PASSING IT ON: DISSEMINATING AND EVALUATING THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF THE MUSIC EDUCATION PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an innovatory approach to music education and its means of dissemination The Music Education Program revolves around shared, altruistic music making through the Music Outreach Principle. Central to this Principle is the idea of individual free choice requiring constant questioning and monitoring of participants' engagement and their opinions about their engagement. Thus the Music Outreach Principle provides an in-built, on-going facility for evaluation that is immediately of practical value. The paper describes how this continuous feedback has developed into part of the practice of the MEP as well as its practical and theoretical dissemination through a formalisation of its evaluative structure. Three levels of evaluation are embedded in the Program: first, on-going formative evaluation has a utilitarian function in providing immediate change and/or development that affects participants and is often created by them; secondly, collected data contributes to a form of illuminative evaluation that refines and disseminates practice and theory; thirdly, the widening pool of large-scale survey information and deeper critical incidents and case studies contributes to the evaluation of the impact of the program across its broad range of participants. From this evaluation model, ideas can be developed that have a wider application in other music making situations.

1. The Music Outreach Principle

The Music Education Program at the Australian National University School of Music operates across the entire educational and community sector on the basis of a very simple philosophy called the Music Outreach Principle: I make music in order that others will make music for the mutual benefit of all. The conscious intent of participants is to make music, generally but not exclusively through singing, simply so that others will be inspired to join in, with everyone sharing in the benefits of music making, whatever those benefits may be. The Music Outreach Principle can manifest itself in any number of ways: it is not an activity, it is an intent. Every music making situation can be a music outreach situation, depending on the aspiration of its participants.

Situations in which the Music Outreach Principle can be applied may include from teacher to student in a school classroom; between students of different ages and skill levels, including special education students; between generations beyond the school gate via, for example, a retirement home for senior citizens (see Fig. 1); from community members to teachers and students; and so on.

In this model of music making, everyone can engage both as music maker and music facilitator at the same time, regardless of age, musical expertise or experience. Engagement can be extremely personal where singers sing as a group but also individually with another singer, often, in the case of the frail elderly, for example, with close contact between the generations. The most important 'skill' in the interactions is quasi-musical but also highly social: that is, the degree of 'tuning in' or empathetic communication with the 'other' involved in the personal interaction but also with all the 'others' present. It is this idea of 'giving out' one's own music while 'taking in' the music of the other that allows the personal sharing of music making to occur in very large, multi generational, multi skilled groupings as well as one-on-one.

2. Implications of the Music Outreach Principle

The most important implication emerging from the application of the Music Outreach Principle is the centrality of individual choice: the altruistic sharing of music making for the benefit of another cannot be mandated. The idea of free choice includes the freedom to choose engagement in the music making and the sharing of the music making. It follows that if individuals and groups are free to choose then no particular content or activities can be mandated by either teacher or student. Developing methods by which this freedom can operate in the many and varied situations in which the Music Outreach Principle operates is an important aspect of the Program's development. Defining what happens, what outcomes accrue, without mandating those outcomes, is another.

It may well be asked: how does one provide for free choice of music making and/or outreach through music making in, for example, a primary school classroom where children ostensibly have no choice but to be present? First, we accept the notion that human beings are innately musical but that coercion of singing, while possible in the short term, is not productive in the long term. If the environment is conducive to singing, we can expect that most young children will automatically sing, and want to continue singing. If they don't, there is a problem to be solved, rather than behaviour to be, in euphemistic terms, 'managed.' The teacher does not need to spotlight the singer or the non-singer but simply let everyone 'be'. Secondly, singing is accompanied by the development of an 'atmosphere of choice' that is both implicit and explicit so that each child can find a comfortable place in which the innate desire to sing may be realized. Explicitly, that 'atmosphere of choice' includes specific questioning of each group to garner opinions on the content and processes of the music
making. Implicitly, it may include the teacher encouraging expression of personal likes and dislikes in ways that are fully expressive of each individual’s opinion while respectful of the rights of others. The empathetic underpinnings of the Music Outreach Principle are particularly important in this latter regard.

