

Undergraduate Students' Experiences of Music and Learning during University Outreach Activities

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Abstract

This paper focuses on students' musical experiences while participating in community outreach placements during a five year Musicology degree. Part of a term-long university module, the placements took students beyond the walls of their university course, providing them with valuable opportunities of coming into contact with new ways of making and using music with hard to reach populations (patients in drug and psychiatric rehabilitation and Roma children). A research investigation undertaken in Spring-Fall 2011 sought to explore the benefits of engaging in such activities to students involved, employing focus group discussions and documentary analysis of student written work. Findings reveal perceived shifts with regards to students' relationships with others; with their self; and with music as their disciplinary focus. Findings presented and discussed here focus particularly on students' changing views of the use of music during the activities and their own musical learning when engaging with student peers and community participants. Implications for university curricula, particularly the critical role of higher music education in encouraging and facilitating prospective musicians' participation in outreach activities, are discussed.

Keywords: Student learning, community outreach, university curricula

Background and Aim of the Study

The changing reality of the music profession requires of students to possess unprecedented skills of musical and intellectual flexibility, enquiry and reflection. Vital also are wider conceptions of career opportunities to those that are currently available to performing arts graduates. A contemporary musician is expected to function as a performer, composer, leader and teacher, applying these roles to diverse contexts (Bennett, 2008). There is now growing evidence that increasing numbers of performing arts students are devising alternative approaches to gaining vital work experience, using their creative practice in new ways that benefit their communities as well as their own career goals and personal development (Gregory, 2005; Kushner, 2002). Such experiences are not only limited to the commercial sector; public and third sector organisations are often very willing to work with students in the arts, and value them for their subject-specific skills with benefits for all parties involved (Ball et al, 2010).

Performing arts curricula can provide multiple opportunities for students to apply their learning in a variety of non-profit settings via placements and/or performances within the framework of community work. In such settings, the boundaries between what is classed as voluntary work and what is classed as work experience are often blurred and relate to intention on the part of the worker rather than job role per se (Ball et al, 2010). The opportunities provided through these experiences could encourage the development of broader conceptions of professional careers and identities, expand existing views of disciplinary boundaries and possibilities and promote personal reflection and an inquiry stance to learning.

The wider study on which this paper is based builds on a growing body of research around higher music education teaching and learning and student employability (Odam & Bannan, 2005; Weller, 2008; Bennet, 2008; Brown, 2008), drawing also on the continuing discussion of developing entrepreneurship and work-related learning in the broader field of arts higher education (Ball, 2003; Ball et al, 2010). It is grounded also in initiatives that support student involvement in community outreach work during their undergraduate studies, as key to their overall development as musicians within a global community, with benefits to all parties involved (Carruthers, 2008). We drew also on theories of experiential and situated learning in generalist education (see Brennan & Little, 1996 for an overview) as well as informal learning theories in music in particular (Green, 2008, Folkestad, 2006). Much of this literature moves away from approaches that focus on developing individual skill levels and reproducing a canon of work to approaches where group work and the creation of original pieces and new forms of expression are encouraged.

Furthermore, while we do not underestimate the significance of formal learning environments for a discipline such as music, we believe that informal learning is a powerful complementary way of acquiring a set of skills necessary for any musician and musicologist. More specifically, informal learning experiences often take place when musicians are working together, away from formal educational environments, on a more or less equal basis, listening to and imitating each other (Smilde, 2009). The acquired learning is often highly applicable to the contexts where the musical activities took place (p.75). Renshaw (2006) refers to the related notion of ‘context-based learning’, where knowledge and skills are acquired in a communal or collaborative setting, generating a shared sense of belonging and knowing

within a particular context (p.12). Experiential and situated forms of learning arising from such collaborative community-related experiences often result in a deep sense of personal engagement and ownership, as well as the development of professional autonomy and voice (Triantafyllaki & Burnard, 2010).

The aim of the wider study was to investigate such forms of learning that undergraduates experience while participating in community outreach placements. The benefits to students of engaging in outreach activities as part of a university course of study have for the most part been tacitly discussed rather than the specific focus of a research investigation. In the context of the current paper, we specifically explore the ways in which undergraduate students' perceptions regarding the use of music and their own learning shift, having engaged with active music-making in informal learning contexts with hard to reach and often disadvantaged populations.

Description of the course and placements

The module discussed in this paper forms part of a five-year theoretical Musicology degree at the Department of Music Studies, University of Athens. During this module, students attend weekly classes and visit their chosen placement on a weekly basis. In the class sessions the multi-disciplinary theoretical background is discussed: Apart from the focus on music theory and analysis, emphasis is also given to approaches to community music, music therapy, cognitive, social and clinical psychology, sociology, education, informatics, and selected topics from psychiatry. Consideration is also given in class on issues that arise from the

practical work during placements, including discussions on various problems the students might encounter, evaluations, feedback and preparation for future placement sessions.

