Music Language, Pedagogy and Inclusive Learning: Musical Diversity and Music Educator Identities

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Contents

Abstract

Introduction

The Purpose of Education

Research Project: The Case of Music Theory
   The Enlightenment Thing
   A Case Study
   Inherent Dichotomies?

Research Project: Perceptions of the Purpose of Music Education
   Music Education Policy and Practice
   An Interpretive Approach
   A Pilot Survey

Research Project: The Tool Is Not The Object
   The Tools of Music Education
   Cultural Historical Activity Theory
   A Multi-Modal Analysis

Reification and its Impact on Music Educators
   Alienation and Ideology
   Historical Standpoints
   Reification as A Tool

Music as a Master Signifier
   The Musical Act
   Measuring Learning and Creativity
   Music Education and Psychoanalysis

Conclusion

References

Web References

Appendices
   1) Research Project: The Case of Music Theory
   2) Research Project: Perceptions of the Purpose of Music Education
   3) Research Project: The Tool Is Not The Object

Notes
Abstract

Music Language, Pedagogy and Inclusive Learning:
Musical Diversity and Music Educator Identities

Recent developments in music education have led to recognition of the need for pluralistic and inter-disciplinary approaches to teaching music (Welch 2004, O’Flynn 2005). The growth of children’s or students’ knowledge and understanding is seen as key to their musical development (Lines 2003, Welch and Adams 2003). In order to design the best possible curricula for achieving this, attempts have been made to account for and to explain musical experience, ranging from the classification of musical activities into performance, composing and listening (Swanwick 1999, Hannan 2006), to the categorisation of musical elements, musical styles and associated subcultures. Research on informal learning styles (Green 2001, Jaffurs 2004) has asked if students are better left to find their own ways of developing skills and repertoire, and new technologies have opened up possible approaches to music-making that defy conventional instrumental work (Savage 2005). However the musical experience is understood, the difficulty for music educators is how to ensure learning and musical development take place and can be demonstrably measured.

The majority of music education research is focused in schools (Cox and Hennessy 2004, Green 2006) yet in post-compulsory education there is a greater remit for experimentation and flexibility in allowing a diversity of style, here a variety of approaches to music making can flourish. In the further education college in which I work I am struck by the different types of music professionals I work with, their different stylistic and industrial backgrounds. This leads to an environment where a multitude of, often conflicting, conceptions of the purpose of music education are apparent, held together only by the common goals of a specified syllabi and a shared desire to see the best from our students.

This paper will explore some of the research I have undertaken to discover commonalities and differences among different music education practitioners’ conceptions of the purpose of music education and discover if these conceptions vary significantly between educational sectors of British society. Foremost in my research is the question of pedagogy, how we as practitioners deliver music education and if this is informed by our identities as musicians and teachers. How do we feel if the music student is at the centre of curriculum design but we are meant to be teaching and assessing their musical skills?

The main pieces of research I have conducted so far are a case study of a music theory classroom, a survey of the perceptions of a cohort of music PGCE students and a multi-modal assessment of the ecology of music technology classrooms. These have been conducted as part of my studies on a Master of Research programme and have led me to question whether the language we use as music educators takes for granted assumptions about how music should be taught that have been inherited from traditions that are non-pluralistic and are unable to recognise many of the aesthetics that motivates young people to engage in music in the first place. Perhaps this research can contribute to our understanding of possible methods for providing a multi-cultural music education that can include both students and teachers.
Introduction

This paper represents the summary of the journey I have made over the last two years in which I have struggled to come to terms with the underlying belief systems that determine my desire to facilitate student centred learning experiences for musicians with a diversity of musical backgrounds. The issue of diversity in curriculum content is currently important to music education discourse, the questions of what should be taught and what strategies music educators take is widely debated. Through the examples of three research projects I have undertaken I will try and explain how I have come to believe that curriculum design needs to take account of the irreducibility of the musical act leaving a space for individual evocations of its constitution to be defined by learners and teachers during the educational act itself. I rely heavily on the language of activity theory and explore the implications of the concept of reification, which has led me to an interest in the master-signifier of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a useful method for symbolising the musical act.

In desiring to better understand how to improve the opportunities and methods I use to help people who come to me to learn about music and enhance their musicianship skills I have embarked on an investigation into how music education is perceived. I have come to believe that the ideas music educators possess about the purpose of music education greatly influence the educational processes engaged in and the outcomes of these processes. However, despite the significance that I feel these perceptions of the purpose of music education have, I find many people involved in learning about and teaching music hold firm assumptions about the supposed content of music education processes. Such universally prescriptive approaches to content are often seen to be essential to the process of doing music education and central to the achievement of standards.

My research so far has been exploratory, pertaining to both the actual activities that take place in sites of music education and to the belief systems and underlying linguistic and philosophical structures that support the actions of music teachers and learners. This paper reflects upon my research activities and identifies important questions that will direct my future work. I outline three specific research projects I have undertaken and define how these can serve as the basis for generating future data that helps me better understand how music education is perceived, both in the commonalities and differences between my belief about its purpose, and the beliefs of other teachers,
learners, musicians and policy makers.

