

Basic Information**Type of contribution:** Session Paper**Title:** Music, Meaning and Transformation**Connections to Conference themes or focus areas:** Sound worlds to know and Sound worlds to teach**Author:** Dr Steve Dillon**Job Title:** Senior Lecturer in Music and Sound media and Music education.

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Steve Dillon is a singer, composer and senior lecturer in music and music education in music and sound media faculty of Creative Industries, Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane.

- 1985-2003 commercial music education publications in collaboration with Andrew Brown include: Retro Rock and Sound reflections (Exploding Art music productions), Reading and Writing Rock and Rock Essentials (Science Press), Pop Percussion (Peter Leyden Publishing).
- Editor of the Xart journal <http://www.explodingart.com/xart/>
- 2000 founding director of the Digital Arts Education Studio a research unit at Griffith University which sought to examine the meaning of arts in the 21st century and the role of digital media in arts education.
- 2001 Facilitation of *Arts Education 21C Colloquium*, which brought together arts education academics, teachers and executives of arts professional and community arts organisations to debate the meaning of arts in the 21st century, and to identify an appropriate research agenda for arts education in the light of this debate.
- 2001 completed doctoral thesis entitled 'The student as maker: An examination of the meaning of music to students in a school and the ways in which we give access to meaningful music education.' From this research I have written nine refereed journal articles that focus upon the contextual aspects of arts knowledge, learning and curriculum.
- 2002-3 Lead a research team and collaborative design of an Australian Research Council Discovery project "Constructing a new conceptual framework for using digital technologies in achieving better arts assessment." That has examined the use of eportfolio systems in arts assessment <http://dmap.ci.qut.edu.au>. In addition, we have developed both theoretical protocols and implemented eportfolio systems through Apple University Consortium funding.
- 2002 in collaboration with Andrew Brown and Andrew Sorensen developed jam2jam an interactive generative music making software program for children that utilises research into meaningful engagement in its design and development.

Abstract: Music, Meaning and Transformation

This paper presents a broad overview of doctoral research into meaningful engagement with music making in a school context drawing upon a five-year participant-observation case study. It primarily involves an examination of the meaning of music to young people in an Australian school context and the processes that facilitate that involvement. It seeks to contribute to the understanding of how meaning and the processes that may give access to meaning in music education might be constructed and interpreted by teachers and curricula. The study privileges the voices of the student as makers of music in answering the question of meaning and access to meaningful music education but does so within a systemic environment which examines all aspects of context. The intention of the paper is to elaborate the meaning of music to young people and to explore the issues of how meaningful engagement might become transformative experience. The paper argues that meaning is located in social, personal and cultural experiences and suggests the need for access to all of these in music education. Through a narrative vignette drawn from the examination of context, it highlights the potential and possibilities of music experience for building and giving access to a range of music meanings. (The presentation will utilise recordings of children's music embedded in the story to communicate these ideas.). An examination of the implications of what these ideas mean for a school, policy development and the characteristics and role of the teacher is drawn from the vignette. The study seeks to 'put the meat on the bones of theory' and prior to the conclusion lists the theoretical tenets that inform the study and in turn reciprocally enable a thicker description of each aspect of theory which contributes to the robustness of this theory. In conclusion, the paper seeks to describe how teachers might teach in and construct environments where students can make meaningful music and experience a transformation of consciousness that constitutes music learning.

Music, Meaning and Transformation

Dr Steve Dillon

Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss a broad overview of my research into meaningful engagement with music making in a school context. Firstly, I will outline the theoretical basis that grounds the research and secondly describe the context, methodology and parameters of the study providing a sample vignette to contextualise the theoretical tenets drawn from the research. The idea here is to draw out both the students' experience of music making and comment on the complex environment in which this interaction takes place. Finally, I will seek to describe how a teacher might both teach in and construct environments where meaningful music might be made explicit and accessible in curriculum and practice and put the 'meat on the bones of theory'.

