

Research Note

Embracing the music of our time: an exploration of the benefits of benefits of teaching popular music in small groups

by Trish Rooney (trisha.goggin@gmail.com)

Abstract: *This piece of research aimed to study whether and how the kind of learning that takes place in groups, focusing on popular music, might enhance students' enjoyment of music lessons. It was located in The College of Popular Music in Ireland that is inspired by the philosophy underpinning the Berklee College of Music, Boston:*

"Berklee was founded on two revolutionary ideas: that musicianship could be taught through the music of the time; and that our students need practical, professional skills for successful, sustainable music careers. While our bedrock philosophy has not changed, the music around us has and requires that we evolve with it." (Berklee College of Music, Mission & Philosophy)

Institutional Context and Background

The College of Popular Music commenced activity in September 2011 and is the first institution to teach popular music at second level in Ireland. The college teaches popular singing, electric and bass guitar, drums, and keyboard, popular music theory and music technology to students of all abilities between the ages of 10 and 25. Lessons are taught in groups of five, while theory classes have 25 students.

In the context of this study, "popular music" refers to genres other than Western Classical music. The students at the college have a choice in the repertoire they work on; staff do not dictate the song choices but work with the student to choose what they like, once it is of appropriate standard. This usually includes contemporary pop, rock and roll, indie, blues, country and jazz.

As popular music education combined with group teaching in Ireland was a new phenomenon and individual classical lessons continued to be the dominant form of tuition, this author intended to use this research to look at the students' experiences at the college and be sure that the education provided was quality assured, was enjoyable, educational and rewarding for the students. As the college was in its first year, research to help understand the advantages and possible disadvantages of teaching and learning popular music in small groups would be very beneficial. Knowing if students were enjoying the lessons and why, and if there were elements to the tuition that can be improved upon, was important. The college's teaching philosophy is centred on and around student interests and this research could really provide great insight into the attitudes and feelings of students towards their studies at the college.

Rationale

Allsup (2003), Burgess (2001) and North et al (2000) agree that music that is culturally relevant motivates students to work harder. Dewey believed that many students will only engage with a subject if it links directly to and extends their experiences (Dewey,1966). Children and teenagers are greatly influenced by popular music and pop culture (Green 2002, 2006). This is the music they listen to everyday and for the majority of students this is

<http://www.educatejournal.org>

all they know. As Green (2002 p.3) points out, “over 90 per cent of global sales of music recordings consist of popular music, including traditional forms such as folk and blues, with classical music making up only 3 or 4 per cent”. There are strong pedagogical incentives for educating students in topics that they are interested in. The student should have the ability to choose which genre to study.

Ireland is quite far behind trends in music education (Heneghan, 2001, p.10 & Herron, 1985, p.vi) when compared to the UK and the US. Boston-based Berklee College of Music awarded its first Bachelor of Contemporary Music degree in 1966, and the Brighton Institute of Modern Music (BIMM) was founded in the UK in 1983. In Ireland, the first degree in popular music was introduced in Dublin by BIMM (Brighton Institute of Modern Music) in 2011.

In relation to teaching in groups, there are a plethora of benefits associated with group learning. Vygotsky believed that learning increased development (Woolfolk, 2007) and is built by the interactions the student has with others. Students can learn from their peers, develop good ensemble and listening skills, have more fun and become motivated to practice (Mills, 2007; Mueller & Fleming, 2001; Slavin, 1990; Hooper, 1946). Group lessons can also foster independent learning in pupils, provide opportunities for informal performance to assist with overcoming nervousness, provide more opportunities for critical evaluation and be more stimulating for both teachers and students (Hallam, 1998).

Research Questions

In the context of this study, as its focus is on a specific institution, I proposed a research project to answer the following questions:

- How, if at all, do students of popular music perceive that its cultural relevance impacts on their enthusiasm?
- How, if at all, do students at The College of Popular Music perceive that their interaction, participation and enjoyment is enhanced through teaching in small groups?
- What benefits and difficulties do students perceive in studying popular music with their peers in small groups at The College of Popular Music?

Theoretical Perspective

Epistemologically, this research was approached through a social constructivist framework. The conceptual framework embodies the exploration of a less dominant pedagogical approach (group teaching) and was concerned with the importance of studying a culturally relevant style of music. Primarily, social constructivism describes how students learn by constructing knowledge and meaning from their interactions with others and their environment. The concept is based on writings by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) and American philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952). My conceptual framework embodies the exploration of a less dominant pedagogical approach (group teaching) and is concerned with the importance of studying a culturally relevant style of music. Education is ultimately concerned with the improvement of practice. Music educators are always searching for successful teaching approaches from which to learn and on which to model. My aim is that this study may contribute to the development and re-evaluation of the teaching and learning of popular music.

