

RICHER LEARNING, POETIC THINKING AND MUSICAL UNDERSTANDING

John Finney makes a plea for a better balance between meeting targets and criteria and music learning from the inside.

Our current national educational project is concerned with raising standards and school improvement. A 'performance' culture is created and this is linked to the idea of 'global economic competitiveness' on which the future prosperity of the nation is thought to depend. The performance of schools, teachers as well as pupils is thus monitored, measured and made accountable; this in turn places assessment at the heart of the project. Music teachers are expected to demonstrate that their pupils are achieving worthy standards as shown in progress from one Level of Attainment to another and thus providing evidence of learning. This breeds fabrication involving the creation of data efficient systems capable of telling an official truth conforming to what will be approved by internal and external monitoring agencies. This fabrication in due course comes to be consecrated as an act of 'professionalism'. The mantra 'Teaching and Learning are at the heart of our school' seals the package of inauthenticity. With this dismal perspective placed before us, I thought it timely to ask, what kind of learning are we most concerned with as music teachers, what kind of thinking, and what kind of understanding? In what follows I draw data from the practitioner diaries and In-depth Studies of trainee music teachers and from my non-participant observation of their classroom practice.

Richer Learning

Starting from a description of a classroom event will I hope begin to explain what I mean. Fay is observing ensemble musicianship in a Key Stage 3 classroom as work nears completion:

'Another impressive development was that the whole piece moved from three-time to four-time in the middle section, possibly led by Chris, although I am not sure that this was intentional. He produced wonderfully authentic polyrhythms at several points. Each of the sections also seemed longer than before, adding to the highly repetitive and driving feature of Ritual Music. This too may not have been envisaged in advance but it was perhaps a sign of the performers becoming really involved in their music and enjoying each moment to the full. Nobody seemed embarrassed about performing in front of an audience and, by the looks on their faces and their written commentary that followed, the group was proud of its work. Finally, I loved the ending: the dynamics gradually expanded and the rhythms repeated over and over again, almost to a state of frenzy, until Peter gave the dramatic signal and took his last note with great aplomb'.

We note that what is happening is felt by the observer to have spontaneity, energy and commitment, critical elements of fluent musical performance that absorb and enchant. The learners are lost in what they are doing, deeply engaged, coming to know, realising intentions through an intuition for what feels to be right. There is evidence of personal risk taking and through an authentic act of self-expression personal meaning and self-understanding are achieved. The reader may already be reacting badly to my celebration of what might be thought of as the soft side of musical experience concerned as it is with the quality of the learner's engagement with music. Does it feel too non-cognitive? I don't know. You must tell me.

This softness takes us some way from the generalisations of National criteria and Levels, lacking in tone, timbre and poetry as they are. Our concern becomes: what qualities characterise and distinguish this musical event? What makes this 'here and now' unique and special? Our criteria for success begin to arise from the outcomes of activity in contrast to the official approach of specifying outcomes in advance of encounter. Our interest is in qualities far beyond the attainment of task criteria, for completing a task is in itself irrelevant to what I am thinking of as richer learning. While being able to say 'I can play a three note ostinato', 'I have made use of imitation', 'I can play using all fingers of my right hand', 'I have incorporated the stylistic features of reggae', for example, represents achievement and goals met, it tells us nothing about quality.

In music, as in other realms, quality often defies description. We simply know it when we see it. However, we do have some language that may help. In creative activity we usually value fluency, energy, commitment, expressiveness, spontaneity, craft, finesse, for example, and we might make use of the suffix 'well'. The music is 'well phrased', 'well proportioned' and so on. Or again, we might look for the learner to show a 'feeling for', a feeling for blues style, a feeling for a particular idiom, a feeling for the use of blue notes to make telling musical gestures perhaps. Yes, these are gentle, subjective ways open to interpretation, yet they are able to

soften and complement the harder, more objective statements that make up National criteria and Level descriptors. Refocusing on the illusiveness of quality enables us to think about 'musical understanding', what it might mean 'to be musical', and what 'musical progression might mean in fresh and worthy ways.

