MOTIVATION AND LEARNING AS PRAXIS IN A SENIOR ADULT INSTRUMENTAL PROGRAM: IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSIC TEACHER EDUCATION

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1) The realities of today’s changing society demand an expansion of the music education profession’s mission beyond school walls and present opportunities to further goals of music literacy, performance proficiency, and appreciation in adult populations.

2) A 2007 report first presented at the Summit on Global Aging hosted by the U.S. State Department and the National Institute of Aging anticipates that people 65 years and older will comprise 1 in every 8 of the earth’s inhabitants by the year 2030 (Dobriansky et al, 2007). In the United States, demographic information confirms that this age cohort is the most rapidly expanding segment of American society (Smith 1997).

3) As we progress through the 21st century, communities must address issues of housing, planning and zoning, transportation, health and supportive services, public safety, civic engagement and volunteer opportunities, and provide cultural and lifelong learning opportunities for aging populations (Blueprint 2007). Senior adults will constitute a strong presence in culture and social policy.

4) Education researchers must investigate questions of adult teaching and learning to inform the practitioners of today and prepare future generations of teachers for a changing society. As adult populations increase and the number of adult participants in educational programs continues to rise, “education can no longer define its function primarily as the preparation of youth for adult life” (Myers 1992, 23).

5) Researchers in both adult education and music education have identified a need for greater understanding of the dynamics of group learning and the ways in which adults utilize social networks in their learning pursuits (Brookfield 1994; Coffman 2002). This study begins to explore those questions and suggests implications for music teacher education.

6) Utilizing qualitative research methods, I investigated how social interactions and networks may influence, and be influenced by, adults’ music learning in an instrumental program. Roy Ernst, professor of music education at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, started the New Horizons Band program in 1991 to offer an entry and re-entry point into music participation for older adults. He promoted an inclusive philosophy and placed much of the decision-making regarding participation into members’ hands. Players choose their own pace of learning, their instruments, and even their ensembles.
7) The public face of the Rochester New Horizons program comprises three large concert ensembles. Study participants agreed that making music with others is the principal reason they enjoy activity in the Rochester New Horizons Bands.

8) A common interest in music and learning in a group setting combine with shared experiences. This combination results in bonds of affection and a system of support and motivation for participants.

9) Many players cite their participation in small ensembles as integral to their New Horizons experience. These groups usually take the form of traditional chamber ensembles such as brass quintets, woodwind quintets, and other instrumentation groupings with a standard literature base. Members who seek such experiences traditionally gather with a few others, acquire music, and meet to practice, often in a member’s home. Over time, some of these grassroots ensembles have been institutionalized as formal program offerings.

10) Although members derive enjoyment from the sounds and the fellowship of their large ensembles, many believe that small ensembles better facilitate musical interaction and skill development and offer much more intimate interactions. The size of the concert bands limits intimacy and requires hierarchical direction from a conductor, whereas chamber groups promote enhanced aural awareness and interaction among players.

11) Specifically, participants felt that small group interactions challenged their aural skills and allowed them to develop their listening abilities to a fuller extent.

12) In addition, with just a few collaborators in small groups, players feel that they make a singular contribution to the whole that differs from their corporate participation in a large ensemble.

13) The significant growth of the program and the achievement of veteran members have understandably led to logistical problems. The problems that the program continues to address are natural outgrowths of participant learning and organizational success. More advanced players desire to challenge themselves and, understandably, seek continued musical development. Those who are less skilled do not want challenges that far exceed their skill level; yet, those same players seek association with good musical models in an accomplished ensemble. In a controversial step to address the unwieldy numbers in the large concert band, the ensembles were split into three self-selecting levels: beginning, intermediate, and advanced.

14) As I presented at the 2007 International Symposium on the Sociology of Music Education in Newfoundland, learning in the Rochester New Horizons program occurs within the context of social interactions. Members embrace learning as a lifelong process and seek to do it in a communal environment. Seemingly, enjoyment exists in the pursuit of something new or unfamiliar.

15) According to psychologists Ryan and Deci (2000), humans possess the “inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise [their] capacities to explore and to learn” in those activities that interest them (70). Activities must satisfy fundamental human needs for
competence, autonomy, and relatedness to elicit intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000). An integral study question therefore emerged. How does the New Horizons program meet these needs for participants?

16) People perceive themselves as competent in action only when they exert significant effort in the process of meeting optimal challenges (Deci 1995). Additionally, individuals must possess “both the strategies and the capacities for attaining desired outcomes” to recognize themselves as proficient (Deci 1995, 64).

17) In the quote on this slide, Sarah, a study participant, describes both challenges and practice habits that contribute to her emerging sense of competence.

18) In addition to repetition and drill, members emulate musical models as an important strategy to achieve desired musical outcomes, and thus to develop a sense of competence.

