

Fall 2013

# Pre-service music teachers' perspectives of experiences in an informal music learning group

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Pre-Service Music Teachers' Perspectives of Experiences in an Informal Music Learning Group

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A Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Visual and Performing Arts  
James Madison University

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Music

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by Veronica Jane Sharpe

December 2014

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Accepted by the faculty of the School of Music, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Music.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I owe my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. David Stringham, for his invaluable guidance and support throughout the completion of this project. I would also like to thank the members of my reading committee, Dr. Jeffrey Bush and Dr. Michael Gubser, for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.

I would like to acknowledge the participants of this study for donating their time and sharing their experiences, Kaitlyn Hammack for designing my research poster, and the James Madison University Honors Program for funding my participation in the 2014 National Conference of Undergraduate Research at the University of Kentucky.

## **Abstract**

Pre-service music teachers' undergraduate preparation is often geared towards formal music making (i.e., large conductor-led ensembles). However, recent research suggests that many school-aged students are making music in informal settings (e.g. garage bands) outside of school. Despite a recent influx of research in informal music learning, there is little information on pre-service music teacher's opinions towards and preparedness in incorporating informal music making into the classroom. The purpose of this study was to examine how pre-service music teachers' informal music learning experiences shaped their perspectives on the importance of informal music learning and its role in the classroom. For this study, I observed six undergraduate music education majors at a public university in the mid-Atlantic region who participated in a student-created informal music learning organization over the course of one semester. Students each selected a new instrument and worked in small groups to aurally learn songs of their choosing. I interviewed participants before and after their involvement in this organization. Through their participation in IMC, these pre-service music teachers each developed an understanding and appreciation of an approach to music learning that is far different from what they were used to. The participants also developed musical skills such as learning music by ear and secondary instrument proficiency. I suggest that pre-service music teachers should experience and learn to teach many different approaches to learning music, including informal music learning techniques, as a part of their required coursework. Future research is necessary in order to learn more about informal music learning and its role in music classrooms and undergraduate music education curricula.

## Introduction

It was well past the end of class on a Thursday afternoon, yet nearly all of the students in beginning instrumental methods remained in the classroom. They had just read excerpts from *Music, Informal Learning, and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy* (Green, 2008) and were full of excitement, questions, and concerns. The book details a study of seven schools in the UK that undertook an informal music learning model in which groups of students attempted to learn songs on rock instruments by listening to recordings. These music education students were both intrigued and intimidated by the informal music learning model described in Green's book. Results of Green's study convinced them that learning music informally is a valuable endeavor and an excellent learning experience that they would like to incorporate into their own classrooms. However, most of them had not experienced the informal music learning methods described in Green's book.

This unfamiliarity generated concern: how are teachers supposed to teach using models that are unfamiliar to them? The students wondered how to implement informal music learning into their own future classrooms. Questions arose such as, "How much informal learning should occur in the classroom?" and, "What is my role as a teacher when students are learning independently?"

Many also expressed concerns about their own musicianship. They desired to experience and benefit from informal music learning themselves. Several students expressed jealousy towards friends who never had formal training but were skilled pianists, guitarists, and singers due to their informal music learning experiences. Some students even asserted that their formal music learning experiences did not provide them with the skills necessary to become excellent musicians.

The interest and concerns regarding informal music learning expressed during this discussion are reflected in music education literature. All of the teachers in Green's study were interested in exploring the use of informal learning in their own classrooms, but were also unsure about how it would work (Green, 2006, 2008). Other research also suggests that informal music learning is gaining interest from in-service music teachers as well as pre-service music teachers and music teacher trainers (Allsup, 2008; Cuttieta, 1991; Davis, 2005; Davis & Blair, 2011; Dunbar-Hall & Wemyss, 2000; Folkestad, 2006; Green, 2001; Heuser, 2008; Väkevä, 2006; Vitale, 2011; Westerlund, 2006; Woody, 2007). Several researchers suggest that pre-service music teachers need more experience in learning music informally as well as greater preparation to teach informal learning from their teacher training programs (Allsup, 2008; Cuttieta, 1991; Davis & Blair, 2011; Dunbar-Hall & Wemyss, 2000; Folkestad, 2006; Heuser, 2008; Jones, 2008; Väkevä, 2006; Westerlund, 2006). This research suggests that pre-service music teachers, such as those in the vignette above, generally have little or no experience learning music informally and are not prepared to teach it, although they are experienced in and prepared to teach in more formal large-ensemble settings.