I am aware that my experiences as a music educator, not to mention as a musician, are located in specific contextual spaces and that these environments are formative of my ideas of the constitution of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ music education. In attempting to define some of these environments I am aware that the influence of aesthetic, ethical and institutional factors will vary from others that work in differing environments. In trying to locate commonalities and differences in attitudes to music education, important philosophical debates are seen to be relevant to the social and psychological dynamics of any understanding created. However, I have come to believe that music education is a good medium in which to explore some of these wider debates that can often appear abstract and elusive. Central to my investigations are questions of relative meaning and importance, that can clearly be illustrated with examples of musical style and culture, and pertain to anti-foundational philosophies found in debates about the role and content of education in general.

It is my argument in this paper that it is not possible or desirable to fix the proposed content of educational processes, that such content is defined by the actors and the tools (Wertsch 1998) they use when engaging in such processes, but that how music students engage in musical process is dependant upon the language used by music educators and therefore affects how the successful achievement of proposed outcomes is perceived. The language that is used, not just for doing music education but also for thinking about music education, is both given to and created by music educators and is contradictory, directional and representational of particular concepts of music. Music educators are required to achieve objectives that are in themselves defined by such language and therefore are impossible to apply universally. How music educators deal with such objectives is central to the process of doing music education and the psychological and linguistic tools they adopt is central to how successful they feel they have been.

The argument made here is that music educators who adopt ideas of the universality of the content of musical processes can disempower and exclude learners who possess differing ideas of what the essence of music is. This is not to say that music educators cannot employ specific language dependant tools for the achievement of outcomes, but that the recognition of the purpose and nature of these tools is important. Ensuring that any person wishing to engage in music education has the opportunity to have a part in defining and contributing to the language they employ in learning about
music is key to their sense of satisfaction and achievement of any given outcomes.

The Purpose of Education

In a recent edition of UC Magazine (June 2008), the monthly magazine of the University and College Union to which I belong, Dennis Hayes asks ‘What is education for?’ He says that some people:

Believe that education is about social inclusion, skills, the economy, the environment, sustainability or building community cohesion [and that] Instrumentalism of this sort is rife in colleges and universities where we should solely be concerned with the transmission and pursuit of knowledge without fear or favour. (Hayes 2008:32)

For him ‘Education is an end in itself’, and we are tempted to ask this question because we have lost the meaning of ‘education’. Apparently ‘many students and lecturers are now more interested in their inner emotional life than seeking objective knowledge.’ (ibid.) Whilst I have sympathy with his identification of an important issue in current educational discourse, I am interested in these statements for the way in which they assume a given purpose for education, creating a binary between the positive intellectual and cognitive approaches to understanding and the supposedly ‘dangerous emotional and therapeutic trends in education.’ (ibid.) This article explicitly discusses an important tension in the role of educators, but does so in a simple and unproblematic way. When applied to the subject of music this tension appears quite complex and with not such obvious conclusions.

If we ask what music is for we may come to similar conclusions; as a pleasurable activity that is an end in itself. But as music educators this is not enough of an answer, do we want our students to improve as musicians and how do we help them do this? Do we ask them to focus on objective aspects of music, its history perhaps, the physical properties of sound or the artefacts of musical production and culture? Do we focus on intellectual understandings, the theory of music or its artistic aesthetics or perhaps even analyse the transactions we make with our audience and other members of the ensembles and bands we perform with as acts of communication?

The act of performance in itself requires an understanding of emotional reactions to adrenaline as well as control of technique and a focus of motivational desire. I believe
that many students would be upset if they did not think they had improved on their chosen instrument, or their use of technology to produce recordings they were satisfied with! Music education as an end in itself is only a part of any definition of its purposes, there are many reasons that people engage in learning about music and certainly not all music learners have the same goals or conception of what music is for.

There is another reason that I start with this article to explore these tensions about the purpose of music education and that is that it makes a reference to an objective type of knowing that is used to support the argument being given. Scientific objectivity is easy to question in an artistic or performance based subject such as music, but has also been questioned as a meaningful point of departure for any enquiry into the nature and purpose of education itself.

I feel it is important not only to understand the basis for this debate but also how and why it is often used to justify specific educational activities. Science is not the only type of knowledge that is used to support arguments in favour of a particular view of the purpose of education, historical, social and (as Dennis Hayes points out) instrumental standpoints are often used to support arguments about purposes, methods and activities. Investigating these arguments can help to develop tools for understanding some of the more subtle ways in which music education is often directed toward specific purposes and away from others. This is particularly relevant to issues of student centred learning and engagement, especially when the subject matter consists of a diversity of musical styles. The research I have undertaken has helped me begin to develop a language that allows me to discuss these issues without relying on simplistic and reductive statements about the nature of music or the perceived purposes music education may be seen possess.

**Research Project: The Case of Music Theory**

**The Enlightenment Thing**

Realist texts draw upon a shared inter-textual lineage that links them to countless other texts built on the same premises, and containing the same petitions to be read in particular ways. And when we, as readers, read them we draw on that inter-textual heritage too. We don’t encounter each text as a unique and self contained object whose meanings lie entirely ‘within’ it, although that is exactly what it feels like. Instead, we activate our own inter-textual knowledge, which has already inducted us into a particular way of reading.
one that covers up its own history, precisely so as to persuade us that meanings lie within. (Maclure 2003:93)

Maggie Maclure’s excellent introduction to the theories of Jacques Derrida, “Discourse in Social and Educational Research” provides an accessible place from which to view some of the most challenging contemporary philosophies that engage with ways of looking at education that do not rely on references to particular standpoints to argue for the validity of their claims. Such philosophies argue that much of our way of thinking, and therefore the knowledge we use, is based on inherited belief systems that belong to the Western European Enlightenment Project that is exemplified by philosophers such as Kant and Descartes and forms the basis of many of the scientific approaches to education. At the root of these beliefs is a separation between the body and the mind and an adherence to observation and reason as core tenants of how we can know about the world.

