

INFORMAL AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURES IN MUSIC EDUCATION

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Informal and Participatory Cultures in Music Education: Pitfalls and Possibilities

Music provides a forum to explore knowledge, creativity, collaboration and expression as a part of the human condition, in which we relate self-identity, self-knowledge and a socio-cultural context for our experiences (Hodges, 2005). Many youth are able to be involved in participatory cultures, where musical learning occurs easily and without formal intervention, through the development of complex technologies that allow interaction and sharing across the world without the limitations of geographical boundaries. Musical activities are a significant part of many young people's everyday lives, as they are musically encultured from a young age, yet the majority of their musical participation occurs outside of formalized music education (O'Neill, 2005), through informal learning within popular music (Green, 2007). Contemporary music educators are faced with finding ways for youth to strengthen the connections between music education at school and their musical experiences outside the school walls; and I posit that an understanding of participatory and informal music learning practices might help this challenging endeavour.

Informal Music Learning Practice

Historically, music-making practices have been a predominant part of the social culture in which human beings exist (Blackling, 1981). Green (2007) proposes that "informal music learning practices" are how many popular musicians are becoming educated as musicians, and that formal music education has had little relationship to the popular musicians who create a majority of the music that the world listens to and

appreciates (p. 16). According to Green's (2007) research, the criteria that describe young musicians' informal music learning practices include *encountering* knowledge and experiences outside of formal education, being *enculturated* into musical practices via "lived experience in a musical environment", *interaction* with their peers and family outside of formal teaching capacities" and "*self-teaching* by developing independent learning techniques" of skills and knowledge acquisition (p. 16). For comparison, Green defines "formal music education" as instrument-based in nature, where "classroom music teachers" implement "practices of teaching, training and educating" (p. 16).

Upon comparing formalized Canadian music education to informal music learning, it may seem that formal music education is overly rigid and standardized, as it adheres to a set curriculum that requires quantifiable assessment of learning outcomes. This can be seen in The Ministry of Education - Province of British Columbia (2010) Curriculum Guide that focuses on structure and form within music education, and how curriculum should provide learning outcomes that can be "expressed in measurable and observable terms" (p. 11). In reality, formal music education is not always the stringent classically-focused entity that one envisions of music education in conservatories or in days gone by, as jazz, blues and popular music have become a large aspect of the formal school curriculum (Jaffurs, 2004). Yet, a pertinent question arises, 'if popular music is primarily learned through informal music learning practices, then how are teachers within this formalized environment helping their students learn this popular material within a technologically evolving world?' Further, while informal learning practices have provided many popular musicians with their musical skills and knowledge, the challenge for music educators in incorporating these informal practices into their classrooms is not only 'how to implement it', but to address

the challenge of creating and developing spaces within the classroom where music can be expressed “as a medium, practice, and art that carries, reflects and instills values” (Mans, 2009, p. 89), not simply as a skill that is honed through solitary practice, repetition and systematic achievement of seemingly arbitrary goals.

In the endeavour of integrating informal learning practices into formalized environments, Green (2007) suggests ways for music educators to strengthen their understanding of how popular musicians learn, such as teachers first attempting to place themselves in the position of their students, and to “try out some informal learning for themselves” by experimenting with “purposive listening” to recorded music (p. 214). Applying an approach such as Green suggests to an existing culture, where youth are learning music through informal practices, has its limitations, as the approach is not a natural progression within the formal classroom and does not fully encompass how youth are experiencing music. To enable a comprehensive understanding of how youth are learning and engaging in music, I propose, in addition to Green’s informal music learning practices, that Jenkins’ (2009) notions of youth participatory culture in media education may be of use in providing a way for music educators to strengthen the connections of music education for youth, both in-and-outside of school.

Participatory Culture and New Learning Spaces

The term ‘participatory culture’ can bring to mind a variety of definitions, and in many cases, the term is related to old (pre-digital) and new (digital and interactive) media technologies (Jenkins, 2006a). At its core, participatory culture holds the possibility of developing skills and competencies that not only hold value with the present-day workforce but allow for diversified cultural expression, creative expression, and opening opportunities

for civic engagement (Jenkins, 2009, p. xii). Jenkins' (2009) defines this media-based participatory culture as one that has “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement”, where there is “strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others”, “some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices”, and “where members believe that their contributions matter and where members feel some degree of social connection with one another” (p. 5). Examples of participatory cultures include online social communities (e.g., Youtube), creative digital forms of expression (e.g., video ‘mash-ups’), and disseminating media and content through such forums as blogs (Jenkins, 2009, p. xii; Jenkins 2006b).