One form of explicit canvassing of student opinion involves the song repertoire used in each class room. The teacher provides songs to sing but then regularly surveys the class in age-appropriate ways to ascertain which songs the students actually want to sing; over the repertoire in each class may develop in different directions while maintaining some common songs that are shared across schools and communities. At the same time, there is an implicit understanding developed that allows students to comment on or suggest song repertoire at any time. In this way, both group and individual opinions can be accommodated. Indeed, in an atmosphere of mutual respect students can see that individual choices can be widely divergent. The teacher may offer content and activities but is always open to comment from each class and actively encourages that comment. At the same time, the teacher functions as an observer of levels of involvement to pinpoint any unspoken but palpable evidence of disengagement. This latter problem is more likely in older classes that are already somewhat musically disenfranchised and acclimatised to an education system that is more likely to mandate than offer choices.

3. Working outside the box

The Music Outreach Principle resists categorisation in musical, educational and research terms which has assisted its development since it is not limited by any particular goals. It works within a number of different systems including the school system and the tertiary education system, amongst others, but is not constrained by any one set of boundaries. The conceptualization of an evaluation platform is designed to show how working ‘outside the box’ or, more appropriately, the ‘boxes’ of other systems can contribute to these formal systems in their various ‘boxes.’

In musical terms, the Music Outreach Principle has developed through applying an idea that has a social imperative at its core. It includes a musical element that is of great importance but is, at the same time, non-essential. We can reach out empathetically to others without the use of music. The music making functions as a way of encouraging both engagement in music but also engagement between people: an empathetic, connective bridge of joint singing.

In educational terms the Music Outreach Principle contributes to the school system but sits outside of it, thus gaining some immunity from the regulatory forces at work in that system. It provides more music making in ACT schools than any other single program but has no mandated outcomes, activities, or assessment for teachers or students. Its flexible operation allows for a wide dissemination which now includes a range of groups outside the school system, as well as providing bridges between these different educational and social groups. While it can and does develop musical and educational skills, that is not its primary agenda.

In research terms, the Music Outreach Principle is applied via the Music Education Program which is part of a research-led university. However, its funding arrangements are not predicated on producing research outcomes; indeed its funding is allocated for action and development exclusively ‘in the field’ direct to teachers and students. Funding is for program and activity, not for either evaluation of, or research into, program and activity. Thus, the MEP collects data from its many participants and stakeholders, in order to enhance service to those participants and stakeholders, rather than at the service of any particular research agenda.

The lack of any one ‘box’ has allowed for much ‘cross-box’ development. Its holistic approach, its range of activities, its multiple locations, its cross generational, cross cultural, cross institutional and cross disciplinary links provide a wide framework for data collection which clearly have secondary research implications. Yet while its data does function as research material, it is not collected with that agenda in mind. The Program is action driven not research driven.

4. Developing feedback loops

The basic premise of the Music Outreach Principle is designed to encourage engagement and reflection on its activities in order to ensure the continuation and spreading of engagement. Engagement, especially through singing as the most basic and essential, but not exclusive, component of human music making, is both the goal of the program and the ‘test’ of its efficacy. If all participants are free to engage, they are also free to disengage, thereby providing an automatic, built-in, basic level of feedback. In fact, one could argue that this feedback loop is in operation with music education in general, given that the vast majority of children, whatever their educational background become musically mute adults (West, 2007).

Feedback is an absolute necessity in a program that relies on the free choice of its participants; thus, feedback loops have developed organically with and through the Music Outreach Principal. Students of all ages (including teachers doing PD) provide both solicited and unsolicited feedback in a range of forms designed to improve the offerings of the program to suit its different environments. The simple underlying principle of making music to encourage music making as a means of life enhancement does not change. The methods by which the music making is encouraged may vary, depending on the input from those making the music. The perceived nature and degree of life enhancement will also vary for each participant. In essence, the MEP asks for input from all its participants, reacts to that input, and measures the impact of its efforts in an on-going cycle in order to maximise its role as musical life enhancement.

A simple example of feedback modifying and elucidating the Music Outreach Principle involves discussion of repertoire at the primary and secondary level. At the primary level, a Year 4 class had a discussion about its repertoire to decide what, if any, songs should be discarded. It was agreed by the class that they had sung Along the Road to Gundagai more than enough, having learned it in Kindergarten and sung it on many occasions since. Following this discussion, a further discussion ensued about the song choices for an outreach visit to a

nursing home facility the next day. The teacher said, in passing, that obviously Gundagai wouldn’t be on the list. One student responded that, although the class was sick of Gundagai, she didn’t think it should be struck off the ‘outreach list’ since many of the residents would know it and enjoy hearing and singing it, a comment supported the class. The class did not want to sing Gundagai in class or at school but would happily sing it with senior citizens who would enjoy joining in.

