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Future Prospects for Music Education: Corroborating Informal Learning Pedagogy:

A Review Essay

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Abstract

While issues of informal learning, mainly connected to popular music teaching and learning, have been part of Nordic classrooms for several decades; there have been few attempts of systematic academic exploration of such matters. The book, *Future Prospects for Music Education: Corroborating Informal Learning Pedagogy*, edited by Sidsel Karlsen and Lauri Väkevä, is an important contribution to a theoretical and philosophical discussion of informal learning in music education. The editors recognize Lucy Green's works on popular musicians' learning strategies (2001), and the implementation of such learning strategies in the classroom (2008) as major influences for this book. Green's work is frequently discussed throughout the book,

and Green has in fact also written one of the chapters. The main theme of the book, however, is informal learning, and how such learning strategies may inspire change in music education.

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The main theme of the book, however, is informal learning, and how such learning strategies may inspire change in music education. One important question is therefore what such an approach requires of the teachers. If informal learning is to inform and inspire music teaching, this implies student centering and therefore a less dominant teacher. How, then, is the teacher supposed to promote student learning, and what should be the teacher's qualifications? Some of the authors are concerned that the implied retraction of the teacher may affect the learning outcomes (Clements, chapter 1; Allsup & Olson, chapter 2). Others suggest that teachers are very important for framing informal learning, however, they must forgo some control in the classroom (Rodriguez, chapter 7). The teacher may not be distant, but rather gradually fading in and taking more responsibility as problems that require a more formal approach emerge (Väkevä, chapter 3).

Discussion of informal learning is often associated with the learning of popular music. Not surprisingly, this is also the case here, since this book takes Green's popular music pedagogy as its starting point. However, as rightly noted by several of the authors (Väkevä, chapter 3; Gatien, chapter 4), informal learning is about *learning styles*, not about music styles. Even though rock and pop music are frequently mentioned, examples of other informal learning practices are also provided, such as digital music making (Väkevä chapter 3), improvisation (Kanellopoulos & Wright, chapter 8), and aural training (Green, chapter 8). This opens up the concept of informal learning to the reader.

The challenge of framing informal learning practices within formal educational structures is a recurring theme in the book. Because the intention of the book clearly is to contribute to scholarly discussion, the book offers no final answers or solutions, nor should it. The discussions are often theoretical, drawing upon what the editors identify as possible

frameworks for a corroboration of informal learning; culturally responsive teaching, socio-cultural learning theory, pragmatism, and critical pedagogy. Some of the chapters provide descriptions of specific informal music learning practices, thereby grounding the theoretical discussions in a fruitful way.

The non-musical outcomes of music education are frequently mentioned. Perceiving music as an instrument for political change, enhanced communication and collaboration, multicultural understanding, participation, etc., could easily be criticized for reducing music to its social functions, and thereby ignoring music itself. In some cases, that would be a relevant critique and a good starting point for debating the fundamentals of music education. In my opinion, those arguments do not necessarily apply in this context because of the obvious connection between informal music and the musical community.

The book contains a series of chapters about *informal learning pedagogy*, that is, quoting the editors, the “pedagogical approaches that build on strategies found within learning situations or practices outside formal settings, such as school lessons” (p. vii). This quote highlights a major challenge in discussing the formal-informal nexus in general: Informal learning is per definition not about teaching, it is about *learning*. Turning informal learning into a pedagogic strategy will inevitably shift the focus from learning to teaching, which traditionally belongs in formal settings. As Sidsel Karlsen points out (chapter 5), learning contexts – in or outside the institutions - will be a mix of the formal and informal (see also Söderman, 2007; Gullberg, 2002). The formal - informal nexus imply a series of fixed categories, even dichotomies (teacher - student, teaching - learning, institutional - private, school time - leisure time, school band - garage band, classical music - popular music and so on). Further discussions on the topic could adapt to the categories or try to break free from them; the former could imply an effort to bridge the opposites, while the latter implies an attempt to frame the discussion in another way.

The editors, Karlsen & Väkevä, call for a discussion that could bring forth new perspectives on informal music learning. In the following, I will introduce some issues that may inform a further debate on informal learning.

What could be the purpose of emphasizing informal learning in music education? As I interpret it, one underlying theme in the book is the need for a more democratic music education, which in this context means a music education that includes the perspectives and life worlds of the students, thereby contributing to student involvement and participation. Informal learning strategies could, then, potentially contribute to fulfill this ambition.

Involvement and participation is connected to agency. Children's agency is an important topic in the so-called "new sociology of childhood" (Ariés, 1962; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; James & James, 2004) that brings forth a perception of children as subjects with agency who must be understood in relation to social and cultural context. Further, not only should children be allowed to express their opinions, they should also be heard. In short, children should be recognized for their competence and value, not judged for their shortcomings. This tension between children as *human beings* here and now, or as *human becomings* - future adults, is a dilemma for education. In the book, we find this clearly articulated in the question from Eva Georgii-Hemming & Maria Westvall (chapter 6): "Can there be a teaching context that can include children's and young people's lifeworlds as well as broaden them, without becoming normative?" (p. 103). The discussion of informal music learning strategies and the teachers' role could very much be understood from this perspective: The music teacher stepping back leaves more room for students' musical life-worlds; still, the teacher's experience and competence represents a possibility for expanding the students' life-world, and thereby for growth and development. Also, recognizing students' life-worlds and agency opens up an understanding of students being potentially more competent than the teacher in some situations. The challenge then becomes one of recognizing students as agents, actively contributing to their own musical education, while still acknowledging the here and now as part of an ongoing process that at some point necessarily must include the involvement of somebody more competent than the students.

