

Learning Gamelan: A teacher's experience

Jennie Henley explores her learning processes through learning Javanese Gamelan and considers the impact that this has had on her own instrumental teaching.

I never thought that I would walk down the corridors of a women's prison but in July 2008 I found myself doing just that. I'm not quite sure how to describe my feelings as I walked through the pink corridors, taking in the sights and sounds of prison life. I was there to participate in a project carried out by Good Vibrations, a charity who take Javanese Gamelan projects into prisons. The Good Vibrations project had been taking place in the prison all week and my community gamelan were invited in for the last morning to watch the women perform, perform to the women and then participate in a joint performance. In the few minutes of walking down that corridor I felt a whole mixture of feelings. I didn't know what to expect. When I stepped through the door of the room where the Gamelan project was taking place, I could have stepped in any room in any building and I instantly forgot where I was. There was a feeling of calm in the room. The women were rehearsing a piece that they had composed and were completely engaged in what they were doing, so much so that there were probably unaware of our presence. The feeling that I had stepped into something very special outweighed any nerves or fear at the thought of being inside a prison.

Participating in this project has been one of the highlights of learning gamelan. Not only did it affect me as a gamelan student, it also had a profound impact on me as an instrumental teacher.

Returning to my learning roots

I joined my gamelan in 2005. A new community gamelan had been set up in my home town and I took the opportunity of taking a small group of GCSE music students along to the launch of the gamelan. Both I and the students were in awe of the instruments, the way they sounded as well as the way they were carved, crafted and painted. They were unlike anything I had seen before and they were very beautiful.

During that session I found a sudden affinity with my students. We were all playing Javanese Gamelan for the first time and so were all in the same boat together. Unlike any other situation, we were sharing difficulties and celebrating triumphs together. Not as teacher and student, but as peers. Working in an unfamiliar tonal system, with unfamiliar instruments and method of notation

meant that I had no prior knowledge that I could draw on in order to assume the position of 'more knowledgeable other'. When I saw that I struggled with the damping technique required in gamelan playing and that I was just as frustrated as everyone else in trying to memorise the notes that we were playing, I realised that I was feeling exactly the same as the students felt. Not only this, but I was probably feeling exactly the same as many of my students feel in their instrumental lessons.

This was a light bulb moment for me. As a teacher, I try to ensure that my teaching reflects the needs of the student. I aim to be responsive to the student in terms of how they as an individual learn and also support the student when they are tackling something that they find challenging. However, my own musical learning began over thirty years ago and try as I might, I can remember very few details of my actual lessons, particularly from the first eight years or so of learning. Therefore, if I am so removed from the process of these initial stages of musical learning, how can I possibly imagine what it is like to be a learner of music and therefore how can I ensure that my teaching reflects the needs of the learner? If I wanted to fully understand how a student engages with the learning process, I would need to engage with this process again, but not as a musician with thirty-something years of playing my instrument behind me, as a beginner.

At that community gamelan launch I decided that I would like to join the gamelan and learn how to play traditional Javanese music. This provided me with the perfect opportunity to get back to my learning roots and see for myself what it is like being a beginner and experience learning within a group. Although my experience of music making over the years did give me some foundation, learning to play music from a non-Western tradition was as close as I could get to experience learning music over again.

I decided that to really see what I was like as a learner, I would keep a learning diary of my experiences of learning gamelan. This was one of the best decisions that I made as I now have a detailed record of my own learning processes, and it makes very interesting reading!

Looking back at my diary there are moments that shocked me and there are moments that have brought back deeply buried anxieties. There are times when I am ecstatic about what I have achieved and my confidence soared, and there are times where I felt so low that I wanted to quit. Amongst all of this there was one thing that fascinated me as a teacher. How I learnt from and with the others and the transition from being an individual to being a group learner.

Individual strategies

One of the first entries in my diary is

'I find it really hard to play on the anticipating off beat. Anyway, I messed it up and [the tutor] helped me and I tried it again. Was a bit better. I then wrote down where I thought my notes were in relation to the tune and this worked a treat, I got it.'

This and many of the early entries in my diary are concerned with how I as an individual could play my part. I was finding ways to pin down exactly what it was that I needed to do, and writing down my notes against the notes of the main tune was a strategy that worked.

'I found that when I was playing something different I really needed to look at the 'score' and see where my bit fits in.'

I was using my own individual techniques for learning the music, but whilst I was looking at the score, I'm not sure how much I was thinking about everyone else. Although Javanese Gamelan is by nature a group activity, at this stage I was focussing more on my own part rather than the music as a whole.

I discovered that the tools that I was using in the learning process were derived from what I knew best. However, I was worried that doing this was cheating.

'I've tried really hard not to count and not to use my known ways of learning music, but I find that it is the only way that I can keep from losing it. And actually, it's ok to do that. I felt very much at first that it might be cheating but it's not, it's just my way of learning and coping with the new material.'

This was a moment of realisation. It wasn't my way of learning music, but my way of learning everything. I'm a picture drawer. A person who doodles when thinking about something in order to help it sink in to my brain. Once I had realised that I wasn't cheating by doing this, I used it throughout my learning with great effect.

'The main difficulty was knowing where each note was, so I drew a diagram. I was really pleased with my bonang efforts.'

After around six months of employing this strategy I found that I was progressing.

'I think I'm making progress. Things started happening automatically.'

Moving towards group learning

Once things did start happening automatically, I found that I started moving towards learning through being part of the group rather than as an individual within a group. The role of the group in

the learning process started to become clear. I began to combine my visual strategy with listening to the others in the group.

'I found that today I could clearly hear the drum signals. I think that it was because I was on an easier piece. I could really listen to the bonang and they were playing something that I have played before. So I could hear what it sounds like from the other side.'

