"Let them Jam!" Incorporating Unschooling Pedagogy in the Secondary School Music Classroom

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Abstract

This paper examines how the principles of unschooling were accidentally uncovered during my tenure as a music teacher in a secondary school in suburban Toronto, Ontario. As traditional music pedagogy during my first year at this school was unsuccessful, I delayed the start of each class in an attempt to shorten my instructional time and lessen the acrimonious relationship I had developed with my students. This delayed segment of class time evolved into an extraordinary and valuable learning experience for all of my students which became known as "jam time." This form of learning embraced the pedagogical philosophy of unschooling, which eventually motivated my students to increase their musical knowledge and skills as well as embrace traditional music pedagogy. In addition, this paper also examines the contextual philosophy of unschooling versus traditional pedagogy in the secondary school music class.

Introduction

In the fall of 2002, I was given the opportunity to launch an instrumental music program in a secondary school that had been in operation for nine years in the Greater Toronto Area. Although attempts at establishing a music program at this school were made in the previous nine years, they were severely under-funded, and courses were poorly subscribed. This inadequate support for the music program created a revolving door of music teachers (five to be exact) in a nine year period. Despite a state of the art

music room and ancillary facilities, there was not even one wind instrument in stock. Through the support of school administration, three class sets of instruments were purchased, and the only thing that remained was getting students through the door and starting a Wind Orchestra. Thus, with a new administration committed to promoting and implementing quality music education, a golden opportunity was placed in my lap.

Many of my colleagues, however, expressed their feelings that a successful music program would be nothing short of a miracle in this particular school. Sentiments such as "the community won't support it" and "the students at this school are not cultured enough" were routinely directed my way. I knew that my future was going to be filled with hardship despite almost a decade of successful teaching experience behind me.

During my first month at the helm, most of my pedagogical knowledge and techniques failed. The harsh reality of my situation quickly set in and panic and anxiety became my two best friends. After promising the administration that I had a plethora of pedagogical experience and academic preparation to succeed, failure was simply not an option. Yet, my students were simply non-responsive to traditional music instruction, no matter how many different approaches I implemented. All of the usual suspects within the realm of music education were at one point or another employed during the first couple of months, all of which had a high failure rate. Students were not responsive to music theory, music history, listening exercises, ear training, rhythmic dictation, and instrumental method and repertoire, the latter of which was given the most priority. I even tried basic rote methods of playing music without any books or sheet music. Yet, no matter how animated and enthusiastic my pedagogy was, I was going nowhere at a very high rate of speed.

Unschooling Via Trepidation

As I continued to struggle with my own pedagogy, I delayed the start of classes each day by incorporating an unusually long warm-up period (about 20 minutes), hoping that a shorter teaching period would be easier to manage. It was through my own trepidation that I discovered a viable pedagogical approach to music education at this school -- let the students teach themselves.

This unusually long warm-up that I permitted at the start of each class assumed a life of its own. Students created their own curriculum that was accurate and meaningful for them. The natural flow of student islands (groups of two, three, four, and more) became so organized that it looked like a planned co-operative learning workshop. Students of like-minded musical tastes joined together and experimented with different instruments, playing popular songs, and even creating their own songs. I actually participated in these informal groups offering my opinion or helping students with technical challenges in performance and music theory. Ironically, all of this magnificent learning was transpiring with absolutely no effort on my part. When I attempted to re-align the students in orchestral seating for formal instruction, the students protested, indicating that they preferred working in their own groups. I can specifically remember one student saying: “Sir, let us jam. It’s way more fun!” Just as the students naturally discovered their own way to learn, I also discovered my own way to teach. The problem was, however, I had an administration who wanted a traditional music program with a wind orchestra playing at various school functions. Since I knew I had at least one year before the pressure was put on me to “Strike up the Band”, I tried to theoretically and philosophically better understand this new pedagogical approach I was incorporating.

My academic background in education provided me with several theoretical and philosophical contexts with regards to pedagogy. My recent classroom experience was clearly indicative of the transformation paradigm of Holistic Education (Miller, 1985 & 1993) where student and teacher both learn from each other and transform into a new and higher sense of being. I was also familiar with Discovery Learning (Bruner, 1961), where students are urged to make connections through self-exploration and discovery. The approach of the Waldorf Schools[1] and the Summerhill School[2] also provided some similar notions to the freestyle pedagogy I was employing. Yet, these theoretical and philosophical contexts did not truly capture the essence of what was transpiring in my classes. This changed the day I discovered the concept of "unschooling."

What is Unschooling?

Unschooling (a term coined by American author and educator John Caldwell Holt) is a form of pedagogy where learning is based on the student's interests, needs, and goals. Unschooling has two philosophical contexts. The first is associated with homeschooling, where traditional curriculum and pedagogy are executed in the home rather than in a school setting (Farenga, 1984). The other, which succinctly summarizes my experience, refers to unschooling as self-directed learning in the classroom within a school setting. Vandermeer (2005) has stated:

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[1] Waldorf education seeks to integrate practical, artistic, and intellectual elements of all subjects (Steiner, 1976).

[2] Summerhill is noted for its philosophy that students learn best with freedom from coercion (Neil, 1960).

