

# Music Education Assessment and Social Justice

## Resisting Hegemony Through Formative Assessment

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### Introduction

Assessment in music education is a problematic and contested area. There are multiple uses and purposes of assessment, and a range of views and interests—vested and otherwise—concerning it. This chapter will consider the role that assessment, particularly formative assessment, has to play with regard to social justice purposes in music education, focusing particularly on the way that formative assessment can be utilized to resist the prevailing hegemony. It suggests ways in which assessment can be used to open the sphere of music education to democratization, and challenges some of the customs and practices in music education that have developed over the years.

To begin with, we need to be clear on the topics this chapter will be addressing. There are a number of different terminologies used with regard to assessment, and it is important to understand these at the outset. Principal among these are the two common notions of *formative* and *summative* assessment. Although these terms are frequently encountered, and to some extent understood, there are considerable differences in the ways in which understandings are applied; this is especially true for formative assessment. Summative assessment is, in essence, an assessment that *sums up* the attainment of a learner, and does so by ascribing a grade, mark, or level. Summative assessment is normally undertaken at a significant point, such as the end of a course of study, a unit of work, a term, or a year. This assessment is designed to yield data that will be used for specific purposes, as Harlen observes:

. . . in the case of summative assessment there are various ways in which the information about student achievement at a certain time is used. These uses include: internal school tracking of students' progress; informing parents, students and the students' next teacher of what has been achieved; certification or accreditation of learning by an external body; and selection for employment or higher education. (Harlen, 2005, p. 208)

It is summative assessment that often assumes primacy both in educator discourse and public perception. It could be said of summative assessment that it is well understood, and embedded into educational thought and practice. The same cannot be said of the other significant assessment terminology, *formative assessment*. This can also be known as assessment for learning (AfL) which is actually a helpful way of describing this form of assessment and what it does. The equivalent terminology for summative assessment is assessment *of* learning; and it is the differences, between *of* and *for*, that most adequately encapsulate what is going on in each mode of assessment. Assessment of learning summarizes for the audience (whoever that might be) a level of attainment of the individual. Assessment for learning, on the other hand, has as its primary focus improving learning and activity for the learner. What this means is that formative assessment does not necessarily need to involve grading, marking, or leveling. Instead, it is concerned with teacher and student discussing what specifically the student needs to do next, and how the student can take his or her learning and attainment to the next stage.

## Assessment and Testing

One of the problems that has arisen is that the use of the word "assessment" as employed in the terminology 'formative assessment' troubles conceptions that equate assessment

with testing. As Dylan Wiliam, a key researcher in educational assessment, observed in an interview published in *The Times Educational Supplement*:

The big mistake that Paul Black and I made was calling this stuff ‘assessment’ . . . Because when you use the word assessment, people think about tests and exams. For me, AfL is all about better teaching. (Stewart, 2012)

This has given rise to a situation in which formative assessment has become in practice two different things entirely: formative assessment per se, and what might better be termed as *the formative use of summative assessment*. True formative assessment, that which involves teacher and student in a dialogue about the music produced, and has as its primary aim to develop the music that the student has produced, is very different from the formative use of summative assessment, where the student is told what grade they have scored in a test, and this is then used to provide a target for the student to aim at next time a test is given. As Wiliam noted:

In the United States, the term ‘formative assessment’ is often used to describe assessments that are used to provide information on the likely performance of students on state-mandated tests—a usage that might better be described as ‘early warning summative’. In other contexts it is used to describe any feedback given to students, no matter what use is made of it, such as telling students which items they got correct and incorrect. (Wiliam, 2004)

These differences can be clearly seen in music learning contexts throughout the Western world.

## Assessment and Valuing

Allied to this issue, we have in music education an ongoing and deep-rooted history of valorization of Western art music as the highest form of achievement. This hegemonic view places Western art music at the apex, with all other forms falling short in some way:

. . . the music that is typically and unquestioningly assumed by many to have the highest status, music of the Western classical tradition, has attained this hegemonic status through its association with a dominant cultural order and has come to be one means by which such a hegemonic order is maintained. . . . (Spruce, 2007, p. 19)

Sometimes this can be stated overtly, as in this instance:

It is surely not difficult to establish the superiority of Cole Porter over R.E.M.; one has only to look at the incompetent voice-leading in *Losing My Religion*, the misunderstanding of chord relations, and the inability to develop a melodic line in which the phrases lead into one another with a genuine musical need.