While authors offer various explanations as to what constitutes musical meaning, there seems to be a general consensus that the intrinsic qualities of a piece of music (its dynamic relationships) account for its meaningfulness. (Reimer and Wright 1992)

Music is an intrinsically motivated activity (Dewey 1989) and the 'flow' that both children and adults receive when engaging with music making is well documented (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde et al. 1993; Csikszentmihalyi 1994; Csikszentmihalyi 1996). It has been suggested that meaningful music making builds upon our natural aesthetic responses (Aronoff 1969; Abbs 1989; Askew 1998). Music meaning in this study is defined as; a natural attraction or engagement with music making, a playfulness with sound materials which may be a universal human quality but becomes culturally constructed when a culture imposes or shares its values for particular ways of being playful or constructive with sound upon individuals within the culture. John Dewey suggested in *Art as Experience*, 'the actual product of art is both in and with experience' (Dewey 1989:3). What is evident from any critical discussion about music and meaning is that it is necessary to establish the meaning of music as an object and as human experience in a distinct context. Whilst much has been written by theorists and philosophers about music and meaning and the knowledge of our experience of music as 'symbolic form' or another way of knowing very few studies have sought to ask and observe students experiences of music and meaning. It was the intention of my doctoral study to do just this; to observe students in a school and discover where, when and how they experienced meaning. The purpose of this study was to examine the meaning of music in a school context, not isolate it in philosophy or pedagogy or abstract it but to examine what music means to a student in a school, follow the trail of access and interaction of positive and negative experiences to weave a tapestry of meaning that showed the detail of all the people, places and things that make up the complex community of a school. From this understanding, it is hoped that I could then identify the qualities of teaching, classroom and school that gave access to meaningful music making.

A brief context and methodology

The questions of meaning and access to meaningful music education were examined empirically in a participant-observation case study and examined in conjunction with

an ongoing body of theorising about music education. The major data collection took place in 1997 at an Australian independent school with a population of 590 students but ex post facto data had been collected over a five year period prior to the interviews and observation data was collected. Data forms included: interviews with students and teachers, observations, participant observation, video and audio recordings of school events and policy analysis of school and discipline documents. The primary tool that influenced analysis was biographical interviews where both students and teachers recounted their musical life stories. These data were compared against observations and other media evidence in analysis and gave the clearest indication of the role and meaning of music in the participant's lives. Close to a million words in data was archived and analysed using QSR NUDIST and a qualitative analysis procedures and checks for honesty and trustworthiness.(Dillon 2001). It is essentially a curriculum studies and seeks to contribute to the understanding of how meaning and the processes that may give access to meaning in music education might be constructed and interpreted by teachers and curricula. As narratives about 'musical lives' is central to the theories raised in this study I have constructed a brief story of one student's experiences with music making in that context to illustrate the idea of music, meaning and transformative experience for this child.

Dennis' Story

Dennis was a year ten secondary student, he had learnt violin for about a week when he was 8 years old at another school but was so turned-off by the sound he made that he gave up quickly. At about age 12 he inherited his grandparent's piano which was put in his room. His parents enrolled him in Piano lessons at his school but he also found this uninspiring whilst at home his dual interests developed, enjoying computer programming and improvising on his piano. His parents continued to encourage his interest and enrolled him in private 'Five C's piano methods' lessons (a method based upon a kind of kinaesthetic programming principle). From this method he began to use his fingers much more creatively in his improvisation and also turned his new found skills to MIDI sequencing on his Commodore Omega computer, even exchanging MOD files (Modifying files and exchanging them with each participant developing the work collaboratively) with other enthusiasts in other states by email. He struggled to remain interested in any other aspect of school life and his parents brought him to my school's speech night and he was immediately impressed by several of the school ensembles; an electro acoustic ensemble, a Punk band and a Soul band.

His parents transferred him to the school and once at the school as a year 8 student, he enjoyed the classroom music focus on domain projects in Rhythm and Blues performance and composing. His classroom teacher noticed his love of composition, improvisation and computing and directed him to have private synthesiser lessons involving sound programming, sequencing and composing techniques. He also joined the electro acoustic ensemble and the soul band where he had the opportunity to not only develop his skills but also apply what he had learnt in his private lessons. I should note here that the policy for school ensembles suggested that they do something for their school, something for their peers and something that pushed the boundaries of their art form. This made for a vibrant and energetic musical community where students composed or

arranged music for school ceremonies and church services, ran outdoor rock concerts for charity or performed to promote the school at the city musicians club, at a school fair or a shopping mall or on an interstate or overseas tour.

