

Teachers' views of constructivist theory: A qualitative study illuminating relationships between epistemological understanding and music teaching practice

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Abstract

While constructivist theory is widely promoted in pre-service music teacher education, there has been a lack of research conducted to reveal the ways in which the theory is individually personalized, then subsumed, translated and adopted into in-service classroom teaching practice. To address this shortfall, this article explores some of the ways that music teachers individually apply their understanding of the philosophically generated ideas and the cognitive concepts and principles that are broadly regarded as “constructivist.”

In seeking to contribute to professional dialogue and debate surrounding this matter, this study seeks to illuminate how a small sample of music teachers engages both theoretically and practically with constructivist views of learning. Using a qualitative approach, the researchers incorporated staged, informal interviews with invited teacher participants. Preliminary analyses of interview data were returned to the participants for review and further commentary. This process was designed to contribute to both the trustworthiness of representation and to enhance the transactional process between participants and researchers. The commentaries are designed to problematize issues, raise points for discussion and the article concludes with implications for practice in schools and universities.

Keywords

Constructivism, music education, music pedagogy, pre-service music teaching

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Based on our observations from work in schools and in tertiary courses, we were struck by the contrast and variety of ways that constructivism is theoretically understood or espoused and how it is implemented in practice. While the process of turning theoretical principles into embodied actions is highly subjective, the ways that individuals take charge of this process is an important professional step for teachers. In addition, there is also little understanding of how those pre-service teachers structure and justify their practice once they are professionally placed. Revelations of the ways that teachers experience this process can inform actions in tertiary education, and in continuing education.

The article examines individual cases of constructivism as personal epistemology and perceptions of constructivism in practice. The meanings, understandings, complex inter-relationships and points of contention that arise from this study of authentic, “real life” issues are intended to provide pre-service teachers and those working in pre-service teacher education with important points of entry into the dialogue as we seek to address and socially construct meanings about the theory/practice divide. We begin by outlining the theoretical frame that informs our inquiry. This is followed by a description of the methodology utilized. The data is then presented in a way that privileges the voices of the participants and researcher commentaries. Points raised offer opportunities for readers to create further interpretations, dialogue and discussion.

Theoretical frame

In order to explore this topic, it is necessary to accept the scope and complexity of the topic *constructivism* (see Fox, 2001, for a wide-ranging discussion and critique), and the challenges that teachers face as they form an overall teaching and learning standpoint.

We relate to Schwandt’s (1998) comment that “what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective. Knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind” (p. 236). Constructivism is then an anti-objectivist paradigm that according to Denzin and Lincoln (1998) “assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities) and a subjectivist epistemology (knower and subject create understandings)” (p. 27). From a relativist position, constructivism links the knower and known by assuming meaning to be a personal, individual construct rather than external to the individual and part of a mind-independent reality (see Kincheloe, 1991, p. 27). However, meanings are not simply subjective and personal but socially generated constructions within the interplay of consciousness and the object of experience (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Hence, knowledge is not just created by the individual mind but is a process of social exchange.

Additionally, we acknowledge that translation of learning theory into embodied action is a highly subjective process and the ways that teachers personalize, individualize, subsume and implement this process into their in-service classroom teaching strategies is an important professional step.

Individuality, diversity and difference are acknowledged, and we assume that each individual *constructs* personal meaning and hence, due to the notion of *multiple realities*, there will be as many versions of constructivism as there are alleged proponents.

Methodology

Our qualitative approach is rooted in our constructivist epistemology with the assumption that knowledge, meaning and understanding are “individual constructions of reality” and that “knowledge is constructed rather than discovered” (Stake, 1995, p. 99). It follows that as researchers we view our own constructions and understandings as inseparable from our ways of working and with ownership of our subjective positioning, we do not engage in the research process as “flies on the

wall.” We recognize subjectivity and are consciously evaluating each participant’s perspectives against our own – not against a benchmark or finalized “truth.” Our commentaries emerge from the bias of our analytical lens and with awareness of this, our aim is not to uncover any “correct” approach to implement theory, but to offer the outcomes of our curiosity in exploring the issues as matters for on-going dialogue.

