

Problematising issues of musical understanding and ‘musical ways of knowing’: an exploration of the pedagogical challenges posed by teaching students from formal and informal music learning backgrounds

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Music learning, in Western traditions, has been defined by two clearly differentiated and unique practices—the formal learning strategies and processes occurring in institutional settings—and a completely different set of informal practices found in settings such as communities and in the home. However, recent research into diverse areas such as learning theory, music cultural practices and music enculturation processes, music identity formation, popular and ethnic music learning styles and the use of music—has supported the case for many institutional settings to value, align with and cater for both formal and informal learning styles. Importantly, this acknowledgement of diversity broadens the function and appeal of music engagement in schools by more suitably meeting the needs of young people who are immersed in a range of technological, social and postmodern contexts of music learning.

Noticeably, with the inclusion of formal and informal learning strategies, institutional music educators are now more likely to engage with classes that include a mix of students from both formal and informal learning backgrounds. Problematically, these students have widely contrasting musical identities, musical ‘ways of knowing’, goals, values and technical skills. This poses a number of pedagogical challenges for the music educator. Firstly, educators may be confronted and/or limited by their own background and training, which may be confined to one form or the other. Secondly, integrating classroom practices that cater for both identities requires specific strategies.

As an educator of pre-service teachers, in this paper I describe these challenges and present reflections, ideas and solutions based on my own tertiary practice. I relate issues to my own musical identity and past experience as an informally trained (‘popular’) musician, who then made a transition to formal (‘classical’) music study and finally returned to informal (jazz based) learning. Observations are presented together with suggested implications for teaching and a call to continue challenging the issues.