The ongoing questioning of such philosophies, whilst not providing any certain alternatives, does highlight the way in which many forms of discourse about the nature of education promote ways of thinking and being that are confined by inherited values but that are seen to be natural, obvious and unquestionable. A common theme of post-structural, post-modern and deconstructive approaches to education is a promotion of the awareness of the language we use and the way it controls our understanding of what we are discussing.

**A Case Study**

In my first piece of research I conducted a “case study” of the music theory classroom. I found there not only to be parallels with these contemporary philosophies and their struggle against received traditions, but also a need to question how we identify the tension between received forms of knowledge and other ways of thinking and acting. The basis for this research project lay in investigating how music theory was taught in a class of popular musicians.\(^{10}\)

Music theory is a good example of inherited language directing our understanding of how things should be. Music theory is a system of symbolic representations that is formalised by a set of conventions evolved from musical conservatoire teaching systems, a students understanding is typically assessed by a set of examinations run by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, and is seen to directly correlate with a
student’s progress as a musician. However popular musicians are often considered to use a different set of skills than musicians trained in the classical tradition, indeed there has been a lot of work recently to identify what these informal learning skills are, most notably Lucy Green’s *How Popular Musicians Learn* (2001). Here peer learning, aural imitation and improvisation are given a higher status than the reading and performing of written notation as informed by music theory.

It is my belief that the term music theory should be conceived as something much wider than musical notation, that popular musicians think about the music they make and therefore create theories that inform the way they do things; this is music theory as something much more than musical notation. My research project investigated how teachers negotiate, on the one hand a knowledge that the popular musicians they teach use informal techniques and on the other a knowledge that these musicians need to acquire musical notation skills in order to progress as musicians. I used observation and interview methods, transcribed and coded the qualitative data and searched for language that indicated formal and informal musical learning techniques.

**Inherent Dichotomies?**

However I soon realised that it was very hard to draw the line between formal and informal language. I could impose my own understanding and make decisions about which words belonged to which category, but this indicated my conceptions of the meaning of the words more than it helped me understand the negotiations of the teacher in the classroom. I was trying to measure predetermined criteria based on presumptions I was making about music teacher and learners. The interaction of different exterior factors is far too complex to distil in this way. Hammersley (1995) criticises the belief that language has inherent meaning. This belief sees ‘writing conceived as a matter of coding pre-existent messages, with reading as the decoding of the messages.’ (Hammersley 1995:85)

By presuming a clear distinction between formal and informal language I was assuming that these frameworks for understanding musical learning had inherent and objective qualities that if I could observe clearly I could find inherent meaning in their relationships and in the relationships of the teachers and students using them. This assumption is simplistic and representative of tendencies to dichotomise meaning into binary opposites, therefore undermining the complexity of actual usage. I sought reassurance from David Lines (2003), who uses early anti-foundationalist philosophers to
develop a more complex way of looking at the nature of music education:

Music educators have been struggling for years with practices that reinforce the dualism of ‘musical sounds on the one hand and ‘cultural assemblages’ on the other. The Heideggerian perspectives of poiesis’ and ‘work’ (Arbeit) and the Nietzschean notions of ‘will to power’ and the ‘revaluation of values’ challenge this dualism and lay the conceptual ground for a music education practice that is more critical. (Lines 2003:15)

Here is a philosophy that rejects an objective standpoint and provides potential tools for discussing how meaning is constructed between participants in the course of their interactions. My case study on music theory had helped me see how easy it was to let the language that I employ to do research direct and shape the results of that research. I discovered that it is important to try to spot assumptions that are made and that the appearance of dichotomous binaries can be a key indicator.

**Research Project: Perceptions of the Purpose of Music Education**

**Music Education Policy and Practice**

If an objective or scientific approach to music education is not appropriate and a simple distinction between formal and informal learning styles is too simplistic to be meaningful, how can one build an understanding of the differing conceptions of what the nature of music education should be? I decided to describe the range of opinions that might be found in a group of music educators through the use of survey techniques. I decided to develop a data set concerned with perceptions of the purpose of music education. I wished to inquire into similarities and difference between policy, research and practitioner aims across a variety of music education sectors in England, with specific consideration to the impact on the developing 14-19 agenda in the UK education system.

I developed a questionnaire designed to reflect key themes appearing in some of the literature discussing music education. The quantitative data collected in the survey was to be used to develop further strategies for inquiry, identifying trends and informing an analysis of the discourse encountered in follow up interviews. In many instances I used similar language as used in the literature. I felt that the way issues are defined affects our perceptions of them and I used academic terminology to assess if respondents
feel such symbolic constructions are relevant to them.

An Interpretive Approach

At this point I had become further convinced of the anti-foundationalist position and the importance of open and reflexive approaches to research design. I found it incredibly hard to decide on the terminology I wanted to use as my particular viewpoint was very evident in the language I was using and I wanted to develop a questionnaire that was more rounded and related to the wider community of music educators.

