

“Do they know they’re composing?”: Music making and understanding among newly-arrived immigrant and refugee children

Gillian Howell

Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne
Australia
howellgm@yahoo.com.au

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses issues of creative music making and understanding as they arose in the context of a music program for newly-arrived refugee and immigrant children. How do young people make sense of a music environment when they don't understand the language of the facilitator or other participants? Visual information and imitation offer reliable entry points into participation, but are not always sufficient for more complex creative processes such as group composition and invention. The author draws upon recent experiences working in an English Language School for new arrivals, and explores the key points of resonance and understanding that may take place for participants in a composition process.

Keywords

Composition, child immigrants, ESL/EAL, visual scaffolds, musical understanding

INTRODUCTION

For community musicians in many countries, the groups with whom we work are becoming more and more multicultural, as populations shift and change in response to global patterns of work and study, as well as because of conflict, civil instability, and other world issues. Music, along with other forms of creative and artistic expression, has a great capacity to offer meaning and pleasure to young people undergoing the stress of cultural transition. It is a powerful means of expression, and can act as an outlet for difficult emotions; it can also support participants to build social connections and self-esteem (Rousseau, Drapeau, Lacroix, Bagilishya, & Heusch, 2005). Musical vocabularies can be flexible, with great capacity to fuse or become hybrid forms, and in a community setting, music making can connect directly with previous skills, experience and knowledge in ways that are not language-dependent and that do not always require lengthy discussion, explanation or negotiation.

Despite the capacity of music to connect beyond words, confusion and misunderstandings can still arise when there is a lack of a common language between participants and facilitators, especially among younger (school-age) participants, and those experiencing huge “cultural

distance” between their country of origin and the new country of residence (Babiker, Cox & Miller, 1980, cited in Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001, p. 9). It isn't always easy for facilitators and teachers to recognise the frustration that can be hidden behind smiles, effort and enthusiasm (Brown, 1979).

RESEARCH CONTEXT

I have been the resident music artist at a Melbourne English Language School [MELS – a pseudonym] since 2005, working with children and teachers in both primary and secondary school classes to develop compositions that support musical development, emotional journeys, and English language learning. I am employed by an external arts organisation that provides music experiences for disadvantaged young people in schools and community settings throughout Australia, and spend one day a week in the school throughout the school year, working with three classes each day.

In the State of Victoria, English Language Schools provide specialist language and learning support for new arrivals of school age. Students typically spend two to four terms at language school before making the transition to mainstream schools (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2007). New students arrive throughout the term, and exiting students leave at the end of each term, thus in every class the newest arrivals will be working alongside peers who are preparing to make the change to a mainstream setting.

In 2007, I commenced a Master of Education research project at MELS that investigated the way newly-arrived students in the primary section of the school perceived music making and music learning. I interviewed students and teachers, and observed general classroom work and a series of music classes, viewed retrospectively using video footage. These observations in particular revealed much about the way newly-arrived children learn and make sense of the environment when they have little English to help them, but also suggested the possibility that many new students had little understanding of the intention or meaning of the activities in music. *Do they know they are composing?* was one of the questions that arose.

“I SAW THE DRUMS... I FIGURED THIS WAS MUSIC”

The first time I met you, I didn't know you. I didn't even know where we were going... then I saw people starting to do some drums so I figured this was music.

Susan, 14, Sudanese

How do new arrivals cope without language when they first enter a new community? My initial investigations into the way new students navigate and make sense of the new school environment revealed the importance of visual information, and the essential role that routine, repetition, and imitation play in building students' confidence before they have the language skills to make more detailed, thorough sense of things (Brown, 1979; Muir, 2004). Many refugee and humanitarian entrants have lived much of their lives in dangerous, unstable settings, and have had severely interrupted prior schooling; thus the cultural rules of the new environment are completely foreign to them, in addition to the language. Refugee camp life will have honed their survival skills, but these are often in complete contradiction to classroom expectations of waiting patiently, standing in lines, taking turns, sharing, and asking for adult help when resolving conflict (Birman, 2005; Cassity & Gow, 2005; Earnest, Housen, & Gillieat, 2007; VFST, 2004).

