WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN MUSIC CLASS?
Lee R. Bartel and Linda M. Cameron
University of Toronto

We were at a dinner party recently and the person across the table discovered our connection to education and music. The next bit of conversation was predictable (as is the opening of most music education articles these days)! "Have you seen Mr. Holland's Opus?" "Yes," we answered, "on opening night!" "So, what did you think of it?" What we think is that it raises some important questions such as what is important in music class, who controls the content of instruction, what makes music instruction worthwhile, and how can we contribute to the survival of music in the schools. We will try to explore here what we think is at least one of the central questions: what is the role, importance, and quality of the relationship that engages the learner with music.

Consider the following reflections on music learning experiences. Are there aspects of these experiences that resonate with yours? Do you contribute to these sorts of experiences with your students?

...the people that turned me off to music because of the subtle personal abuse and the relentless focus on performance and not play! If only I could have had the opportunity to explore what music could do for me instead of always having to play someone else's music someone else's way -- I had no ownership. I was immersed in music but not with the variety that would have captured me. I did not have good demonstrations of music-making that inspired or encouraged -- not even enchanted me -- and never that instructed me -- just words and criticisms that were punctuated by impatience. No one worked within my zone of proximal development. No one worked with any understanding of who I am. Engagement was not there, nor "use" in Cambourne's sense as practice ("learners need time and opportunity to use, employ, and practise their developing control in functional, realistic, non-artificial ways" Cambourne 1988, p.33) Oh, but there was practice!.... terrible experiences of practice -- at home on the piano or my singing -- but school!! Terrible instruments that tasted like rusty spit and smelled...and would not stop squeaking and squawking because they were in such bad shape and no one was there beside me to care appropriately. The music that emerged both individually and collectively was nasty and provoked my sensitively tuned ears. I knew it was terrible and felt hopeless to do anything about it. And, I couldn't have the instrument I wanted -- none of them. I had to play the E flat alto sax...I wanted the drums or the flute or, best of all, the vibes or a harp!...but a sax.... If I had been able to be in a situation that met the conditions that Cambourne and Max van Manen suggest, I might be a satisfied 'functional' musician or at least an informed audience participant. It is one of the most disappointing aspects of my education. One of my ways of knowing was squelched by miseducative experiences.

Linda Cameron
My first musical instrument was a harmonica - my brother's cast-off. I lay on my back on the lawn and experimented with it. I used my fingers to close off the reeds I didn't want. I used my tongue. I found the notes I heard in my head. I learned to play on my own just the way my grandfather, uncle, and brother played. And the first Christmas I could play, I was asked to stand up in front of my grandparents, uncles and aunts, and all of my cousins and play a carol. Everyone clapped! They evidently enjoyed my music-making.

One warm spring day, my sister let me use her guitar. No, she did not just let me use it. She sat with me in the sun in front of the house and showed me how to play two chords to accompany some songs I had learned to play on the harmonica. It was not a lesson but a moment where I was helped to learn how to play a few chords. The next Christmas I put my harmonica on a neck holder and played both harmonica and guitar for all my relatives. And they clapped louder.

In school I sang. We did not have music classes where we were taught concepts or theory or made to listen to records. We had singing periods. We sang songs we already knew and songs we had to learn. In second grade several of us sang harmony parts -- alto, although I heard the bass part in my head. In fourth and fifth grade we sang in 2 and 3 part harmony - wonderful songs chosen by a teacher I thought was beautiful and kind and the most inspiring person I had ever met. She was most beautiful when she conducted most expressively -- to me it was like dancing! It was joy and it was release and it was the energy of life. It was like romping with my new pet goat! It was like running through a hay field in June! It was like making an angel in fresh fallen snow! And, music was her favourite thing to do too. She even sang in a choir herself in the evening. I would have liked to have had singing periods all day! The two or three times a year we shared our music with parents seemed simply like times where we let others into that part of our lives.