Reading Smith (1993) solidified my feelings and also provided me with some valuable strategies. Smith identifies three broad schools of thought with regard the nature of inquiry: 1) a post-empirical, positivistic belief that in some form or other sought to find universality in claims to truth i.e. an objective standpoint; 2) critical theory traditions that were specific to a perspective and that privileged the viewpoints of particular groups in society. These traditions are emancipatory in nature and seek to make ‘transparent the historical conditions that have resulted in false consciousness, distorted communication…’. These are what Hammersley names “standpoint epistemologies”; 3) an interpretivist tradition that seeks solidarity and is practical and moral but not abstract:

For interpretivists... the point of inquiry is to understand the “whys” in terms of reasons, motivations, intentions and so on that stand behind human expressions. (Smith 1993:12)

A Pilot Survey

I decided to employ terminology that was used in the literature on music education. This allowed me to avoid creating my own distinctions in the terminology and potentially compare the performance of different pieces of literature in the responses I received, although of course I selected which terminology to use. As well as academic articles I included terminology from a number of key documents relevant to music education in the UK.13

To pilot this questionnaire I surveyed sixty students on a post-graduate certificate of education. Using a scale of 1 to 5 of perceived importance I took a mean score of each term employed and ranked them in a table. What was most striking about this result was that creativity was clearly considered most important as were other similar concepts such as fun, engagement and exchange of ideas. Other issues that can dominate syllabi and discourse in music education, such as technology, Conservatoire curricula, ethnicity,
class formal instrumental lessons, society, gender and the music industry all were considered less important. This data provokes many questions and as a pilot I would not want to make any claims about how this may represent perceptions of music educators in general, but it does raise questions as to how music educators may choose to negotiate the delivery they are engaged in.\textsuperscript{14}

**Research Project: The Tool Is Not The Object**

**The Tools of Music Education**

The relationship between the creative or musical act and conceptions of what music educators should be teaching is an important tension in music education discourse. My initial desire to locate the differences between the popular and classical domains is reflected in much of the literature. As well as the discussion of informal learning styles,\textsuperscript{15} Bill Crow’s (2006) article discussing the use of sampling and computer games used for composing music explicitly discusses this relationship:

> Research into music teacher identities suggests that the bulk of trainees entering the teaching profession are still predominantly trained in the classical performance tradition (Hargreaves, 2003), making it difficult for them to articulate and model effective teaching approaches in musical creativity. (Crow 2006:122)

Despite this being a common point of tension I felt there were parallels with other traditions that precipitated exclusivity in certain domains of knowing.

It is my experience that sometimes it is difficult to find and negotiate appropriate working spaces for the development of the specialist skills that are required in music education. In trying to articulate what I believe is required to my colleagues and management I often find a presumption that the technology that is available is sufficient, that an investment in, say, computers should be enough to ensure an effective learning environment! Also I had detected in my case study the way in which the division between performance and technology imposed by the curriculum influenced the language and perceptions teachers had of students that studied in one of the two areas, citing different skills and knowledge requirements. Furthermore I had read in a survey of *Contemporary Music Students Expectations of Musicianship Training Needs* (Hannan 2006) that the data seemed ‘to indicate that different curriculum agendas might be necessary for
performance students, composition students and music production students.’ (Hannan 2006:155)

Cultural Historical Activity Theory

In seeing these parallels among discourses of music theory, music technology, music education and musicianship I began to look for conceptual frameworks that would help me articulate the commonalities in such dichotomous language and begin to ask how they appeared to manifest themselves. An introduction to Cultural Historical Activity Theory provided me with some tools that were useful.

Wertsch (1998) discusses and focuses on the relationship between the agent (in this case the teacher/students) and the tools they use, which he calls the “mediational means”. He takes these terms from Burkes “Dramatistic Method” which ‘takes human action as the basic phenomenon to be analysed’ (Wertsch 1998:12). Wertsch has an interest in avoiding dichotomous language and cites an irreducible tension between agent and tool, that it is not possible to separate them or discuss them in isolation from each other.

I found this conception of cultural tool very useful, I identified commonalities between some key tools used in the act of music making and central to music education processes: music theory - the mastery of notated form; music technology - the mastery of equipment, as well as: technique – mastery over instrument; style – mastery over audience; and form – mastery over composition. These were all conceptions that were symbolised to represent processes that are important in the act of music making.

A Multi-Modal Analysis

I feel that all of these processes are in some way a part of music making but also meaningless when seen outside of the contexts in which musicians use them. However, they are often perceived to be autonomous objects used and articulated in linguistic traditions that presuppose a correct method of application and therefore also an incorrect method. This sense of setting up a binary opposite in language is a key concern for anti-foundational philosophies and also seems to be primary to Activity Theorists:

A major part of the problem is how the terms placed in opposition are understood. They are typically understood as referring to essences or objects that have some kind of independent existence…these terms are hypothetical constructs or conceptual tools (tools
that maybe of only temporary use) in our process of enquiry. (Wertsch 1998:11)

Examples of such binaries are very evident in everyday musical discourse as well as in the realm of music education: classical/popular, talented /untalented, urban /rural? or perhaps /white, improvising/composing, serious/commercial, performing/listening etc.

