

Learn As You Play: Gloucestershire's Adult Ensembles From Scratch

The Learn As You Play scheme in Gloucestershire provides opportunities for adults to learn to play an instrument within an ensemble. Beginners can join a group and learn together developing both ensemble and instrumental skill whilst enjoying making music in a social environment. But how does it work? Jennie Henley explores the issues of the social context of learning through participation based on her own research into adult learning ensembles.

Background

In 2002 Gloucestershire Music launched a new initiative called the 'Learn As You Play' scheme. The scheme was aimed at adult beginners who wished to learn to play either a brass, woodwind or string instrument within an ensemble. The scheme very successfully trained students in instrument technique and ensemble skill and quickly developed into a whole programme of adult provision within wind bands, string groups, jazz ensembles and an orchestra.

The idea of the music service providing opportunities for adults came from the then Head of Service in answer to the question 'what happened to students once they left school?' If a student had reached a high level of playing, there were groups such as amateur orchestras for them to play in, but what of the students who reached grade 5, where could they play?

During the 90's the government's emphasis on education services promoting lifelong learning coincided with this thinking and during that time Gloucestershire set up an adult jazz group and wind band, catering for exactly these sorts of people. This then paved the way for discussions about providing opportunities for adult beginners. As the music service had an excellent instrument hire service that could hire instruments relatively cheaply, a package was put together that involved the hire of an instrument and tuition within an ensemble environment for adult beginners.

The Learn As You Play Scheme

After appointing an Adult Learning Co-ordinator, the scheme was launched with a 'Bow/Blow it and see day'. This was an afternoon where people were invited to come along and have a go on brass, woodwind and string instruments, helped by staff, in order to decide what they wanted to play. Potential students were given information about how the scheme would work, what the costs would be, what material would be used and how to sign up.

The material chosen was Hal Leonard's 'Essential Elements 2000' and the students purchased their own copy of the book. The book is written as a 'band method' and can be used with different combinations of instruments; there is a string version as well as a wind band version. The students can follow the book in the ensemble environment and as they develop their instrumental technique and knowledge and understanding of notation, the music becomes more complex, moving from unison playing, to two-part playing and eventually to full band/string orchestra arrangements. However, the book also comes with a CD backing and 'Smartmusic' software so that students can also use it for personal practice.

Two groups were formed initially: a wind band and a string group. The first rehearsal was quite amazing, and very loud in the wind band room! Students were shown how to put their instruments together and how to get a sound out of it. The students were allowed to experiment with their sound and most couldn't

wait to get their hands on their instrument. A main tutor who was a violin/viola specialist and a support tutor, who was a cellist, supported the string group and a brass player led the wind band, supported by two woodwind specialists.

The students gave their first concert after two terms as part of the annual showcase events for the music service groups. The results were phenomenal. What the students had achieved in such a short space of time was quite breathtaking and something that the music service could be proud of.

From then on the scheme moved from strength to strength, developing very quickly with the formation of an intermediate orchestra, to accommodate players who had learnt previously but were not of the level demanded by local amateur orchestras, and a second 'Learn As You Play' wind band. Three more wind bands and a jazz group followed soon after.

By 2005 it became apparent that students who had learnt in the initial 2002/3 'Learn As You Play' wind bands were reaching a level where they wanted to move on from the beginner groups and play more challenging 'real' music. For the strings, the progression into the intermediate orchestra was obvious, but for the wind and brass players the progression wasn't clear and restructuring was needed. Five wind bands were in existence as well as one jazz group. One wind band remained as a 'Learn As You Play' group and students could choose to join that group if they wished to continue at a beginner level. Then a new wind band was formed out of the other wind bands to accommodate players who wished to move on to the next level of learning in that environment. The jazz group evolved into an intermediate jazz ensemble so if students wished to play jazz, they could choose to join that group, if they wished to play orchestral music, they could choose to join the orchestra. To support this, instrument specific technical workshops were set up so that instrumental technique could be developed alongside the ensemble skills that the main groups offered.

During this period the existing jazz group and wind band also grew in both competence and numbers. Now they provide an outlet for both instrumental and class teachers as well as players who have reached a high standard of playing but have entered other careers. These two groups are the showcase adult groups in the structure and provide Gloucestershire with a progressive scheme of groups where adults can learn to play together from beginner level to advanced.