Classroom singing and choirs continued to be significant music-making for me, but instruments of all sorts were the real challenge. I played accompaniments on guitar to my mother's melody-picking Autoharp, I played melody-picking guitar duets with friends, I played mandolin, fiddle, steel guitar, and the pump organ I bought for $25 from a neighbour. When I first had the opportunity to take music lessons, I did so with this rich background of exploration and experience with real music-making. I then studied the violin with a passion motivated by the desire to perform.

As I reflect on this background I realize I did not have the opportunity for the focused early instruction on a single instrument needed to become a virtuoso, but I had a rich and varied experience with real music-making thoroughly rooted in life. I was part of authentic and vital music-making experiences with expressive and emotional content. I had the opportunity to explore music without censure or instilled fear of failure. I was led in my musical explorations and expressions by `teachers' who invited participation, who showed me new musical ideas and techniques and let me try them, who encouraged my attempts to perform, and who praised my successes.

Lee Bartel
I had always been musical, as long as I can remember. My parents enrolled me in the Royal Conservatory of Music (the recorder) at age six and I never looked back. I took up the challenge of the cello on my eighth birthday, enduring the taunts of the neighbourhood kids who would stop their road-hockey game each Monday afternoon to chant "Cello, Cello!" as I'd pass by Baker Street on the way to my lesson. By the time I reached high school I was a veteran of ensemble groups and a first cellist in the Royal Conservatory of Music orchestra. My father said I had a musical ear. I was never sure exactly what that meant, but I assumed that my "ear" was the reason I could play back unerringly whatever musical phrase my teacher would first play for me. My Conservatory conductor, a musical madcap named Jack Montague, clearly shared my enthusiasm for making music. He sported an unruly thatch of silver-grey hair and waved his baton with such vigour that once during a rehearsal, it flew out of his hand, soared over the string section, and narrowly missed skewering the second trumpet player. Jack made music fun and I loved playing for him.

When I was about to finish high school I was looking for another orchestra to join. The Toronto Youth Orchestra was the next logical step. I auditioned and was accepted. I reported to the MacMillan theatre of the Edward Johnson building and entered the hall. I could see the cellists on stage unzipping their cases, rosin ing their bows, extending the end pegs on their instruments and starting that all so familiar tuning drone. I happily walked into this familiar environment and unpacked my cello. The first desk positions were taken so I settled into the second row. My cello partner eyed my battered instrument with disdain. Her cello was older than mine, but clearly much more valuable. I noticed that her cello case, a hard-shell with a canvas cover, sat elegantly in the corner of the stage while my case, a canvas bag, lay crumpled in the wings. The atmosphere in the MacMillan theatre was markedly different from the loose and relaxed camaraderie of the Conservatory theatre. Gone was the friendly banter. I could almost smell the tension in the air. The conductor walked regally onto the stage and raised his baton. Not a word was spoken. No one welcomed me, no one told me where to sit, no one introduced me to my section members, and most perplexing of all, no one told me what piece we were about to play. The "music" produced by these "musicians," while technically brilliant, froze me to my core. If an orchestra is an extension of a conductor, surely this man had no love of music in his soul. His expression of disdain never changed. No eye contact was given and none returned. Once the piece had been successfully executed and permission had been granted to lower the instruments, the conductor looked right at me. Clearly his first impression was not pleasing. His stare, to me, looked most unfriendly.

At the end of rehearsal, having given up trying engage any of my section members in conversation, I dragged myself over to the wings and began stuffing my cello into its case. For the first time, I heard conversation around me. This orchestra, it appeared, was seen as the first stage of a proving ground for professional musicians. From here, the NYO (National Youth Orchestra), and with the right backers and some European exposure, maybe a symphony job, if not in Toronto, New York or Chicago, hopefully in a large metropolitan centre. The TYO orchestra conductor, instead of celebrating the joy of music, had instead
chosen to promote the competitive environment of the adult professional world where only a select few, those who work hard and pay their dues can succeed. The love of music had no place here, and clearly, neither did I. The experience shook me so profoundly that I returned home and packed away my cello. Twenty-one years later I still have not unzipped that case.