I undertook a multi-modal assessment of the ecology of the music technology classroom and was able to demonstrate that the relationship that can be implied between technical resources and good quality teaching environments ignores the existence of a relationship between those resources and the teacher/students and conceals some of the practical considerations of delivering curriculum and developing musical skills in such an environment.16 This is a key theme for activity theorists:

People often seem to think of the environment as something to be acted upon, not something to be interacted with. People tend to focus on the behaviours of individual objects, ignoring the environment that surrounds (and interacts with) the objects. (Resnick 1994:239 cited in Wertsch 1998:21)

The research projects I had undertaken had helped me to see how the language we use can define and direct how we perceive the nature of music education, and that assumptions about the nature of music can often be revealed by dichotomous relationships. I had shown that such language can obscure and undermine the relationships between teacher, learner and educational environment, and that creativity was a key concern for at least some new music teachers. Activity theory had given me a good set of tools to discuss these issues and it now appears to me that reification is an important concept in exploring these relationships and investigating further the philosophical tensions that are revealed.

**Reification and its Impact on Music Educators**

**Alienation and Ideology**

The process whereby cultural tools and mediational processes become essentialised and separated from the relationship they have to the people enacting them can be defined as reification. The concept of reification is Marxist in origin and relates to discussions of alienation and ideology both of which are sites of contemporary discussion
both in music education and in wider philosophical debate. These concepts enable us to access some of the social and political dimensions of music education discourse.

Certainly for Lucy Green alienation is central to understanding music classroom interactions. She argues that teachers who do not recognise the equal utility of non-classical forms of musical language, will struggle to engage students who do not have the confidence, or have not yet found a way, to translate the symbols presented to them into musical concepts they can relate to:

Negative experiences of inherent meanings arise when we are unfamiliar with the musical style, to the point that we do not understand what is going on, and thus find the musical syntax boring. Negative responses to deliniations occur when we feel that the music is not ours… Musical ‘alienation’ occurs when we feel negative towards both inherent and delineated meanings. (Green 2006:103)

In activity theory the construction of meaning depends on reified processes:

Meaning is constructed in communities of practice through the dual process of ‘participation’ and ‘reification’….for Wenger this process [reification] of depersonalising ideas plays a key part in strengthening and developing the power of abstract thought. (Benzie, Mavers, Somekh, Cisneros-Cohernour 2005:182).

The concept of reification also helps us understand how Dennis Hayes, quoted at the beginning of this paper, is so incensed by what he perceives as neo-liberal, economic instrumentalism, that is pervasive in British educational discourse. Burris (1998) defines reification as describing:

A situation of isolated individual producers whose relation to one another is indirect and realised only through the mediation of things (the circulation of commodities), such that the social character of each producers labor becomes obscured and human relationships are veiled behind the relations among things and apprehended as relations among things. (Burris 1998:2)

Persons are thus reduced to functioning as representatives or “personifications” of things in their possession, while productive relations among them become dependant upon the market relations that are established among those things (Marx 1967a:85 cited
Clearly not only has reification become an important part of the way meaning is produced and can obscure alternate relationships, it is also symptomatic of a sense of alienation from contemporary discourse which can be seen in the appearance of disapproving or cynical attitudes to our modern learning environments.

**Historical Standpoints**

However useful such arguments are to our understanding of how meaning is produced activity theory and Marxist conceptions of ideology and alienation are based upon a Hegelian historical dialectic. They privilege knowledge that is grounded in an understanding of history and thereby limit other ways of being that are equally applicable. This is evident if we turn again to the case of music.

Many musicians pride themselves in an understanding of the history of the cultural form from which their stylistic preferences are formed, although some do not. It is however fruitless to expect a student of music to necessarily be moved through reference to a great musician/composer or artist that does not pertain to the style in which they are interested in working. The lack of knowledge of the historical evolution of the stylistic form within which the student is working is often frustrating to their teacher and can be seen to limit them in their ability to create stylistically accurate music, but that does not stop them creating music that is deeply meaningful to them. Indeed many forms and traditions in music have evolved from a defiance, disregard for or re-conceptualisation of their own historical development. I am thinking specifically of Punk, Rave and Be-bop, but of course this is by no means exclusive or definitive of those cultures.

Furthermore to argue that the basis for my belief in the ahistorical nature of these forms is wrong would demonstrate an undertaking that each cultural form is discreet and contained within a particular history, denying my experience of engaging in them.

**Reification as a Tool**

As music educators, particularly if we are employed to deliver a curriculum, we are surrounded by social, cultural and institutional forces that require us to engage in the use of language that does reify, and require us to use, language that makes assumptions about the discreetness of the process we are engaged in:
As Codd (2005, p. 27) notes, “current neoliberal policies [informing education] emphasise performativity, conformity, and maintenance of the status quo” in a system where “skills and competencies” are sought in students in order for them to function more effectively in the modern day economic world. Many teachers in neoliberal democracies work in cultures of technicism characterised by stringent accountability and an expectation to generate learning outcomes strictly in accordance with the directives of schooling authorities. (Lines 2008:3)

Often we can relate to and perhaps are used to using such language. Often we are confronted with language and musical forms with which we are not familiar yet we are expected to engage with as if they were a natural part of our own musicianship. This is as true to a classically trained musician trying to teach about Gamelan, as it is to a jazz guitarist trying to engage a student who only knows death metal, as it is a hip-hop dj wanting to become a qualified music teacher.

In recognising the reified nature of much of the language we use we can perhaps begin to devise strategies for engaging with the institutional and psychological demands that are inescapable in the social contexts in which we often work. Is it possible to describe music education interactions without being confined by reified language that may limit our understanding of the multitude of possible ways music education can function?