For the purpose of this study, three music teachers were initially invited to participate in the study. Small-scale sampling was chosen as we sought rich and detailed data that respected individuality and idiosyncrasy and “particularisation rather than generalisation” (Stake, 1995, pp 7–8).

We selected the participants based not on our prior understanding of their perspectives about constructivism but because they are quite different in respect to music teaching experience and they represent professionals working in quite different education contexts. Importantly, when invited to participate, they each expressed a willingness to discuss “constructivism in theory and practice.” We decided to focus on presenting only two participant cases, largely due to limiting the length of the article and because the two presented here, Seline and Joshua (pseudonyms) offer widely contrasting approaches that present us with an array of *puzzlements* (Stake, 1995, p. 3) and opportunities for commentary and further discussion.

We interpreted the data by utilizing *narrative synthesis* (derived from Polkinghorne, 1995, and elaborated upon in Cleaver, 2009) that derives themes from “within” the data and moves “outward” from each participant’s experience to wider concepts. This equates with the process of finding elements within storied data to form a further story or “picture” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). This system of data interpretation seeks to retain focus on the intrinsic idiosyncrasies of individual teaching practice and experience.

The study was directed by focusing on the following questions:

1. What are music teachers’ perceptions of and attitudes towards a constructivist theory of learning?
2. What is the relationship between teachers’ espoused theory of teaching delivery and their design of practical learning experiences?
3. To what extent do the teachers’ perceptions and attitudes seem to be embodied in their teaching practice?
4. What are the suggestions for music teaching and for music teacher education?

These questions were at the forefront of our thinking as we engaged with the perceptions (and stories) of our participants and ourselves. The commencement of analysis began “in the field,” at the informal interview with both participants, and later from reviewing the transcriptions.

After the interviews, we returned to the participants with the initial commentaries to allow them to respond and comment in return and these are incorporated into the discussions that follow. This contributed to the trustworthiness of representation and also the intertwining of our understandings together with those of the participants. In this manner we were “joined together in the process of co-construction” (Amos Hatch, 2002, p. 150). While we have sought to privilege the experience and perspectives of the participants in a process of “transactional validity” we also privilege our own perspectives, our role as critical commentators and the process of problematization. For the reader, we stress that our observations and analyses do not always result in “sympathetic resonances” as often we raise new questions and points of dissonance or philosophical contention that are designed to “trouble certainty.” These are terms used by Barrett and Stauffer (2009) who also remind us “in a state of sympathetic vibration, we would experience agreement only and never deal with any issues . . .” (p. 3).

We have undertaken to anonymize the participants, varying and minimizing contextual information to protect their identities. Large segments of transcript are included as they reveal our respect for participant voice and are the vital part in this transactional process.

Seline – melding pragmatist underpinnings to constructivist practice

Seline is a music teacher in an independent secondary school. She is an active musician, as well as a successful and respected teacher. Her classes are highly popular and many of her students graduate to continue their formal studies in music. Seline adopts a teaching approach that is loosely informed by the Kodály methodology but this has been honed and customized over more than a decade of experience. With content and methods that are drawn from the Western Art music tradition, her approach is also fuelled by aural traditions of global folk music, as well as a variety of genres such as film, pop music and contemporary, “progressive” styles.

Seline began by discussing the issue of teaching “mixed ability” classes. This revealed facets of her approach:

Teaching . . . a class of “mixed ability” is such a hard job, but the only other alternative is to do it all by accident and maybe I am too much of a perfectionist and I think I can’t let learning happen by accident; I need to actually feel like I’ve taught it to you to stop the frustration. Because at the other end of Year 12 you expect them to know all of this stuff; I need you to know where the augmented chord is and **the only way for me to expect you to know that is if I’ve actually taught it to you.**

Here Seline reveals significant markers in an understanding of her role and the relationship between the teacher and learner. Importantly, our bolded text highlights a personal responsibility for, and a deep interest in the outcomes of her teaching. In our minds, there are tensions that exist between pedagogy as *transmission* and perceptions of learning as the *creation* or the *discovery* of knowledge. Also, is it possible or reasonable to expect, that each student develop a personal and therefore individualized construct and understanding of the musical concepts? We referred to Wiggins (2009) who recommends, “fostering and enabling learners to construct their own understanding,” but questions “whether traditional approaches to music teaching take this understanding of learning into account” (p. 4). Seline’s response was:

Fundamental questions remain . . . Is it more efficient, effective and empowering for learners to construct their own understanding un-taught, or a facilitator to guide this process carefully with a deep knowledge of common stumbling blocks?

