Lack of Talent or Miseducation: A Study of Teachers' Perceptions of Inability

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Introduction

People's stories about their music learning are often potent with the terror experienced, the soul-deadening castigations endured, and fortunately, there are also stories of the delight and wonderment music learning engendered. Changes in classroom teaching responsibilities as a result of current financial restraints are revealing many classroom teachers' inability to teach music because of lasting attitudes resulting from their own miseducation with music. Although people who have decided to study music to an advanced level have had positive experiences resulting in long-term engagement with music, even they have frequently experienced abusive or self-confidence-shaking episodes with significant teachers that leave them with lasting discomforts or inhibitions contributing to a tendency to disengage from music. This paper addresses this important problem in music pedagogy and examines possible practices and dispositions teachers could employ to contribute to lasting engagement.

To develop as musically competent and confident persons, 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 (Cameron & Bartel, 1996). 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 and private lessons would be wonderfully successful. In the stories we collected for this study, all the musicians and most of the other respondents had experienced early and frequent immersion in music (listening to recordings was dominant) and demonstrations (for the musicians often by parents). However, immersion and demonstration must
be accompanied by engagement for lasting learning to take place.

Engagement may on the surface appear similar to motivation but these two concepts are most easily differentiated in light of external motivation. The child may want or decide to go to the music lesson or volunteer to play an instrument or sing loudly in class because of a promised reward or threatened punishment. However, presence or physical participation is no assurance of cognitive connection, of self-initiated problem solving, of fascination, appreciation, criticism, delight, or sustained attention. Engagement results in these phenomena. Engagement is a holistic reciprocal relationship with the phenomenon of focus. While motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic, engagement is always intrinsic. Motivation is the reason while engagement is the actual holistic process.

Engagement can occur 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 is dependent primarily on what Wang, Haertel and Walberg (1994) identified in an analysis of 50 years of research on what helps students learn: "direct intervention in the psychological determinants of learning" (p. 79).

Method
Beginning with an article entitled, "What really matters in music class," in the Canadian Music Educator (Fall, 1996), we invited students and educators to submit personal narrative accounts of memorable experiences with music learning - positive or negative. In this paper we are drawing on the accounts of 42 people. The majority of these are stories of a specific incident or teacher while some have provided a more comprehensive reflection of their experiences over the years. Six people told several stories as distinct units resulting in 61 individual usable accounts. The respondents included 10 people who are not now "doing music." The rest (32) are all musicians engaged in performing or teaching. The respondents included undergraduate students, pre-service student teachers, practising classroom teachers, and graduate students. The accounts represent private instruction from earliest years to advanced university level performance instruction. They include stories of experiences in orchestras, bands, choirs, and private lessons and solo performance.

We analyzed the collected stories by noting reactions and attributions of the learning conditions that made the incident memorable. We classified these by themes. When the categories appeared saturated, we compared our themes to the conditions of the learning model of Brian Cambourne (1988) and the student - centred philosophy of Max Van Manen (1986). We found that our findings
matched these models but extended the significant categories to include aspects perhaps specific to music learning.

**Results**

One of the crucial factors in engagement is clearly **EXPECTATION**. If students expect to achieve they achieve; if they expect to fail they fail. But, the teacher's expectation of the student is particularly influential.

> From the first note I made on the instrument, he [the teacher] knew that I had potential, and fuelled my desire to be a better player. By the time that a few months had passed, he had me playing solos at feeder schools... (respondent 20)

Although many of the significant factors are evident in positive experiences, respondents seem to find negative accounts more memorable. However, the same factors are evident whether positive or negative.

> She told me that I had an excellent touch and could feel and interpret music well but for the more technically difficult pieces she always gave me the easiest choices. Her attitude made me feel that I was not able to play these pieces. I was never challenged to try and when I wanted to play a particular piece that I loved she would not allow me to do it deeming it beyond what I was capable of doing. (respondent 4)

> When I went back to her saying that I actually succeeded in playing it at a certain speed, she didn't believe me because I was unable to do it again, with her being in the room. (respondent 21)

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" (Cambourne, p. 33).

> She had me choose my own repertoire and prepared me for my grade 10 and for my auditions. He also helped me start up my first brass quintet.

> He was limiting my musicality and making me play a piece the way he liked it. He then entered me in a music festival and forced me to play a piece that I did not like at all. (respondent 13)

Responsibility or student ownership may be difficult to envision in a performance program where all music is selected and rehearsed by the teacher/conductor but that practice may need to be examined. Opportunities for chamber music or solo projects greatly enhance responsibility. It should be easy in private instruction but even there most decisions are commonly made by the teacher.

