Furthering Music Appreciation in Students: a research study

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Overview

Music is often regarded as the most intangible and powerful of all art forms; it cannot be seen and it possesses no physical form yet it can cause a person to feel extreme joy or mournful sorrow. The teaching of music appreciation is thus concerned with the teaching of the intangible. This paper summarises a research study that set out to gain a better understanding of how various learning and teaching methods are able to influence students' appreciation and understanding of popular music. It has been conducted as action research within the interpretive paradigm, focused on the learning and teaching of an undergraduate first-year, bachelor's level module on music appreciation, offered at London Metropolitan University.

At the study's heart was the question:
'How does the perceived student experience of a variety of learning and teaching techniques match up with a multi-disciplinary view of how music appreciation works?'

The module was presented from a variety of academic perspectives on music appreciation (musicology, business studies, socio-cultural studies, and psychology), delivered through an assortment of pedagogic techniques (e-learning, lectures, seminars, videos, readings, student-led research). Growth in musical understanding was measured through an array of instruments: reflective portfolios, focus groups, pre- and post-module multiple choice tests, and observation of student presentations.

The wide mixture of learning and teaching techniques used was deemed to have helped maintain student interest, enthusiasm, and motivation and to have addressed a large variety of learning styles. Which techniques and which content perspectives were the most effective varied greatly from learner to learner. This is in keeping with previous research that states each individual has their own preferred learning style and unique understanding of music. The study found that content perspectives that were strongly linked to sound were most effectively delivered by multi-media

means and that heavily conceptual content perspectives were most effectively delivered by lectures and assigned readings followed up with seminar discussions. Overall, the data revealed the student perception to be that the module had been highly effective in developing their music appreciation and that this was largely attributable to the range of academic perspectives taught along with the variety of learning and teaching techniques used.

Research Aims and Methodology

The present growth of music business degrees on offer at universities has had the knock on effect of increasing the number of non-musicians taking HE level courses centred around the appreciation of popular music (as reported by the Music and Entertainment Industries Education Association. However, there is very little pre-existing literature focused on teaching popular music appreciation to adults. Hence, the study sought to ascertain the impact of a variety of learning and teaching techniques in relation to the delivery of a multi-disciplinary approach to furthering the music appreciation of students in higher education.

The module on which the action research focused was run in the spring of 2006, and the sample size was 125 students. The principal learning aim of the module is to expand the musical experience and understanding of students who are on a degree programme which otherwise deals exclusively with business aspects of music.

The module was delivered via weekly 90-minute lectures and 90-minute seminar sessions, over eleven taught weeks. Assessment occurred via a group presentation on a genre of music, a 1500-word individual write-up on the same topic, and submission of a reflective portfolio (2500 - 3500 words). For seminars, the class was split into seven groups - three of which were handled by the author, the rest by an hourly paid seminar tutor.

Other key aims of the research were to develop recommendations for the effective teaching of music appreciation to such learners, thus adding to the relatively small body of work that exists on this topic, and to further the author's understanding of the human musical experience.

Findings and Discussion

In this summary of the research findings, we look in turn at each of the individual pedagogic methods used, and scrutinize their overall impact. That analysis is followed by an examination of the interaction and crossover between the methods.

E-learning

The e-learning exercises were designed to illustrate four of the key aspects of musical intelligence (rhythm, pitch, timbre, melody) and to make students

consciously aware of their use. They generally followed an interactive approach whereby the learners had some guided instructions, heard some sounds, and then had to define or categorise what they had heard. The perceived impact of the e-learning exercises was overwhelmingly positive. Despite a number of technical difficulties due to a tight 'go-live' date, most students commented (in the focus groups and the reflective portfolios) that they had found the e-learning tasks to be enjoyable and engaging, through which some felt they had learnt to listen to music on a much deeper level. The majority of students remarked that the exercise had been effective to this end. This was echoed by the multiple choice test scores (the figures are not robust in terms of statistical tests of significance but are used simply to provide an indication). Those scores revealed a 23% rise in the number of students who were able to name the four aspects of musical intelligence, a 9% rise in those who were able to recognise a description of a tremolo effect, and a 13% rise in those who were able to identify a description of a '4-on-the-floor' beat.