Here, there is an important point regarding “facilitation,” which has become cornerstone in common perceptions of the role of a constructivist teacher. For Seline, the operations of the guide and facilitator are to help avoid “the common stumbling blocks.”

We believe that some students might naturally adopt a more auditory, less cognitive but intuitive understanding of the augmented chord (for example), one not gleaned through any theoretical, technical and formalist engagement.

An “intuitive” way of understanding an augmented chord certainly works . . . for some . . . a select group of people who have a wonderful propensity to learn “in spite” of teaching. Ella Fitzgerald, Bono, Maroochy Barambah and Mozart can demonstrate their “knowledge” (“doing”) of an augmented chord by performing intuitively. But let’s not get confused, I need to use a model that works for everyone in my classroom, not just those students who “get it” intuitively anyway. . . .

. . . Does the true constructivist really skip straight to intuition as an expert, without underlying careful instruction and guidance?

This response points to the variety of abilities and learning styles that may exist within a class and the complex process where the music teacher, when striving to accommodate this diversity, must either blend teaching strategies or develop a “model that works for everyone.”

We asked Seline directly about student-centered learning. We sought to know how she links this to the concept of constructivism.

I’m sort of in two minds about student centered; I don’t know sometimes when people ask me is it a student-centered class, is my class student-centered or not? I don’t know – if you look at a music classroom it looks like me with a music stand standing up in the front and I’m directing, you do that, you do that, you do it by yourself. It looks like that and it looks like it is very teacher-directed. But at the same time it’s all about the students having to do things individually. I am saying you do that, you do that; so in some ways it is ultimately completely student-centered and in other ways very much teacher directed.

While Seline’s practice is to explicitly direct, control and lead from the front, ultimately, the students have to “do things individually” and it is not learnt until the student “figures it out.” Later, when commenting on the nature of music education and student-centered experience Seline added; “

I don’t know [about student-centered learning], that’s the nature of music isn’t it . . . people often have . . . I don’t know . . . if you are in an ensemble you need to have someone who is going to lead. Who on earth will count us in?

Seline highlights a paradox that might exist in a blend of traditional and constructivist approaches within the classroom. While the traditional classroom and (particularly) ensemble direction requires the teacher to “lead from the front,” ideas of constructivism ask us to be closely mindful of “teacher power and learner agency” (Wiggins, 2009, p. 23). An issue that teachers might face, Wiggins suggests, is where they can “get in the way of learning” by positioning themselves between the student and the music and when “students spend more time doing what the teacher directs them to do than they do interacting directly with music through engaging in musical thinking” (pp. 23–24). To this point, Seline responded in detail:

Looking at the 5-year journey of my students, we move from teacher-centered in Year 8 when students need tools to express themselves, to a very much constructivist approach in Year 12 when students have been equipped with skills that give them a launch pad to act more experientially. I [also] run a co-curricular composers group where students negotiate their own journeys in their own time. I also observe students who entered Year 11 Music and who have not completed my junior programme. Anecdotally, the difference is sublimely powerful. The “non-gifted” Composer’s Group students fumble in the dark without a torch. Their work is rarely resolved. The unskilled Year 11 newbies are frustrated at their inability to keep up without the requisite tools in their toolbox. A freeform composition project for them is stressful and non-empowering (and un-interesting from an audience perspective). “Getting in the way of their learning” is the only way to make these students feel worth as musicians.

Seline expresses the need to flexibly re-position herself between radical constructivism and objectivism, as her understanding is that the requirements for the earlier years are different for those of senior students.

When asked for a broad, personal description of constructivism and how learning is constructed, Seline responds associatively with what she calls the “light bulb going on” moment. This is the time when she notices that her students “get it.”

In a music specific context I am thinking about individuals constructing their own learning, that's my understanding, which is really very important.

I suppose as a concrete example if I'm talking at a class giving you information it is never until I actually come around to an individual and see them working through that themselves, through *examples* of playing, auditioning or whatever, that you start to actually see the light bulb go on.