Dennis could perhaps be described as the shy 'computer nerd' adolescent. His social skills had been hampered by his low self-esteem and shyness. In this environment, he grew in confidence. This was promoted by the personal sense of achievement and intrinsic motivation. Classroom and extra curricular ensembles enhanced his social skills, whilst his performances at informal and formal concerts changed the way that the wider school culture viewed him. His nickname was the 'Wildman' because when he got excited during an improvised synthesiser solo he bit his bottom lip. Nicknames and understatement based upon opposites seem to be an Australian tradition. Amongst his classroom musical experiences, he explored African, West Indian, South American, Jazz and Rock styles. In year ten he participated in an elective that explored 20th Century Art Music styles such as Serialism, Minimalism, Expressionism, Nationalism, Electronic and Musique Concrete not from a historical perspective but through engaging with making music using these compositional processes and examining how composers have used them effectively. The aim of the project was simply to compose an eight-minute piece utilising any of the selected 'isms' or combinations. The focus here is on keeping the listener engaged over a greater time than a 3-4 minute pop song and developing creative processes to do this. (The tune 'Minimalisation' which was a short developmental composition working with minimalist ideas and electronic manipulation of timbre will be presented at the conference) Dennis' final 8 minute work was an electronic work that used samples taken exclusively from another year ten boys body noises (you can imagine what some of them were) This work was one of the funniest and well constructed pieces I have heard and the entire class was in stitches during its presentation. In terms of its expressive production values it showed incredible skill and control in capturing and synthesising samples as well as interesting structural development a very funky rhythmic groove, a good understanding of harmony, voice leading and arrangement. Dennis continued to involve himself in ensembles throughout his life at the school and now works in communication design and sound and has released several commercial recordings with the punk band he joined shortly before leaving school.

Student as maker describes three areas of meaning:

Personal

Personal meaning in this research was defined as a communication between self and music making. Participants described the activity of making music expressively, and attentive listening to music, as evocative of a personal response, a feeling of well being and an emotive and aesthetic relationship with the music. It also promoted for them, an understanding of self as an expressive being, something that 'acquaints us with ourselves'. P217

Social

Students and teachers alike reported that music making provided them with a broader social contact with musicians from a variety of social contexts. They met and worked creatively with people of different genders, ages and cultural backgrounds. The relationship they described with others in ensembles was warmly outlined as a 'deeper way of knowing'. Participants described the process as getting to know other members of the ensemble through the music, through their expression, the commonality of the musical experience and the challenge of the task rather than words alone P.217

Cultural meaning

Cultural meaning is the most complex area of meaning explored in this research. It is a particularly powerful meaning. It is influential in the sense of self, the sense of self and others and reflects personal and community character. It is about expressiveness and the reciprocal interaction that both the artistic product and the maker have with the community. P218 (Dillon 2001)

If we apply these to Dennis' story, we can see that:

- 1) His personal relationship with music was provided by his parents valuing of music in his life and the recognition of his engagement with it. This was further encouraged and nurtured by his classroom teacher, studio teacher and ensemble directors who recognised his engagement and encouraged and facilitated further experiences.
- 2) The ensemble and collaborative project work in classroom and co- curricular ensembles gave him opportunity for social meaning through his interaction with peers, older students girls and staff.
- 3) Both in classroom performance and in the many performances for school functions, tours and public appearances Dennis had access to safe and encouraging performance opportunities that were a genuine contribution and expression of the community, cultural and youth sub-cultural values.

What does this mean in a school?

- A psychological environment that values and encourages expressive music making of all kinds.
- Access to instrumental experience
- Access to ensemble experiences
- Access to meaningful sharing of musical expressiveness for the school and wider community.

For the school policy

The school philosophy that integrated classroom, instrumental and ensemble programs with school ceremonies and events curriculum provided the opportunity to make music for a school community and its staff and students. The idea was to emulate a village where all participated in expressing

themselves artistically across the arts KLA. Hence the policy that led to an electro acoustic ensemble composing and performing a ‘stations of the cross’ multi media work at an Easter service, Techno pieces at a lunchtime dance party and performing works by Reich, Jarre and Japanese electronica as part of a chamber music series. It is both the teacher’s values and the context built by the teacher that gives the child access to personal social and cultural meaning. Most important in the findings was that we need access to all of them in each classroom experience and in every school context.