I was one of the students in the methods class described above. Like my colleagues, I came into class that day full of enthusiasm and questions. Unlike most of the students in the class, however, I had experience learning music informally. My dad is a rock drummer; he inspired me to begin playing rock music at an early age. I grew up jamming with my dad and friends, learning music informally. I also experienced formal music education: I played violin and cello in my school orchestras and started taking private violin lessons in high school. However, I feel that my most meaningful musical experiences occurred outside of my formal education. My background gave me a unique perspective on Green's informal music learning

model and its use in schools. The class discussion opened my eyes to the benefits I drew from my own informal music learning experiences. I realized how essential my own informal music learning was to my musicianship and to my plans for my own future classroom. I value my own informal music learning experiences; most other students in the class had no such experiences.

Out of this class dialogue grew the Informal Music Club (IMC). IMC was founded in Fall 2012 by Vincent, a student in the methods class. IMC consisted of groups of undergraduate music education majors who made music together based on principles of Green's informal music learning model. Within a few weeks, groups of students within IMC were meeting weekly to experience informal music learning first-hand. The creation of IMC gave my colleagues the chance to experience and benefit from informal music learning like I did.

I began researching the Informal Music Club in Spring 2013, during its second semester of existence. In this study, I examined how participating in informal music learning affected members' perceptions of their own musicianship, their outlooks on informal learning in the music classroom, and their plans for incorporating informal music learning models in their future classrooms. My goal in conducting this research was to document pre-service music teachers' experiences with and perspectives on informal music learning, to contribute to existing literature on informal music learning.



## **Methodology**

There are several ways that I could have researched pre-service music teachers' experiences with and perspectives on informal music learning; for this particular study, I chose to use a case study method of inquiry. I chose this method because I was interested in studying pre-service music teachers' individual experiences engaging in informal music learning. I used a single instrumental case study design (Creswell, 2012) to study an established group at my institution, through which I could study pre-service music teachers' perspectives and experiences.

Six undergraduate students, four female and two male, participated in this study. Participants were selected based on their active membership in an existing group, the Informal Music Club (IMC); these six participants comprised the entire IMC membership. Participants in this study are not representative of the general population; each participant was a music education major at a public university in the mid-Atlantic region. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with approval of my institution's Institutional Review Board.

Students were interviewed before and after participation in one semester of IMC. Vincent, the founder of IMC, was also interviewed. Students formed two groups of three and planned to meet for one hour each week for the entire semester. One of the groups was successful in meeting consistently, but the other group only met one time during the semester. Several of the students had participated in IMC during the previous semester and referenced those experiences in their interviews. I developed interview protocols to guide the questions I asked the participants (Creswell, 2012). This gave me the opportunity to cover similar themes with each participant, but allowed flexibility to ask follow up questions based on their responses. Each interview was audio recorded and was later transcribed and coded for analysis.

## **Findings**

Based on analysis procedures previously described, five themes emerged from my data: experiencing the student perspective, learning by ear, student independence, challenges, and environment.

### **Experiencing the Student Perspective**

Many participants reported that participating in IMC allowed them to experience a beginner perspective on learning an instrument, and more generally, learning informally. Experiencing a beginner perspective allows teachers to understand their own students' points of view, giving them insight into how to structure their learning. Woody (2007) stated that teachers must challenge themselves to become learners like their students in order to become better teachers.

One of the reasons that Vincent formed IMC was so pre-service music teachers could experience a student perspective. This helped them discover successful strategies for learning a new instrument informally. Kristine, Vincent, Nico, and Lily felt that they benefited from experiencing a student perspective because it helped them explore the feelings and challenges that their own future students may experience. Nico stated, "I feel like a lot of the experiences that I had in IMC are going to be like the same experiences that any future students I have would have in a similar setting." Living these experiences themselves helped guide these students in their plans for incorporating informal music learning into their future classrooms.

### **Learning by Ear**

Learning by ear is an important characteristic of informal music learning. The groups listened to and attempted to copy recordings, which forced the members to listen critically in order to understand the music. Vincent predicted that learning by ear would make members focus more on listening, helping them improve musical aspects of their playing.