**Music as a Master Signifier**

**The Musical Act**

When tradition thus becomes master, it does so in such a way that what it ‘transmits’ is made so inaccessible, proximally and for the most part, that it rather becomes concealed. Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial ‘sources’ from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin, and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to those sources is something which we need not even understand. Dasein [the human subject] has had its historicality so thoroughly uprooted by tradition that it confines its interest to the multiformity of possible types, direction, and standpoints of philosophical activity in the most exotic and alien of cultures; and by this very interest it seeks to veil the fact that it
As musicians and music educators we know that the musical act, the creative act, is the essence of what we do. Yet in attempting to define or substantiate these acts we have no choice but to use language that we have inherited and does not enable us to fully capture the nature of what that creative act is. In the meantime we are pressured into taking on the concerns of traditions, institutions and the cultures of others and to incorporate them into our own way of being:

By using the cultural tools provided to us by the sociocultural context in which we function we usually do not operate by choice. Instead, we inherently appropriate the terministic screens, affordances, constraints, and so forth associated with the cultural tools we employ. (Wertsch 1998:55)

A prime example of this are the contradictions we face when trying to work with the new music education that overtly proclaims the importance of multi-cultural approaches to musical style and student-centred understandings of learning techniques, yet insists on a core knowledge of the Western cannon and exemplifies alternative approaches in exotic musics from cultures far removed from our own.  

**Measuring Learning and Creativity**

I am an advocate of student-centred and multi-cultural approaches. I think it is wrong to predetermine what constitutes 'good music' and therefore label students who do not meet my chosen precepts as 'bad students'. But in my role as a teacher it is expected of me (I expect it of myself, as do my students) that I teach and assess the progress of my students in their learning about music. This appears to imply some superior knowledge; I feel I must be an expert. Yet if I am dealing with the wide variety of musical styles that my students are interested in, it can be impossible to claim expertise when what I am teaching about often rests in a tradition and language with which the student is more familiar.

I feel that it is important to ensure that I give the best opportunities to my students and find a way of coming to terms with this paradox. This not only means accepting that the boundary of my expertise is permeable and often reversible, but that I can recognise the structures, linguistic or otherwise, that continually work to reinforce the difficulty of
this struggle. I believe that there is a psychological impact that is irreducibly bound up with the social conditions that define my identity as a music educator. Thinking about this psychological impact may require a linguistic framework that allows us to consider the relationship between us as musicians, teachers and learners and the social and cultural environments that we work within. The Mapping Music Education Research in the UK review commissioned by the British Educational Research Association discusses many approaches to understanding music education and within it is a suggestion of a methodological framework that may be useful:

Not only is music a ‘mirror’ that enables us to recognize aspects of the self, but the specific properties of music also come to represent or transform the image reflected in and through its structures. (O’ Neil and Green 2004:253)

I would like to take step towards a philosophy that can work within the economically instrumental positivist paradigms from which I cannot escape, the standpoint epistemologies which I use when I feel I have privileged status in dealing with students that have less experience than me with a particular musical tool, and a relativists ability to recognise the validity of the musical opinion of others when trying to engage with students that have different musical tastes to me, even though my sensibilities may be telling me otherwise.

Music Education and Psychoanalysis

I have began to read Slavoj Žižek’s (1992) psychoanalysis of popular culture and am finding new tools that may be useful in dealing with some of the contradictions I have to confront as a music educator. I find his work enjoyable in that it is not concerned with some cultures being more or less serious than others; this is reassuring to me as a popular musician. It also gives me a way to label the creative act without defining it, as a ‘fantasy object’ (Žižek 1992:82), a master-signifier. If we regard the music that we are educating about as a symbol that represents something that we cannot define then we open up space to be filled by individual creative acts, be they the musical acts of our students or our own acts of musical expression. We can continue to engage in discourse with the interactions of that thing we call music or creativity but we do not need to fix it to a set of rules or definitions. In defending his work on music education and democracy Woodford (2008) appears to employ just such an approach:
I’m not interested in defining the nature of music or of musical experience except how it is qualified by events, people, and circumstances in the wider world. Indeed, I’m inclined to agree with Wayne Bowman that “it is at least possible to hear anything musically” and that, further, “one sonorous system’s noise may be another’s music and vice versa.” (Woodford 2008:118)

It may be useful to employ a method that does not attempt to define or attempt to essentialise the musical or creative act in two ways. By allowing for a space that can be shared between student and teacher, it is possible to overcome the psychological construct of the teacher as expert in all circumstances, imposing a language on the student and keeping the teacher on the defence against a slip of their mask of expertise. It also allows for the language we use to be adapted, invented, borrowed and used in the way we feel is appropriate to the particular circumstance, allowing both student and teacher to reclaim ownership of musical and educational interactions and denying the sense of alienation that comes with the commodification of our actions.

The music we make and the language we use would no longer be perceived to be controlled by a ‘big Other’ (Žižek 1992:18), we would be able to recognise the nature of our inter-subjective symbolic interactions and to negotiate with the other that we are engaged with. The tools that we use may take a reified status but we could recognise their temporal nature as such and their ideological power would be subverted. Could this allow students to be given credit for making music on their game-consoles?:

For music teachers, who often find themselves in culturally complex classrooms, the ability of these musical tools to cross boundaries within the context of authentic musical expression should be recognised. (Crow 2006:126)

Such a space could allow for new innovations in ICT, stylistic diversity or experimental approaches to inclusion, as well as provide opportunities to advocate for more traditional forms as is appropriate to the particular context.