But once you look at modern popular music in this way, you will come to see how gross, tasteless and sentimental it mostly is, and how far it is from our tradition of meditative polyphony. . . . (Scruton, 1996)

This viewpoint is at least clear in its valorization. There are occasions in music education where we see examples of thinking that has not even gotten as far as this, containing tacit assumptions that “West is best,” and excluding many (or, in some cases, all) other forms of music. This has important ramifications for assessment in music education, not least because, as Spruce observes:

[Classical music] still exerts its influence through the assumptions we hold about music: assumptions about the way in which musical quality is best evaluated. . . . (Spruce, 2007, p. 19)

This point is one that has been part of the discourse in mainstream music education for many years. As long ago as 1977, Shepherd et al. (1977) were asking the question of “whose music” should be studied in music education, and in 1991 Janet Mills observed that

[First] . . . in a multi-cultural society our culture is not just European. Second, a notion that high art is great and other forms of European music are not great is open to question. Third, the transmission of our cultural heritage, whatever we mean by this, is only one part of music education. (Mills, 1991, p. 108)

More recently, writing about music education in the United States, Kratus observed that . . . the music made in schools, largely based on classical, folk, and sometimes jazz traditions, represents a small and shrinking slice of the musical pie. Students perform music in school that they rarely, if ever, hear outside of school. (Kratus, 2007, p. 45)

The points raised by Spruce, Mills, and Kratus lie at the heart of what a consideration of assessment in music education for the twenty-first century should involve. Music is a dynamic, vibrant, lived culture, which has importance in terms of identity formation, socialization, and relevance to a huge number of young people, and this has been the case for many years. And yet if Kratus’s observation is correct, then the music that young people encounter in school can be a long way removed from their personal interests and

involvement. Why does this matter? It matters because if a separate category of music exists that can be defined as “school music,” then it begs the question as to why this has any relevance beyond the immediate and circular self-referential format of its own devising. It matters, too, if we want our young people to develop in music making beginning with and on their own terms, and have their horizons not just broadened, but also deepened. Let us examine this in a little more detail.

We know that young people bring with them a raft of personal knowledge, experience, and attitudes that are highly relevant to them on a personal basis. Making music falls into this category. Many young people want to make music that is relevant to their lives, and that emerges from their own experiences. This is not to say that they should be constrained within the limitations of their own knowledge and experience, but that the enthusiasm and energy they have for wanting to make music, and improve at making music, should be part of classroom ontology. This point was recognized many years ago by Mrs. Curwen in her piano method of 1886, when she recommended that music teachers “[p]roceed from the known to the related unknown” (Curwen, 1886, p. 104). As the pupils are fully acquainted with what they know, they also tend to like what they know. The job of the teacher therefore becomes that of leading them to the “related unknown.”

This finds its most obvious outworking in music education in the choice of materials for pupils to engage with. Social justice is not served if the predominant modality of musical encounter that is planned for and enacted is one that privileges Western art music culture, which (as Kratus said above) “they rarely if ever hear outside of school,” over the lived experiences and enthusiasm of the young person. As we have

seen, what all too frequently tends to occur is that there is a school-based hegemony resulting from a privileging of certain types of musical styles and genres over others. Thus Western art music tends to trump all other types; dubstep, rap, scratching, toasting, DJ-ing, MC-ing, heavy metal, and many others, become marginalized and their existence disavowed. In the urban twenty-first-century high school, many of our pupils come from non-Western cultures, and so the same happens to bhangra, dhol, township, gamelan, and many other types of world music.

But it is not only in the choice of materials that social justice issues come to the fore. Assessment practices that are based on music that is thought to be “other” in comparison can also cause problems. Assessing a dhol drummer using criteria or rubrics that were designed for an orchestral player will be difficult. What tends to happen as a result of this is that there is a concomitant stratification of assessment practices that render otherwise valid forms of musical expression as becoming inadmissible for assessment purposes; so the dhol drummer realizes that his/her performance is not valued in and by the dominant assessment culture, and retreats away from “school music.”