Sample

For this research project, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. The study adopted mixed methods including questionnaires, focus groups and individual interviews. My position as Principal of the College of Popular Music helped to source students from vocal, drum, electric bass, electric guitar and keyboard classes. Classes were chosen based on students having some previous experience of music lessons before joining the college. Each class had five students, providing twenty-five students, who were interviewed as focus group by class. A questionnaire was circulated to all students at the college and completed by 67 students. The senior bass, guitar, keyboard and drum tutors were interviewed individually.

Data Analysis and Initial Findings

To analyse data obtained from the individual and focus group interviews, I followed the approach of Miles and Huberman (1994, as cited by Robson, 2002, p. 459), by giving codes to the interview data, by adding memos or comments, identifying themes and patterns, and gathering a set of generalisations from consistencies in the data. Two main themes emerged from the focus groups and staff interviews:

- 1) the benefits of studying popular music in small groups and
- 2) areas in need of improvement.

Within the first category, emerging themes included motivation, cultural relevance, interaction, participation, enjoyment, and confidence (see Figure 1). Streaming issues related to teaching groups of mixed levels of expertise, and an interest in spending more time as part of a band were the main issues and areas that needed improving. Students reported many advantages associated with group work, including learning how to play together, having the ability to help each other out and learn from each other, getting the experience of playing in a band, improving timing, ensemble skills and aural awareness, and making friends. The college's ability to enable like-minded students with a common interest to mingle is of huge value to both the college and student. It is this social element that truly underpins the college's aims, objectives and achievements. Students with a common and culturally relevant interest, in this case pop music, engaging positively with others in a non-threatening and rewarding social environment can achieve their true potential.