Students reported that they valued highly the guidance provided by hints that some e-learning exercises provided when original answers were incorrect, and also expressed feeling 'lost at sea' when doing exercises that bore no hints. The usefulness of the hints tallies with the value that much of the music education literature reviewed (Riddle and Dabbagh 1999, Vygotsky 1978, Gardner 1993, Piper 2006, Swanwick 1988) places on the role of guidance.

The wide differences around which of the four exercises (pitch, timbre, rhythm, melody) students found the easiest and toughest are very much supported by the viewpoints in the literature which state that each individual's musical intelligence is unique (e.g. Swanwick 1988, Plummeridge 1991, Gardner 1993). If there was any overriding trend in this area, it was that melody was the hardest and rhythm was the easiest. Again this is supported in the literature where it was identified that rhythm sense tends to be somewhat universal while melodic sense tends to be more culturally specific (Trellub, Schellenburg, and Hill cited in Deliege and Sloboda 1997).

Readings

Roy Shuker's *Understanding Popular Music* (1994) was used as the core text on the module. It came to light in the focus groups and in the reflective portfolios, that the majority of students had struggled with the reading level of the book. This difficulty with reading was evidenced by the multiple choice test which showed very little in the way of gains on questions related to assigned readings. Since the publishers (Routledge) regard the book to be suitable for undergraduate use, this raises concerns over reading levels and emphasises the need to deliver the content of the reading via additional modes (such as lectures). Students also reported in the focus groups and their portfolios that they felt little motivation to force their way through the readings, as there was no examination on the module. Asking students to prepare chapter summaries for their seminars might be a useful strategy to engage them in reading.

Video Material

The BBC's ten-part history of popular music series *Dancing In The Streets* (1996) was exhibited partially in class and partially online. Most students stated that this material had contributed vastly to their understanding, knowledge, and appreciation of popular music. More than a few students admitted that they thought they knew it all, until this series made them aware of how much more there was to know. The multiple choice scores also reflected this rise in knowledge: the increase in the proportion of correct answers to questions relating to video content was 13% for material viewed in class and 41% for material viewed at home.

Due to the connection between music and memory (Jackson 2003, Jourdain 1998, Odam 1995), the video format provides an excellent learning vehicle whereby sounds and musicological and sociological facts all presented simultaneously. The reflective portfolios revealed that the students' heightened understanding of the sociological contexts that led to developments in music was a major part of their learning.

One of the key objectives at the start of the study was to compare and contrast teaching music history through showing videos *versus* lecturing. While investigating at the focus groups what the student experience of both had been, the majority of the students came out in favour of lectures. They found having key points up on the screen (in a PowerPoint slideshow) was very helpful compared to the abstractness of having to try to pick out key points from a one-hour video. Some also expressed that it meant more to them hearing anecdotes about music history from a lecturer whom they knew, rather than from someone they did not know doing a *vox pop*. Others felt the variety of lectures and video viewing was a key element to maintaining their interest in the module. The minority who favoured a video on the topic instead of a lecture mentioned time and transport as the key issues as to why that was their first choice. Preferences for being able to view video material online versus seeing it in class varied greatly, and students in the focus groups discussed the matter largely in relation to their own perceived individual learning styles.

Students also reported that in answering questions about video content they had gotten more out of open-ended questions (*'What facts did you become aware of that you didn't previously know?'*) as opposed to questions that made them hunt for specific things in the videos (*'What were Bob Dylan's influences and who in turn did he influence?'*).

Lectures and Seminars

The majority of the students reported that they felt the lectures on the module had formed a crucial part of their learning. Many noted that it had been their favourite module of their first-year studies and pointed out that the very high attendance level

at lectures each week (in comparison to attendance on their other modules) was a strong indicator of how much people were enjoying the lectures.

A fair number of students reported that the variety of lecture content - spanning Business, Socio-Cultural Studies, Psychology, and Musicology - had led to their discovering new interests. Some reported having been inspired subsequently to sign up for socio-cultural related modules (which is also attributable to the video content); others mentioned tracking down music psychology books for personal reading, and many mentioned that they had been inspired to buy or download music from artists whose works had been discussed. Indeed in the reflective portfolios the module comes across as having been quite successful in pushing their appreciation of music in a number of directions.