This incident illustrates the way in which repertoire sets are developed but also highlights the group’s ability to distinguish socio-musical situations and consider the needs of others. Similarly high school students, when discussing repertoire, showed a high degree of sensitivity to different musical contexts. Over time, this sensitivity was reflected in survey design which asked students to comment on repertoire in terms of not only ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’ but the context of the singing: for example – Would you be happy to sing this song a) at outreach; b) in class; c) in front of your peers? Through this type of surveying it became clear that students were perfectly happy to sing a far larger range of repertoire in context specific situations than they would otherwise have either agreed to, or had the opportunity to, in normal circumstances. Indeed, some students have commented on the way in which the Music Outreach Principle has allowed them to experience and enjoy a wider range of repertoire than they might otherwise have been exposed to when limited by either the formal musical classroom or the demands of the peer group.

5. Examples of developments through feedback
A responsive program can be responsive to both group and individual feedback, to more and less proactive members, and to a range of different situations. An individual, for example, can make a suggestion that can be trialled to assess its impact on a larger group. Following is a list of influential ideas that have determined direction in the Music Education Program, emanating from a range of different sources.

1. The 70/7 Base Line: Through over ten years of canvassing student opinion a ‘base line’ set of songs has emerged that are generally liked at different year levels by students across the system. These simple songs do not represent a complete or compulsory set, but a starting point, particularly for teachers new to the idea of singing as part of normal classroom activity. The aim is to teach ten songs for each year level of primary school and have students going into secondary school ready, willing and able, to sing 70 songs in a group or on their own.

2. Seniors Project: The idea of the Music Outreach Principle generally involves the young going to retirement homes or care facilities and singing with the residents. One ex-student of the Music Education Program, now a young woman working with the program, proposed a different option. Why not approach active seniors, still living in the community at large, to train them in the Music Outreach Principle in order to support teachers in schools singing with their classes. She obtained a grant to trial the program and over the course of a year, reached over 300 seniors. Some of these seniors now make music with others in the community and the program continues.

3. Boys groups (see Fig. 1): Some of the secondary students involved in the Music Education Program identified the problem of the engagement of boys, particularly in singing. They proposed two solutions to try. The first involved timetabling singing sessions at their high school in a time that did not clash with other activities that boys wanted to do and that might appear more socially acceptable. The second idea that the boys suggested was using them as mentors for younger boys. Two primary schools agreed to trial boys-only singing groups and three groups: one high school group, and two primary school groups, were brought together to sing and discuss the activity. One strong comment from the group was that singing with boys helped confidence and singing ability which enabled them to feel more comfortable singing with girls.

4. Music making as potential reconciliation (see Figure 1): An very pro-active MEP trained teacher moved to Jervis Bay School, part of the ACT on the NSW coast. She instigated a range of musical activities in the school designed to help connections between indigenous and non-indigenous students and families. As with the high school students, the instigation of a men’s singing night (with boys and their adults relatives and friends) was met with a strong request from some girls for a similar group for girls and women.

5. At-risk students: Another teacher working within the MEP program, was interested in working with students in Learning Support Units, who had social and/or intellectual difficulties. She found several
schools and teachers interested in partnering with her and has written about these experiences in music magazines to disseminate her ideas. Another graduate student undertook a formal case study involving at-risk students as part of her PhD dissertation.

6. From feedback to more formal, structured evaluation

The examples given above occurred as the result of normal activity in the program. The activities were noted, supported and recorded by the small Music Education Program team in order to help teachers in the system who wanted to spread music making using the Music Outreach Principle. The nature of ‘outreach’ that arises from the Music Outreach Principle involves ‘messy’ situations of music making (see Fig. 1) that often lead to more refined skills or activities and eventually also to higher levels of cooperative, sensitive musical outcomes. Likewise, the ‘messy’ collection of feedback in more or less formal ways, sometimes planned and sometimes opportunistic, has led not only to improvements and development in the program but to the conceptualisation of an evaluation environment that includes large parts of the Australian Capital Territory and large numbers of residents therein. The aim, to borrow from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discussing Polkinghorne, is to develop ‘a theoretical edifice that is consistent with practice’ (p.15).

Data collection methods include surveys of all age groups; filmed and aural recordings of activities; solicited and unsolicited “critical incidents”; in-depth case studies of individuals and/or aspects of the program; quantitative summaries of participants and events; articles by teachers and students; formal papers; post-graduate studies; focus groups; individual interviews; and informal feedback in conversation or via email.