19-20) The New Horizons program facilitates the perception of autonomy. External control diminishes self-determination and the perception of choice (Deci 1995). In the absence of a predetermined sequence of music learning, New Horizons members set their own learning pace and direction.

21) The presence of choice does not imply a lack of guidance or parameters in the learning environment. Instructors introduce members to musical content and shape the context in which music making occurs, but the philosophical foundation of the New Horizons concept directs that instruction “must be completely supportive and free of competition and intimidation” (Ernst, 2004). Deci refers to this as “autonomy support” and suggests that instructors should try to “take the perspective” of the learner and “encourage self-initiation, experimentation, and responsibility” while avoiding controlling behaviors (1995, 42).

22) Ryan and Deci hypothesize that “proximal relational supports may not be necessary for intrinsic motivation, but a secure relational base does seem to be important for the expression of intrinsic motivation to be in evidence” (2000, 71). Individuals believe the camaraderie of the ensembles is the most salient aspect of participation. In older adulthood, New Horizons peers often become a primary support group. A “secure relational base” is certainly evident for most New Horizons members.

23) Comments from Penny suggest that a sense of competence is closely linked to a sense of relatedness in the large ensemble. She utilizes her interactions with those around her to assess her achievement.

24) Likewise, interactions between players reflect mutual autonomy and mutual autonomy support; people give aid and guidance to support performance and learning, but do not attempt to control the behavior of others.

25) Not all activities hold intrinsic interest. Where autonomous extrinsic motivation exists, it is associated with better performance, lower dropout rates, and higher quality learning (Ryan and Deci 2000). The structure of most New Horizons large ensemble rehearsals reflects a
professional ensemble model in which players receive and respond to didactic instruction with relatively little questioning or negotiation. New Horizons members’ behavior in these settings might be categorized as passively compliant; however, given the dedication members demonstrate for the program, they have more likely internalized and possibly integrated the values associated with didactic rehearsal practices that others model:

The primary reason people initially perform such [extrinsically motivated] actions is because the behaviors are prompted, modeled, or valued by significant others to whom they feel (or want to feel) attached or related (Ryan and Deci 2000, 73).

26) Although competence and autonomy are theoretically connected to relatedness, we lack evidence to state that relatedness itself is directly tied to human performance or learning (Ryan and Deci 2000). What compels players to work together and on behalf of one another rather than solely for the improvement of their own musical skills? Why are members persistent not only at learning music, but specifically at learning music with others in the New Horizons community?

27) Playing a musical instrument requires the development of specific performance skills associated with the Aristotelian concept of techne, which is a general kind of knowledge based on a pre-determined idea or pattern (Bowman 2002). Praxis is a cycle of action and reflection that begins with a question or problem, but with no a priori plan for addressing the question or problem. Within praxis, phronesis, a moral disposition to act rightly and to further human well-being, guides deliberations about contextually appropriate means. Therefore, unlike techne, praxis is situation-dependent and indeterminate. “The question motivated by a practical interest becomes not ‘What can I do?’ but ‘What ought I to do?’” (Grundy 1987,13).

28) Study participants require situated reflection in ensembles to improve performance within those groups and gauge their competence. This suggests that perhaps relatedness to others in the ensembles provides a better guide for action than does some predetermined standard of performance. Members develop awareness of the other musicians around them through ensemble rehearsals and performances. Each estimates not only his or her own competence, but also the rightness of his or her actions through moment-to-moment comparison with other players. Techne is not entirely absent, but players appear to be coupling their technical development to the overall musical good of the ensemble. Thus, learning as praxis involves developing capacities for judgment about right action parallel to developing capacities for musical performance.

29) Contextual judgment and capacities for musical performance develop largely from emulation of models in the form of instructors, peers, and even recordings. Samantha tells a story about a New Horizons tuba player who provided a model of musicianship, but also demonstrated a musician’s dedication to his art and to fellow ensemble members.

30) New Horizons members generate their own judgments about performance and behavior through contextual learning and dependence on others who provide models. In the absence of typical controls such as participation prerequisites, auditions, and formal assessments, what remains are musicians’ dispositions to further the good of others, and thus to further the good of the ensemble and the Rochester New Horizons program. This provides a possible explanation
for the tension that results from organizational change, which poses threats to members’ relatedness, competence, autonomy and learning as praxis. Tensions that result from changes in the organization imply the situated nature of learning and motivation. Whether members can modify their praxis to exist comfortably in a restructured program remains in question.