Engagement increases when learners have time and opportunity to **EMPLOY** their developing control in functional, realistic, non-artificial ways.
I would occasionally get my "twelve year old Italian-insecure-young-girl who can't play" depression, and she would help me, not by telling me I was wrong, or not to feel bad, but by giving me small opportunities to show off my musicianship. (respondent 14)

She not only allowed me to play my violin in all settings, but gave me many different viewpoints and experiences. During my final year she allowed me to tackle "Spring" from Vivaldi's "Four Seasons." This not only stretched my abilities, but gave me a sense of pride in showing what music meant to me." (respondent 29)

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. However, what lasts in students' memories particularly are the negative experiences related to performance attempts that result in "mistakes" - inaccurate approximations of the intended model or notation.

My clearest visual memory is of him standing at the front of the class throwing a temper tantrum - literally screaming and jumping up and down when the students were playing something wrong and not fixing it as instructed. I used to hate going to class. (respondent 37)

My best friend Paul played the clarinet. He couldn't seem to adjust to playing it and one day he couldn't get this one note or passage. Mr. K. lost it and knocked the clarinet on purpose! into Paul while he was playing. The mouthpiece cut Paul's gum and he was bleeding and crying and left never to come back to music class again. (respondent 5)

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" (Cambourne, p. 33).

She told me what I needed to improve and what I did that was right. She actually complimented me! She knew I heard things well harmonically, so she had me harmonize my studies on the piano. (respondent 14)

During lessons I would look at her for feedback and her head would be on her chest, her eyes closed. Other times when she stayed awake she would often smack my knuckles with a ruler. I quit her services only having learned to read music. (respondent 17).

Music teachers 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.

A general but crucial dimension of education that strongly affects engagement is the EMOTIONAL TONE of the classroom or studio. Van Manen (1986) points to tact, thoughtfulness, and 'seeing the person' as essentials in creating a supportive learning environment that stimulates and facilitates
engagement. This dimension was pervasive in the stories from respondents.

*Shortly after my first few organ lessons ... I realized that I was studying with an exceptional teacher... Not only did he have a reputation as a sensitive performer, but this same sensitivity was evident in all aspects of his teaching: sensitivity to musical nuance and expression..., sensitivity to my understandings and limitations with the music, and sensitivity to the pressures of my life as a mature university student.* (respondent 39)

*I always looked forward to accordion lessons, because my teacher was special. He always greeted me with a big smile, asked how I was doing in school, and what was new in my life. We would discuss issues in the music world and there were many things I did not know, but he would ask my opinion and treat me as an equal...* (respondent 33)

Where tact, thoughtfulness, and "seeing the individual" is present students seem to see the teacher as friend and as enthusiastic about music. It leads them to emulate and grow.

Just as the positive emotional tone is nurturing and fosters engagement and lasting involvement, a negative emotional tone is destructive. We were shocked at the frequency and seriousness of the verbal, emotional and physical abuse experienced in learning music. Several incidents have already illustrated that above.

*She locked me inside the church building, which was beside her house, for about four or five hours at a time and left her four year old son there to run and go and tell her when I was not practising.* (respondent 21)

*Upon arrival at my first violin class I informed my teacher that I played an instrument (trumpet) and she proceeded to tell me that what I had already learned was meaningless and that she hated brass instruments. I was eight years old! I remember leaving the first class crying because I was made to feel that everything I thought was music was a platform to be abused by the teacher... she centred me out in front of my peers and embarrassed me more than once. This teacher was also verbally abusive to me in music class by swearing at me and holding me back after class to yell and harass me.* (respondent 18)

Another dimension of music learning that seems to contribute to lasting engagement that probably results from a combination of some of the factors already listed is a sense of **COMMUNITY** among the learners.

*When I first started in the choir I was very uncertain and unconfident ... When I graduated I felt accepted, competent, and musically stretched and enriched. What caused the change? A highly qualified, devoted choir director who saw my potential when I didn't, expected nothing but the best, and gently challenged me personally, academically, and musically. Special efforts were made to make the choir an inclusive, cooperative community that allowed for safe risk-taking and emphasized others before self. We were also reminded that real transcendent issues of life took precedence over course content.* (respondent 8)

*The music room with all the friends, the band, the choir, and Mr. W. was social and musical.*
It provided for many of us a place we could belong, and an identity. (respondent 36)
Conclusion

Other dimensions of the engaging music experience emerged in our categorization of comments but because of space limitations here we will not explore these. In some cases they are possible subcategories, e.g., celebration of achievement, experiencing the 'professional,' and others appear to be unique but minor dimensions e.g., sense of 'place,' and creative opportunity. It is clear that teachers are a highly significant factor in students' engagement or disengagement with music. Stories are all too common of people who refuse to sing because a teacher in elementary school told them only to mouth the words. When these people are classroom teachers we understand why music in schools is not as pervasive as it should be. The fault lies with music teachers of the previous generation. We believe that opportunities to examine present attitudes through reflective thinking and writing and to experience engaged music-making in an environment that supports first attempts, that legitimizes musical exploration, that expects passions and preferences to surface, that aims above all to open to students the joy and release and energy of life through music. Doing this for students now is the best hope for music education in the future.

References


Van Manen, Max (1986). The Tone of Teaching. Toronto: Scholastic Canada.