This is not the sole prerogative of non-Western music, though. In many music education systems, the archetypal apotheosis is the performer. It is the expert performer (in the Western classical tradition) who is highly valued, lauded, and held as paragon exemplar. Even within the Western classical art tradition, this means that the process of composing, of creating music, can often feel undervalued in comparison—only taught, if taught at all, and learned in limiting (and limited) ways, and only problematically admitted to the periphery of the canon of admissible musical experiences (as one inner-

city pupil observed in a research site I was investigating, “Does you have to be dead to be a composer?”).

## Assessment and Hegemony

So how can music education assessment address these issues, and remake itself in such a way that it is not solely the purveyor of a single hegemonic structure? One way of doing this is to begin by considering that which Spruce refers to as

. . . the manner in which musical achievement is defined and assessed [that] inevitably articulates a set of philosophical and political principles about the nature and purpose of learning, the subject being assessed, and the relationship between school and society. . . . (Spruce, 2001, p. 118)

This is the point that *Musical Futures* (see, *inter alia*, Hallam et al., 2008; Price, 2006) endeavors to address by starting from the very aspects of music that young people bring with them to the classroom. Important and useful though this is, it is not the only way in which social justice can be served. One important aspect of musical learning that can be developed is that of emerging proficiency in the music that the young person wants to make, and doing so on his or her own terms. What this means is that assessment criteria that are negotiated between learner and teacher, and are aimed at developing whatever aspects of the music are appropriate, and amenable to development, need to be negotiated. To do this, some music educators feel that they lack the necessary background and knowledge of musical styles and types other than that of their specialty. Yet music educators are teachers, and should be able to discuss with students what it is that is important in the music which is amenable to intervention. For example, with



regard to the issue of quality, key questions for music educators to ask of their pupils are these:

- What are the key characteristics of this type/style/genre of music?
- Is this a good example of a piece of music of this type?
- Is your composition/performance within the context requirements of the type/style/genre?

And a further question, to tease out understandings, would be

- Why? (Fautley, 2010, pp. 80–81)

To do this requires a shift in the balance of power, however. This does *not* require the teacher to be the sole expert arbiter of quality, but instead democratizes the process of valuing. It involves the pupil in co-construction of criteria for what will be done, what will be worked on, and what will be the focus. This point was recognized by Hickman with regard to art education, when he observed that

[i]f criteria are considered to be necessary . . . the community decides on criteria for assessment, but we need to determine the size of the community; I would advocate that the learner's own criteria be used, which means that the community is a minimum of two people. . . .

(Hickman, 2007, p. 84)

In other words, the domain of quality is not to be determined solely by external arbiters. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) argued that for creativity to occur, there had to be an interplay between the individual, the domain, and the field. The domain he saw as a “. . . set of symbolic rules and procedures” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 26). The field he defined as “. . . all the individuals who act as gatekeepers to the domain. It is their job to decide

whether a new idea or product should be included in the domain” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 28).

Negotiating criteria between student and teacher means that Csikszentmihalyi’s notions of field and domain are allied with what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as a *community of practice*. In this case, the community of practice will more properly be *communities*, as a number of different communities will overlap and elide.

What all this means in practical terms is that the application of assessment needs to shift from one in which the primary purpose is certification through summative assessment, and toward one in which what really matters is developing learning and achievement through formative assessment. In many ways, this is not a major shift in *direction* for most music educators, but it does involve a repositioning of mindset. This is because for many years summative assessment, or at best the formative use of summative assessment, has been the dominant modality of assessment discourse. In order to truly develop music education for all pupils, then formative assessment, assessment *for* learning, needs to be significantly privileged in this regard. So, how can this be achieved?