Vincent felt that learning by ear gave him a “totally different kind of comfort on an instrument.” His primary instrument is euphonium and he chose to play bass guitar in IMC; both of these instruments commonly play bass lines. Vincent felt that learning bass guitar by ear helped him become much more comfortable with hearing bass lines. He said that learning by ear forced him to explore his instrument, so he was able to discover what his instrument could do. It was through this process of exploring his instrument that he was able to become more comfortable with bass lines.

Rachel said that learning by ear was the most useful part of her experience. She predicted that gaining aural learning experience through IMC would prepare her to teach informal music learning strategies. She also felt learning by ear in an applied setting (i.e., in IMC) helped her develop her aural skills more effectively than she was able to in her formal ear training classes.

Nico stated that learning by ear is important because it encourages audiation. Gordon (2012) states, “Audiation is the process of assimilating and comprehending (not simply rehearsing) music momentarily heard performed or heard sometime in the past” (p. 3). Audiation is essential to musical understanding. Nico stated, “You don’t really think about the musicality quite as much when you’re not audiating.” He said that learning informally forces you to audiate before you play, leading to a better understanding of the music. Sheet music does not force the musician to audiate before playing, making this deeper understanding of music that Nico described difficult to achieve from a sheet music learning approach.

Luna and Lily thought they had poor ear training skills before they joined IMC, but they both discovered through their experiences that they were better at learning by ear than they thought they were. Lily was afraid of making her students learn by ear because she was not good at it herself.

Vincent felt that it is important for students to focus on sound rather than notation. He said that playing from sheet music promotes accuracy rather than musicianship, which is a backwards approach to learning music. He stated, "You really can't learn in an informal setting unless you're listening and thinking." Vincent also discussed the importance of a "sound before symbol" approach. He felt that music should be learned by its sound first, and notation should be linked to it afterwards. Vincent felt that focusing on sound instead of symbol requires creative thinking and leads to musical understanding. He said that playing only from notation can lead to essentially meaningless music making, in which the musician presses the right buttons at the right time with no consideration of the music behind the notation. He said, "I was trained to read notes on a page, to the point where it was just a black dot on the page with a rhythm assigned to it, and I would put down a fingering, and then a sound would come out."

Nico stated that in an informal setting, you must experiment with your instrument in order to find the sound you want. He felt that finding the notes to play by listening and experimenting promotes critical thinking, whereas playing notes indicated by sheet music requires little more than following direction. Nico stated that although informal learning may be more challenging and more time consuming at first, you gain skills and understanding quickly and begin to learn more quickly. He reflected, "I feel like in some ways you learn faster and you learn more intimately through informal learning."

Several of the participants felt that not having to focus on note names and sheet music actually made learning easier for them. Vincent felt that he got much better at bass, regardless of not knowing the note names very well. Luna and Lily said that learning in a formal setting was easier because they didn't have to remember fingerings.

## **Student Independence**

**The teacher's role.** In an informal classroom setting, students learn individually or in groups while the teacher observes and assists students as needed. Woody describes the teacher in an informal setting as a "guide or facilitator" (2007, p. 34). He said that in this setting, students make musical decisions for themselves, whereas in a traditional music classroom the teacher tells the students exactly how to interpret and perform the music. An issue raised by Green's study is that teachers may perceive their role in facilitating informal music learning as not actually teaching. Readers, as well as the teachers in the study, felt uncomfortable with stepping back and allowing their students to direct their own learning. However, after the study, the teachers felt that their students were consistently focused, despite not being told to focus by a teacher, and that they progressed much farther than teachers had initially expected (Green, 2006, 2008).

Vincent felt that students learn better when they direct their own learning. He stated that student-centered learning is accompanied by a very different role for the teacher, in which they observe and work with students individually, allowing students to explore and learn on their own. Nico and Lily also felt that the teacher should serve as a guide in an informal setting. Lily said that students get little individual attention from the teacher in large ensemble settings. In an informal setting students work individually or in groups, giving the teacher opportunities to observe and assist each student individually.

