

A challenge to assumptions of the transformative power of music

A provocation given to the 3rd SIMM-posium on the social impact of making music, Porto, 19/20th May 2018

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Last year, I was asked to write a chapter for a new book on Music, Mind and Wellbeing. The chapter is called Music, Emotion, and Learning. I was asked to provide a literature review of research exploring the connections between emotion and music in music education, and then a case study to illustrate the arguments presented in the literature review.

As I began reading I started to realise that much of the research was based on huge assumptions about the connections between emotional development and musical learning. Even in the most recent articles I read, it was taken for granted that music contains inherent emotional content, that this content is universal, and emotional transformation occurs as a result of the great and good powers of music, and very little attention was paid to the way it was learnt. There were one or two articles that hinted that pedagogy played a role, but in general the focus of the research that I read was on the musical content of the learning (the curriculum) as opposed to the form that the learning took (the pedagogy).

It became clear to me that I had a massive challenge ahead. My chapter, that has now gone to the publishers, critiques the idea that music contains universal emotional content that is transmitted when anyone engages in it, and secondly I critique the idea that learning music and learning through music are two separate things. I argue that it is the socio-musical interactions as fostered by the pedagogy that give rise to both musical development and emotional development, and these are not two separate things but are symbiotic.

To do this, I needed to unpick the concepts of curriculum and pedagogy, as it became clear that the difference between the two is misunderstood. In fact, confusing these two things leads to the kinds of huge assumptions that are made in relation to the transformative powers of music. So I unpacked learning theory to put forward an argument that different approaches to learning result in different levels of emotional engagement, regardless of the musical content.

I explain that in behaviourist approaches, deriving from early psychologists such as Skinner, learning is uncritical and emotion is treated as something that is learnt and evidenced through demonstrable behaviours. Constructivist approaches, encompassing stage theories, such as Piaget, and phase theories, such as Bruner, place the student as an “active agent” in learning. If emotion is understood to be a cognitive activity then engaging the mind through the construction of one’s own understanding of music should lead to emotional development. Sociocultural theories place constructivist approaches in the wider socio-cultural environment. Such

theories include Communities of Practice, Situated Learning, Gestalt Theory and, the theory that underpins my own teaching and research, Cultural Historical Activity Theory. These theories build on constructivism but embrace group and peer learning as well as the way a teacher uses their understanding of the social environment to plan learning, and should lead to socio-emotional development.

In short, if a teacher uses a behaviourist pedagogy, the learning may only lead to behavioural changes. If a teacher uses a constructivist pedagogy, the learning may lead to emotional changes but not necessarily to socio-emotional development. If a teacher uses a sociocultural pedagogy, then learning should lead to socio-emotional development.

Now, what has all of this got to do with the many different kinds of music making that happen in various social contexts?

Firstly, it is important to remember that just because you don't know of or you reject theoretical perspectives related to learning, it doesn't mean that they are not present in your practice. Learning is the process of development and pedagogy the mechanism that makes that happen. Every learning event can be analysed using learning theory to understand the processes that are occurring as a result of the pedagogy. Pedagogy incidentally is understood in the English context as the full range of strategies, techniques, decisions, etc. used by the teacher. The teacher uses their nomothetic knowledge of what kinds of strategies work in general alongside their idiographic knowledge of the learners to develop bespoke learning that is appropriate for the unique group of people they are working with.

Secondly, for those who do not class themselves as a teacher, I am using the word here in a generic way. The research that I used as a case study for my chapter set out to explore what the differences are between teaching and facilitation. The organisation involved say that their music programmes in prisons work because they facilitate, not teach. What I found was that actually, it doesn't matter what you call it – it was the pedagogy underpinning their programmes that gave rise to the social and emotional development reported as a result of the programme – this is outlined in detail in the chapter. So even though this was not classed as teaching, or was school-based, or formal music education, there was a very clear pedagogy. What makes the project work is that the facilitators use their nomothetic knowledge which is underpinned by socio-cultural learning theory and continue to develop their idiographic knowledge – i.e. they constantly reflect on what the unique group needs, so as to facilitate a unique learning experience.

Thirdly, I am personally very tired of hearing people say that their music projects 'work' because it is informal not formal, or community based not school based, or uses pop music not classical music, or uses classical music not pop music, or uses technology, or improvisation, or performance, or ! All of these arguments are still content-centred, none of them relate to 'how' the learning takes place. I have seen awful community music projects that have been 'delivered' in a very behaviorist way but claimed as transformative simply because they use improvisation. In reality the participants are told what riffs to use, when to play, when not to play, and there is very little creative content – the 'success' of the project is based, and measured, on demonstrable behaviours.

So here is my provocation.

Education in itself is a transformative process – that is the point of education. The mechanism for transformation is pedagogy, not curriculum. The curriculum merely forms the content. Why else would the same outcomes be reported in evaluations of prison projects using different musics or even different art forms – theatre, dance, creative writing. It is not the music that is transformative, it is the music learning that is transformative. But, transformation goes both ways.

Every person I meet in my working context has some issue or other as a result of their music education, including myself.

Aha, I hear you say, but that is the result of a formal/classical/elitist/ etc. education system. Well, for a start, you don't know my background.

Let me tell you, I had a transformative experience with a participatory music project when I was 18. The project was multicultural in that there were all kinds of different instruments and musics, and creative in that it was based on improvisation. But I walked out of that workshop thinking, I am NEVER doing that again. How dare those people come into my community, make assumptions about me as a musician, and put me in a position where I felt like a complete idiot because I couldn't improvise! On reflection, what was lacking from that project was any kind of idiographic knowledge (of who we were), any kind of constructivist approach (how our prior knowledge might be built on), and certainly no sociocultural awareness.

So I say this – remember that although the people in the room might nod and say 'yes, that was great, thank you very much' like I did, they may walk out of the room thinking that they never wish to do that again, like I did. So if we do believe that it is the music that is transformative, we must also believe that those negative transformations are a result of the music. And that is just one step away from saying that those who experience a negative transformation are simply not musical.

We need to move away from this content based argument for transformation. If we don't all we are doing is creating a hierarchy of musics (and musicing). THIS music is transformative implies THAT music isn't. And we are allowing those who steer people toward negative transformations to shirk their responsibilities.

If we shift the emphasis to the pedagogy we have a framework to research and understand the processes that lead to transformation, either way, and a framework that isn't based, and measured, on outcomes alone.

At the end of the day, music does not transform people. People – including the self – transform people.

Full references are given in the chapter: Henley, J. (2018) Music, Emotion, and Learning. In P. Gouk J., Kennaway, J. Prins, and W. Thomählen (eds.) The Routledge Companion to Music, Mind and Wellbeing: Historical and Scientific Perspectives. Routledge.