Being involved in this scheme from the beginning has been an incredible journey. The adults gain so much from playing within their groups and the level of playing that they reach through learning this way is impressive. How many of us have spent a year teaching beginner children in school on a one to one level or in small groups of two, three and four, who would not be able to play in an ensemble situation by the end of their first year? So why does it work?

The Research

That was the question I asked myself when I undertook a small research project as part of the Associated Board of Royal Schools of Music's Certificate of Teaching course (CTABRSM). Through this project I concluded that the method of learning within a social group, and the fact that the group was a performing ensemble, had a major impact on the pace at which the students learnt and the depth of their musical understanding. In short, more in-depth research was needed and so I undertook a PhD at Birmingham City University, which I am in the throws of writing up, to attempt to answer the questions left by the initial CTABRSM project.

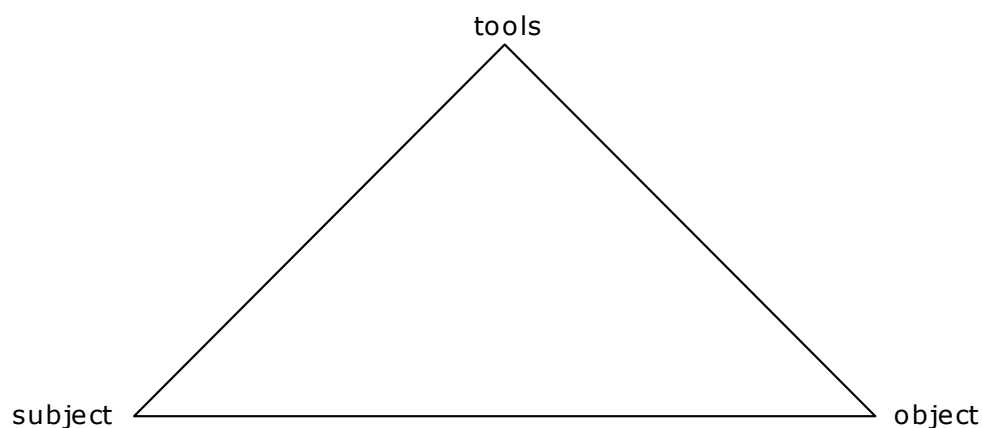
In order to understand the process of learning that occurs within these learning ensembles I took six groups, two of which formed a pilot study, from different parts of the country. All groups employ a large ensemble method of teaching adults. I observed each group, conducted a group interview with students and followed these up with individual interviews and interviews with the tutors. From the data I have been able to identify common themes across each case study and construct a picture of how the adults are learning within their groups, what the key motivational factors are and how participation in these groups shape their identities as musicians.

After the pilot study I realised that as an instrumental teacher myself, I have very little knowledge of what it is to be a beginner learning music through participation in an ensemble. So I decided to do it myself. Since 2005 I have been learning Javanese Gamelan and recording my experience in a research diary. This then has enabled me to analyse the data from the case studies alongside that of my own experience as a learner in an ensemble.

This aspect of the project has been the most exciting, illuminating and personally fulfilling part of the research. The experience has made me question how I learn, how I teach and why I teach the way that I do. Questions that we as teachers should continually ask ourselves in order to ensure our teaching is relevant and effective. I have also found so much common ground between my own learning and that of the students in the research that I believe I can present a convincing case for learning in this way, based both on student case studies and ethnographic research.