The placements are related to psychiatric rehabilitation (mainly people with psychotic syndromes), drug rehabilitation (teenagers and young adults), and multi-cultural day centres (such as immigrants and Roma children). Hence, students are called upon to respond to the situational requirements of a completely novel environment that they would not have otherwise met, using music as a tool for communication. Students form small groups of three or four, and visit their one chosen placement weekly. Their aim is to encourage musical creativity and general musicality, as well as the development of cognitive, emotional and social skills of community participants. The musical activities involved include all types of musical games, improvisations, song writing, musical theatre, and others, depending on the participants' interests, needs, abilities and background.

Research Method

Drawing on the learning goals of the seminar itself, the objectives of the wider study, on which this paper was based, were to explore the changes occurring with regards to (a) students' relationship with music as a field of study and their career choices; (b) collaboration with peers and community participants and the types of knowledge and skills that developed as a result; and (c) personal and professional identity development.

We were interested in tapping into group perceptions of learning experiences, in accordance with the structure of the placements. As such, five focus group interviews, each hosting between 2 to 4 students, served as the primary data source for this paper. Each focus group consisted of the actual group that took part in each placement. The participants had completed the module and their placements and submitted their final essays. The involvement of the researcher was kept to a minimum, encouraging students to direct the flow of conversation amongst themselves. The emergent data is a negotiated social construct rooted in the understanding of participants themselves (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2001 in MacDonald & Wilson, 2005:398).

Data analysis initially involved open coding by breaking down, examining, comparing and categorising data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Data was analysed in accordance to the three broad learning goals of the course – ‘music’, ‘other’, and ‘self’. As student reflections varied across these three ‘themes’ we sought common sub-themes across students by collapsing codes and conducting data reduction. As we reached consensus as a research team, we identified critical shifts in students’ views in relation to the three themes as a result of their engagement in the course. The current paper presents data relating to students’ experiences of the use of music in particular and processes of learning in general during the placements.

Findings

There was significant discussion across groups regarding how they used music in the communal music-making activities. In this section we initially explore some of the ways in which students conceptualized the use of music, and then present findings relating to the

characteristics of learning that students' discuss as taking place through their placement experiences.

The Use of Music during the Placements

Collaboration/Communicating with the group

Music, as a tool for enhancing collaborative activity and communication within groups, was cited by the majority of students: "When we went there we were two groups, but when we played we became one. When we were singing, playing, using the instruments, there was a communication that wasn't there before or after". (Group 3, Psychiatric rehabilitation, 3.13)

Working with sensitive populations would often entail restrictions with regards to issues of verbal and emotional expression. As viewed in the excerpt below students relied on music for communicating with participants:

The music was an extension of ourselves. We were all in a circle and music was in the middle. We were restricted in what we could say, not to get too attached, not to ask something we shouldn't, how to deal with something they'd say. So there was nothing else, besides getting together and exchanging sounds. So, how each of us played, how we improvised on the instruments, how we built the melody, that was our communication, where we got to know each other, through what we played and did. Nothing else. That's why the children called this musical communication.

(Group 5, Drug rehabilitation, 6.5)

Students expressed feelings of great achievement by collaborating with group participants who had no prior knowledge of music:

Feeling you can communicate with anyone through music, exchange feelings and thoughts, being on-your-toes all the time, following your neighbor, who might not be listening to you and is playing something else, and then following him and creating something entirely different to what you initially thought. We were able to play with people who didn't know what rhythm was and how to make sounds with the instrument they were holding. (Group 2, Psychiatric rehabilitation, 2.4)

As these quotes suggest, group interaction and communication are encouraged through improvisation, by creating more musical awareness through 'tuning in' to an idea, by copying, adding and responding to changes in the music (MacDonald & Wilson, 2005). In the placement contexts, music-making was conceptualized as a space for creative collaborative expression, where students could come into contact, often for the first time, with sensitive and hard to reach populations developing as a result high levels of social and moral commitment.

Inclusivity/Breaking down musical barriers

During the outreach activities, traditional conceptions of musical learning were challenged; notions of "talent" and "excellence" within students' formal music education environments were particularly questioned:

Student 1: There is no right or wrong in this. Each and every one of us will do her best, whatever that is, and within this she will come into the group and music will

become our music. Whoever you are, you can create music together with other people, in a group.

Student 2: There are no boundaries in music, at least in what we did during the placement. My viewpoint has changed so much – you don't have to be the world's best musician to create something musical, and as a group I think we proved that.