31) Self-directed learning is tied inextricably to praxis, and genuine autonomy resides at the core of both. Brookfield maintains that “critical reflection on the contingent aspects of reality, the exploration of alternative perspectives and meaning systems, and the alteration of personal and social circumstances” constitute a “praxis of thought and action” that is the most “fully adult form of self-directed learning” (1986, 58-59). Regarding autonomy, Grundy postulates:

Praxis is informed by an emancipatory interest which would preserve for all groups the freedom to act within their own social situations in ways which enable the participants to be in control of that situation (1987, 113).

Rochester New Horizons members exercise autonomy by choosing a large ensemble that suits their needs and abilities, forming chamber groups, and engaging peers in their music learning. Concern for right action within the ensembles and the spirit of collaboration among New Horizons members suggests that learning is praxis. Members’ deliberation and autonomous actions on behalf of the ensembles suggests that these adults are in control of the learning environment and have significantly developed their capacities for self-directedness.

32) All available data support that society is in the midst of significant demographic change. Additionally, our culture continues to transform with remarkable speed as new technologies develop and our knowledge base exponentially increases. Music teachers and the programs that prepare them have a window of opportunity to redefine aspects of the profession that will allow engagement in some of these societal and cultural shifts to not only promote lifelong learning, but also influence existing music teaching and learning practices for people of all ages.

33) Tetenbaum and Mulkeen (1986) identified critical factors of our changing society that teacher education programs must address in the 21st century. Continually growing bodies of knowledge, expanded information flow, organizational decentralization, and change and impermanence have implications for teaching and learning. These factors serve to contextualize the results of this study of the Rochester New Horizons Band and challenge educators to transform their approaches in significant ways.

34) Due to a significantly expanding knowledge base and amplified information flow, content mastery becomes increasingly elusive. People must utilize critical thinking skills rather than rely on information recall to selectively choose and synthesize overwhelming amounts of data (Tetenbaum and Mulkeen 1986). Students and teachers need strategies to research, assess, and apply information in context-dependent situations. Those practices that emphasize reflection, problem-solving, and cooperative learning promote increasing degrees of self-directed learning (Myers 1992).
35) While traditional didactic approaches to music instruction do promote efficiency and may coordinate action in large groups, they do not acknowledge the kinds of peer interactions that promote critical awareness and self-direction. Best practices in music teacher education will prepare teachers to be facilitators of learning who offer autonomy support, ask students to draw on their prior experience, reflect on alternatives for musical action, and collaborate with peers in musical decision-making. Teachers should question whether their preferred approaches reflect autonomous decision-making or unconscious adherence to traditional modes of instruction. Through critical reflection, prospective music teachers should develop greater awareness of alternatives for their own thinking and instruction.

36) Hierarchical group structures promote efficiency in action but do not necessarily facilitate problem-solving and collaboration. “Where decision-making rather than efficiency is the primary educational goal, the concept of decentralization needs to be applied at the individual classroom level with increased use of small group problem-solving units as opposed to the traditional whole group lecture unit” (Tetenbaum and Mulkeen 1986, 626). Somewhat antithetical to the traditional vertically structured classroom, lateral structures in small groups promote experimentation, risk-taking, flexibility and autonomy.

37) Small ensembles that are democratically formed and run promote skill development and awareness and thus serve essential purposes in cultivating a sense of competence and preserving a sense of autonomy. The musical genre is not as important as the democratic nature of the experience and the opportunities therein to increase musical skills and awareness, and thus foster a sense of competence. Instructors can also better facilitate musical learning when they reserve time during group rehearsals for peer collaboration and intentionally direct players’ attention to peer models. Self-determination and ownership in this process results in greater satisfaction in the activity (Tetenbaum and Mulkeen 1986); while most New Horizons participants were content to let conductors make general musical decisions for the group, they still wanted to feel welcome to express opinions and have their voices heard. In addition, music teachers should collaborate with students to align instructional practices with how each individual learns. Instructors need to ask students to share how they learn and reasonably tailor teaching and learning interactions for maximum effectiveness.

38) The rapidity of change leads to impermanence in society. Music educators who possess the skills, attitudes, and values to teach learners at all stages of life will find themselves much better prepared for these societal demands (Myers 1992).

39) Because collegiate programs prepare prospective teachers for state certification, they normally place emphasis on K-12 school music; however, the present study clearly illustrates a need for music teacher education programs to embrace a broader vision of lifelong learning. Teacher education programs must offer essential musical and technical training for beginning educators, but must also emphasize critical thinking skills and continuing professional development that will serve students through a lifetime of learning.

Our profession must offer more entry and re-entry points into music making throughout people’s lives. Careers and families demand much of the time that adults might otherwise dedicate to their learning activities; however, several study members either sought out private lessons or
participated in other music activities before retirement. Programs that meet during alternative
times would enable various cohorts of people to engage in music learning. These opportunities
could be offered by institutions such as public schools, university schools of music, or even
connected to the corporate workplace, hearkening back to industrial bands and orchestras of the
early 20th century.
References