## Democratizing Music Education

To begin with, we need to question the very role of what music education is, and what it entails. For many years in the United Kingdom, and many other jurisdictions as well, music education has been both conceptualized, and legislated for, as consisting of three more or less equal components: listening, performing, and composing. This triumvirate is somewhat different from those parts of the world where music education occupies a position solely centered on performance. Although we know that performing is a creative act, there are differing levels of creativity employed. By thinking about what music is (or

could be) we start to wrestle power away from a hegemonic perspective that situates performance at the educational apex. This attitude has persisted for a surprisingly long time in some quarters, and composing can still be looked on with some doubt and suspicion; but in these technologically plugged-in, switched-on times, it is clearly untenable. The proliferation of free or low-cost music software means that anyone with a phone, iPad, tablet PC, or laptop has access to sophisticated music production apps that would have been unimaginable only a few years ago. This means that students can create, edit, and store their own music with ease; not only that, but they can do so in styles that may not even have a name-label yet. Creation of new songs does not necessarily require technique on an instrument; there are many computer programs and apps that involve variations on the drag-and-drop principle so that students can create and be original.

This democratization of the production of music places a greater responsibility on the shoulders of music educators. It is not sufficient in the twenty-first century simply to shrug, walk away, and retreat into conducting the school wind band playing great movie themes. As Woodford observes:

[music teachers] are charged with helping children to develop, warrant, and defend their own beliefs and ideas—their own values and choices—while simultaneously opening themselves up to the world and possible criticism. (Woodford, 2005, p. 31)

The music produced by young people for themselves should be worthy of as much attention in the music room as, say, the paintings and sculptures produced in the school art room warrant. We do not, in most high schools, see school artwork consisting solely of novice reproductions of Rembrandt and Rubens; instead we see exciting, relevant,

sometimes “edgy” pictures that have meaning for the young people who produced them. Assessment that follows the democratization of music for social justice purposes therefore needs to be grounded in the requirements of music production and creation, as well as in performing.

## Formative Assessment for Social Justice

So let us take a closer look, then, at what implementing formative assessment for social justice purposes in music might entail. We have already seen that the democratization of music education content matter questions a performance tradition that overly privileges Western art music. What is the role of formative assessment in developing more socially just ways of working?

In order to do this, we really need to come to grips with formative assessment—and what it is not. Much has been written concerning formative assessment, and, as we saw earlier, a lot of it misses the point. Central to the notion of good formative assessment is that quality is developed by personal human interaction between teacher and student. At the heart of this is the notion of *feedback*, or, as some would put it, *feedforward*. This takes place in the moment, as music making is proceeding, and while the process is still unfolding. Doing this renders the *process* of musicking significant, as opposed to the *product*. In many cases of summatively assessed music creation, it is the final product that is marked and graded. The processes that were gone through in order to arrive at the product can be either invisible, or ignored by the assessment regime. In the case of some examinations, what this means is that it is only the finished work resulting from the process, whether this be composing or performing, that gets any credit. When such assessment is the result of external assessment, teachers would argue that there is

little they can do about it, and they may be right. But this does not mean that in preparation for such final high-stakes examination an identical assessment modality needs to be followed. This is an especially worthwhile consideration, as there are direct causal and correlational linkages between an improvement in process leading to a concomitantly improved product. The role of formative assessment, therefore, in addressing the processes of the activities of learning, will have direct consequences for the non-process-based summative assessment that ensues.

Feedforward, then, involves discussion of improvement. We have already seen how the teacher does not need to be an expert in all styles of music in order to be able to make helpful interventional judgments in this regard. We have also seen how the students themselves can be involved in the creation of assessment criteria that help them understand what they need to do in order to get better. The implications of this are that one of the most powerful tools of assessment, and one that foregrounds social justice, is the notion of *ipsative* assessment. Ipsative (from the Latin *ipse*: “of the self”) assessment is where students are concerned with their own development and progress against their own previous performance (either in the musical or non-musical sense). Students themselves set their own baselines against which improvements are made and judged. We see this very commonly in sports, where rather than trying to beat standardized targets, athletes aim for their own “personal best.” The same is true in music; examples include the teenage guitarist practicing speeding up licks in the privacy of her own bedroom, the drummer trying to do faster rolls, the cornet player trying to play very fast passages, the pianist practicing his scales at increasing speeds, the vocalist holding notes longer, and so on. Ipsative assessment can also be used for composing and music creation. This can

include understanding how to extend a verse and chorus with the introduction of a middle eight, the use of effective key-shifts, ways in which the *affekt* of music can be developed, and many more. For composers using technology, it can include not only increasing complexity, but also more nuanced control of sound sources.