Luna also believed that students should experience learning on their own, but only during short classroom activities. The rest of the time, the students should be learning from the teacher. She felt that it is important for the teacher to maintain control of the classroom and direct their students' learning. Rachel said that students should experience learning in both a large ensemble setting and an informal group setting. She felt that learning independently and in small groups is

important, but so is learning and playing in a large conductor-led ensemble. She discussed how different musical skills are developed in both settings: individual and small group work encourages interaction while large ensemble work encourages watching the conductor.

**Structure.** Before they participated in IMC, most participants were unsure about how informal learning could fit into a music classroom. After they experienced learning music informally themselves, many members felt more secure about the role of informal learning in the classroom and had even developed strategies for employing informal learning in their future classrooms.

Rachel felt that her experience completely lacked structure. She said that each member of her group had different goals, which made it difficult for them to decide what to do. Lily said that she felt insecure learning in a setting without any sort of structure. She felt that young students would feel very uncomfortable trying to learn in an informal setting without instruction or set goals. Vincent said that his group struggled with learning songs because they would usually pick songs that were too difficult for them to learn as beginners. These participants learned through their experiences that it is very important to structure informal learning activities in the music classroom, rather than tell students to do whatever they want.

**Creativity and Freedom.** Several of the participants felt that learning music informally leads to greater creativity and freedom in music making. Nico felt that being in control of his music making, rather than just doing what someone else told him to do, allowed him to be more creative. Kristine believed that learning music informally helps students develop their own creativity. She stated,

I think that we kind of stifle creativity a lot through trying to teach music, and I don't think that's what we actually intend to do, but we give so much direction on how kids

should be creative, but informal music could kind of give them a chance to, be their own kind of creative, instead of what we're telling them to be.

Vincent felt that focusing on playing the music itself rather than reading sheet music helped stimulate his creativity. He appreciated the freedom of exploring his instrument and making up his own parts rather than being limited to the notes on the page. Rachel and Lily were encouraged by their experiences in IMC to apply informal learning methods to their primary instruments. They both stated that they enjoyed learning music by ear on their own instruments.

### **Challenges of informal music learning**

**Learning the basics.** An inherent challenge in learning music informally is learning how to play an instrument on your own, without help from a teacher. The most challenging part of learning on your own, as noted by several of the participants, is learning the basics of an instrument. Nico said that in a formal classroom setting he would have been taught the notes before he tried to play them. In an informal learning setting, he had to experiment in order to find the notes he needed to play. Lily struggled with figuring out how to put her saxophone together and learning the fingerings. She said that learning saxophone by herself was easier once she gained knowledge of fingerings in a more formal classroom setting. Lily suggested that informal music learning is easier and more productive after the musicians have gained a working knowledge of their instruments; before this level of comfort is reached, learning in an informal setting is very difficult.

**Intimidation and frustration.** Vincent predicted that members would feel intimidated by their deficiencies in learning by ear. Lily was not only intimidated by learning by ear herself; she felt intimidated by making her own students learn by ear as well. She questioned how

school-aged children would successfully learn by ear if an advanced musician such as herself struggled with it.

Vincent felt that learning music on a new instrument was frustrating at first, but it got easier as he got better at playing his instrument. One of Lily's reasons for joining IMC was to determine whether informal music learning could be used in a classroom without causing too much frustration. Vincent discovered through his experience that frustration is not necessarily detrimental to student learning. He said, "A little bit of the frustration, actually, I think is a good thing, as long as it's not too much or too early." He felt that frustration is a natural part of learning music informally and a small amount of frustration can actually motivate students to succeed.

## **Environment**

**Safe environment.** Luna felt that learning music informally creates an environment that is free from worrying about note names and getting things right. She also thought that peer interaction in informal settings contributes to a safe environment. She said that when musicians help one another, they learn more successfully and feel more comfortable.

**Working with others.** In this informal music learning setting, students worked in small groups to learn and perform music. Rachel stated that learning music in an informal, small group setting is beneficial because students can have discussions and make decisions about how to learn and perform the music. Lily said that a major benefit of working with others is getting help from your peers. A saxophone player in her group helped her learn how to put her saxophone together and learn basic fingerings. Receiving help from peers helped her succeed in learning a new instrument.



