

Leading Students to Ownership of Music Learning through a Deweyian Perspective

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Introduction

The general music classroom is one of the most unique and challenging teaching environments for music teachers. Not only do teachers see almost every student in the school and have to learn all of their names, but they are also responsible for providing the foundations of musicianship skills that will be used in other more specialized music classes such as band or choir. That being said, one of the greatest struggles for general music teachers is reaching each and every individual student and realizing their needs. The sheer numbers of students in classes make it difficult for teachers to give their attention to individual problems and still run their classroom smoothly. This problem has now increased due to other changes to the school system such as mainstreaming where it is not appropriate and standardized testing taking away from class time. One solution to this problem is to help students help themselves and each other. If students have confidence that they can solve their own musical problems, that confidence will then transfer outside of the classroom. The purpose of this paper is to verify the need for students to gain ownership of their learning in the music classroom for further use in their musical pursuits outside of the classroom.

Understanding what is valued by students is one of the most important tasks of a music teacher, and is essential for leading students to musical ownership. If a music teacher does not realize what is valued by students, not just in music but in their lives, then the music education the student receives may not be as valuable to the student. Students are going to want to have ownership over their music education if this concept is observed by the teacher. Ownership, as defined by Merriam Webster Dictionary, is “the state or fact of owning something” (2015). When concerning music, students are going to want to continue pursuing music throughout the rest of their lives if they have ownership over what they have musically mastered. For the

duration of this paper, musical ownership will be considered “the state of owning the learning of music to be able to continue using these skills in their lives outside the music classroom”.

Dewey’s Values: Why Apply Them in the Classroom?

John Dewey is one of the most influential examples of advocating for students to have ownership over their education. Dewey (1900) believed that the education of his time was heading toward the “household arts” being conceived and taught as “distinct studies” rather than methods of living and learning. Dewey propagated that students should view school as a smaller representation of what society and the community would be like as they grew up and became a part of it. In addition to this idea of being a part of society, Dewey was adamant that moral education occur within the education of the child. In order for children to grow up and understand the importance of their contribution to society, they need to have hands on experience with the problems that they might encounter as they become adults contributing to a functioning society.

Dewey (1900) defines a society as “a number of people held together because they are working along common lines, in a common spirit, and with reference to common aims” (11). Dewey uses this definition to support his idea for a new and improved school system. In the school system of the time, the general structure consisted of learning viewed as a reception and regurgitation of information. Both now and in the past, education has been heavily focused on the measurement of product and achievement. Students are not engaged in learning, and are simply taking in the information without actually using it. This was a huge issue in light of Dewey’s definition of society, and still is today based on the impact of standardized testing in schools. If students are not taking what they learn into their own hands in the first place, they

will not become functional members of society. Without ownership of their education, students will not be able to positively contribute to society as adults.

Being a part of society and positively contributing means being a good citizen. Dewey (1900) specifically mentions having “an obligation to do something, to produce something, in the world” (7). As teachers, we are preparing our students to not only lead successful lives but be able to fill the role of a “good citizen”. When teachers are guiding their students through their education, it is important to eventually show students how to direct their own education for their benefit. If students can govern their education, then they can pursue their interests and talents that are relevant to them and will help them be successful in their lives outside of school. This is important because this provides children with ownership of their education, and prepares them to become contributing members of society.

As a member of society, part of contributing is being able to help one another. Helping others is not only beneficial to others but to the one doing the helping (Dewey 1900). Being helpful is one of the many moral values that are an essential part of a child’s education. This quality in a person causes concern not just for the task at hand but the quality and content of the work being done. Dewey goes on to explain that this quality of work must be invoked by discipline. Discipline is also essential to a society because of the need for organization and cooperation among the people within the society. If students are disciplined, work will be able to be accomplished as a cooperating group. When thinking of this idea in the general music classroom, students can do more than help themselves. If students are disciplined in their work ethics in the music classroom, they can direct their own education and that of their peers. This creates a very supportive atmosphere in the music classroom, and encourages students to be less afraid to make mistakes and more willing to try new things.