All of these examples show how involving students in the development of their own musical learning, and the importance of attention to process, can result in improved personal performance. It should also be clear from these discussions that doing this does not, and should not, represent a diminution of standards in any way; this is not “dumbing down” for the sake of it. What it is instead is using formative assessment to develop students’ personal interests in their own music making, and by doing so, taking them to the next level incrementally, so that their own music making, judged by their own standards, improves, develops, and progresses.

## Recasting Music Education Assessment in Line with Principles of Social Justice

The reconceptualization of assessment discussed in this chapter requires a shift in perspective as to what assessment in music education is, and how it is undertaken. As Freire observed, “education is a political act” (Freire, 1985, p. 188) and within education as a whole, assessment too has a political dimension, as Broadfoot points out:

Assessment procedures are the vehicle whereby the dominant rationality of the corporate capitalist societies typical of the contemporary Western world is translated into the structures and processes of schooling.

(Broadfoot, 1999, p. 64)

While this may seem an extreme stance, nonetheless the disenfranchising of vast swaths of world music, pop, rock, and jazz happens on a daily basis in music classrooms, studios, and rehearsal halls all over the Western world. Add to this the potent mix of curricular neglect and public examination valorization procedures, and it becomes clear that the dominant hegemony is busily reproducing itself in many music education contexts today. But just because something is so, does not mean that the *status quo* is right. There are ways in which music education can be reconceived from the perspectives of social justice.

One way in which teachers can take the first tentative steps in this regard is by a consideration of the question of who it is that any assessment is intended for. As we have seen, summative assessment's role is to mark, grade, or level any piece of work. We have also seen that this can play a role in developing student work if it is used in a formative fashion; however, all too often this is not the case. Summative assessment is also used for accountability purposes, of both teacher and students, as well as of the institution in which it takes place. What this means is that there are potentially multiple audiences for the same item of assessment data. For the music teacher, addressing the question of whom the assessment data is for can be reduced to three essential items:

- the student;
- the teacher;
- the system.

The students are, or should be, the most important of these, as it is their learning, their music making, and, ultimately, their grades, that should be the focus of attention. The teacher will want access to assessment data, formative and summative, in order to

monitor student performance and progression, and to determine how to tailor the work plan for the students to help them progress to their maximum potential. This is an important aspect of formative assessment. It should not be the case that teaching and learning proceed solely along linear and pre-established non-deviational pathways, although the teacher will have some idea of the route, inevitably. Instead, a good teacher will use the results of formative assessments to plan for subsequent pedagogic activity, personalizing materials so as to take account of what he or she knows that the student needs to do next, and differentiating tasks for whole classes so that appropriate challenge is available to all students in a group.

It can sometimes be the case that the systemic requirements of assessment can seem to outweigh the other audience groups, especially when dealing with school, regional, and national requirements for assessment data for accountability purposes. At the systemic level, the performance of an individual student matters not a jot; it will be subsumed within a range of statistics. For the teacher, though, the student will not just be a number, she will have a name. The teacher will know about her likes, dislikes, preferences, and foibles. This relationship matters to the success of the teaching and learning encounter, and this can be especially true in music education, where the importance of the personal should not be downplayed.

## Conclusion

We have seen in this chapter that formative assessment in music education can play a powerful role in resisting hegemony. Formative assessment undertaken in the ways suggested becomes assessment for social justice, as it involves learners in becoming agentive in the processes of their own learning, and although interventionist to some



extent, it is personalized purposefully so that the learning journey is negotiated, not imposed. It is underused in some music education contexts, and yet implementing it does not, in many cases, require a huge shift on the part of the teacher. We have also invited music educators to reflect on their own professional practice, in terms of what is taught and learned and, by so doing, to think about ways in which the contents of music education curricula publicly display the values that lay behind their inclusion. We have also reflected on the democratization of the assessment processes, and of ways in which this can be addressed.

Hopefully a consideration of the issues raised here, and throughout this Handbook, will cause music educators to ask difficult questions of their own customs and practices, and will enable subsequent generations of teachers and learners to benefit.

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