**Conclusion**

The intention of this paper has been to reflect upon research I have undertaken during the course of studying a Masters of Research and describe how my attitudes to my
practice are evolving. This has involved in an engagement with the practicality of doing research and developing an understanding of the underlying philosophies that inform the design and interpretation of that research. I have hoped to explore some of the tricky and varied conceptualisations thinking about music education entails without oversimplifying or seeking refuge in concrete universalisms. I also hope that I may provoke sufficient interest in the reader that I may receive some feedback as to the coherence of my ideas.¹⁸

I intend to continue this work in studying for a PhD and wish to refine some of the tools I have developed, conducting a more thorough piece of research that may be useful to other music educators, facilitating the practice of teachers who want to engage with and include the diversity of musical interests that exist.

I plan to focus on two particular activities the development of the survey, engaging with as wide a range as possible of music educators across different sectors of British society and focused around urban centres, primarily but not exclusively, Manchester which is where I work. I intend to seek further advice and feedback as to the content of a survey that should provide data about the nature of music education as perceived by its providers and users so that the results be of interest to as broad a section of the community as possible.

I also plan to conduct further case studies with teachers and youth-workers who have contact with people that are influenced by 14-19 policy in England. I hope to take an open approach, collecting qualitative data that will aid me in further consideration of the philosophical issues surrounding the nature of music education. Hopefully I will be able to provide some insight into the different demands on music educators and identify methods that they use to successfully engage with young people and their diversity of musical tastes.

Ultimately I would hope to provide some tools and motivation for popular and community musicians to engage with the mainstream education system, promoting their knowledge and skills as invaluable to discourses in education and music education alike.
References


BURRIS. V (1988). ‘Reification A Marxist Perspective’. In Californian Sociologist 10:1


Web Resources

Edexcel Level 3 BTEC Nationals in Music and Music Technology – Issue 1 – September 2006 Specification - BN018436:
http://www.edexcel.org.uk/quals/nat/media-pa/nd-sept-07/music/

Musical Futures:
http://www.musicalfutures.org.uk/

Music Industries Association:
http://www.mia.org.uk/publications/

The Music Industries Association ‘Attitudes to Music in The UK – Nexus survey’:
http://www.musicmanifesto.co.uk/assets/x/50044

Music Manifesto:
http://www.musicmanifesto.co.uk/

National curriculum guidelines for key-stage 4:

‘Our Music: Musical engagement of young people aged 7 –19 in the UK.’ an omnibus survey commissioned by the charity Youth Music in May 2006:

Youth Music:
http://www.youthmusic.org.uk/
Appendices

In each appendix I have provided a brief description of the output of each of the three research projects I have discussed in the paper.

1) Research Project: The Case of Music Theory

2) Research Project: Perceptions of the Purpose of Music Education

3) Research Project: The Tool Is Not The Object
Appendix 1

How Do Perceptions of Music Theory Affect the Motivation of Popular Music Students?

My first research project focused around the use of language in music theory classes for popular musicians. Motivated by a project on grounded theory, I observed several classes and conducted an interview with a teacher, transcribed and coded the results using Nvivo. The project evolved in several stages, attempts were made at unstructured and semi-structured techniques to gather data, which was processed using open and axial coding respectively.

The *Tables Of Binaries And Ulterior Counterparts* arose from an unstructured interview with a colleague. I identified assumptions in the language we used discussing his music theory classes that I observed, and posited ulterior significances that perhaps we were not aware of. The *Spectrum* arose from my realisation that it was not possible to completely separate language pertaining to formal or informal learning techniques (classical or popular musicianship), however there did appear to be a proximal relationship to perceptions of belonging to the self, the other or shared. The chart was generated in Nvivo and represents a culmination of several stages of coding.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table Of Binaries And Ulterior Counterparts</th>
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<td>Own Origin</td>
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Appendix 2

Perceptions of The Purpose of Music Education: A Pilot Survey

This survey was piloted with 60 trainee music teachers at the beginning of their studies on a Post Graduate Certificate of Education. I conducted a focus group and some follow-up interviews after processing these results. The terminology used is derived from relevant literature relating to Music Education, although their relationship to the results is yet to be investigated. The Preferred Variable by Mean is an initial analysis summarising responses. I wish to undergo further consultation before revising and conducting a larger scale survey with a range of music educators.