Figure 1: ‘Messy’ music as potential reconciliation via the Music Outreach Principal

At the most basic level, it is a responsive approach because it ‘take[s] into account and value[s] the positions of multiple audiences (Hamilton, 1977). These evaluations tend to be more extensive ...more naturalistic... and more adaptable’ (Wilde & Sockey, 1995, p. 23). Just as all participants are facilitators of music making so they are also partners in collecting and contributing to feedback. For example, the most recent ‘Big Gig’ involving over 3000 students, 50 teachers and a multi-generational community group provided a full population of feedback from the youngest participants (4 years) to the oldest (78 years) (See Fig 2).

Figure 2: Participatory concert for mainstream and special education students with full population evaluation.

This data impacts upon the day-to-day running of the program but, at the second level, it also is used as part of “illuminative evaluation” that describes and demonstrates the practices of the Music Outreach Principle, particularly in comparison to other approaches in music education. Illuminative evaluation ‘takes account of the wider contexts in which educational programs function. Its primary concern is with description and interpretation rather than measurement and prediction...The aims of illuminative evaluation are to study the innovatory program; how it is influenced by the various school situations in which it is applied...and, in addition, to discern and discuss the innovation’s most significant features, recurring concomitants, and critical processes’ (Patton, quoting Parlett and Hamilton, 1980, p.55).

Most powerful in the education arena for teachers is the idea of “critical incidents”, that can be analysed and compared with classroom practice. Thomas (1995) describes critical incidents ‘like vignettes, [that] concentrate upon episodes and especially those which identify specific pedagogical practices and which can be used to begin reflections upon the origins of those practices’ (p.5). Given the focus in the Music Education Program on development of new practice directly disseminated to teachers, the idea of critical incidents, as developed by Tripp, has particular resonance. It also offers an answer to the theory/practice divide that is mentioned in the music education literature (Henry, 2001; Young, 2003, Tripp, 1993, Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Critical incidents collected in the Music Education Program are often highly personal and infused with meaning: what teachers often rightly regard as deeply descriptive, educational, stories. The stories teachers tell often start with their own feelings of alienation from a
musical life and the way in which this alienation occurred in childhood, generally through a particular critical incident that is burned into memory (a child being asked, in various ways, not to sing, being a prime example.) Through MEP Professional Development the teacher's own story begins to change and affects her musical behaviour, thus impacting upon the behaviour of her students, who become partners in developing a new musical environment. Stories then arise through the interactions of teacher and student; or between students with those outside the school gate, giving rise to further stories told by the students themselves.

At the third level, in an academic context, these incidents can be collected, critically discussed and analysed, and help generate themes, which suggest future practical pathways, as well as provide a widening pool of evidence to analyse the impact of the program. Larger, more formal case studies also emerge, often based on exploration of the original critical incident. Rossi, Freeman and Wright (1979) describe impact evaluation as the 'assessment of the extent to which a program causes changes in desired direction in the target population' (p.16). In the context of the MEP, the concept of 'impact' applies not only to 'desired direction' but to observed direction; that is, the activity is not constrained in terms of its desired outcome but in terms of what outcome arises and its value to the participants.

7. From specific to general
One problem with evaluation models is that of generalising from the specific instance to a broader domain. Wolf comments that journals rarely publish evaluation studies because they 'seldom produce knowledge that is sufficiently general in nature to warrant widespread dissemination' (p.9). Patton (1980), however, argues that through inductive evaluative processes 'generalizations may later emerge as case materials are content analyzed, but the initial focus is on fully understanding individual cases before combining or aggregating those unique cases' (p. 41). Wilde and Sockey (1995) add that ‘multi-site evaluations of the same type of program in dissimilar contexts provide a great deal of generalizable information’ (p.37).

The MEP is undoubtedly multi-sited and involves multiple forms of data collection across multiple manifestations of its basic practical application. The ever-increasing pool of evaluation data provides a broad base to consider the wider application of the MEP model beyond the Australian Capital Territory. Under the basic, simple philosophy of the Music Outreach Principle, and 'when we give weight to local conditions' then 'any generalizations are a working hypothesis, not a conclusion' (Cronbach quoted in Patton, 1980, p. 280). The utility-focused evaluation approach ensures that likely leads are followed and new initiatives encouraged; critical analysis both 'in-the-field' and through review of collected data allows the MEP to apply findings but also disseminate findings for use and comments by others. Eventually through the widening group of practitioners and their embedded evaluative practices, suggestions can be made that are applicable and replicable beyond the ACT boundaries.

REFERENCES