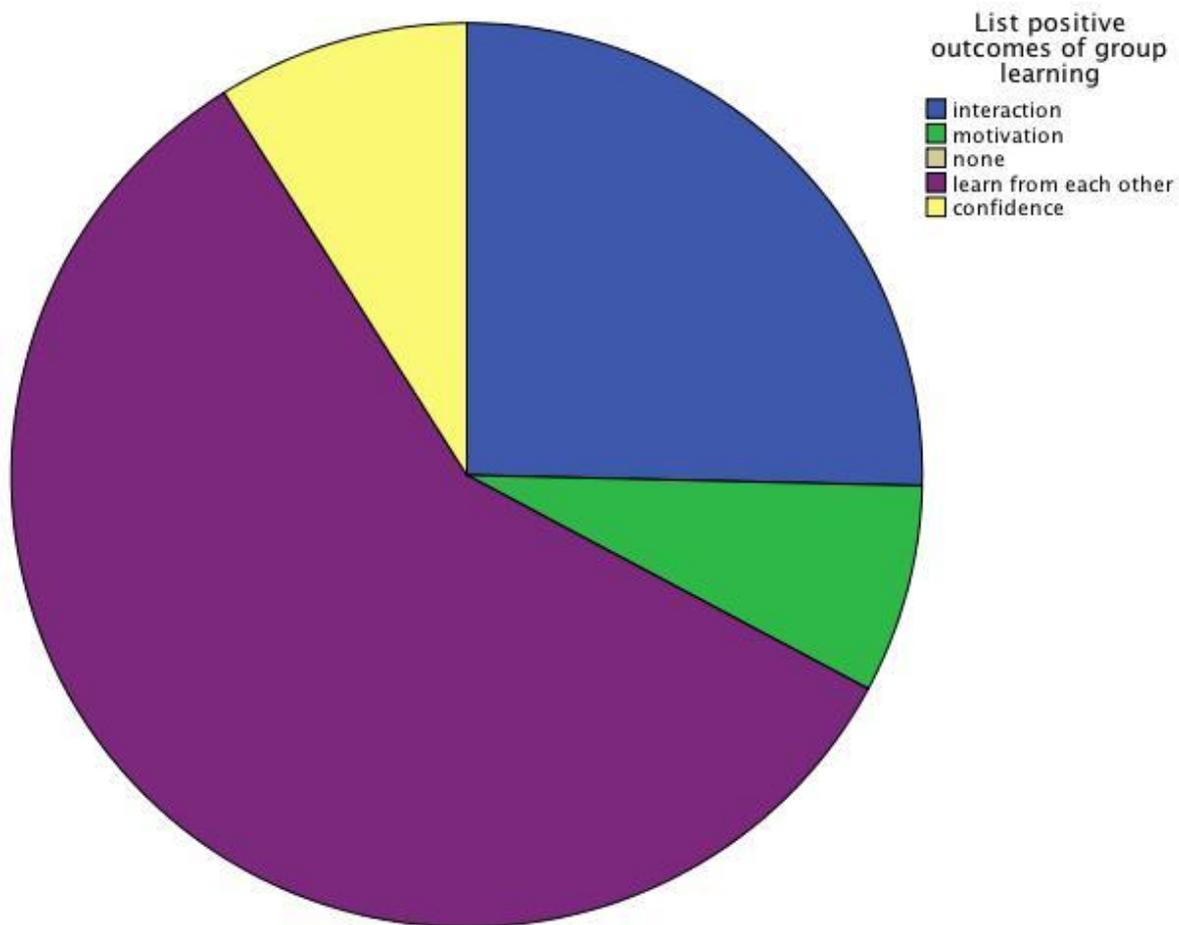


Figure 1. The positive outcomes of learning in groups

It was interesting to note that when the students who completed the questionnaires were asked to list any negative aspects of working in groups, 76% of respondents reported that there were no negative effects (see Table 1).

Table 1: The negative aspects of learning in groups

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
slower pace	3	4.5
no individual attention	12	17.9
streaming problems	1	1.5
none	51	76.1
Total	67	100.0

As we were in our first year and had limited students, there were a couple of streaming issues raised by the senior tutors and some students. We hope that greater student numbers next year will prevent this problem.

Below is a basic representation of the main themes that emerged (Figure 2).