Poetic Thinking and Musical Understanding

Bonnett (1994) suggests that if we are concerned that students develop the capacity to think poetically as well as think in a calculative way, which is the hallmark of much of school life, where categories and conventions are impressed on the learner, we need to expand our conception of what it is to understand. For Bonnett this would embrace:

- Rules and conventions,
- Facts, evidence, data
- Knowledge of patterns, webs of explanations
- Compatibility with existing beliefs
- Appreciation of its underlying motive
- Empathy - ability to enter into
- Active involvement - sense of responding and responsibility
- Active sympathy - being able to positively relate to
- Personal experiences
- Being affected - having outlook transformed, sense of wonder or astonishment
- Felt relationship to own concerns

The first three of these conform easily with the dominant conception of understanding. They are, to be sure, crucial and central to the growth of musical understanding and of course a helpful focus for assessment. However, the whole enterprise of music education may only take on a distinctive form and provide for significant value, meaning and purpose when the whole of Bonnett's list is invoked. Only then might we be able to speak of being engaged emotionally and cognitively and coming to understand musically. Let me show what I mean through another classroom episode.

Teaching Music the Right Way Up

A Year 9 class are asked to enter the music room in silence. It is not set up with its usual horse shoe arrangement of chairs but instead with two rows facing each other. There is to be no speaking. The class are intrigued. Each instrument has a card with a simple musical motif written on it. The teacher draws students into playing one by one with the rhythm to be played tapped on the instrument. An ensemble performance emerges. New motives, effects and compositional devices are introduced through tacit messaging. Small ensemble textures are contrasted with large, dense with fragile and intricate with simple. There are solos and duets. New musical relationships are made. After thirty minutes the teacher brings the music to a close and tells the class that they have performed a piece of minimalist music. The class are asked to write about what they felt. What was it like? What characterised 'minimalist music'? 'Miss, I could write for ever', says one student. Five minutes is sufficient for most.

An open forum for discussion follows and students are asking the questions and telling each other and their teacher about the conventions of minimalism that they had engaged with. Where does this music come from? Who plays it? Tell us more about it Miss. The teacher shows a DVD of Steve Reich's Dolly the Sheep. The students are again intrigued. The subject matter seems to connect with their interest in human life, human existence, other human beings. Students come to see scope for their own composing and the use of ICT. The students have come to shape the learning and are taking responsibility for their own learning. The wholeness of Bonnett's model of what it is to understand becomes clearer.

In our example above trainee music teacher Rebecca had initiated a musical encounter rather than prescribed a set of outcomes. In turn her students joined in this process as they constructed meaning and musical understanding. The subject matter seemed to be worth looking at, listening to and playing with. Self-expression and personal meanings were happily fused with the rigours of a subject discipline - its rules, conventions, facts and web of knowledge. This seems to me to be an example of 'richer learning' involving 'poetic thinking'.

Another example is needed to enrich the argument being made. But before entering another musical classroom I invite the reader to re-present Bonnet's scheme of what constitutes understanding, not as a list or hierarchy, but as a dynamic interaction between many very different elements.

Teaching Year 8 to Compose Mini-operas

'I have learnt about Opera, and about Aria and Recitative, but I think the most important thing and biggest is learning about the street children in Calcutta. I would not have known about this or thought about how they feel if it weren't for this project'.

'I have enjoyed this unit because I didn't realise about kids in Calcutta, it made me feel a bit sad, they can't have fun like we do'.

'I have learnt that Opera isn't just people with posh loud singing voices but it can be not so loud and posh and more feeling and interesting'.

'I have learnt about Opera and Arias, and about how Recitative tells the story'.

'I have learnt how to sing well in a group and how to sing much better than I could before. I think I would like to do more singing now'.

These extracts from the students' evaluations of their Opera project tell something of the richness of their learning and the kind of musical understanding they are developing. I will leave the reader to map all this on to Bonnett's model.

Trainee music teacher Clare, in linking the study of Opera with aspects of the Global Dimension of the Citizenship curriculum, has judged well what might connect with the interests of her students, with their concern for the street children of Calcutta, whose stories had provided the narrative for their opera making and exploration of the conventions of Opera. In reflecting on the lessons the teacher writes:

'In many ways these lessons could be regarded not as lessons at all but as a structured extension of their

home/playground lives. Engendering creative empathy within a task-environment which tries to avoid the often threatening strictures of the school classroom, students are empowered by the proximity to their own learning and experiences and thus all students are engaged, motivated and enabled to achieve highly'.