The question of the connection between informal learning and popular music is somewhat unresolved in the book. There are attempts to distinguish between the two. For instance, Randall Allsup and Nathaniel Olson (chapter 2) warn the readers against conflating informal learning with certain music styles, while Lauri Väkevä (chapter 3) states that Green's starting point is actually genre-independent and pointing to the processes of music education; *how* music is taught and learned, and how difference in process may affect the motivation for and take-up of music as curriculum subject in different ways. Still, the overall discussion very much revolves around popular music. In my view, informal music learning is not necessarily connected to the learning of popular music. However, if the purpose of informal music is seen to contribute to a democratic music education, the link to popular music is logical. I will elaborate on this from a Nordic perspective.

As mentioned in the book, popular music has been part of the general music curriculum in most Nordic countries alongside Western art music since the 1970s (chapter 1, chapter 6). Since then, popular music styles have also become a natural part of Nordic higher music education. U.S. scholar David Hebert points to the Nordic region as one of the most advanced in the popular music pedagogy field today (Hebert, 2011, p. 13). There could be many reasons

for this development. I would like to point to a few political and cultural factors that may have contributed:

An important purpose of Nordic cultural policy has been to contribute to democracy, openness and inclusion. For instance, Norway has had a longstanding political focus on a *democratization of culture*, that is, spreading traditionally highbrow cultural expressions to the people. As a result of a cultural turn in the 1970s and 1980s, the notion of “culture” was expanded to also include other kinds of cultural expressions. This meant a turn towards *cultural democracy*, characterized by participation and local ownership (Aslaksen E. , 2000). This general development is also seen in other Nordic countries and coincides with an inclusion of popular music styles in the music curriculum, as mentioned by the Swedish educators Georgii-Hemming and Westvall (chapter 6).

Furthermore, there have been long and strong Nordic traditions for acknowledging children as participants in a democratic society, thereby also granting children rights, and taking children’s experience and perspective into account. From a music education standpoint, this must necessarily imply active participation from children; playing, singing, dancing, creating, improvising, etc. Danish and Swedish educators early advocated and implemented student centered music education. For instance, in 1930s Sweden, composer and music teacher, Knut Brodin, developed teaching strategies built upon children’s interests and creativity, utilizing the popular music of that time (Sundin, 1988). In the same period, dance teacher, Astrid Gøssel, and composer and music teacher, Bernhard Christensen, were part of a Danish cultural leftist movement that perceived jazz music as contributing to the creation of free, natural, authentic, creative and playful human beings (Thing, 2002). Inspired both by jazz music and children’s play, Gøssel and Christensen created an oral music education practice based on rhythm, movement, improvisation, interplay and interaction. This approach to music education is an important backdrop for the Danish rhythmic music education tradition, which has also spilled over to Norway (Christophersen, 2012).

By focusing on the process of students’ music making (not the music style itself), the Gøssel/Christensen approach exemplifies a way of working with music that promotes informal learning strategies within a formal education context. Still, there is a strong link between this approach and so-called ”rhythmic music”. Rhythmic music is a Scandinavian construction of terms, that includes a variety of vernacular music styles like jazz, blues, pop, rock, hip hop, funk, reggae, salsa, world music, techno, etc. (Hagen, 1996). The complexity of these styles is in most cases not horizontal, like art music’s long themes and harmonic sequences, but rather vertical, with layered combinations of short, repetitive segments (Danielsen, 2002). Groove- and riff-based music provides possibilities for musical involvement and participation for students with varying skills and training. This corroborates a view that

music style may not be the main point in informal music learning, but rather a vehicle for a differentiated music learning - in this case through music that is close to young people's own musical preferences. An approach like this may then contribute to a more democratic music education; a music education that promotes inclusion and participation from students. However, several of the authors in the book express concerns about leaving too much of the responsibility to the students themselves, leaving students "on their own to explore the music they are most drawn to", as Allsup and Olson writes (p. 17). Georgii-Hemming & Westvall also make a convincing argument that the process of utilizing informal learning strategies may actually go too far; making music education about letting students do what they want, thereby reducing young people's confidence in the school system (p. 109). This shows that the line between student participation and school compliance can be thin. Returning to the previously mentioned topic of children's agency and the question of children as beings or becomings; respecting students as *beings* would mean respecting their competence in relation to the context in question. That would include students' right to speak, to be heard, and to influence their education according to their ability. Respecting students would also include protecting them from the responsibility of having to make decisions they are not ready to make. The book is an interesting contribution to music education. By emphasizing the formal-informal nexus, the discussions are framed in a familiar way. Still, interesting questions and perspectives are being put forward and discussed throughout the book. It is commendable to raise this topic, and I hope the music education community will contribute to a further debate.

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