### Brief Summary of Results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred Variable by Mean</th>
<th>How important do you think the following factors are in music education?</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Important</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classical Music</td>
<td>1.50</td>
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<td>Jazz Music</td>
<td>1.50</td>
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<td>Popular Music</td>
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<td>Rock Music</td>
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<td>R&amp;B &amp; Hip Hop Music</td>
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<td>Opera</td>
<td>1.50</td>
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<td>Musical Theatre</td>
<td>1.50</td>
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<td>MSS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vocalism</td>
<td>1.50</td>
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<td>Instrumental Music</td>
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<td>Vocal Ensemble</td>
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<td>Dance</td>
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<td>Physical Education</td>
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<td>Drama</td>
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<td>Mathematics</td>
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<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>1.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Physical Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visual &amp; Performing Arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication Skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
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<td>Curricular Assessment</td>
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<td>Core Curriculum</td>
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<tr>
<td>General Knowledge and Skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learner Engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>1.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>1.50</td>
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<td>Collaboration</td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
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<td>Responsibility</td>
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Please briefly summarize what you think the purpose of music education is:

- To provide opportunities for self-expression and self-fulfillment
- To develop social and emotional maturity
- To develop cooperation and teamwork
- To develop personal growth and self-esteem
- To develop understanding and empathy for others
- To develop creativity and critical thinking skills
- To develop communication and collaboration skills
- To develop leadership and management skills
- To develop social and emotional growth
- To develop personal development and self-expression

For more information, please contact me at: info@musiceducation.com
Appendix 3

The Tool Is Not The Object: Exploring Activity Theory Through The Application Of Music Technology In A Further Education Setting

This research project was developed for presentation at the Discourse, Power and Resistance 7: Cultures in Resistance conference in spring 2008. The intention was to demonstrate that the relationship between given resources and pedagogy is not fixed, that the identification of tools for music education can create language that obscures the complexity of the relationship between students, teacher and the environment that they work in. I used the language of Activity Theory, relying particularly on Wertsch’s ‘Mind as Action’. I found it a very useful method for expressing relationships between objects without losing the irreducibility of their interactions.

Below are two slides from the presentation that represent the multi-modal nature of the investigation, not only using pictures as evidence of issues in a music technology classroom, but also to demonstrate the variability of the tools we use and how they can express specific modes of meaning. The use of the word Object is deliberately used in two distinct senses: as things that exist and we use, as tools often are; to mean the goal, purpose or objective of our activities, that which we are using the tools for. My concern is to ensure we do not lose sight of the purposes of music education (however they are defined) in the process of learning to use the tools of music creation and performance (whether they be objects, skills or specific linguistic knowledges).

Cultural Tools – The ecology of music technology classrooms

Affordances – agent’s interaction with cultural tools

An ecology that can impede, despite the quality of the tools within it....

- Constant conditions
- Space where students take notes
- All workstations are not visible at once
- Projector screen is a busy part of the room
- Limited seating of computers
- Projector screen in front of door
- Varies equipment at different workstations
- No storage for earphones, other musical instruments

Better resources, the computer is ideal:

"Tools can be said to have affordances which are best understood as latent possibilities which humans can appropriate to develop new ways of doing things, rather than features which in themselves have any power to determine changes in human behaviour."

Sociological (2017)

"accidental and unexpected side-effects may be the norm rather than the exception when it comes to cultural tools used in marketed action... Indeed, in many cases we may be trying to speak, think, or otherwise act for employing a cultural tool that, unbeknownst to us, actually alters our performance..."

Wertsch (1998:59)
The abstract nature of the musical experience is something most people have an understanding of and are able to relate general comments about music to specific experiences they have, therefore music can provide a good medium for explaining and providing examples of some of the abstract philosophical concepts I am dealing with.

I use the terms anti-foundational and enlightenment to refer to the broad philosophical debates that influence educational discourse. My understanding of these positions is particularly informed by Hammersley (1995), Smith (1989 & 1993) and Maclure (2003). I hope the reader will forgive me in the brevity of the discussion I give to these terms.

Specifically teaching and learning processes.

I am specifically using language derived from James Wertsch’s Mind As Action (1998), actors being the participants in the process i.e. teachers and learners, tools meaning the mediational means by which we do music education, such as music notation, specific pieces of technology or performative assessment techniques. A more detailed discussion follows below.

Successful achievement is defined by the outcomes themselves, these are not universally given but are relevant to the individual context in which specific acts of music education are happening. For example in a syllabus that provides assessment criteria for a particular task or by the particular students motivational goals which could be to produce a stylistically appropriate piece of music or a give a particularly fluent performance.

See for example the Table of Binaries and Ulterior Counterparts in appendix 1.

Many musicians consider music itself to be a language. I am using the terms language and linguistic tools in the broader sense of the symbolic systems used for understanding and communicating about ideas and phenomena, rather than a more restricted reference to the written and spoken word. This is particularly evident in this paper where I discuss research projects I have undertaken concerning music theory and music technology.

For example: “There are great over-simplifications propping up the assumption that there is an observable physical change for every sound event, let alone that we might measure such an event.” (Swanwick 1998:20)


Here I refer specifically to syllabus units labelled and primarily concerned with ‘music theory’ in the narrower, more conventional sense. This is normally seen to refer to music notation and an understanding of harmonic structures, melodic development and rhythmic conventions i.e. crotchets and quavers. On the music courses in the department I work in these are primarily taken from Edexcel BTEC syllabi and sometimes supplemented with ABRSM examination preparation. Assessment criteria often refer to these notated forms of music theory but can be rather more open-ended. We do not require that students enrolling on our programmes are specifically popular musicians, indeed some are not, but the vast majority of our students would not be considered classical in their interests or any previous training.

There are many arguments made to this effect most notably Swanwick’s Process and product in metaphorical change (1999: Figure 5).

See Appendix 1.


See Appendix 2.


See Appendix 3.

O’flynn (2005:194) identifies this tendency in the International Society for Music Education’s Policy on musics of the world’s cultures (Lundquist & Szego, 1998).

To contact the author please email: timewell@gmail.com. Comments and feedback are most welcome.

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