The traditional formats of music education, where knowledge is transmitted from the teacher to student have become only one option for learning music, as youth are engaging in multimodal and technologically advanced musical activities (Peluso, 2012). Jenkins (2009) provides similar observations in that many youth are engaging in meaningful new informal learning environments (either physical or virtual). These virtual collaborative learning environments are termed “affinity spaces” by James Gee (2003), where youth engage in experimental learning and knowledge sharing in collaboration with others, rather than the conservative and solitary regimented learning environments of formal school education (Jenkins, 2009, pp. 10-11). Participatory cultures provide youth with a new sense of empowerment and identity, that they typically might not have the chance to explore outside these affinity spaces.

Within virtual affinity spaces, youth are able to create new identities for themselves, where they are able to learn, share their expertise, and be a part of a knowledge sharing community that fosters creativity and expression, all without judgment of their background,

ethnicity, and most importantly, age. Within these participatory cultures, such as YouTube, youth are able to create, edit, remix, mash-up, and broadcast their own content in the form of videos (Jenkins, 2009). More importantly to music learning, many of these videos incorporate complex music creation and editing, which youth have learned within the context of experimenting with these technologies. Within this environment, youth are able to create, express and learn music with little resistance, and a high level of support and mentorship.

Participatory cultures not only encompass many aspects of informal learning practices, but also allow youth to be musically creative and expressive individuals, and provide an outlet for civic engagement and a place to express one's values. These participatory cultures provide youth with not only a vast environment for expression, but also an environment where they are supported and heard. Participatory culture and informal music learning practices each bring forth their own benefits, thus it would be ideal to find a way to embed these practices and culture into formal music education, as a way to provide educators with opportunities to be involved in these ways of musically learning.

The Teacher In This Digital Age of Musical Learning

I propose that youth still need someone to facilitate their music education, while incorporating informal learning and participatory cultures, as well as helping youth navigate the changing landscape of musical learning and expression. Adults have the ability to influence how youth are enculturated into music, as seen in Green's (2007) study, where many popular musicians came from musical families or environments. Jenkins (2006a) suggests that adults, and in my adaptation, music educators, can use contemporary media content such as television, to instigate conversations with youth about issues that may be

difficult to understand due to differences in generations. This provides youth with ways of communication that are relevant and familiar, as Prensky (2001) notes that in comparison to their pre-digital age educators, contemporary students have become technologically literate from early childhood. These conversations can provide a forum for reflection and new ways of talking about issues, such as sexuality, violence, politics and social lives. Taking Jenkins' suggestion and applying it to music education, it could be possible to engage in similar conversations using multimodal resources such as YouTube, where image, video, text, and music are ways to discuss meaning, moral and ethical issues. By providing a way for youth to connect their interests outside of school to meaningful concepts in the classroom, educators may find a way to critically engage their students in ways that traditional routes have not had a chance to do otherwise.

While many teachers may believe that they already have existing participatory cultures in their classrooms, as they let their students *surf the net* for music videos and sheet music, they are not truly enabling a participatory culture. To clarify, a participatory culture must consist of a combination of the five outcomes that Jenkins' identified. While it is beneficial to allow students to use new technologies and expand their knowledge online, they may really only be exploring potential new genres of music to listen to, or in the worst scenario, viewing the use of the computer for non-participatory related actions – as just another curriculum task that does not relate their out-of-school experience.

Facilitating Learning Opportunities: Pedagogical Concerns

The picture of how youth are “plugged-in” to these participatory cultures is painted by Jenkins in such a way that there are equal benefits and consequences for this emergent culture. While Jenkins' (2009) research noted the main competencies that emerge from

participatory cultures, he also recognized the flaws of this informal way of learning within a technological culture. He identified three pedagogical concerns, which I posit provide music educators with a crucial role in helping educate their students to be informed citizens of the physical and virtual informal music worlds.

The first concern is the “participation gap”, where youth do not all possess the same skills and abilities to navigate technology, nor do they all possess identical access to these new technologies, which lead to a “digital divide” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 16). In response, many teachers do not incorporate these mediums into their classrooms, or if they do, they require that all students have equal access to the computers or media. By implementing equal access to all students, this reduces the possibilities for creative expression for the youth already engaging with these technologies in advanced ways. This also increases the knowledge gap for students who have little to no experience with these technologies, as they may not be able to keep up to the same pace as their peers. The role of the music teacher is then essential, in creating opportunities for more advanced learners to flourish, and to enable new learners of these technologies the ability to increase their knowledge. Music educators can play the role of a facilitator for peer-to-peer learning opportunities, where their advanced students can take on leadership roles in sharing their expertise with their classmates.