Martin Franklin

How should we teach music to students in music classes? A better question is, how should we teach students? But, even that is not the best question, because education is not so much about teaching as about learning. So an even better question is, how can we help students learn? Now this question does not say 'learn music.' If we could restrict classroom learning to only subject matter, we might concentrate the question on 'learning music' but that is not possible. The subject matter cannot be all that is on our minds.

In learning situations students shape their own self-perceptions and self-esteem, form concepts of others, develop attitudes toward the intended subject of learning, develop or lose competencies, gain increased or decreased curiosity, gain or lose energy and excitement, find their 'souls' growing or shrivelling, and become more human or less human in the process. John Dewey (1938) in *Experience and Education*, wisely says that each 'experience' in learning lives on in future experiences in a helpful or harmful way. A sensitive teacher's focus, then, cannot be so much on content to be learned as on the overall learning experience with the designated content.

The question "How can we help students learn?" is still not asking the question quite correctly. That question would be, "How can we help Jim learn?" "How can we help Yolanda learn?" How can we help Gagan learn?" If we see only the class we are not seeing the ones who learn. Individuals learn. Real people learn. Each person will extract different learnings from the situation. As teachers, we must see Jim and Gagan and Yolanda as persons. Especially easy in performance-oriented music is to see only the class or only the ensemble. Directions are given to the ensemble or section and if one person is not playing the correct notes the whole performance is marred -- the music suffers and since perfect performance of the music is the goal the group fails and the teacher's disappointment and maybe even anger is justified. No! No!! No!!! There are only individual people in the room and in the ensemble -- people with differing goals and needs and desires and motivations. People are the focus of teaching, not perfect performance!

If perfect performance is not the top priority in a music class, what is? I (Lee) taught in a school situated in a neighbourhood riddled with ethnic and language-related animosities, unemployment, the social degradation of reliance on government social assistance, and unstable family relationships. Several of my students in the seventh grade guitar class were being monitored by probation officers. Most of the students in the class took the guitar option because music was required and it was the least distasteful choice. Did they want to be in music class? No! Perfect performance my top priority? No! But did I engage the students in music-making? Yes! What was my primary priority? It was involving these students in music-making challenges they were able to meet successfully in such a way that they enjoyed the experience. They gained satisfaction and a substantial boost to their self-concept from the success and their engagement with music increased. But, that reward would have been completely negated and perhaps been unattainable if the process
of learning had not been enjoyable.

Music class must create an environment where all students are invited to experience music-making in a way that supports first attempts, that legitimates musical exploration, that expects passions and preferences to surface, and that aims above all to open to students the joy and release and energy of life through music.

What are the features and conditions of the environment that enhances student learning? Brian Cambourne's (1988) Model of Learning offers a description of conditions that contribute to successful development of language proficiency. This model has strong application to our goals of developing music proficiency in learners and we will adapt it to music learning. Central to Brian's Model is IMMERSION and DEMONSTRATION accompanied by ENGAGEMENT. Learners need to be immersed in music experiences of all kinds (listening and music-making) and need to receive many demonstrations of music-making, music-enjoying, and music-using. However, playing music for students and demonstrating music-making to them will not in itself lead to music learning. If that were the case most of our music classes would be wonderfully successful. Immersion and demonstration must be accompanied by Engagement. Engagement occurs when the learner feels and is convinced that: (1) "I am a potential 'doer' or 'performer' of the demonstrations I'm observing; (2) engaging with these demonstrations will further the purpose of my life; and (3) I can engage and try to emulate without fear of physical or psychological hurt if my attempt is not fully 'correct' (Cambourne, 1988, p. 33). Helping students make these decisions constitutes a dimension of teaching best described by Max van Manen as we will explain below.