Many of the reflective comments about the seminar groups pointed out how much students had enjoyed the chance to discuss music. This fits in with Swanwick's (1999) point that music is a social art and therefore music curricula are best delivered when a social dimension is factored into the design.

Student-Led Research

The predominant issues regarding the student-led research centred on the use of group work and the application of ZPD theory (zone of proximal development – see Vygotsky 1978). There were large variances in views on whether students had learnt more or less content wise through working in a group as opposed to working individually. Perceived benefits reported included the chance to discuss and debate findings with others (Swanwick's 'social dimension' of musical understanding appearing again!), the greater manageable breadth and depth allowed by group research, and the 'life lessons' learnt through difficult group experiences. Yet others reported that dividing up tasks within groups meant they never got to see the total picture of things, and that the difficulties of working in a group was a hurdle not a learning experience.

In assigning groups a genre to research, the students were asked to list three choices in order of preference. They were all given the third option on their list, based on the assumption that this was a genre in which they had some interest, but with which were not already overly familiar. Indeed having them research their third choices saw them working on the boundaries of their Zone of Potential Development, and this was confirmed in the talk of high motivation to learn about their genre that was in much of the feedback.

Overall Learning

The reflective portfolios were overwhelmingly positive in terms of the students feeling that their appreciation of music had been significantly enhanced overall by the module. Multiple choice test scores indicated an overall gain of 11% ranging across all four content perspectives taught. In addition, a question on rating the extent of

their guessing, plus reports in the portfolios, revealed there had been a massive reduction in guessing and a large rise in their confidence in their answers in the second multiple-choice test. Furthermore, across the board students' said in their portfolios that they felt they had learnt a lot more than their multiple-choice test score increases showed.

As to which aspect of the module students felt contributed the most to expanding their appreciation of music, their views varied greatly between the teaching techniques. This variance is strongly indicated by the other research which maintains that each individual's understanding and appreciation of music is entirely unique (e.g. Swanwick 1988, Plummeridge 1991, Gardner 1993). The variances are also supported by many learning styles theories which state that different students learn best in different ways. For instance, the videos were suited to visual learners, the lectures and presentations to aural learners, and the e-learning exercises to experiential/tacit learners. Where the content, (e.g. Politics and Music) was delivered through a variety of methods, it sunk in for learners of all learning styles. Yet the issue of too much repetition of a topic arises when the same thing is delivered again and again in different modes.
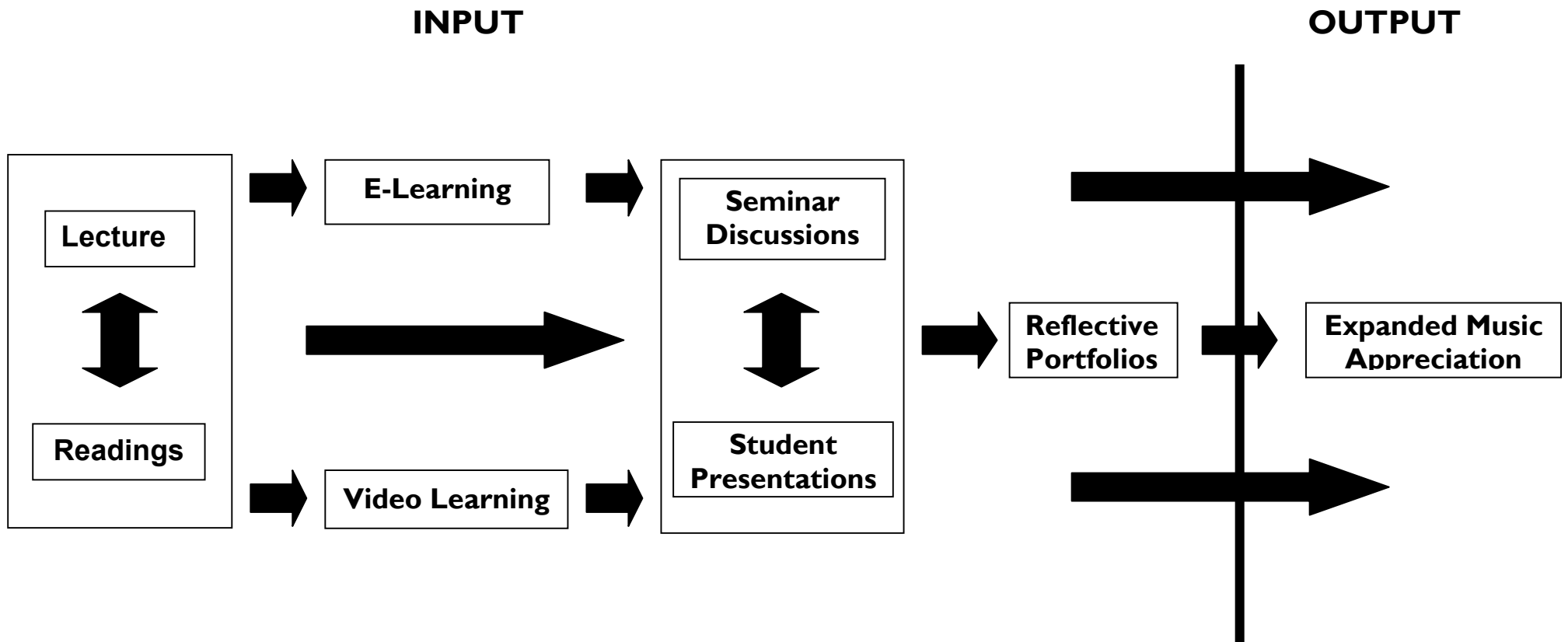
Interaction of Learning and Teaching Methods