The idea of the school system being a smaller representation of society is a provoking idea. In relation to music education, Williams (2011) writes about using the large performance ensemble as the most popular model for public school music participation motivation. According to Williams, students have actually been less inclined to participate in music programs because of the emphasis on this kind of musical product and activity. Foreign countries have been especially successful in using more varied musical activities to increase interest in programs, like offering more instrumental studies and multicultural music opportunities. These ideas of applying more varied musical studies in schools have been more effective in drawing in students because of the variation in interests and opportunities to become involved in music. Keeping in mind Dewey's ideas, this would be an important consideration. Students may or may not continue to be musicians outside of the school district. Offering more varied opportunities to be involved in music during their K through 12 educational years will show them that there are always many opportunities to be involved in music as there are in the real world. Offering a varied music program for students is more in line with Dewey's ideals than just the large performance ensemble because it is more representative of what music in society will be like after years of schooling. Not only are students feeling as though they have access to various music experiences, but they are also provided with ownership of their experiences because they are authentic and can be used after their years in school.

If students are to be involved in music programs, they want to have purpose in what they do just as much as the music teacher. When Dewey speaks of school curriculum content, on more than one occasion he mentions the difference in atmosphere of a room full of children learning with a purpose and a room full of children learning material for the sake of learning the material. At one point in his writings, Dewey (1900) goes so far as to say that the difference "is

so obvious as fairly to strike one in the face” (12). The feeling in the room is inherently different because of the sense of purpose. When there is not purpose or direction to the learning, it is extremely obvious to the observer that the learning has no meaning for the students. When students realize they are doing an activity and it has a meaningful purpose, they are more intrinsically motivated to continue to work hard to master the skill. Not only are students engaged in a social activity that they care about, but they are finding meaning and purpose in what they do. This will certainly provide ownership, if only subconsciously, because students are learning to do a task that is important to them and that they are motivated to continue learning.

Children’s motivations are shaped by their experiences at home before they set foot into the classroom. Dewey (1900) agrees by emphasizing the importance of the “household and neighborhood system” (6). This is his way of saying that students bring a lot of their general education into the classroom from their home life. Children bring an immense amount of cultural and household knowledge into the classroom just by having lived at home with their families. When teachers are able to recognize this, they can use the child’s predisposed knowledge to help them find meaning in the education in the classroom. This is already an introduction into being a functioning member of society for the child, and has already been established by the time the child reaches school. Teachers should take advantage and acknowledge the knowledge that children gain from home and build upon this kind of learning especially within the general music classroom. Musical backgrounds of families in the area in a school district are often surprisingly varied and can provide teachers with a starting point when creating their curriculum and activities. When teachers recognize the cultural background of their students, they can create a relevant musical environment. Teachers should know that

children have knowledge from their lives at home before they enter the classroom, which creates a springboard for teachers to continue this kind of educational experience.

Nell Noddings (1998) summarizes Dewey's theory for education in one simple word: growth. She explains that Dewey believed that growth was the outcome of education, and that learning is growth. Noddings compared Dewey's idea of growth being that of education to Darwin's theory of life. Life leads to more life, and growth leads to more growth. This is a provoking concept when considering providing students with ownership of their education. If students have ownership over their education, then they forever have access to "growth". Students will be able to continue growing in their education after years in school if teachers are able to provide students with the ability to seek their education. Dewey's goal of education is more education, and Noddings supports this concept by providing a foundation of inspiring ownership in students. If students educationally grow in the classroom as a result of their own efforts, they will continue to seek education outside of school. This is Dewey's philosophy and goal of education, and with this as a guiding tool teachers can show their students how to continue their education outside of the classroom.

The wonderful idea that centers all of Dewey's thoughts into one concept is the idea that this kind of school system is directly related to real life. Students learn to assimilate and function as independent beings not just in society but in the lives that they create and want to have. If teachers are able to give students the opportunity to learn collectively, help each other, and direct their learning through hands on experience, then they will be able to do this for the rest of their lives that exist outside the classroom.

Leading Students to Musical Ownership

Helping students gain ownership over their musicianship is a difficult task for teachers. When teachers are trained, a big part of learning to teach is learning to take control of the classroom. If students are to learn to be responsible for their learning, teachers must learn to let go of control of every aspect of the classroom and learning experience. Blair (2009) suggests that students need to have both mindful engagement in the learning experience, meaning to learn to solve musical problems, and to contribute. If students are able to contribute to the learning experience, then they have been given the opportunity to direct their learning. If they have mindful engagement in the experience, then they are putting their musical skills to use to solve the problem. Both of these qualities are important for teachers to embed in musical experiences because it encourages students to use their musicianship skills to solve problems independently.