The group was becoming my learning aid. Javanese Gamelan is all about sets of instruments interacting with each other. Some instruments provide the structure and give signals as to when to move to the next bit, others play the tune whilst others embellish the tune. Each player needs to know the function of their instrument as well as that of the other instruments so as to ensure that the gamelan functions as a whole. If I am playing the gong whose role is to signal the end of each cycle, I need to make sure that I know exactly where I am in the piece. I might only play once every 32 or even 64 beats, but I have to be alert and listening so that I don't get lost. It may sound very obvious, but the only way I can do this is if the others in my group are playing their part. There is no conductor to bring me in, and actually, some people might be relying on my signal to let them know that what they are doing is right. So you find yourself in an environment where everyone is supporting each other by developing their own learning (i.e. getting their bit right), and their own learning develops through the support that the others give. In other words, the group acts as a community of practice.

The learning community

A community of practice is a

'group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.'

(Wenger et al, 2002; 4)

Within a community of practice members start on the periphery of the group and travel into the group as their learning progresses. As they move deeper into their learning, they start to help other members in their learning. Therefore a community of practice facilitates peer learning.

What is interesting about this community is the type of peer learning that it facilitates. Not only is this learning explicit, for example, if I was lost, someone else might either point to the section of the main tune where we are or sing the notes of the main tune so that I can find my place. It is also implicit. It's a natural part of the learning process that can only occur when the group are together.

As I moved deeper into my learning, I found that I started using my safe strategies less and that I began to develop new ones as I used this implicit peer learning more.

'I played four notes to the tune's pair and the tune was on my 2 and 4 but I kept getting it on 1 and 3. The thing is though, I could hear that I wasn't right, and I just stopped and listened hard and got back in.'

This may seem a simple thing to do, but it was a massive shift in my learning process. Not only does it show that I moved from my visual strategy to an aural strategy, I could only do this by participation in the group. At the start of my learning I could quite easily have done what I did on my own with a saron, now I have to be in the group in order to use this new learning strategy and move my learning on.

Using the community

Over four years after first struggling with the anticipating off-beat, I finally worked it out.

'I've got it. There is no anticipating off-beat. There is no such thing as an off-beat, just a beat that moves quicker than another beat. Yeah! I cracked that this evening and all of a sudden the bonang paneris became much clearer!!'

The instruments within a gamelan operate as smaller cogs in a large machine. Each cog has a different number of teeth, some have 16, some have 32, some 64, some only have 1, but they all take the same amount of time to do a full circuit. Through prolonged interaction with my community I could see how these cogs fitted together. This is not something that someone could have told me, in fact the tutor explained this early on in my learning, but it is only through experiencing it myself, through learning with the others that I now understand it.

The beauty of our community of practice is that although many of us started at the same time, over the past five years members have come and gone and we all have a different pace of learning. It is that fact that makes the community work. We have light bulb moments at different times and we share these with the group. When our playing becomes more confident, we are contributing to that implicit peer learning and giving somebody else an opportunity to learn how to do their bit right.

Within this, the tutor is able to skilfully put us in places in the gamelan where we either have a supporting role or are in a challenging role, depending on where we are in our learning and how far we want to move on. He has a sense of who wants to be challenged, who has had a hard day at work and wants an easy night and if he gets it wrong, we tell him. There is no pressure to tackle something that we don't want to, yet there is always an opportunity to give something new a go.

Back to teaching

It's quite often said that we teach how we were taught. If this is true, how do we teach in situations that we have no experience of as a learner? The diary that I kept produced a wealth of information about my own personal learning patterns. It has helped me to understand myself as a learner and show how a group can facilitate my learning. This in turn has helped me to understand myself as a teacher.

Looking back at my experience of watching the women in the prison I realise that it caused a small, but significant shift in my teaching perspective. The realisation that whatever your background, the social music making process is a powerful way of connecting with others without actually having to confront people. That may sound a little strange, but when you think of the shy child who doesn't say very much in the lessons, who hides behind the others in the group and who never offers to demonstrate or answer a question, what do we do? We try to coerce them into contributing, putting them on the spot when they don't feel comfortable in the hope that the more they do it, the better they will get at it. What I have learnt from Javanese Gamelan is that perhaps this child is fully engaged in the community of practice, maybe they are using implicit peer learning alongside their own preferred personal strategies in a way that is most comfortable and secure to them.

After my experience as a learner I understand the importance of developing your own strategies. I understand what it is like to be put under pressure to do something on the spot – when this happened to me, my diary entry is unprintable! Not only this, but these situations brought back some very uncomfortable memories of being put on the spot as a child and while some children thrive on this, it made me remember that others do not.

I also have gained an understanding of the benefits of playing less technically challenging music sometimes so that students can develop their aural skills, and just enjoy the thrill of playing something well. I think this is particularly crucial in a large group situation. I have seen many teachers push students on and be proud of how far they have come in such a short space of time, but I wonder what would happen if the students took a little longer to travel and take in the sights and sounds along the way?

Martin Fautley suggests that we should look at assessment methods that *'help students to travel rather than to try to measure how far they haven't gone!'* (Fautley, 2009; 87) By shifting my teaching perspective from teaching a group of individuals to facilitating a community of practice, I feel that I can help my students to travel in their own way. Not only this, but I am also a part of this community

of practice and I too am travelling. Mostly, what I have learnt from this experience is at the end of the day, as long as the students are travelling, does it matter how far they have gone?

References

Good Vibrations: www.good-vibrations.org.uk

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For more about musical communities of practice, see:

Barrett, M. (2005) 'Musical Communication and Children's Communities of Practice' in D. Miell, R. Macdonald and D. J. Hargreaves (eds.) *Musical Communication*, Oxford, Oxford University press, pp. 261-280.

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