I observed a progression of increasing understanding among new arrivals aged 8-13 that had important implications for all areas of learning and participation, including music. There were three distinct 'levels'. The first level involves making sense of the new environment and working out how to behave within it. At this level, the students take part in activities with their class simply by copying what they see their peers or the teacher doing. This visual information ensures they understand what they are supposed to be doing (most of the time), but they don't necessarily understand *why* they are doing it, or the learning intention behind the activity. This way of building understanding corresponds with the "beginning" stage of the Victorian DEECD's English as a Second Language [ESL] Developmental Continuum for primary students with little or no prior English language (DEECD, 2009).

The second and third levels of understanding are linked to English language learning. As students become more familiar with English they begin to understand the meaning or purpose of an activity (level two) and make greater individual contributions. As their language proficiency grows, concurrently with their familiarity with the school environment, they build confidence at a tremendous rate. They assume the role of 'experts and helpers' in the classroom, modelling processes and activities for the newest students, and taking on independent challenges (level three). The visual demonstrations they provide for the newest students play a key role in the learning continuum (Howell, 2007).

The initial dependence on imitation as a way of navigating the new environment has implications for music learning. In music, we can see that full participation is possible from even the newest arrivals, due to the non-verbal, visual nature of many of the activities - particularly hands-on, experiential, participatory music-making using percussion instruments and voices. However, when tasks move towards creative work and individual input, participation becomes more complex. I have described elsewhere (Howell, 2009) some of the strategies I use to encourage creative work, but what sense do the recently-arrived participants make of a composition or inventive process? How much do they understand of what is taking place, and at what stage does this understanding arise?

The following vignette imagines what a newer arrival – someone who has perhaps only been at the school a couple of weeks – might make of a typical songwriting activity, where lyrics are generated through questions to the group, and children's ideas are written up on the whiteboard before being sung.

You sit on the floor, because that is what you see your classmates doing. You look at the teacher, waiting for a cue or a clue. You hear the teacher ask a question (or say something – you may not recognise the interrogative vocal inflection). You see other children raise their hands. You see the teacher look at a particular child and say their name; that child then says something. Then the teacher turns and writes something on the board. This pattern is followed for a while, with different children speaking, and the teacher writing something after each child.

Then the teacher takes the guitar and says something. Then she sings something. Everyone repeats what she sings, so you do too. She sings something else – you copy it along with your classmates. Sometimes it seems the words are sung several times in a row, and the sounds become more predictable. You test them and taste their unfamiliar shapes in your mouth, perhaps trying some out loud.

If you didn't understand the language of the teacher or the children what sense would you make of all of this? How would you know that the words the teacher wrote on the board were the words spoken by the child? How would you know that these were later the words that were sung?

‘COMPOSING’ IN CONTEXT

In considering the meaning that newly-arrived children may ascribe to their music experiences, it is helpful to bear in mind the different meanings ascribed to 'composing' in different contexts and cultures. Within my music practice in communities and schools, 'composing' is broadly defined as the invention of new musical material. Compositions may be recorded or written down, but they are often ephemeral, existing within the timeframe of the composition project, and performed only by the group(s) responsible for their creation.

In the wider community, the word 'composing' may have a narrower definition, only referring to music that is written

down using standard Western notation. In my experiences working with young Australians, the word 'song' or 'songwriting' is often more helpful than 'composition' or 'composing' when establishing understanding of a project's intention, regardless of whether there will be lyrics in the composition or not.

Within newly-arrived communities of both adults and children, the notion of composing may be a foreign one to start with. Western music places considerable emphasis on the composer, but in other cultures, it may be that the performer is the composer, or that the music is created through improvisation or group processes.