Engagement is the most crucial feature of a learning experience and Cambourne maintains that the "probability of engagement is increased if these conditions are also present: EXPECTATION, RESPONSIBILITY, USE, APPROXIMATION, AND RESPONSE (p.33). If students expect to achieve they achieve; if they expect to fail they fail. Students "are more likely to engage with demonstrations of those [whom they] ... regard as significant and who hold high expectations [for them]" (p. 33). You as music teacher may immediately think 'performance excellence' but that is only one manifestation. Our EXPECTATIONS should be for more broad music learning -- the development of musicianship.

To engage effectively in learning, students need to be allowed RESPONSIBILITY "to make their own decisions about when, how, and what 'bits' to learn in any learning task" (p. 33). That is difficult to envision in a performance program where all music is selected and rehearsed by the teacher/conductor. Opportunities for chamber music or solo projects greatly enhance responsibility.

Engagement increases when learners have "time and opportunity to USE, employ, and practise their developing control in functional, realistic, non-artificial ways." Especially important in music learning is the need for the learner to be "free to APPROXIMATE the desired model -- 'mistakes' are essential for learning to occur." Suzuki, in his parallel between language acquisition and music acquisition (talent education), pointed out how parents do not scold children for mistakes in the child's attempts to learn how to speak but simply repeatedly respond by modelling the 'correct' words. The child is allowed, and indeed encouraged, to approximate the model. We need to apply that approach more generally in music and not just at the very earliest stages of learning.
For engagement to be sustained, the learner "must receive ‘feedback’ from exchanges with more knowledgeable ‘others.’ Response must be relevant, appropriate, timely, readily available, non-threatening, with no strings attached" (p. 33). Music teachers may need to be reminded that feedback to the whole band or clarinet section is not adequate. Students need personal feedback on their individual learning. This may not always need to be from the ‘teacher’; peers or older mentors can play a crucial role in this response to the learner’s attempts.

Aspects of this model may seem to be merely a matter of program orientation or lesson planning or rehearsal or class procedures. However, the conditions for engagement depend to a great extent on attitudes or perspectives and qualities which you, as teacher, possess. Hopefully we do not need to be reminded that a fundamental perspective we need is to see that students are not there for us, we are there for our students. Therefore, what goes on in the class must be for the students' growth, not our reputation, merit pay increase, or satisfaction. We need an attitude that celebrates students and their achievement, not ourselves. This attitude requires that we first see each student as valuable, able to learn, curious if curiosity meets with revelation, and as a ‘feelingful’ individual experiencing life not by semesters or weeks or days, but by the moment.

In dealing with people in our frequently stressful and frightening world, we need to embody an attitude of hope. In a wonderful little book entitled, *The Tone of Teaching*, Max van Manen says: "This experience of hope distinguishes a pedagogic life from a non-pedagogic one. It also makes clear that we can only hope for children we truly love, in a pedagogic sense. What hope gives us is this simple confirmation: "I will not give up on you. I know you can make a life for yourself." Hope refers to all that gives patience, tolerance and belief in the possibilities for our children. Hope is our experience of our child's possibilities. It is our experience of confidence that a child will show us how life is to be lived, no matter how many disappointments we may have experienced. Thus hope gives us pedagogy. Or is it pedagogy that gives us hope? (Manen, 1986, p. 28.)

This attitude of hope, however, is not merely demonstrated in a set of outcomes or behavioral objectives. Such objectives, encouraged by the industrial model of schools, appear at first glance to be statements of expectation for the student, statements of hope. But, you see on close observation that they are primarily focused on 'doing' for the future not on 'being' now. The shift to outcomes-based education may easily trigger a shift to a product orientation instead or a process orientation. Yet, 'being' with students in an attitude of hope is immensely important. Hope versus sterile sets of expectations makes a difference also in the learning encounter. Max van Manen says: "Having measurable objectives" differs from "having hope." Expectations and anticipations easily degenerate into desires, wants, certainties, predictions. Thus teachers close themselves off from possibilities that lie outside the direct or indirect vision of those expectations. To hope is to believe in possibilities. Hope strengthens and builds. (Manen, 1986, p.28).