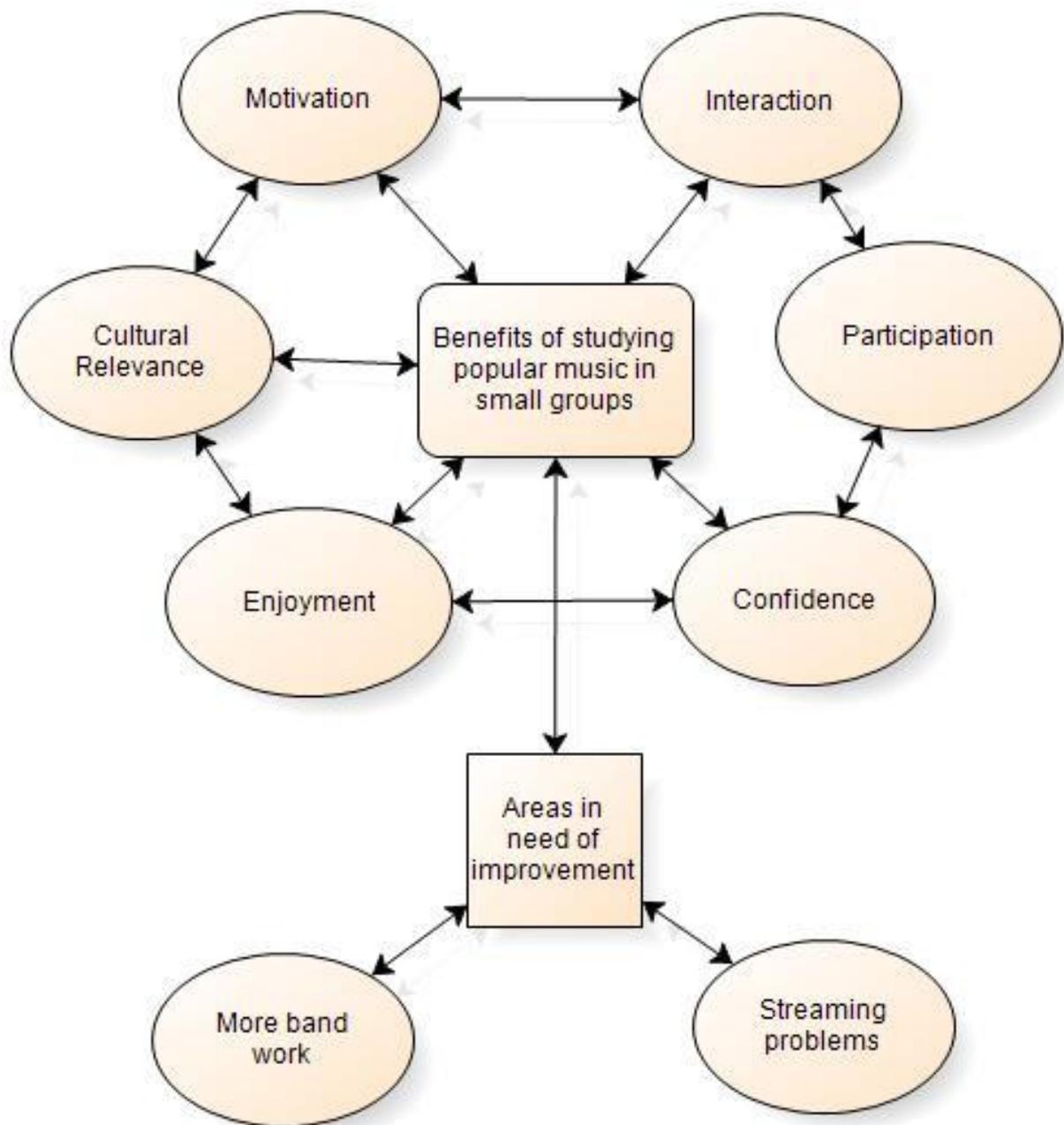


Figure 2. Emerging themes and sub-themes

Ethical issues and conclusion

I conducted my research in line with BERA's ethical guidelines, ensuring that children as well as their parents gave informed consent for participation and were fully informed about the research process. Anonymity was preserved in all reports.

Politically and ethically, I was asking students and parents to participate in research that is relevant to their lives.

This piece of research could possibly and potentially diversify music teaching repertoire, practices and methods and hopefully contribute theoretically and empirically to improving

educational policy and practice for future professional development “in order to be increasingly relevant to the children’s interests, desires, and prior experiences. In this light, children’s perspectives and experiences would become a necessary component to music education” (Griffen, 2009, p.172). Giving students and teachers a voice through the use of interviews and questionnaires could contribute to making the school the best it can be. The concern of this study was to help improve the quality of what the institution/college offered and the research has been extremely useful in this respect. As principal of the college the feedback was invaluable. It demonstrated that the students get enormous satisfaction from attending the college. The interviews were also a useful tool for the tutors to reflect on their teaching. They cared about the standard of education they were providing and were anxious to improve their individual teaching pedagogies and the work of the college as a whole. Overall, the study has been hugely successful in supporting the development of the college.

References

- Allsup, R.E. (2011) *Popular Music and classical musicians: Strategies and Perspectives*, Music Educators Journal. DOI: 10.1177/0027432110391810
- Burgess, R.G.(1984). *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research*. London: Allen & Unwin. Chapter 5.
- Dewey, J. (1966) *Democracy and Education*. New York: Free Press.
- Green, L. (2002) *How Popular Musicians Learn, A Way Ahead for Music Education*, Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Green, L. (2006) *Popular music education in and for itself, and for ‘other’ music: current research in the classroom*, International Journal of Music Education.
- Griffen, S.M. (2009) *Research Studies in Music Education, Listening to children’s music perspectives: In and out of school thoughts* 31:161. DOI:10.1177/1321103X09344383
- Hallam, S. (1998) *Instrumental Teaching, A Practical Guide to Better Teaching and Learning*, Heinemann.
- Herron, D. (1985) *Deaf Ears? A report on the provision of music education in Irish schools*, Arts Council Ireland.
- Heneghan, F. 2001. A Review of Music Education in Ireland, Incorporating the Final Report of the Music Education National Debate (MEND - Phase III), Dublin Institute of Technology. Available from URL: <http://www.musicnetwork.ie/content/files/MEND09d.pdf>
- Hooper, C. (1946) *Teaching Music to Classes*, E.J. Arnold & Son Ltd.
- Mills, J. (2007). *Instrumental Teaching*. Oxford Music Education Series, Oxford University Press.
- Mueller, A. & Fleming, T. (2001). *Cooperative learning: Listening to how children work at school*. Journal of Educational Research (94), 259-265.

Slavin, R. E. (1990). *Cooperative learning: Theory, research and practice*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Robertson, D. (1987). (Ed.) *Roll over Beethoven. Teacher's kit*. Waterloo, Sydney: Fairfax Magazines.

Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research*, Second Edition, Blackwell Publishing.