Comments about contextualization and reinforcement, that came up in the focus groups and portfolios, indicated that the techniques were building upon each other. Numerous students reported that the readings they had done served to frame where lectures were coming from. They also mentioned that the videos and e-learning exercise came across as extensions of what had been dealt with in the lectures and readings. These had created a basis for informed discussion in seminar groups as well as background for preliminary research for their group presentations.

The presentations and seminar groups consolidated knowledge initially gained through skimming readings and attending lectures (knowledge which was later enhanced through the videos and e-learning exercises). It was clear in analysing the reflective portfolios that these had led the students to revise and deeply reflect on all that they had done on the module and had thus also contributed significantly to the students' learning. As noted by Plummeridge (1991) and Swanwick (1988), such evaluation of the change in the individual over the length of a course is the optimal way to assess musical gains. The overall output of this process was the increase in students' music appreciation that was discussed in their reflective portfolios and reflected in the multiple-choice test. ***Figure 1*** represents a model of this concept.

Model of Interaction of Music Appreciation HE Learning and Teaching Techniques

Figure 1

INPUT   **OUTPUT**

Lecture
⇅
Readings

→ **E-Learning** →

→ **Video Learning** →

Seminar Discussions
⇅
Student Presentations

→ **Reflective Portfolios** → **Expanded Music Appreciation**

Cultural Differences

The module threw up numerous examples of the aesthetic theory view of music as being both culturally and individually specific, yet also having universal qualities. Indeed, as previously discussed, different sounds mean different things to different people. Perhaps this was best exhibited when Ennio Morricone's theme from *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* was played in a lecture and students were asked to say what the track made them think of. Responses were as varied as "the wild west", "something Celtic", and "the blues". This incident was mentioned in a few of the reflective portfolios as having stood out and hammered home the idea that everyone's interpretation of what they hear is unique. Conversely, when played John William's *Star Wars* theme (the soundtrack to one of the most widely seen movies of all time), respondents unanimously mentioned "thinking about the movie" and "excitement" with no variations - thereby illustrating and driving home the idea of commonalities between how people interpret music, regardless of the uniqueness of each individual's musical language.

Nearly a quarter (20% - 25%) of the students on the module were black and many of that group identified themselves in seminars as urban music lovers. A number of those students pointed out that through the module they had learnt to appreciate guitar-based genres: *"I used to hate punk and it sounded like noise to me. But now after learning about it, I can listen to it but just simply don't like it. That might not sound like much, but that's a big step for an ardent R&B follower like me"*. It is gratifying to note that this backs up previous research that states that musical forms that are foreign to the mind are heard as noise, yet with guidance they can be heard as music. Nonetheless, the presence of rock examples which went over the heads of urban music followers does tend to support Hudak's point that music appreciation classes may unintentionally racially discriminate (McCarthy, Hudak, Miklaucic, and Sauko, 1999).