Engaging students in music-making who may not have done so before high school, who have been told by a previous teacher that they are not good at it, or who have very different interests than those exemplified by the school orchestra or band, requires the teacher to believe in
possibilities. Students quickly sense the presence of possibility in the classroom. It is this to which they respond with engagement and achievement.

Look with me (Lee) for a moment at a music class I visited recently in a school located in a dangerous part of the city. The school is in an area known for government-assisted housing, drugs, and racial problems. In this school the traditional band program died several years ago. A keyboard class attracts some students; however, the real attraction is the steel pan class. We are looking at one of these classes.

Mr. Greenwood -- the tall, elegant, brightly dressed teacher -- leans against the large glass window between hallway and classroom as he chats with a lingering student from a previous class. A few guys dressed in rapper baggy clothes sit on a counter over a storage cabinet at the back of the room. A few students drop their books at the side of the room as they enter and walk over to one of the soprano pans in the front row. They pick up the small sticks with rubberband tips and play a short repeating pattern on the pan. Their arms verily dance as they follow the across-the-pan scale pattern. It looks like the same muscular joy I saw in the guy shooting a basket on the school courtyard when I arrived at the school -- a familiar easiness that feels good. Wrists loose, arms easy, right hand circling the top, left hand following the bottom circle. Soon two girls are huddling over the set of bass pans in the back. They share the mallets that look like they are constructed of rubber bouncing balls and sticks. They alternate bouncing the mallet to draw out the rich warm bass tones. Soon a repeating walking bass pattern is evident and the students at the soprano and alto pans slowly merge into the music as they apparently search for and find the appropriate tune or motive to go with the bass pattern.

Mr. Greenwood has been giving winks, smiles, nods, thumbs-up signs or high fives to every student that has walked in. Some drop off notes on his desk. Some seem to collapse in fatigue at the side of the room. Some hover around him for a word. But, most have found their way to the pans. One person shows him a tenser on her wrist and he asks about it in concern and hands her one thin drum stick and gestures toward the brake drum on a stand at the side of the room. She goes over to it and with her good hand tries some rhythms. After a few gentle words to the ones around him, a pat on one student's back, and a signature on another's note, Mr. Greenwood holds his hand with thumb, index finger, and pinky in the air for a moment. The playing at the pans subsides and he announces a song title. He gives a gesture of invitation to the two students reclining at the side of the classroom and points them to a tenor pan. He walks to a pan, picks up a set of mallets, taps his foot four times and starts to play. The students now play with enthusiasm what they were practising individually just a moment ago. As they play he walks around to watch. He raises his hand and stops the class briefly to say, "remember when we learned this pattern on the board? There was a spot nine counts in where we gave a moment of silence for the swallow with the broken wing flying on its side? Don't forget the moment of silence for the quarter rest." He starts the class playing again. He steps in beside a girl who has apparently forgotten the note sequence. He takes her mallets and shows her in slow motion and hands them back to her and she joins the section. He walks over to the two students at the tenor pans who were evidently very tired earlier. They are looking a little mechanical in their movements and he starts to dance energetically. They laugh and play with more joy. He walks over to another student and teasingly pulls the pan off to the side while the student pretends alarm and strains to stay with the music. He then picks up a set of maracas and takes them
over to one of the guys still sitting at the back of the room. He is obviously not a member of the class and is given the invitation to stay and play or apparently a suggestion to leave. He takes the maracas and plays the rhythm he has been shown.

The music fragment that has been repeated over and over is becoming cleaner and tighter rhythmically and the students relax technically and start to move their knees or hips with the beat being laid down by the bass pans and the drummer. Mr. Greenwood shimmies to the front of the group, holds up his hand for an ending and claps his approval to the group. A few 'spectators' outside the classroom window applaud.

