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STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE STUDY OF MUSICAL PRACTICES

Review by
Eugene Dairianathan and Lachlan Crawford

INTRODUCTION

An experiential learning approach to the study of music could be regarded as the most effective form of learning, but it is not always the preferred teaching strategy in learning situations. Generally, approaches to the teaching of music have been primarily teacher-centred, with the emphasis on the giving out of information, either in the form of notes, or knowledge about the subject. In the teaching of the history of music, musical excerpts are usually played to reinforce theoretical concepts or historical facts about music. The choice of musical practices has usually been restricted to a selection of chronological periods from western art music.

Keith Swanwick (1994) refers to the difference between ‘knowledge of music’, procedural knowledge, and ‘knowledge about music’; which is propositional knowledge. As a process experienced in time, music is not only an aesthetic experience (I refer to the Greek use of the term, aisthesis, to refer to sense experience), but an effective educational process as well. The performance of a musical work not only brings to bear chronological experiences (past, present and future) but other musical traditions around the world as well. It is in being involved in music-making activity that one experiences interaction with related skills such as music analysis, music history, music theory and aesthetics.

Live performances facilitate experiential learning, through demonstration, about a variety of issues; techniques, performance practices, modes of interpretation and even historical and oral research. When this live experience does not coincide with student lessons within the module, the experience becomes, by necessity, one level removed, substituted by a video recording or an audio-recording. Nevertheless, the experience afforded by a video-recording/CD-recording has sufficient value for reflection, enabling students to broaden their perspective of the discipline, and determine how various approaches either relate to or differ from one another.

This article briefly examines the concept of experiential learning and reports on some of the preliminary findings of a local study on students’ perceptions of experiential learning in a module entitled Historical Overview of Musical Procedures offered to third year BA/BSc music undergraduates at the National Institute of Education in Singapore. The article also suggests a number of strategies teachers could use to ensure that students benefit from an experiential approach to the teaching and learning of the history of music.
WHAT IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

Experiential learning may be viewed as a form of ‘learning gestalt’, which when effectively carried out, results in making the whole process of learning greater than the sum of the individual experiences. An advocate of experiential learning, John Dewey (1963), observed that the formation of purposes involved:

1. observation of surrounding conditions;
2. knowledge of what has happened; and
3. judgement which synthesises observation and recollection to evaluate the significance of what has been experienced.

These qualities enable an understanding of a musical work within its social, historical and cultural context, and inform participants of perceptions about the musical work and the composer and the compositional strategies involved.

David Kolb (1984) believes that most learning is characterised by a commonality of certain propositions, which are embedded in the idea of experiential learning:

- learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes;
- learning is a continuous process grounded in experience;
- the process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world;
- learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world;
- learning involves transactions between the person and the environment; and
- learning is the process of creating knowledge.

Students’ perceptions of music
Patricia Cross (1976) lists five conditions and principles of learning crucial to individualised education for experiential learning to be effective.

1. The student must be active rather than passive.
2. The goals of learning must be clear and must be made explicit to the student.
3. It is desirable to structure learning sequences in small lesson units.
4. Effective learning requires feedback and evaluation.
5. It is important to recognise enormous individual differences in the rate of learning.

Jerome Bruner (1960) suggests that if an idea is fundamental to the learning process, it should be introduced on an experiential level, then redeveloped and subjected to continuous exposure, facilitating a deeper and more meaningful understanding of that idea. This “spiral curriculum” sequence operates in such a way that with each subsequent exposure, fundamental ideas about the subject are spiralled through progressive degrees of complexity. The Kolb ‘learning cycle’ (1984), as an extension of this spiral curriculum, begins with the concrete experience, followed by reflection on those experiences, leading to concept development and its after-effect on the experience. This “experiential spiral” not only forms the basis of the learning process but challenges concepts about the experiences. Therefore, a historical study of musical practices would be most effectively carried out if music making and music listening formed the basis of learning about any specific musical practice; the activity of experiencing and reflecting on the musical practice.

Any musical experience in any musical practice or tradition is worthy of reflection, analysis and the teaching and learning of concepts within that particular context. The lack of literacy and/or verbalisation about music in other practices should not be construed as the manifestation of a less sophisticated or civilised tradition, much less render it less worthy of serious study. The music educator, Patricia Shehan Campbell (1991) points out that music is integrated into every aspect of African life.

Jacques Barzun (1966) notes that “all the books on appreciation....program notes....are powerless to reproduce the experience of music.” Cannon, Johnson and Waite (1960) emphasise the fact that “music to be known must first be performed.” Any musical experience forms not only the basis for listening, learning, and bearing relevance to abstract concepts, but provides as well a referential point for collective and shared experiences. Through observation and reflection, these shared experiences facilitate a social learning and problem-solving process that assess and evaluate what can be regarded as normative and/or deviant structures/strategies and attempt to account for them.

**REVIEW OF LOCAL RESEARCH**

Music teachers have been encouraged to facilitate an effective historical study of music by making the necessary changes in their approaches and attitudes to a diversity of musical practices, adopting a variety of strategies and exploring possibilities, and articulating the teaching and learning of these traditions. An experiential learning approach to the historical study of musical
practices brings together a rich and varied experience for the students in experiencing unfamiliar musical practices and also allows for students to share their varied experiences. An experiential approach therefore could alter the way students are motivated to engage in the study of music. How successful would this change be moving away from teacher-centred learning towards student-centred learning? Would students be required to adopt new attitudes to learning? How would they adapt to higher order thinking? What would be the impact of an experiential approach on the study of music?

