

Music Lab blog

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Looking back at the Music Lab project - whose report came out a few months ago and can be downloaded [here](#) - it's interesting to reflect on some of the project's findings and its impact. Music Lab was a piece of action research conceived by NESTA and Sage Gateshead, to explore the possible mutual learning between approaches to Science and Music education, in the hope of better understanding what makes learning engaging for KS3 students in STEM subjects. Its central enquiry was, 'How can teachers and musicians work together to improve the learning of KS3 students in STEM subjects?' It involved 4 Sage Gateshead musicians working with teachers and school staff from 4 different secondary schools in the NE in what we referred to as 'school research partnerships'. The form of their investigations took very different forms, from exploring the notion of 'performing' Science through to working with Science teachers to actually perform music as a steel pan ensemble.

These 'excursions' from a more traditional approach to curriculum development were purposely 'disruptive', emphasising the difference in perspectives between the musicians and teachers involved. The idea behind this approach was to reveal insights that wouldn't have been arrived at by following more conventional means. Reflecting on practice from your own perspective may tend to reveal insights that you're already at least partially aware of, whereas reflecting with others is more likely to reveal things you hadn't previously considered. Creativity guru Keith Sawyer says, 'creators usually don't know which sparks are important until they start to collaborate; in their conversation with others, earlier sparks start to make a new kind of sense.' (Sawyer, 2008)

Of course, there are different kinds of disruption. Throw a large rock into a calm pond, and the surface is radically disrupted, but it returns to its calm state in due course. Whereas big disruptions - think earthquake, say - have a structural impact, and things don't return to how they were before. I'm not suggesting that Music Lab has been the equivalent of an earthquake, but the intentions behind the project were to discover new ways of understanding the challenges of engagement at KS3, and to support practitioners and teachers to think about how they might do things differently. As the apocryphal saying goes, 'If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got,' and Music Lab was about taking a different approach to the question of engagement, a bit like the 'Oblique Strategies' that Brian Eno developed for getting round creative blocks in the recording studio (Eno, 1979), or the 'Creative Excursion' techniques championed by Mathilda Joubert (Joubert, n.d.) and George M. Prince's Synectics group (Synectics, n.d.), or Keith Sawyer's approaches to fostering creative collaboration (Sawyer, 2008).

As it turned out, the findings from the project turned out not to be not too radical or unachievable in terms of the KS3 STEM curriculum, simply emphasising the importance of good pedagogical approaches:

1. Collaborative relationships - students believed that working in small groups led to better learning outcomes. They also said they wanted more open and active group learning in school;

2. Choice-making, ownership of learning and motivation - where choices were given to students and outcomes were more open-ended, they were more engaged;
3. Active, multi-sensory learning - doing things practically via experiment or participatory activity also made it more memorable and helped the learning to '*stick*';
4. Challenge, risk and the unknown - anxiety over risk was eased by trusting relationships. This was apparent in smaller groups where teachers could model risk-taking more easily. This feature also links back to their collaborative group work in that learning challenges were better met by individuals.

Taken individually, none of the above may appear to be radical new insights into the question of KS3 engagement, but perhaps what they do remind us is of the good pedagogical practices that can easily get side-lined during the hectic day-to-day business of teaching. Perhaps the good news from the report is that we may not have to radically overhaul our approaches to teaching in order for learning to be more engaging for our students; we can make a difference to students' engagement simply by following our best pedagogical instincts, even with the pressures associated with modern teaching. It's a different kind of disruption to the ones described above. It's maybe less about throwing rocks into the pond of our practice, and more about climbing in to it, clearing out some of the weeds, and making sure that water is flowing through it and preventing it from becoming stagnant. And collaboration is important - sometimes we need the perspectives of others to help sharpen our own focus and reveal new perspectives, or simply to reveal new ways of seeing things we already know.

Away from the immediate findings of the project about KS3 STEM engagement, this 'dialogic' aspect of the project has become an important feature of what we – as Sage Gateshead – learned about our own practice from our involvement in Music Lab. As well as the musicians' pedagogical approaches being broadly 'dialogic' – their instincts being to invite learners into collaborative learning processes to help shape the learning – we also saw dialogue becoming a key part of the relationships which evolved between the musicians and the teachers involved. Similarly, at the level of the project's management, dialogic approaches were again emphasised as a means of accounting for the many, rich and diverse perspectives of the nationally-respected Advisors round the table.