One of the biggest questions for teachers is how to help students become independent learners and thus enable them to gain ownership of their learning. According to Dewey (1900), “the moment children act they individualize themselves” (33). When children make their own decisions, we as teachers see them and the qualities that make them unique and the environmental influences that have shaped them. When children act independently within the educational setting, they show potential to begin to make decisions as to the direction of their learning. This is important to the child’s future because the child will learn to make decisions based on their needs in the classroom, and later in their lives outside of school. Dewey summarizes this concept by advocating for the classroom and school system to be like real life and have spaces to work out real life problems. Students will continue to strive to learn as they grow up and live in the real world if given this kind of learning environment.

Part of the job of the teacher is to generate enough interest in the learning process to motivate students to continue to learn. This can prove difficult and cause teachers to be creatively challenged. Dewey (1900) encourages educators to help children pursue their “impulses” and continue on past the imagination phase of the interest. However, it is not enough to simply indulge the interests of the students. If students are motivated to pursue their impulses and problem-solve to realize them, then they have been given the tool of independent learning. This provides students with ownership of their education.

Learning Experiences and Musical Experimentation

Experiential learning is at the forefront of Dewey’s ideal school system. Hamilton (1980) argues in favor of experiential learning as more applicable to real life situations, and places the students into roles of responsibility and goal-directed activities. In Hamilton’s definition of experiential learning, he makes a valid point that all learning is essentially experiential learning in accordance with Dewey’s philosophy. Hamilton continues to add an element to experiential learning, naming it “sponsored” experiential learning. This entails that the teacher is the guiding force for the educational experience. Students still need guidance in the classroom, but all of their lessons need to have an active experiential component that is initially guided by the teacher.

One of the most effective philosophers of experiential learning in addition to Dewey is Lucy Green. Her theories on informal music learning are exactly what experiential learning is all about. However, in Lucy Green’s (2005) discussion of informal music learning, there is an absence of a guiding adult. Informal music learning is completely social based and within groups of students without the guidance of an adult. Often these kinds of learning experiences are experimental and in the home, involve imitation, improvisation, and loose composition (Green, 2005). Even though these experiences are without adult supervision, students are given

an immense amount of ownership of their musicianship. They are guiding their experimentation and the content they are exploring. Replicating and providing the opportunity for this kind of exploration in the music classroom would be an incredible source of experiential learning for students, providing a meaningful learning experience and ownership of their learning. Some specific ways for teachers to enact these tactics in their classroom are to allow students to create “friendship groups” to work with in group projects (Green, 2005). This kind of work is most successful when students are able to work with their friends in a positive social situation.

Students in this kind of working group should be given as much freedom to complete projects as possible, projects such as cover songs or compositions. If students are able to work successfully in this type of situation with these guidelines, then they will truly have ownership over their learning. If the teacher and students are not used to this kind of learning environment, gradually decreasing the amount of teacher control would be more advisable than immediately jumping into this kind of learning technique. If students are not gradually introduced to responsibility of this kind, they may not know how to solve musical problems that are too complex. However, having this kind of learning environment as a project or goal would be beneficial in increasing students’ direction of their music education.

Creative Process and Problem Solving

If students are to have ownership of their learning, Dewey stipulates on multiple occasions in his writings that experimentation is involved in the beneficial learning process. This is directly related to and supported by Webster’s ideas on convergent and divergent thinking in creativity. Dewey is essentially supporting the idea that students should be allowed to think creatively in order to guide their learning. Webster (1990) believes that creativity is important for musical achievement through two ways of thinking: convergent and divergent thinking.

Convergent thinking leads to a single correct answer while divergent thinking leads to multiple possibilities for answers to the problem (Webster, 1990). In order for students to take ownership of their learning, creativity in how to problem solve must be involved. Teachers can give students opportunities to think creatively to problem solve in the music classroom in so many ways. Compositions, improvisation, and experimentation with instruments all involve creatively thinking and using musical skills to solve a musical problem. Students can learn to have ownership over their musicianship through creative problem solving.

Webster further supports Dewey's ideas when he describes the difference between previous thoughts on creativity and what he believes to be more important. Webster (2002) describes how most writings focused on the process and product of creativity. However, Webster is more focused on the process. This is related to Dewey's philosophies because of his focus on the process of "growth" and having students be the ones who guide the learning process. Webster is equally as interested in the process and less of the product as Dewey is. Dewey was concerned that the schooling system of his time was more focused on regurgitating information, which became the product of teaching and learning in schools. Both Dewey and Webster want and wanted to change the trajectory of goals in learning and learning processes.