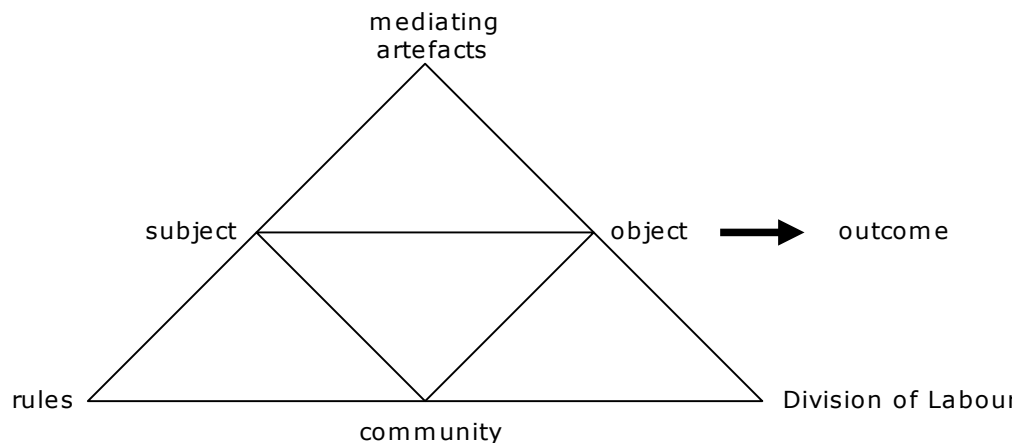
The Findings

In order to explain what is happening within the learning ensemble situation I employed a theory called Activity Theory. Activity Theory describes the process of activity through the interaction between the person undertaking the activity (the subject), the tools (also called mediating artefacts) used to carry out the activity and the object of the activity. Presented in the form of a triangle, it is known as an activity system.



In its most basic form, the subject is the student, the object is to play a piece of music and this is done through the use of tools such as instruments, musical notation, physical gestures etc. The individual cannot play the music without the instrument, and the instrument cannot play without the student, therefore it is the mediation between the two that fulfils the object of producing the music.

But this is not an isolated process and a second layer has been added to place the activity within its social context and show where the outcome lies within the process of activity.



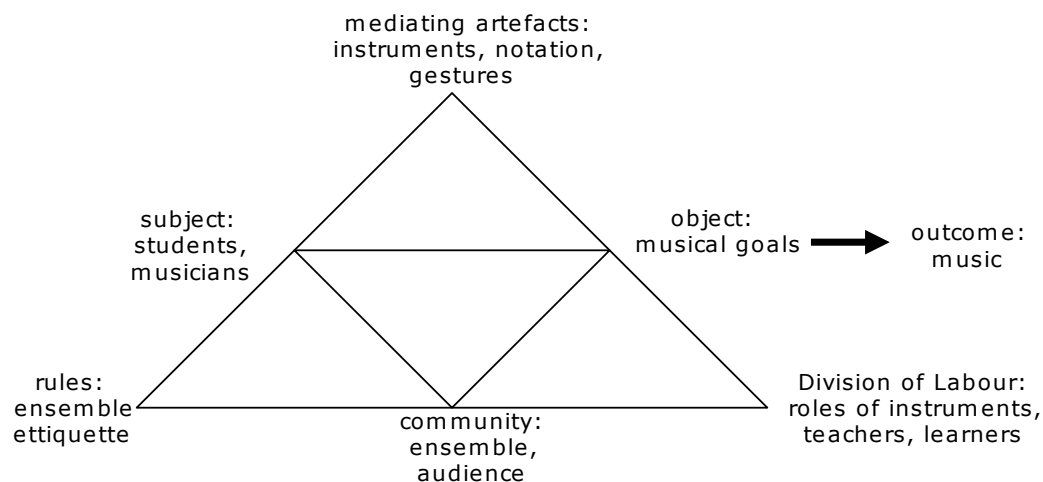
(Engeström, 1999; 31)

An individual student will set themselves a goal, for example to be able to play all the notes of a certain piece of music. The process they then go through to do this involves a complex set of interactions between their instrument and the notation, as well as the physical gestures that the conductor will give to inform the players where they are in the piece and how to play that part. This is within the context of where their own instrument fits with the other instruments in the ensemble, the rules that embody the nature of the ensemble, which in turn are guided by the context within which they are playing.

For example, in order to play the right notes a trombonist will have to physically move their arms and place their lips in the right position simultaneously to get the correct pitch, however if the correct pitch is not attained, and it does not fit in with what they can hear around them, they will firstly need to recognise whether the pitch needs to be higher or lower and then adjust physically to correct the note. The way that the particular note is played will be dependent on whether the note appears at the beginning of a bar or phrase or at the end, and the player will have to make a judgement as to where they are in the music as to how much stress they need to give the note, this can be directed by the conductor or can be gained by an awareness of what everyone else in the ensemble is doing at that particular time, or a combination of both. The note will belong to a series of notes that form a melody, a countermelody or be part of a harmonic sequence and therefore that note may need to be loud or quiet depending on where it lies in the texture of the music. The conductor may give a signal in the form of a physical gesture to indicate to the player how to play the series of notes, for example to play smoothly by a smooth, flowing gesture, or detached by a more jagged gesture, small indicating quietly and large indicating loudly. Simultaneously, the player will have to be sensitive to what particular role their instrument is playing at that point in the music, are they providing the tune, is it a solo or soli, a duet or is it an accompanying figure? On top of this, the player has to be aware of

where they are playing physically, are they in rehearsal or performance? Who is listening? And what the particular rules are for that specific context, for example in rehearsal it may be ok to speak or 'tut' at themselves or another person, laugh or even swear if a mistake is made (depending on the type of rehearsal, each group will have its own specific etiquette.). In performance this may change. All of this happens within a split second.