It's perhaps no coincidence that this emphasis on 'dialogic learning' should be the case. There seems to be some consensus that growing up in the digital age results in different ways of learning:

'The fact is, kids learn differently today than twenty years ago. With video games, television and social media, they are connected to a vast world of fast paced information. They know technology and expect the classroom to be equally as stimulating.' (Scientific American, n.d.)

Rupert Wegerif further argues that, 'the kind of education that is happening now on the Internet embodies a quite different educational logic from the logic that lies behind formal education systems,' a kind of logic which is fundamentally 'dialogic' in that it is 'intrinsically participatory' (Wegerif, 2012). The implication here is not that we should adopt a 'bells and whistles' approach to teaching, in order to compete with the high levels of sensory stimulation that learners are exposed to outside of the classroom. Rather, it simply emphasises the need for learning to be active and stimulating, in fact all of the things that the Music Lab report highlights.

While we might recognise the intrinsic pedagogic value of this kind of 'dialogic' learning, it's also easy to take it for granted, or to assume that we encourage it when really we might be quite attached to the more traditionally monologic idea of the teacher as fount-of-all-wisdom. Relaxing our grip on the keys of knowledge, and letting students use their own powers of discrimination and judgement to explore and learn for themselves, is not always a comfortable process, as we have to allow for the possibility *at some level* that what they uncover might challenge our own knowledge, perspectives or beliefs, or at the very least, that what they learn might be inaccurate, or that it might take them four times as long to learn it.

And yet unless we allow genuinely dialogic processes into our pedagogy, we potentially relegate learning to a more mundane and less engaging kind of acquisition of critically uninterrogated 'facts'. Amongst other examples, Deanna Kuhn's Education for Thinking initiative (Kuhn, n.d.), the Thinking Together programme (Dawes, Mercer and Wegerif, 2004) and Christine Howe's work on peer learning (Howe, 2009) all point to the richness of learning that comes from having to negotiate knowledge acquisition with others. 'The key point,' argues Howe, 'is not simply that elaborated explanations help, but the main beneficiary is the child who gives them, in other words the child who provides the assistance' (Howe, 2009). Howe also acknowledges that recent studies (Webb, 2009) suggest that it's not just the explainer who benefits from dialogic learning: 'the recipients of explanations can sometimes be helped, so long as they make the assistance their own. This can be achieved through translation into the recipients' own words or application in problem solving' (ibid) So dialogue then transforms learning into the rich experience that Paulo Freire always said it was, where all involved 'are jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.' (Freire, 1970)

It's easy to forget the discomfort that comes from having your perspective brought up against different competing perspectives, but it's only through this kind of dialogue that all of our perspectives develop. Developing a culture of learning where knowledge is susceptible to change might appear to be unsettling, but really it invites all learners into a living discourse about the subject, which in itself is exciting, and not just for the learners, but for the teacher as well. Heraclitus (535 – 475 BC) is reputedly the originator of the saying that, 'no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man,' and it's very similar with dialogic approaches to learning: teaching dialogically means never teaching the same thing twice because the learners are different, and so is the teacher.

For Sage Gateshead, the wider impact of the Music Lab project, and in particular the crystallisation of this dialogic approach to learning, has been significant, and has helped to influence other developments within our organisation. At Higher Education level, our BA (Hons) Community Music course is structured and delivered with dialogic pedagogy in mind. Many of our students aspire to be teachers, so learning *inside* dialogic processes helps to prepare them vocationally by giving them opportunities to reflect on their own learning, as well as to develop the skills of 'opening dialogic space' (Wegerif, 2012) for learners. Our emergent research strategy is similarly informed by this approach, creating 'dialogic space' within the organisation for our practitioners to reflect on their practice, which in turn enables us to build up a body of collective knowledge about those practices.

Learning is a journey to be enjoyed and experienced, rather than simply a destination to be reached. To be effective teachers, we also have to be effective learners. We have to reflect on our own learning experiences to continually transform the kinds of learning we facilitate for others, and to

help shape the kinds of learning cultures which support that learning. The Music Lab project provided a very rich opportunity for all involved to 'disrupt' our practices, and to question our assumptions about learning, and the impact of those disruptions is still playing out.

Resources

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