This view speaks of an intense level of student engagement where the quality of outcomes and the communal valuing of these are some distance from what can be contained within National Curriculum Levels and criteria.

We should note that here the project undertaken and the musical events emerging, far from responding to the students' declared interests and wants, nevertheless connect with what comes to be of interest, concern and relevance. The distinction made here I think is important. While there is a breaking down of the barrier between school and non-school, between the formalities of the classroom and the non-formalities of out of school, the experience remains thoroughly educational in that the students are taken somewhere of significance. They emerge from the encounter distinctly less ignorant and wanting to know and understand more. There is much more here than the acquisition of musical skills or a constrained version of musical understanding that touches only a part of Bonnett's scheme. Skills, knowledge and understanding, in this instant, are imminent to the life of the learner, the teacher and the subject.

Resisting cramped thinking

Maurice Holt writing in the Viewpoints section of Times Education Supplement of January 21, 2005 observes:

'We seem to have forgotten that schools can function extremely well, with attentive pupils and contented parents, without extrinsic standards and managerial accountability. Indeed, the idea of driving education through standardised outcomes is at odds with the nature of education...' (Holt, 2005)

However, we are currently bound to a standards agenda and the national strategies arising from it. While other National Strategies may have done little more than distort the nature of musical engagement, assessment *for* learning, a key aspect of the secondary strategy, holds out the promise of endorsing the long established practice of formative assessment or what music teachers often refer to as informal assessment, the process of helping students to improve, achieve their goals and become more musical here and now. But this practice has been largely informal and intuitive. Targets, usually short term, have made sense to the learner because they have been negotiated in the process of learning and bound up with the notion of the learner coming to understand inside the creative process.

What was informal practice now becomes formalised and is given strategic status and in this music teachers are beholden to the advice, support, encouragement, coercion and harassment of senior managers in schools, as well others charged with monitoring the raising of standards. From the bridge of the 'school improvement ship' assessment *for* learning offers school leadership a key that will unlock the door of improvement providing the reason to adopt a system of tracking student improvement and the institution of a target setting regime. Effective teachers will be considered those who will be recording their students' moves from one level of National Curriculum attainment to the next and by the end of Key Stage 3 recording standards that are above the national average and at least comparable to other subjects in the school. This, as I have attempted to show, may well have nothing to do with learning of high quality that focuses poetic thinking and develops an enhanced notion of musical understanding. Let me illustrate what I mean by reference to the Ofsted Report recently published on a rural secondary school telling of 'very good' provision in music.

Teaching and learning are 'very good' and 'the working atmosphere in the music department is inspiring, and the pupils respond with an enthusiasm to match the teacher'. Standards were said to be above the national average. Highly effective formative assessment practices are highlighted in the report. Indeed, there are intimations of 'assessment for richer learning'. However, a weakness of the department is highlighted: 'the assessment system does not yet reflect the specific needs of music, and links to National Curriculum criteria and Levels are not yet established'.

Here is the story of a music teacher well aware of the nature of 'richer learning' and appreciating the value of creating a human and humane classroom climate fundamental to the security and creative energies of her students. Are we to believe that by establishing a system of assessment linked to National Curriculum criteria and Levels that learning will become 'richer'? The report's deeply coercive phrase 'not yet' is hardly liberating for an 'inspiring' music teacher. All this represents an example of technocratic rationality at its most

debilitating.

The national project of Standards and Improvement along with its satellite regime of strategies is unlikely to be sensitive to the idea of richer learning, poetic thinking and a more wholesome version of understanding, for we live in an age where the art of teaching and learning is eclipsed by the technologies of teaching and learning and in which there has never been more vociferous advocacy for a music education and at the same time no greater dearth of rationale and attention to aims. A culture of 'performance' negates a culture of authenticity and meaning making. New orthodoxies emerge. Music comes to be taught upside-down.

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References

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