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Investigating Young People's Engagement with Music through Technology

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Abstract: This paper describes a new study investigating young people's attitudes to and engagement with music to explore how these relate to choices about studying music. The research takes an innovative approach to developing an understanding of a young person's musical world that is holistic, by encompassing engagement with music through technology across everyday and academic settings. In so doing the research addresses gaps in current understanding about young people's engagement with music by including the full range of consumption, sharing and creation practices inside and outside of school. It also extends research into digital media creation that to date has focused on video and text-based cultures. Importantly, the study investigates claims made about how information and communication technology is changing engagement with music and consider the implications for school-based music education.

Introduction

Class enrolments provide evidence that many students do not continue to study music after the compulsory courses end in the early years of high school. Attrition increases in later years, resulting in very small numbers of students taking music subjects for their final high exams. Even though this trend suggests a low-level of student interest in or engagement with music, many students create and listen to music in their personal time outside of school through the skillful use of technology, demonstrating a strong engagement and interaction with music through technology (Mans, 2009; Bell, 2008; Rosevear, 2008; Green, 2006; Zhu & Baylen, 2005). This reflects a wider trend across all areas of creative endeavour with digital technologies enabling new ways to create and share content, blurring traditional boundaries between those who create and those who consume creative works (Goggin, 2004; Manovich, 2001). These new 'creative producers' are often enthusiastic amateurs, who use the tools and knowledge of professionals to develop their own creative cultures (see for example, Buckingham & Willett, 2009; Green & Hannon, 2007).

Students who use these new technologies often direct greater focus and attention to gaining skills and techniques in the use of technology rather than the musical outcome they initially intended. Primarily, the student's aim is to create musical works/compositions by developing their musicianship through the use of computer-based composition applications such as Apple's *GarageBand*. *GarageBand* is one of many software applications that utilizes a 'select-and-insert' process of organising sound. Instead, the outcome for students appears to be a better understanding of how to use a particular application rather than gaining an awareness of the idiosyncratic and performance elements of the instruments for which they are writing. In short, they gain little understanding about whether, for example, a real piano can actually play the music for piano they have constructed within the computer-based environment. And even further, many students are not able to play any of the music they have written on a real instrument (Cain, 2004).

While there is general acknowledgement that music helps to make people's lives meaningful and that students understand (directly and indirectly) the social, cultural and artistic benefits that come with musical and technological knowledge, skills, and understanding (Campbell, 2000; Swanwick, 1999), this situation poses something of a conundrum for contemporary music education. Why do many young people engage in sophisticated informal music sharing and creation practices, but choose not to participate in school music programs (either curricula or extra curricula) after early high school even when some of those programs involve the use of technology? And, what implications do young people's informal music practices have for music education?

This paper describes a new research project that is investigating Australian high school students' attitudes to music and the ways they engage with music through technology in formal and informal learning environments. The study focuses on the following four aspects of young people's engagement with music:

- Examining student choices about studying music in school.
- Understanding student engagement with music outside of school.
- Exploring how and why students create and listen to music through technology.
- Evaluating students' musical development through their use of technology.

Rationale for the study

This new study is significant because it addresses questions of critical importance to contemporary music education. Very little research has been undertaken investigating student engagement with music and technology across their academic and personal lives in an effort to understand the context in which young people make decisions about formal music study. Existing research has focussed on either inside or outside school music activities, or on the integration of a particular technology in the classroom. (Zhu & Baylen, 2005; Ruthmann, 2006; Burnard, 2007; Rosevear, 2008; Bell, 2008) By adopting a broader approach that seeks to holistically understand a student's musical world across a variety of settings and technologies, this investigation will give insights into:

- The reasons students do not continue to study music at school as an elective option
- Student attitudes and thoughts about music both personally and as a school subject
- The technology students use to access, listen to, create and manipulate music/sound
- Students' motivation to engage in music, and
- Students' attitudes to interacting with music through technology.