> Unschooling, also known as "independent learning" or "experience-based learning," differs from conventional homeschooling, where a student will generally follow a set curriculum, which is often based directly on the public school system's program. Instead, unschooling students are encouraged to find the path that works best for them, and empowers them to choose their own intellectual destinies. (p.1)

Similarly, Ricci (2007) views unschooling “as a self-directed learning approach to learning outside of the mainstream education rather than homeschooling, which reproduces the learning structures of school in the home” (p.1). These two previous definitions of unschooling clearly capture the essence of what was naturally transpiring during the opening twenty minutes of unstructured time in my music classes.

Theoretically, unschooling is very inductive in approach. That is, the students are the ones who dictate what is meaningful and important to them, which provides the basis for a pedagogical model of delivery. Deductive reasoning, however, which is the basis of traditional music pedagogy, forces the teacher to place students in an existing pedagogic model which may or may not fit the needs of the students.

Unschooling Versus Traditional Pedagogy in the Music Classroom

The concept of the orchestra is a very traditional and Western-oriented approach to music education. Many students today have vastly different musical experiences than those of the traditional orchestra. Orchestral music (once the pop music of its day) represents a small fraction of the musical world. The vast majority of current musical experiences—particularly during adolescence where music listening is at its peak (Larson, 1995)—revolves around the Top 40 Charts of the last five decades via a variety

of mediums, namely; mp3 players, compact discs, radio, television, computers, and the internet. Why then, is the current music pedagogy dominated by such traditional approaches? For the most part, these traditional approaches are trivial and inconsequential components in the musical world of an average adolescent. Traditional music and orchestral arrangement, therefore, is extremely boring for the average high school student, and when boredom[3] sets in, teaching becomes virtually impossible. Unschooling, however, opposes boredom and fosters musical growth through instrument and musical experimentation. In addition, unschooling also cultivates cooperative learning and helps to develop the social network of students. In sum, unschooling promotes a more meaningful music curriculum and stronger social bonds amongst the students.

As unschooling promotes a stronger social bond between students, it also cultivates a harmonious relationship between teacher and student, allowing the teacher to earn the trust of the student. This trust provides the teacher with more opportunities for pedagogical experimentation. Subsequently, the teacher has more liberty to introduce students to traditional music pedagogy, if such pedagogy is deemed viable and wanted by school administration, as it was in my situation. Students are more inclined to favour traditional pedagogical techniques in the music classroom when they trust the teacher. In sum, trust can counteract boredom. It was through this sense of trust that I earned from my students that eventually allowed traditional pedagogical approaches to music curriculum to work in my favour. My students allowed me to introduce foreign notions

[3]Gatto (2003) has stated: "boredom and childishness were the natural state of affairs in the classroom. Often I had to defy custom, and even bend the law, to help kids break out of this trap . . . kids have a low threshold for boredom; help your own to develop an inner life so that they'll never be bored." (p. 1)

and concepts in class (just as I had done in my first couple of months), but this time, they accepted the traditional pedagogy. The unschooling portion of my music classes, however, still remained a vital and significant aspect of my pedagogic delivery.

Conclusion

Although the vast majority of my students eventually accepted traditional music instruction (becoming active members of viable performance group), it was only attainable through unschooling pedagogy. Even then, traditional orchestra was not the preferred form of musical practice and experience for most of my students. It was the promise of "jam time" (unschooling pedagogy), rather, that allowed these students to tolerate such traditional approaches. Given my experience with jam time as unschooling, I now see the externally imposed traditional approach as an unfortunate consequence and limitation of mainstream schooling that needs to be corrected. One of my colleagues made the comment that I had forged a partnership with my students – in essence, I would let them do what they wanted if they also did what I wanted. I did not, however, agree with my colleague's perspective on this matter. First, the students were learning just as much (if not more so) during the unschooling portion of my class. Second, who was I to assume that my students wanted, or would benefit from, traditional music pedagogy? John Holt (1978) himself (a self-taught musician who wrote a book about his musical experiences), argues that music teachers should not be judgmental about the abilities and approach to music.

> It is not our proper business as teachers, certainly not music teachers, to make decisions and judgments about what people are or are not . . . it is our proper

> business, above all in music, to try to find ways to help people do what they want to do. (p.1)

The practice of teaching has been more educational for me than all of my formal education combined. In sum, the more I teach, the more I learn. Intentionally delaying the start of my music classes in an attempt to kill time turned out to be the silver lining in a dark cloud for both me and my students. In the spirit of holistic education, I experienced a true transformation. I discovered new pedagogies, and the notion that true learning comes in the form of exploration, commotion, and sometimes even chaos, which ironically leads to activities that generate true form and structure. Holt (1984), the father figure of unschooling, has stated: "Learning is not the product of teaching. Learning is the product of the activity of learners" (p.1).

In sum, the type of pedagogy that a teacher employs in the classroom is not dictated by Ministry or School Board guidelines. Thus, the unschooling approach is a totally practical and viable approach to teaching instrumental music at the secondary school level, particularly when students are not experienced with traditional pedagogic approaches to music education. What is important is that students choose to learn and create music that is meaningful for them. This empowers the students, deters boredom from setting in, and provides a sense of sincere and authentic musical experiences.

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