The second concern for Jenkins (2009) is the “transparency problem”, where the increased access of the Internet and mobile devices allows for an inundation of information available at a moments notice, and youth do not always have the knowledge and awareness to critically understand the messages within the media. The role of the music educator for this problem is clear, as youth require a way to separate fact from fiction, and to understand

that not all information they interact with online is fully factual. The teacher can use this opportunity to help youth make connections between what they learn online and what the messages might be. Take for example the scenario where youth are learning to sing via tutorials broadcast by other teens on YouTube – the content, lyrics and messages in the song they are learning may potentially be morally, ethically or socially offensive, yet without critical thought or discussion about that, youth may be oblivious to the underlying messages.

Finally, the third concern for Jenkins (2009) is the “ethics challenge”, where the anonymity of identities on the Internet can be a worrisome aspect. The ethics challenge incorporates the reality that many youth may disclose personal details online, which can be used by disreputable individuals or organizations that prey on children. Youth do not always have the knowledge to be able to differentiate between what is “good” and “bad” online, and connect it to what is ethical in the physical world. For instance, within the online communities where music can be for listening, learning, remixing or adapting for creative expression, youth need to have critical discussions about whether appropriating someone else’s music or Art is suitable behaviour.

As the facilitators of critical discussions surrounding these issues that emerge from technological advances, music educators in this new context now have the opportunity to provide a space for expansive learning opportunities for youth to explore their musical creativity and expression (O’Neill, 2012; Peluso & O’Neill, 2011), while bridging the gap between formal music education and informal music learning practices.

Possibilities for Music Education

If the purpose of education were to provide students with the skills and knowledge to become full participants in their creative, public and social communities (The New London Group, as cited in Cope & Kalantzis, 2003), then it would appear that music education would also hope to encompass those goals. To enable youth to achieve this inclusive sense of community through music education, music educators need to understand how their students experience music both in and outside of school, and more so, allow their students to contribute to their music education with their own knowledge and skills. By envisioning music education within the classroom as a space to equally explore formal curriculum, informal music learning practices and aspects of participatory cultures, music educators may potentially be able to foster this comprehensive goal for educating youth to become a part of this creative, social, technological and civic community. Youth are already learning and experiencing music and a sense of community outside of school walls, yet do not have a forum within formal education to express and share their knowledge. Just as Green (2007) poses that informal music learning practices are able to be a part of formal music education, it would seem that the affinity spaces found in participatory cultures could also foster a new identity for music education, where music educators build upon their students' existing skills and competencies in informal music practices and technology. Through informal music learning practices within their online participatory cultures, youth not only encounter music but are entrenched in musical and technological worlds, in which they learn and share musical knowledge; youth can potentially bring these skills and practices into the classroom. As Green (2007) suggests that educators learn these informal music practices along side their students, acting as peers rather than 'teachers of

knowledge', music educators may also find that they are able to learn from their students how participatory cultures can enable learning music to be a part of a community, rather than a classroom lesson to be mastered.

In viewing music education as no longer just an institutional entity on its own, music educators can include informal learning practices and participatory cultures within their classrooms to create a comprehensive understanding of the ways youth are experiencing and learning music, both at school and outside of school walls. I don't attempt to provide precise solutions to strengthen these connections between music at school and outside school walls, yet I do believe that through further research, and by providing educators with an understanding of these informal music learning practices and participatory cultures, we can start the conversation for change in music education to include the meaningful ways that youth are engaging with music.

Final Thoughts

Contemporary music educators are faced with a changing landscape of music education, where youth are no longer learning music solely through formal music learning practices. Music is a large part of contemporary youth's lives and culture, especially as musical creation, learning and expression are possible without the assistance or supervision of an adult. In considering that the purpose of education according to the New London Group is to foster a culture of public, creative, economic and community based participation (Cope & Kalantzis, 2003), the technological advances in creative expression online that have led to participatory cultures and the various forms of informal music learning practices that youth engage in, provide a way for music educators to facilitate connections for youth between their musical experiences outside of school walls and within

music education. By identifying the main description of Green's (2007) informal music learning practices, and using that, in conjunction with Jenkins' (2009) outcomes from involvement in participatory cultures, it is possible to provide scenarios to help music educators understand their new roles within these new spaces for learning. These scenarios and newfound knowledge can also help music educators to understand these non-traditional forms of musical learning, and finally how they can be embedded into music education as a complement and connection to musical learning in the classroom, rather than an unwelcome interruption or an addendum to formal music practices.

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