This study will also critically examine a common assumption made about technology-based activities - that 'because people can, then they will', and provide evidence about possible relationships between students' attitudes to and uses of technology in their engagement with music. This will advance knowledge in this area, which is often dominated by unevidenced claims based on personal anecdotes. While it is clear that students rarely experience music without using some form of technology (Burnard, 2007; Ruthmann, 2006), little is known about the extent of creative activities that go beyond consuming other people's musical creations. In collecting this evidence the research will offer a basis for informed decisions to be made about future developments in formal music education, in particular school curricula and pedagogy.

This study is also significant in that extends a tradition of research that has explored young people's everyday creativity, but which to date has included few studies specifically of music. It complements, for example, the work on video cultures and text-based publishing (eg. Buckingham & Willet, 2009).

Studies have been conducted examining informal and self-initiated music education (Mans, 2009; Mak, 2007; Batt-Rawden & DeNora, 2005; Folkestad, 2005; et al) that forms part of a diverse range of creative arts experiences in which students engage. However the growing art form of Media Arts – that utilises technology in unique creative ways and seems to engage many students in artistic and social interaction – has not received the same level of examination.

It is very clear from observational evidence that most students in secondary schools listen to and engage with music using some form of technology. Laptop computers, mp3 players, CD players, mobile phones and even some of the instruments student's play are all examples of technologies by which students interact with music both in and out of school. Yet there is little evidence provided by research studies to identify the reasons behind student music choices, motivation and thoughts, and their attitudes to the music with which they engage.

This will advance understanding about young people's actual practices and inform discussion about how in-school music education could relate to informal music practices. The findings will provide a basis for recommending changes in music education curricula and pedagogy by advancing understanding about the types of music activities young people choose to engage in and why.

Theoretical framing

The conceptual framework will draw on Bourdieu's (1990) inter-related notions of field, capital and habitus by seeking to understand the particular music practices undertaken and how they are valued in the different contexts in which students engage, such as in school, in formal tuition outside school, in amateur music-making and in everyday music consumption. This approach is appropriate because it takes a holistic view of an individual's music practices but also sees them in relation to the contexts in which they are conducted. The research will draw on and extend the protocols developed by Lamont and Maton (2008) to investigate students' attitudes to at different stages of secondary schooling in the United Kingdom.

Methodology

The study will adopt a mixed methods approach, combining survey and focus group interviews in the following four phases, commencing in January 2011.

Phase 1 – Analysis of the curriculum and prior research

The project will begin with a detailed analysis of music in the NSW years 7-12 syllabus and a further analysis of prior research findings to extend the preliminary work undertaken to prepare this grant application.

Phase 2 – Develop survey

A preliminary survey instrument will be developed using concepts from the literature and previously developed items from Lamont and Maton (2008). Pilot testing of the instrument will be conducted using three groups of students (one each from stages 4, 5 and 6) to test their interpretation of items on the survey.

Phase 3 – Administer survey

The survey will be administered to every student in the school. The procedure for administering the survey will be negotiated with the school to minimise disruption while maximising the response rate. It is anticipated that the survey will take 20 minutes for students to complete. The purpose of the survey is gauge students' attitudes to music and survey their music activities over different stages of schooling.

Phase 4 – Conduct focus group interviews

The researchers will work with the school to identify a pool of 40 students from each stage who represent a range of abilities and interests. These students will be invited to participate in the focus group interviews in groups of five students. A random selection will be made from the sub-set of students who agree to participate and whose parents give consent. The aim will be to interview up to 10 students from each stage. Focus group interviews will enable the researchers to develop a more detailed understanding of young people's music-related activities inside and outside of school.

The intended outcomes of the project are to:

- Provide evidence about student attitudes and experiences with music through technology
- Evaluate the musical development of students who only engage with music informally outside of school
- Make recommendations for changes to school music curricula to include relevant, current and engaging methods and approaches to music education

Preliminary finding will be presented at the conference.

Conclusion

The new research described in this paper breaks new ground in conceptualising what it is we need to know about the role technology plays in young people's informal and formal music experiences. By developing a more complete picture of a young person's musical world their choices and preferences about listening to, sharing, playing and creating music can be considered simultaneously. By understanding these choices a more informed

discussion can be had about the role of school-based music education, formal music tuition outside school and informal amateur activities contribute to a young person's musicality.

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