What are the characteristics of the Teacher

Swanwick suggests that analytical musical knowledge can be ‘taught’ but intuitive knowledge can only be ‘caught’ from someone who knows (Swanwick 1994). Dennis was ‘taught’ and acquired skill through the desire to be more expressive. He also encountered experiences and policies that led to him ‘catch’ musical knowledge too and this involves ‘the teacher as builder of music learning contexts’ and requires a teacher to create an environment where the student will encounter the learning that you prepare for them. The characteristics of the teacher most valued by interviewees was made up of the following actions and character:

The teacher must be a maker, animateur, and a builder of psychological environment and creator of atmosphere and attitude; they must be personally encouraging, open and have an interest in what the children bring to the relationship and value their interest in music; and most importantly they must facilitate experience through imaginative curriculum. (P168) (Dillon 2001)

What is the teacher’s role?

- Provide a safe and encouraging environment where music making and reflection is valued.
- Act as a gateway to deeper musical experiences in the school and wider community.
- Provide a broad variety of active music making experiences across times and places that lead to an understanding of the diversity of how human societies interact with sound in expressive ways.
- To give students skills of reflecting on and making sense of music in their lives.

What is the role of classroom music?

Classroom music in Australia is similar to that experienced by British students and is distinct from studio instrumental teaching and ensembles but may also include these practices as a gateway to extra curricular study in these areas. When I began the analysis of data concerned with classroom music, I was initially disappointed by some of the comments made by the students, and shocked by some of the negative circumstances I observed and recorded in my field notes. It seemed that classroom music was considered the ‘poor cousin’ to the more challenging ensemble programs. However, when I examined the complex interaction between classroom and the musical life of the student from classroom to studio to ensemble and then community I found the classroom had a far more important role to play. The broad and unified access to meaning in music education is dependent upon the classroom being ‘the hub’ of the music-learning wheel. It is from this hub that access to experiences radiates, and when combined with reflection it forms a strong basis for gaining skills that enable the layers of understanding to be formed and a real basis for musical

learning as a transformative experience. The classroom experience, then, should actuate the access to meaning and give tastes of music making in a sheltered and safe environment. Criticism of the classroom as being 'watered down' or irrelevant to 'real' music making are turned upon themselves. It is necessary that the classroom be a controlled environment so the teacher can safely facilitate meaningful experience to participants. It is not so much a 'watering down' of the experience but a conceptualised simulation of a 'real encounter' that enables students to gain the 'spirit' of the experience. The meaning of music changes in relation to the context so the focus of the school experience is not so much cultural authenticity but what the experience contributes to the acquisition of musical knowledge. This applies as readily to experiences with other cultures and times as it does with understanding our own rapidly changing culture. It is in the classroom that students experienced composing and improvising, in the classroom that they experienced making music from a variety of times and places, in the classroom where they are often directed to studio lessons and ensembles and most importantly it is where they can learn to make sense of how humanity expresses itself in sound.

Throughout this discussion of music and meaning I have sought to 'put meat on the bones of theory' so what are these aspects of theory that have been reinforced by this study's findings?

What are the fundamentals that underpin our experiences in music education?

1) Music is an intrinsically motivated activity (Aronoff 1969; Dewey 1989; Abbs 1990). What this means is that humans are playful beings and being playful with sound and organising it is widespread and universal amongst human cultures. So if children will naturally make sounds and be playful with sound and expressive with sound why do so many of us here have such bad memories of school music teachers and classes. Why is music NOT intrinsically motivated in schools except by the elite 'gifted'? It must be to do with the teachers' values, the curriculum and the approach or method so at the very least we should not get in the way of the intrinsic nature of music activity and aim to build on the child's natural aesthetic responses- create environments where they can both be playful with artistic materials and learn.