Whatever you think of, you can make it into music. (Group 1, Psychiatric rehabilitation 1.10)

Furthermore, students witnessed how different populations, not formally trained, were able to reveal high levels of participatory musical engagement, which encouraged them to re-think their prior 'high art' ideas of music:

My views changed so much. When people engage from such a young age in a particular culture, with music, it gives a different temperament. The way the children dealt with the activities and their relationship with music was amazing...especially their rhythmical abilities, but also music as melody, as movement. We would put music they didn't know and ask them to move around the room, so they became familiar with the music. It was easier for them than for us, for all our education.

(Group 4, Roma daycare centre, 6.5)

The placement experiences offered novel opportunities for students to broaden traditional connotations of music. This was achieved through the realization of the key role of participants' cultural backgrounds in the music-making processes; in the case of the excerpt above, music is re-conceptualised by students as an embodied act, a set of relationships

between people, music, history and the larger culture (Small, 1998). For undergraduates, feelings of belonging and of group identity developed as a consequence of negotiating music making with a wide variety of individuals from different backgrounds.

Perceptions of learning

The type of musical knowledge essential for students' participation in the collaborative music-making activities was often discussed as consisting of very basic elements. These basic elements of music-making were contrasted with the more traditional and universal values of music and academic knowledge regarded highly in their university studies. Students emphasised the contrast between musical excellence and virtuosity with a more personal, situated and context-specific view of music that promotes group cohesion and interdependency, as well as personal creative expression:

It taught me to play music quite simply. Something I did before, but it just gave you a different boost, that you can make music with the simplest of materials, something we musicians sometimes loose...personal expression is sometimes lost with virtuosity, as is collaboration with others. I mean the idea that I am able to play music with anyone, anywhere. (Group 2, Psychiatric rehabilitation, 2.4)

First of all, music was about enjoying yourself. You learn how to like music. What can be more simple? But we completely forget about it in our days. You learn to like to explore body percussion, with simple means, to express yourself through that sound. (Group 5, Drug rehabilitation center, 6.5)

A fundamental element of the experience involved students responding and adapting to the physical and social spaces in which they found themselves, exploring new ways of experimenting with musical ideas, forms and structures, using very basic tools, such as body percussion. In doing so, personal enjoyment and fulfillment were prioritized (Green, 2008, p.56-58). Interestingly, those students that had received formal musical training from a young age had the most difficulties in adjusting to the requirements of collaborative music-making in the community settings:

Student 1: It just happened in the moment. We played together. Musical knowledge was not a pre-requisite.

Student 2: We didn't prepare, like going to take exams. There was no one to judge me.

Student 3: And let me add, musical production was improvisatory. It did not have to do with notes, theory or anything else we studied to enter university. The goal was to create a musical whole, through our own music, through the rhythm and the sound.

Student 1: I happened to discuss this with others and they found this very difficult, to simplify things so much. They had learnt in a different way. It was difficult for some to play music without the rules that their instrument required. (Group 2, Psychiatric rehabilitation, 2.14)

Students here consider learning during placements to involve (a) using simple tools, which enhanced personal creative expression, (b) collaborating with others, (c) improvising as opposed to working with notation and (d) aiming towards a holistic view of music that involved the engagement of the whole person.

Conclusions and Implications

This paper presented initial findings from an ongoing study on undergraduate students' experiences of music and learning during a term-long university module, which included outreach placements in non-profit settings. Emphasis was given on some of the ways in which students engage with music making, and how their perceptions about music as a discipline and about their own learning shift during these experiences. The perceived shifts are summarised below:

- Music-making offered a means for collaboration between people from diverse backgrounds, breaking down social barriers and promoting inclusivity during music-making activities.
- This collaboration was possible between individuals with no formal musical knowledge.
- Related to the above, students start to challenge standard notions of excellence, virtuosity and talent, which dominated conceptions about good music making during students' university studies.
- Sometimes disregarded in formal education, musical learning was about fun and enjoyment as well as personal fulfillment and expression.
- Engagement with and observation of community participants would often lead to new knowledge of the ways music is understood and practiced by groups with different cultural (and musical) backgrounds. The notions of embodiment, participation, belonging and collaboration were foregrounded in students' understandings of how music was used during placements and in their own perceptions of music learning.

The above points seem to imply that the inclusion of such a module into music curricula could be beneficial in expanding traditional views of music and learning during undergraduate education. Through such activities, the focus of attention seems to shift from academic forms of knowledge, universal values and the acquisition of specific skills towards how, where and when music is learnt, as well as what motivates musical learning in both formal and informal learning situations. To this extent:

- (1) University music departments can assist students in recognising the importance of diverse learning experiences, affording opportunities for building community placements and outreach activity into music curricula.
- (2) Raising awareness within Departments of the benefits involved in student participation in music-making outreach activity in challenging and novel environments. This requires a wider cultural shift with regards to valuing and facilitating student engagement.

The study is ongoing and will include an exploration of the changing conceptions of self and career outlook, as well as the development of personal and professional skills and knowledge through engaging with outreach activity during higher music education.

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