To address these issues and questions, a local study was conducted with a group of third year BA/BSc music undergraduates at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. The module, Historical Overview of Musical Procedures, was a core module, which involved a two-hour session per week over twelve weeks and included musical practices from Vietnam, Sub-Saharan Africa and Tuva, as well as periods like Baroque, Classical and Electroacoustic musical practices. In each tradition that was explored, the students were offered hands-on involvement in music-making activities, listening to musical extracts or watching video recordings of music-making in particular practices and were asked to reflect on, analyse and evaluate these experiences in response to a list of leading questions which included:

- What kind of composition is it?
- How would you describe this composition?
- When do you think the composition may have been written?
- For whom, or for what function, or reason, was it composed?

Students were also asked to identify the work within a specific musical practice in relation to the basic constituents of the practice, the context (e.g. function) surrounding the musical practice, and the teaching and learning of that particular tradition.

These questions were designed to promote reflective thinking about the experiences. The visual and aural experiences then became the points of interactive discussion towards learning about each musical practice in focus for that session. Key terms about the musical practice were identified and explained. Reading material was pared down to seminal articles and books per musical practice so that what was demonstrated in the class appeared as demonstrations of ideas in the selected reading material.

At the end of the module, the students were shown the previous course description and the present description of Historical Overview of Musical Procedures and were asked to submit written evaluative comments on:

- the structure of the module;
- the strengths and weaknesses of the module;
- the impact of experiential learning on their own learning processes; and
- how the running of the module affected their learning about music.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The students’ written comments were analysed and translated into positive and negative endorsement of the experiential approaches taken. Positive endorsement for experiential learning was that there were
demands to add more time for each session: having had a taste of the musical practice in ‘hands-on’ sessions, the students did not want to stop. Students suggested that the duration of each session could be three hours instead of two, or the course could be subdivided into two modules - HOMP I, HOMP II. They also appreciated the opportunities to articulate their individual ideas on certain musical practices, particularly when they were informed of the tradition and social context of each musical procedure. Although the students admitted they were struggling to cope with artform, philosophy, and teaching and learning in the module, their responses to tackling these issues were positive. They referred to their struggle as artists and saw this approach to learning about music as a “necessary phase” of their education. In addition, students recognised that the lecturers who conducted the module were knowledgeable and enthusiastic, which positively affected their own interest in the musical practices studied.

Paradoxically the characteristics identified as strengths of the course were the characteristics that were also identified as weaknesses. As the experiential learning approach included ‘hands-on’ involvement, analysis and discussion, students felt pressurised by the time constraints. By the time the musical practice had been explored and discussed, two hours had gone past rather quickly. In addition, not all students were amenable to experiencing unfamiliar musical practices, let alone being comfortable with them. They were uncertain of what to expect and articulated a dislike of some of the musical experiences they had experienced. However, the students were reminded that they did not have to ‘like’ what was experienced or listened to, nor should they feel obliged to. Other students felt that the sessions were “too intellectual” which probably reflected the ability range of students grounded in the musical field. Finally, a few students did not readily appreciate the process of struggling as artists to be educated, but as the philosopher Hegel succinctly observed:

“Any experience that does not violate expectations is not worthy of the experience.”

**IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING**

The music educator David Elliott (1995) articulated what he called a praxial philosophy of music education where the term *praxial* emphasises that music ought to be understood in relation to the meanings and values evidenced in actual music making and music listening in specific cultural contexts. Being informed of any of these musical practices would inevitably involve the fundamental element of the teaching and learning of any of these practices. A worldview of music practices supported by a philosophy of music education would resonate well with an overview of musical practices.
Within the diversity of music practices around the world, it is possible to view two main subdivisions; oral and written traditions. Teachers wishing to ensure that students benefit from an experiential approach to the teaching and learning of music could incorporate the following fundamental ideas in their lessons.

- Create an awareness, in the students, of a diversity of musical practices around the world.
- Inform students that history is not synonymous with chronology. Many traditions in the present century choose their own past for their musical present.
- Articulate the study of Gregorian Chant, for example, in western art musical traditions, as a musical practice without the chronological connotation.
- Let experiential learning form the basis of weekly sessions in a teaching module.
- Encourage students to describe, analyse and reflect on the experiences offered during the module.
- Motivate students to experience unfamiliar musical practices and re-experience familiar practices with different attitudes.
- Allow seminar presentations to include not only module experiences and other experiences outside of the module but also relevant issues.

The praxial approach therefore has at its philosophical foundation, a phenomenological approach that advocates experiential learning.

CONCLUSION

The feedback from the students involved in this study indicated both positive and negative reactions to the implementation of an experiential learning approach in a historical overview of musical practices. The students indicated an awareness of the effect of experiential learning in the module but also commented on the demands placed on them. Their responses indicated an appreciation of the value of their experience and the relevance of their experience of musical practices and the philosophical foundations in phenomenology, however challenging. In having to experience a confrontation between their previous knowledge and new knowledge of other musical practices and adopt new attitudes towards a study of other musical practices, students could almost be forgiven for thinking they were exploring music for the first time. However, as T.S. Eliot in his Four Quartets proclaimed:

_We shall not cease from exploration_
_And the end of all our exploring_
_Will be to arrive where we started_
_And know the place for the first time_
SOURCES