That individual is then constructing and using all of those bits and pieces and constructing their own learning which is much more effective than me just saying this is what a major second is and this is how you play it on the piano, which doesn't mean anything.

Importantly, the association that Seline makes is that practical engagement is a vital component and that a particular *constructivist moment* takes place when information (presented by the teacher) is *worked through* and becomes connected and subsumed into practical and performative action.

The "light bulb moment" is a feature in Seline's story of constructivist principles and she suggests that these moments are a result of the students coming to understand the concepts that had been presented earlier (and they were then able to demonstrate this understanding through subsequent practical engagement with the concept). This description seemed to indicate a deductive approach to teaching and contrasts with the finding by Prince and Felder (2006) who suggest that inductive (discovery, learner-centered, active, problem-solving) methods more readily align to a constructivist epistemology. While not countering Seline's constructivist claims, we note that she takes a pragmatic stance to teaching within the constraints of her context (as, we suspect, most teachers do). Also, while it may be the case that "in practice, neither teaching nor learning (are) ever purely inductive or deductive" (Prince & Felder, 2006, p. 124), we wonder whether music concepts, learned deductively will foster different meaning relationships between the student and music than if the concepts are understood through inductive processes. Will the learner/knowledge relationship be different in each case? A point for contention is that learner agency and musical identity formation are components to be considered by the "constructivist" music teacher who works predominantly through inductive processes.

The notion of curriculum and teacher-centered education arises as we consider the relationship between constructivism and context. Seline's school has a particular and clearly defined educational culture, tradition, and identity. Interestingly, she reminds us that her approach and repertoire choice is markedly different from her predecessors at the school "and in this sense, is not so traditional." We notice that Seline's expressed interest and ability to navigate the management of mixed ability ranges of her students is a facet of her quality as a teacher, particularly when the structure demands that they must achieve the same benchmarked standard, through the same methods and through the experience of the same curriculum content. An example where the students "fit the curriculum" is given:

I love it when the kids have been involved in music making and I'll use an example. A couple of years ago we learnt all of the main themes to a Tchaikovsky Symphony and the kids knew all of the melodies back to front and could write them out and play them; and because I am big on the hand signs, lots of hand signs et cetera.

And we went to see a local Orchestra play the Symphony at the Concert Hall and I had about 20 or 30 kids sitting there in the back rows so they couldn't annoy anyone else. They were loving the guts out of Tchaikovsky and were sitting there hand signing away and conducting and I just thought it is such a concrete way to engage with that music; it is so different to just sitting there and letting the music wash over you and not appreciating it from the inside.

The students are skillfully trained to respond in a certain way to a piece of music that is well known to them. With this process, they assimilate a specific way of understanding music, which is being able to hear particular themes within the music and to recognize and relate to it as a particular set of pitches, intervals and hand signs – *this is do, this is mi*. With this formal design for listening, the emphasis is placed on identifying specific parts *within* the music and we wonder if this may preclude any preference to hearing the music as a whole.

Students hear music as a whole in most parts of their day and night . . . Why would I want to leave them at this superficial level of understanding? Students bring that understanding of “the whole” to the classroom and then we delve deeply. They get immense satisfaction from the rigour. They yearn for a deeper level of understanding and this deep, music-specific understanding is cultivated over years. When music is re-constructed, it becomes so much greater than the sum of its parts, so much greater than the “whole” that students thought they knew.

We understand that this learning design includes understanding the parts within the whole and the objective is achieved when the students listen, understand and respond to the music in a specific way. Whilst discovering and developing a personal approach to hearing music may very well be part of their music education, this extract draws attention to a tradition that serves the purpose of the development of acute listening skills that can be judged against a particular objective benchmark of “aural understanding.” Recognition of specifically targeted “components” within the music promotes a cognitive response (good audiation) and the engagement is predominantly with the formal construction of the music. As students listen they should follow the unfolding form as the considered meaning of the music is essentially assumed to be within an understanding and appreciation of, and the listening to its formal construction (Davies, 1994, pp. 325–326).