When delving into the concept of creativity, students may need guidance during their initial explorations in creativity. Guidance needs to be immediate in the beginning of the process, as students can be easily influenced in the beginning of a new activity. Burnard (2006) supports that from birth, children are influenced by the environment around them. Within the context of creativity, the cultural constructs shape the student's creative experience (Burnard, 2006). Burnard also agrees with Webster's ideas about the different types of thinking processes involved in creativity, and how these are also affected by the environment and context of

creativity. If students are to feel that they can guide their creative process, then teachers must recognize the need for some initial guidance, especially in relation to the environment. As students go through more elaborate and free creative processes, they will know and be comfortable in the environment and feel more at ease with trying new concepts and guiding their personal learning.

Along the same lines as Williams, Woody (2007) describes how music teachers can create a more relatable music education experience for students. Again, this is also related to Dewey's idea of creating a school environment that is a smaller representation of society. If students feel as though they can more easily relate to their musical experiences, then students will be more likely to find ownership of their experiences. Woody advocates that using popular music in the classroom will provide students not only with authentic music experiences but also give them accessible and practical musical skills. According to Woody, "the best way to learn about popular music is to make it" (34). There are not many other experiences as authentic as students making the music that they listen to. This is a perfect example of students using musical skills that are applicable to the world outside of school. Students can truly relate to the music that they listen to by being able to create it, and learn valuable musical skills. Allsup (2011) writes a compelling argument also in support of using popular music in the classroom to help students obtain ownership of their musical skills. He suggests that teachers use tools like Garageband to give students access to technology, create new contexts for popular music such as arranging, and create relationships between popular music and classical music. In Allsup's article, she stipulates that students will "emerge with practical experience" and become mostly independent learners (31). These examples of teaching techniques not only help students relate to the material, but they also provide students with the opportunity to use their musical skills.

These ideas for the classroom truly uphold Dewey's ideals by giving students the opportunity to guide their education, develop skills as independent musicians, and give students a taste of what music is like in society outside of the classroom.

Adhering to the Individual Needs of Students

As stated earlier, the general music classroom is challenging because of the range of knowledge, abilities, and responsibility of the teacher. However, I believe that Dewey would agree that it is the perfect opportunity to enact some of his ideas on the 'democratic' classroom. Within all of the previous ideas for the classroom is the desired underlying result of ownership. Each of the ideas presented are meant to help students take pride in their musicianship and feel responsible for improving and gaining further knowledge. If students are provided with opportunities to be responsible for their learning, they are provided with independence. In order to guide as many students as possible to this goal, teachers must enact gradual release of responsibility. Because we as teachers are so accustomed to having control of the classroom, this is a difficult task to fathom. One way to go about it is to use many various ways of presenting concepts. Differentiation of instruction is essential to gradually releasing responsibility because it teaches students that there are many ways to go about learning a concept or practicing a skill. Standerfer (2011) states that "differentiation is the recognition of and commitment to plan for student differences" (43). When teachers are able to recognize their students' differences in learning abilities and processes, they can more easily help students to achieve ownership of their learning by teaching them how to help themselves in their personal learning process. Standerfer supports this idea of realizing students' levels of processing and readiness to ensure engagement in the curriculum for all students. If students are able to realize how to guide themselves, they will certainly be able to claim ownership over their learning.

Conclusion

Because Dewey was such an advocate for the ‘democratic’ classroom, he was advocating for students to own their classroom. Just as all the people in a government are involved in making decisions, as should be students in deciding the direction and content of their education. To empower students and give them the option to control their education is to give them the confidence to live in the real world and guide their future lives. As music teachers, we must understand that our students need to become independent of us. Otherwise, we have not done our job. If a student can read, learn, perform, or write a piece of music, they are empowered to go out into the world and continue to do the same throughout the rest of their lives. Without that independence, they will most likely not continue to pursue music and keep it a part of their lives. Our goal as music teachers is to inspire students to be musical people outside the classroom. Students who do not have ownership over their music education will be unlikely to continue pursuing musical interests outside of their K through 12 music education. Those who do have ownership over their learning will continue to make music a significant part of their lives no matter where life takes them.

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