Rachel stated that communication plays a more important role in informal small group settings than formal large ensemble settings. She said that learning informally in a small group is beneficial for students because it encourages free interaction and builds their communication skills. Nico felt that playing music with others is a natural process, and the interaction between members flows smoothly. Luna and Nico said that IMC helped them focus on what other musicians are playing instead of being stuck in their own parts. They felt that playing in an informal setting would help students learn to listen to other musicians' parts and consider how their part fits into the music. These findings are reflected in other studies of informal music learning (Allsup, 2008; Heuser, 2008), in which most of the participants expressed that working with others helped them be more successful in an informal setting.

**Fun.** Most students begin playing an instrument because they want to have fun. Having fun while learning can help students become more engaged and motivate them to work harder. Vincent stated that one of the reasons that informal music learning is important for students is because it is fun. He said that making music in an informal setting is more fun because the musicians can play what they want and make their own decisions. Most of the participants said that they enjoyed their experience learning in an informal setting. Vincent, Lily, Nico, and Rachel all said that they wanted to stay involved in informal music learning because they enjoyed it. When asked if he would stay involved in informal music learning, Nico replied, "Oh definitely. I was involved with it before and I'll definitely be involved with it for the rest of my life. I love it."

## **Conclusions and Future Study**

When music education students in the instrumental methods class described in the opening of this paper first discussed informal music learning, they were skeptical about its use in the classroom. They were largely inexperienced with learning informally themselves, so they were not sure whether it would be a beneficial endeavor for their own students. Students who joined IMC largely represented this idea; only Nico had any significant experience learning music informally, through playing guitar in a rock band. None of them knew how informal music learning could fit into a classroom setting. Some of the students were enthusiastic about using informal music in the classroom; Vincent, for example, wanted his future students to learn exclusively through informal techniques. Others were less optimistic, and felt that the formal setting that they had learned in themselves was perfectly fine. Through their experiences in IMC, students discovered an approach to music learning that was far different from what they were used to. They identified benefits that informal learning offers that formal learning does not; likewise, they learned drawbacks and difficulties inherent to informal learning. Most importantly, these students came away with a new approach to learning and teaching music that they were unfamiliar with before.

These pre-service teachers each had years of experience in formal music learning settings and were being prepared in their music education classes to teach primarily in formal settings. However, they had little or no experience learning or teaching using informal strategies beyond the instrumental methods class mentioned. Why was informal music learning so foreign to these students? Music is learned aurally by popular musicians (Green, 2001) as well as traditional musicians around the world (Campbell, 2001). If an informal approach to learning music is so widespread, why are our future teachers not prepared to teach using this approach?

Students in this study were introduced to informal approaches to music learning all because they were introduced to Lucy Green's research in their methods class. These students experienced informal music learning and formed opinions on its use in the classroom because they decided to explore it themselves. What about the students in other methods classes that did not include informal approaches to music learning in the curriculum? The National Association of Schools of Music Handbook, which contains the guidelines for US music degree programs, does not require students to learn to play or teach according to informal music learning methods in order to earn their degrees. The NASM handbook states that music education students must gain the ability to teach using "current methods" and should play in ensembles that are "varied both in size and nature" (p. 121), but informal music learning is never explicitly mentioned.

The students that participated in IMC learned about a new approach to teaching and learning music that they now plan to use in their future classrooms. Students who are not required to learn about informal music learning and are not interested in learning about it will not learn about it, limiting possibilities for their own future students. Music teachers already know that music can be learned in many different ways. Therefore, pre-service music teachers should experience and learn to teach using many different approaches to learning music, including informal music learning techniques, as a part of their required coursework. This will help them make educated decisions about how to teach music in their future classrooms, rather than defaulting to the way that they were taught themselves.

Future research is necessary in order to learn more about informal music learning and its role in the classroom. Researchers should further investigate students' relationships with informal music learning by asking questions such as: What motivates students to learn informally that is not found in formal instructional settings? Which students would benefit from

learning music using informal strategies? What can teachers learn from students who participate in informal music contexts? How can students with informal learning backgrounds and students with more formal experiences mutually benefit from one another? We also must learn more about teachers', and particularly pre-service teachers', experiences with and perspectives towards informal music learning. Researchers should examine topics such as experienced teachers' motivation to begin incorporating informal music learning into their classrooms and the extent to which community stakeholders such as administrators and parents desire that students are given opportunities to learn music informally. Researchers should also study undergraduate music education curricula in order to expand and improve the design of undergraduate course requirements.

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