While this type of musical training is adapted from a traditional Western Art tradition, does it hinder appreciation and understanding of other cultural styles, which are not approached in this way? For example pop and rock styles are not typically approached in this way but through learning as *osmosis* (Green, 2001, p. 100).

As stated, my students delve deeply into every style of music and find the same deep layers of meaning in pop and rock through analysis of harmony, melody, rhythm, etc. I cannot accept that osmosis is an acceptable approach that would be advocated by an instructor of music education. I work daily with professional musicians who have learnt via osmosis and the hallmarks of that approach are 1) inefficiency in learning, 2) inability to deconstruct, 3) frustration, and 4) ineffective music memory and inability to chunk musical information, unaided by symbols (either in your head or verbally or on the page). Although these musicians “made it” as the select group who learnt their craft “in spite” of music education, what about the vast majority of music students who require a crutch to help them?

With these comments we return to Green’s (2001) argument that the “learning practices of the [informally-trained] musicians are indeed more natural than many of those associated with formal education, more akin to the ways in which very young children pick up language, and draw more heavily on enculturation experiences” (p. 100). In consideration though, we do not see this as part of the agenda of the context that Seline works in and importantly, the teacher’s role in osmotic learning would require a different position with regard to teacher intervention and control of the learning.

Although Seline includes a wide repertory of musical styles in her practice, she is mostly aligned with a Western tradition where music learning is regarded as being “a specialised activity” (Seddon, 2004, p. 212). Seddon argues that many individuals have been alienated by feelings of inadequacy or exclusion largely generated by the notion of music as a specialist practice (p. 212). However,

Seline's approach is adapted to her particular educational setting and with this type of musical education, she excels – as do her students.

Joshua: Constructivism is creation

Joshua is an experienced music educator, having undertaken a variety of teaching roles. These include employment as a classroom and studio music teacher, as an *Australian Music Examination Board* (AMEB) Examiner and music curriculum writer. He is now involved in school leadership. Joshua appeared to enjoy engaging in robust dialogue about philosophical matters, as well as the practical issues of music teaching. At the time of interview, he was not teaching music and his contribution is perhaps correspondingly reflective – that is, he was viewing his beliefs and practices in music education from a slight distance. Joshua has experienced teaching music over many changes of curriculum requirements, and changes of government. He draws on his perspectives about “best practice” in education, as well as past experience while articulating understanding of constructivism.

Joshua begins by providing a general comment about his understanding of constructivism:

I believe it is making meaning out of your learning as you learn. Almost like subsuming what you know into what you already have learnt. So that every time you learn something, whether it's by discovery, or by what other means, you have to take it into what you already know. So things are not learnt in a vacuum, they're learnt based on what's already there and built on.

Joshua separates the notion of “to learn” from the “making of meaning.” You learn and then you “make meaning.” From there a “subsuming” occurs where the already known and the new meaning fuse together. It appears that for Joshua, constructivism includes this subsuming process where it is *meaning* that is most important. From this point, the idea of “building upon what is already there” indicates that contained within his idea of constructivism is the important notion of learning and teaching as a scaffolding process.

Joshua then describes his idea of constructivism as it is utilized in his practice. He states:

I've always been – play someone a piece of music and let them engage with it – react to it. Then if you want them to do something like “determine the style,” let them hear several pieces and see if they can talk about it and come up with things we might have in common, rather than try and squash things.

Here, conceptual understanding in context is placed in the foreground and individual response, discovery learning and the autonomy of the learner are recognized. “Finding things in common” highlights what Wiggins (2009) identifies as a social constructivist view where learning operates in a framework of shared or mutual understanding of the learning situation, including a shared understanding of the problem to be solved (p. 22).

Later, Joshua continues to define his understanding of constructivism by highlighting what *it is not*. With this direction he refers directly to the AMEB (which adopts a fixed syllabus approach) stating that it is:

. . . very anti-constructivist because it doesn't ever see the whole. It doesn't ever ask for personal engagement, it just asks for minutia and learning minutia and often you never get to the whole.

Here, Joshua aligns constructivism with a holistic approach and we note his critical disassociation from fixed curriculum and repertoire-centered learning designs. For Joshua, constructivism seeks to integrate all aspects of music, and the pedagogy does not separate it into parts.