The basic qualities I see important in music teachers who will be able to engage all students in music-making are thoughtfulness, tact, and playfulness. When I looked at Mr. Greenwood I first saw thoughtfulness. He saw each individual. He actually noticed, looked at, responded to the person. Each person mattered to him -- they were not just another class to teach for 55 minutes. They were real people with real lives and with real problems and with real hopes and dreams and with real potential and real feelings. He was inviting real people to learn and play. He was thoughtful in relation to the specific needs and problems. One person had an injured wrist but he found a way to invite her to participate. Some students were tired and did not feel like participating but he encouraged them and asked them in and boosted their attitudes. Some students were eager to play and learn and he simply allowed them to do it. Some students were wanting to be part of the class and he did not chide them but made it clear that being in class required participation. All of this demonstrates thoughtfulness. Max van Manen calls thoughtfulness a special kind of knowledge. I think it is a knowledge particularly evident in successful teachers of non-traditional music performance but is required in all music teachers.

Thoughtfulness has the related attribute of tact. Tact is the knowledge of what will be a particularly appropriate and useful action in a specific situation. It is "the ability to appreciate the delicacy of a situation and to do or say the kindest or most fitting thing" (Morris, 1970). A teacher needs to see each student, needs to be thoughtful in every circumstance, and needs to say or do the kindest and most appropriate and meaningful thing in every situation. There are times when a brief dance with a student is more tactful than a word of encouragement, when a gesture is more tactful than a verbal instruction, when one word is more helpful than a sentence, when silence is more fitting than talk. What I saw in Mr. Greenwood was tact.

Play is a word with various dimensions of meaning. We play basketball. We play with toys. We play instruments in music class. We play instead of work. Philosophically and psychologically the activity of play is complex and can be subjected to extensive analysis and theory-making (see Stubley, 1996). Commonly however, play implies amusement or recreation. It implies an activity that is done for its own enjoyable sake rather than for the practical benefit that comes from it. But, professional athletes or professional musicians earn their living 'playing.' Play can be a very serious activity indeed. Perhaps the word 'playfulness' captures the 'fun' aspect of play more effectively. It seems to contain the meaning play has for children -- an innocent absorption in the joy of the making and doing itself rather than in the product. It implies good humour and lightheartedness. It suggests high spirits and frolic in action or speech. However, it does not have to mean 'frivolous' or 'silly' or 'mischievous.' Playfulness does not mean always trying to be funny or telling dumb jokes. Students
tire very quickly of that. Playfulness is a fundamental quality of enthusiastic life.

Music class ought to be playful as well as engaging students in musical play. That does not mean the students are not to gain specific and important knowledge. It does not mean music class is merely an entertainment for students. It does not mean that there is not rigorous hard work involved in learning to play music. But the process of making music should be play at its best - playful in its spirit. The joy of making music is what we want to share with students. It is the joy and playfulness of music that captures the soul of the student and prepares them for a lifetime of musical enjoyment. Mr. Greenwood was playful in class -- his dance, his teasing, his clapping, his reference to a swallow with a broken wing. All were demonstrative of his joy, his pleasure in making music even at the basic level of a beginning pan class. It was evidence that he enjoyed being with those particular students at that time. He was interacting with music and the students in a way that communicated to them, "I like you and I like making music with you." Music-making is fundamentally about joy. Joyful music is best made by joyful people.

So ... What matters in music education? There are stories you have heard and possibly told. What is significant in them for music education and your teaching? What do YOU think matters? What really matters to you?

INVITATION: We invite you to share stories of your own experiences or of your students with us. We would like to use them in writing we have planned to inform the conditions of learning music. Please send your stories to Lee Bartel, Faculty of Music, University of Toronto, Toronto, M5M 1A1
References:


Note: Martin Franklin is a graduate student in Linda Cameron's class at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. This writing was a portfolio entry and is used with permission.