Lastly, the idea that students can invent or suggest content to the teacher may be an alien notion to some newly-arrived students and their parents. Schooling and teaching styles vary greatly between countries and cultures; of those immigrant students that have had prior schooling in their country of origin, many will be familiar with a system that places heavy emphasis on the teacher's expertise and authority. Students are rarely asked for their opinions - indeed, offering an opinion could be seen as impertinent or disrespectful (Igoa, 1995) - and much of their schooling may have been focused on learning information in order to reiterate it, rather than experiential, constructivist, interactive learning models where students make their own discoveries and apply concepts across multiple settings (Roessingh, 2006). Music education is likely to have followed the former model.

“THE WAY THE MUSIC CHANGES”

What are the characteristics of creative music-making at MELS that indicate to newly-arrived students their role in choosing and determining the musical outcomes? I asked their class teacher (who works with them on a daily basis and participates alongside them in all music classes) for her thoughts on what they understand of the composition work they are engaged in.

Maybe they don't understand at the beginning, but I think it clicks that it is their music because of the way it's changed. 'Oh yeah, this suits us better, so forget about that, now we're doing this!'... It is actually changing all the time until we get to the one that suits us. Especially the older ones, I think they know they've got the input... I think they're very proud when they've put it together, done a concert... proud of their ability, and of the fact that they're playing music that no-one has ever played.

Alice, class teacher at MELS

Certain elements in every composition project at MELS can be controlled or decided by the students. Words for songs are brainstormed together, or in small groups. Possible vocabulary may be pre-taught, in order to provide greater context for newer students. Students' ideas are written immediately on the whiteboard to give visual acceptance and endorsement of the contribution - in this way, even the children who cannot yet read can identify which words are

theirs, because of where they appear on the board and the colour in which they are written.

Children create melodies and harmonies by choosing notes from a given range. They test out ideas by playing them, and adjust them as they wish, with some going on to make decisions about melodic contour, or develop the initial melody into a four-phrase line. The students also create rhythmic material using a range of strategies, including cycles of numbers (placing beats on some and not on others) and by inventing and then speaking aloud word-phrases and exaggerating the rhythm implied by the syllables. These phrases go on to be played on instruments.

Lastly, many participants bring with them a vast vocabulary of melodic, harmonic and rhythmic material specific to their life experiences and culture. This may be offered in response to questions from the facilitator, but it may also be revealed through random tapping, experiments, or unconscious musical utterances on instruments or with the voice. This material is prioritised and highlighted in every composition project.

We can imagine that with these strategies in use, the children that understand the process sufficiently to make individual contributions probably understand that the music we are making is coming from the group. However, for the newest students, limited to participation by imitation, what takes place in a composing session may just be a series of spoken, sung or played phrases by students and teachers, unconnected to each other.

THREE CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE MUSIC THEY PLAY

I interviewed three students, each within their first twelve months in Australia, but at a level of English language proficiency that meant they were soon to make the transition to mainstream schooling. Each took part in interviews with the assistance of an interpreter. These three informants were Susan, aged 14, from Sudan, Kevin, aged 11, from China, and Lek, aged 12, from Thailand, and they were asked to describe their perceptions of music making and music learning at MELS.

These interviews revealed that, after some time had passed, and the children had experienced the term-long group composing process once, they seemed well aware of their role in inventing the music they play.

The music we play... it comes from our heads, not from a book...

Lek

We think it up by ourselves. We do it by ourselves.

Kevin

We do it together... you bring your idea, and others help... and then we make it together, we make the song.

Susan

They also described some of the different steps and strategies they used in putting a group-composed piece of music, or a song, together.

We tell the teacher our thoughts, the teacher writes on the board, and then we put it in order. For example, this semester the topic is about friends. Everyone in the class thinks about friends. Then the teacher will gather information from every student. Then the students help each other to organise the body of the songs and put in order.

Lek

We use the alphabet to make words to make music, and we use numbers. This way you know which letter is going with that song. To make a melody, first you just do anything, you just play letters. You find the perfect one, and then you keep doing it. To play xylophone you use the first letter and then the second, and you don't do just one letter a lot of times. And just practise... you learn something quickly if you do it many times.