So the complex process of activity taking place within a learning ensemble presented as an activity system looks like this.



(Henley, 2007)

The ensemble situation allows this activity to take place in a different way than it would if the student was learning in a one to one lesson with a tutor. What is crucial to the success of the learning is what the purpose of the learning is. For every one of the adults that I have interviewed as part of my research, guided as a tutor within Gloucestershire's scheme and shared a song with in my gamelan, the purpose of learning is to make music with other people. If you cannot make music with other people, why learn?

One fundamental aspect of this type of learning is the dual function of the learning ensemble as learning tool and performing ensemble. The students in the ensembles perform regularly and it is the performance that catalyses the learning. A good example of this is the case of a student who joined my learning ensemble a month or so before a big end of year performance. After each rehearsal he would tell me that he couldn't play anything, didn't know where he was and that he would try harder next time. He didn't have to take part in the performance, performances are not obligatory, but he decided that he would. After the performance he was very much elated by the experience and he told me

'Although I couldn't play any of my notes, I knew that everything around me was working.'

For the first time this student was able to sense what was happening around him and to realise that the ensemble was producing a good performance. Without participating in the performance he would not have known that the performance was going well and therefore would not have been sensitive to what was happening around him. What this performance also did was show him that he didn't have to play all of his notes perfectly in order to produce a successful performance and feel good about it, and the performance is the result of a

combined effort that can far surpass the effort of the individual. Since this performance that particular student has come on in leaps and bounds. His confidence is greater and he has been able to integrate his playing with that of the others around him, showing an awareness of the ensemble that he didn't have prior to that first performance.

In this context the performance is the by-product of the learning; it is the outcome of the activity system. In music education we sometimes can put too much emphasis on the performance being the product by which we measure success or failure. Through my research I have come to the conclusion that the performance that the audience hears is not the sum of the achievements of the students and that we as music teachers should perhaps take a step back and look beyond the performance. There are many inspiring stories of adults using the learning ensemble to overcome illness, social isolation or to simply fill the gap that retiring has left in their lives. Many adults who participate in learning ensembles do not actually enjoy the experience of performance, but accept it as a necessary part of learning. They are learning in order to play, not to perform however they recognise that the performance helps them to play better. To others, it is the most thrilling part of the process. But it is the process that is important, not the outcome.

Needless to say, more or less all of the adults who participated in my research said that they would not have continued to play their instrument had they learnt purely with a teacher. All have different reasons for wanting to learn their instrument, for some it has changed their lives (see Henley 2008), but the common factor is that they wish to make music in a social environment and this environment, the performing ensemble, allows each individual's activity system to work in order to reach their own personal goals.

What Next?

For Gloucestershire, the question is where to go next. Decisions need to be made as to how to support the students who have reached a level beyond that of beginner (and indeed the initial expectations of the scheme), how to train staff to work specifically with adult groups and how to extend the scheme to encompass other genres and reach other target groups. One area that Gloucestershire wants to look into is working with adults with dementia, and a growing body of research is showing the effect that musical participation can have on the lives of people suffering with the condition. For myself, the question is where does all of this lead?

To me the answer is obvious; into schools. If adults can gain an understanding of music through participation in an ensemble, why can't children? Once my PhD is completed I intend to develop a project that will take my learning model (the intended outcome of my research) into a school to see how it can fulfil aspects of the National Curriculum, the Music Manifesto and provide a follow up for Wider Opportunities schemes. Maybe it can also begin to address some of the issues of transition from primary to secondary music whilst marrying the skills of the instrumental teacher with the class teacher through partnership working. If a project of this kind involving children is as fruitful as projects involving adults, I cannot begin to image the possibilities that this may create for music education.

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