2) Activity and reflection should ideally complement and support each other. Action by itself is blind, and reflection impotent. (Csikszentmihalyi 1996:226)

We need a balance of these activities of experience and reflection and we need to provide structures and habits of making and reflecting. Activity and experiences in making music in real or simulated way need to be made into cognitive understanding through structured reflection. Reflection needs to be in another medium ie verbal, written, video audio tape- this allows another lens or perspective on the experience. Alternatively, over attention to reflective and abstract learning is impotent. Make it come alive by giving it purpose, context, and relevance and make it concrete- a making activity. The secret is a balance between analytic and intuitive learning between that which is 'caught' and that which is 'taught' (Swanwick 1994).

3) Music lessons should include both making and reflective activities and be taught within a context that is real or simulated so that it is relevant to

community (Swanwick 1981; Dewey 1989; Dillon 1995; Dillon 1999; Dillon 1999; Dillon 2000; Dillon 2001).

In practical terms, this means to make music i.e. create or perform music in the classroom based upon real life activity and discuss and draw out the process and evaluation of each product through reflection both formal and informal.

4) Music lessons should have activities that involve Composing or a creative aspect, Performing or a presentation aspect and listening/audition/ analytic response (Swanwick 1981; Swanwick 1988; Swanwick 1994; Swanwick 1999).

Every lesson should involve the possibility of children making aesthetic judgments or creative thought. Even if it is simply deciding on the timbre and dynamic of singing the 'pop' in 'Pop goes the weasel' the students should be involved in making those decisions. They should always present or perform work at the end or during a lesson and they should always discuss each work in a reflective way using the vocabulary that of musical elements.

5) The musical aspects of curriculum refer to consistently revisiting the fundamental concepts of the elements of music in increasingly deeper and more complex ways that build on understanding of music (Bruner 1966; Bruner 1973; Swanwick 1981; Bruner 1986; Swanwick 1988; Dewey 1989; Swanwick 1994; Swanwick 1999).

The elements of music are used to:

- Develop compositions in expressiveness and form.
- Develop performances in expressiveness and impact
- Develop critical listening frameworks and criteria for aural analysis of sound/music (Pratt 1990; Dillon 2001)

6) Music is a part of life and community - treat it as such in schools.

Music is not just part of the curriculum but can be used as an effective learning tool in other subjects. More importantly, it can be used as a unifying cultural force within the school community and as a way of projecting the image of that community to the world beyond school. (Reimer 1989; Gardner 1992; Swanwick 1999; Dillon 2000; Fiske 2000; Saachi and Saachi 2000)

7) If students gain broad general music experiences in the classroom and they also learn to be reflective and self critical about music then this skill enables them to make sense and gain access to the meaning of music wherever they find it. (Schon 1984; Fiske 2000; Saachi and Saachi 2000; Dillon 2001; Dillon 2001)

8) Music is meaningful in personal, social and cultural ways- students need access to all of these through the classroom and school environment if they are to make sense of the world they live in- a world where music plays an important role (Paynter and Aston 1970; Dewey 1989; Reimer 1989; Csikszentmihalyi 1994; Swanwick 1994; Elliott 1995; Fiske 2000; Saachi and Saachi 2000; Vella 2000; Dillon 2001; Dillon 2001).

Personal- where the student is expressive with sound and communicates with self through the process.

Social- where the student collaboratively presents or makes music as part of an ensemble or group experience.

Culturally- where the student as a person and the music as a product are shared with the community and express something about that community to others. - School concerts, tours, and public performances.

Conclusion

I have argued here that the meaning of music is personal, social and cultural and that this implies that teachers need to build a context which enables access to experiences in music making so that students might be 'taught' analytical musical knowledge in a way that supports and enables interaction with the expressiveness of intuitive and intrinsic musical knowledge. I have suggested that intuitive musical knowledge can be 'caught' through a teacher as builder of music learning contexts. In conclusion, I would suggest that what is important for teaching and learning is that we seek to describe how a teacher might both teach and construct environments where meaningful music might be made explicit and accessible in curriculum and practice. This paper is concerned with music, meaning and transformation because of the idea that when humans make meaningful and expressive music as individuals, and groups, that the processes has the capacity to be self-formative. We can be changed by this interaction as can the community in which we live. This builds upon the foundation of Dewey's *Art as Experience* (Dewey 1989) and further seeks to describe how experiences with the unique aural symbolic form we call music transforms us personally, socially and culturally. (Dillon 2001).

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