Conversely, many of the black students mentioned that the video on the origins of rock shown in the first seminar had led to their developing an interest in the start of rock'n'roll as they had not previously realized that it was black artists who had given birth to rock'n'roll in the 1950s.

Musician and Non-Musician Adult Learners

Delivering such a course to adults is quite different to delivering it to children due differences in the pupil's level of musical development. What all of the developmental theories devised by Swanwick, Parsons, Shuter-Dyson and Gabriel, Sloboda, and Ross express (to a greater or lesser degree) is that from the age of 15 and beyond most people have musically developed to a point where they assign a specific and individually unique meaning to different pieces of music.

Given the keen interest in music expressed by students through their enrolment on a music-related degree, it's in keeping with Gardner's (1993) ideas that the student

sample were likely to be highly musically intelligent (regardless of their abilities with musical instruments) and therefore would be likely to fall in the category of having a highly developed understanding of music. Yet it is clear from the study that the sort of guidance that Swanwick and Slobada (in Delige & Slobada 1997) champion (i.e. task containing hints and cues) has indeed still been of use in further developing the musical appreciation of these adult learners - as the learners unanimously reported in their portfolios.

On the adult learner front, the psychology viewpoint that one's intelligence can not be expanded once the mind is fully developed in the late teens (Allen 2002) implies that a music appreciation course should not have any aims of expanding the learners' musical intelligence due to their age. Yet that does not mean that the module cannot teach them how to best utilize the musical intelligence that they possess.

Recommendations and Conclusions

In terms of which teaching methods best fit the delivery of specific content perspectives, it was found that perspectives for which audible sounds formed an integral part (e.g. Musicology and its necessity for memory recall of musical works) were best delivered via methods that incorporated the use of sound. This included the video viewings, the e-learning exercise, and the lectures where audio samples were played and framed. Perspectives that were largely conceptual and theoretical (e.g. Cultural Studies and Sociology), managed to make some gains through the video viewing yet were best handled by the lectures and the few readings that the students actually completed.

With respect to the interaction of the variety of learning and teaching techniques deployed, a model of their relationship began to surface. Lectures and readings seemed to provide a framework which was expanded upon by the video viewing and e-learning and then consolidated by the student presentations and seminar discussions. The task of completing the reflective portfolios led to many students revising the key things that they had learnt and to think deeply about how their understanding of music had changed over the semester. The end result of this process, as perceived by the students, was an expansion in their level of music appreciation.

The wide mixture of learning and teaching techniques used was deemed to have helped maintain student interest, enthusiasm, and motivation and to have addressed a large variety of learning styles. Which techniques and which content perspectives were the most effective varied greatly from learner to learner, consistent with previous research that states each individual has their own preferred learning style and unique understanding of music.

With respect to the future delivery of this specific module or others similar to it, a number of key recommendations arise:

- Retain a variety of learning and teaching techniques so as to address different learning styles and to keep interest in the module running high

- Continue with the wide variety of content perspectives in order to address the large variances in students' pre-existing knowledge and to provide them with a multi-dimensional expansion of their musical understanding

- Incorporate into the reflective portfolio all key chapters from the assigned readings *or* require students to bring self written chapter summaries to seminar sessions

- Go primarily with online video viewing but use one or two episodes in class to hook in the students

- Assign reflective questions related to these videos (so as to maximise guidance) yet avoid detailed factual ones (so as to address the wide variances in individual knowledge)

- Incorporate more inclusive examples into the lecture content (e.g. more urban music) and encourage students to comment if a musical reference point has been made that they don't understand

From conducting the research and writing this paper, a number of areas for further study are suggested:

- What is the role of music in the development and furtherance of the collective subconscious?

- What impact has widened participation and increased enrolment of non-native English speakers had on the reading levels of UK students?

- Has easy access to music information via the internet reduced the sub-cultural capital value of musical knowledge? Has this contributed to the lower value that youth of today place on music when compared to youth in the latter half of the 20th century?

- Can music be effectively used to increase memory recall in non-music related subject areas?

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Biographical note

At the time of this study, Greg Jarvis was teaching in the Department of Business and Service Sector Management at London Metropolitan University, on a recently introduced course in music and media management.