Susan

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND MUSICAL UNDERSTANDING

However, the students remembered finding everything very confusing when they first arrived in the school, with no English to really support them to make sense of things. For Lek, the sense of fear or nervousness she felt in school stayed with her until she felt more confident in the language.

In the beginning, with no English, there's not much else that can help you in music. I felt afraid, in the beginning. But I stopped feeling afraid when I knew more English.

Lek

Susan, too, described being plagued by feelings of self-doubt in early music lessons when she was still trying to make sense of what was expected of her.

I was, you know, scared and nervous. I keep telling myself, can I do it properly, can I do a nice idea, did I do it wrong, what did I miss...

Susan

For Kevin, however, things in music were much easier than in other parts of school.

In my first days at MELS I didn't understand anything. I just feel, like, helpless! But music's not like this. ... In music, you know a little bit, you feel alright.

Kevin

CONCLUSION

These comments show that the students do begin to understand that they are composing (whether or not they know what that word means), and that their confidence in this knowledge increases as they become more familiar with English (the language in which the projects are conducted) and with the creative process being used by the facilitator. Music's tremendous capacity to connect participants beyond language offers an additional means of

social connection – important self-affirming experiences that can support new arrivals to build the self-esteem and resilience that is essential in tackling the huge challenges of educational and life transition. Sensitivity to the bewilderment that lack of a common language or prior cultural reference points can induce in participants when engaged in creative tasks, and use of strategies that are as visual and non-verbal as possible, can ease any arising confusion and uncertainty, and support newly-arrived children to make sense of and contribute to the music making processes. Transition, like music, requires time to reach its conclusions, and new arrivals require much greater processing time than similarly aged, local peers. In time, they will indeed know they are composing, and will hopefully find much satisfaction, pride and joy in this knowledge.

REFERENCES

- Birman, D. (2005). Refugee children with low literacy skills or interrupted education: Identifying challenges and strategies [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 29 April 2007 from www.springinstitute.org/Files/refugeechildrenbehaviour3.pdf.
- Brown, D. (1979). *Mother tongue to English: The young child in the multicultural school*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cassidy, E., & Gow, G. (2005). Making up for lost time: The experiences of Southern Sudanese young refugees in high schools. *Youth Studies Australia*, 24(3), 51-55.
- DEECD. (2007). *ESL Report 2007: English as a second language in Victorian government schools*. Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
- DEECD. (2009). ESL Developmental Continuum P-10. Retrieved 13 October 2009, from <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/teachingresources/esl/default.htm>
- Earnest, J., Housen, T., & Gillieat, S. (2007). *A new cohort of refugees for Perth: Challenges for students and educators*. Paper presented at the Student Engagement: 16th Annual Teaching Learning Forum. Retrieved 3 May 2007, from <http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/tlf/tlf2007/refereed/earnest.html>.
- Howell, G. (2007). Making sense: Learning in a new environment. Unpublished research report. University of Melbourne.

Howell, G. (2009). From imitation to invention: Issues and strategies for the ESL music classroom. *Musicworks: Journal of the Australia Council of Orff Schulwerk*, 14(1).

Igoa, C. (1995). *The inner world of the immigrant child*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Muir, D. (2004). English and literacy teaching and learning strategies for newly arrived humanitarian refugee students from Sudan [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 18 January 2009 from http://sora.akm.net.au/publish.php?subaction=showfull&id=1071177704&archive=&start_from=&ucat=38&.

Roessingh, H. (2006). The teacher is the key: Building trust in ESL high school programs. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 62(4), 563-590.

Rousseau, C., Drapeau, A., Lacroix, L., Bagilishya, D., & Heusch, N. (2005). Evaluation of a classroom program of creative expression workshops for refugee and immigrant children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 46(2), 180-185.

VFST. (2004). *HealthWize: Health literacy teaching resource for refugees and other ESL students*. Melbourne: Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture.

Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). *The psychology of culture shock* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia: Routledge.