclusions

This paper describes a course that, from the perspective of a university faculty member, should help open the thinking processes of preservice teachers to possibilities of change as they enter the profession. Unfortunately, subconscious satisfaction with large ensemble culture and “teaching as one was taught” seems deeply ingrained in the American psyche. As one student reflected about Gordon’s Music Learning Theory:

I’m a little wary of it. I think that a big reason for my feelings towards this theory are that it is new and I’m not totally convinced yet that it is far superior to the methods I was taught when I learned music. I think that it’s hard for anyone to think that the way that they were taught something wasn’t the best way to learn that information. I mean, everyone in the class is a good musician, maybe not the best we could be, but certainly better than most and I think that in the back of everyone’s mind we’re all thinking “*well I wasn’t taught using this theory and I turned out okay* (italics added).” It’s hard to admit that the way you learned isn’t the best (Student reflection June 2005).

Although students acknowledged that the listen-copy-play approach might foster creativity, most felt that there is little possibility of using it in school settings. This student response echoes the feelings of his peers:

As a music educator, the informal style of learning is much more difficult to incorporate. It is often lacking in a specific direction except for that of where the student wishes to take it. I cannot envision a direct application for a music educator to use this method of learning (Student reflection June, 2007).

These reflections express reticence to even entertain the possibility of change among undergraduate music education majors. University courses designed with the intention of encouraging thoughtful change in practice may not be enough to convince future teachers that aural and informal learning processes can be incorporated successfully into school music programs. College faculty may need to work directly with practicing school teachers to develop model programs using these ideas. One of the great challenges for university level music educators continues to be finding ways of demonstrating how aural music learning as exemplified in the work of Gordon and Green might be used to strengthen rather than replace traditional music education programs.

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