I used to always try and teach things in an integrated way – as far as possible, so that if someone was playing something, and liked the style they were playing, I'd encourage them to have a go at writing something in that style. Ditto if they listened to something they liked or if they were composing something, or I'd suggest pieces they could listen to that were similar. I always avoided having the theory lesson or the listening lesson or the composing lesson because I think they were artificially based.

Again, when discussing fixed curriculum and repertoire-centered teaching, Joshua reveals how the tendency to analyse music into parts is embedded within the tradition and many teachers raised in that tradition retain it despite what he refers to as “new schools of thought in music teaching.”

[Teachers] who come through the AMEB system and still teach the way that they apply it to the classroom. Then there are those who like structure and order and so teach everything as though they were teaching analysis. So, you know, if you want to compose, first of all you have to analyse and when you know how to do a 12-Bar Blues then you can write one, but if you can't work out what it is, you can't write it.

In this line of discussion, Joshua then becomes critical of methodological applications in music education, expressing an opinion that:

Kodály is not really a constructivist either, to my understanding . . . [the approach for gaining understanding is] a pattern that never deviates and there's always an absolute that you want and you teach them that.

We believe that this is a comment about the heart of traditional objectivism. The ontological and epistemological assumption, where the teacher retains a notion of “an absolute” to which they lead students toward, has been the significant and dominant pedagogy and curriculum-driver within the Western Art Music tradition. Focusing on this point, Bowman (1998) recognizes that an objectivist understanding of music places it ontologically “outside the mind” and epistemologically as having meaning existing independently of any consciousness. He recognizes that an ontological and epistemological gulf between mind and body is created and this leads to a detachment from music as it is “actually lived or experienced” (p. 300).

Joshua is also highly critical of the uncritical adaptation of methodologies by teachers generally and appears baffled by the tendency of music teachers to adhere to strict systems and methods, when music is inherently a creative discipline:

. . . there are still people [who] adhere to a methodology, if you like, even if they don't think about it and I don't believe they really do think about it.

The need to underpin one's practice with reflective thought is suggested, and when defining specific practices in music teaching and learning, Joshua points out that a methodological approach works when conducting formal music analysis although in his own practice, he does not go about analysis in a strict, formulaic manner. However, he believes that those teachers who “miss the point” of constructivism and who teach methodologically find composition to be very stressful:

[Teachers are] not concerned about [managing] performance, they're not really concerned about musicology but they're freaking out at composition . . . because they feel they don't control it. They don't know how to control it and they don't know how to teach it.

He goes on to discuss composition, equating it with creativity within a constructivist approach, and the difficulty of achieving that with methodological absolutism.

I don't understand how you can successfully teach composition using [only a particular methodology]. It's fine for teaching certain things, and it has its place in terms of developing aural skills and things, but when we talk about music education, it's so vast, you know, is it performance we're talking about, or composing or whatever. Because to me composing is always constructivist – the way you make sense out of it . . .

Joshua continues the point about acknowledging subjectivity by relating it to his processes when teaching English. This moves toward the necessity for personal interpretation in order to develop a personal voice.

Similarly, in English I never told them what the poem meant, they had to work it out for themselves and then we'd look at different interpretations. But it was always – what does it mean for you first and let's read the poem, the whole poem and understand it, rather than analysing it. [And personal interpretation is important because] I think there's no point of engaging in the arts if it's going to be second hand.

Later we find a comment where interpretation is bought back to the field of music. It includes insight where the ability to interpret music is viewed as an act of autonomy as Joshua identifies constructivism with “freedom from the score,” and from other's interpretations of music:

I've never been overly fond of adherence to the score, once you know the score . . . I would never tell them that there was a story to music. I'd let them listen to it and react to it and then maybe later on say, this was someone else's interpretation. I have always found it odd that people, in such a subjective, emotional kind of subject, are so concreted and so restrictive in the way they go about it.

Joshua then makes a comment about creativity and appears to separate it from “reproduction of the score” and transmission of a tradition:

It comes down to what your aim of music education is . . . The extent to which it's going to work depends on the expectations of what you want out of the course. If you want to reproduce what's happened in the past it's not as good if you want someone who's going to do something creative – I think the essence of creativity and being new and fresh is constructive.

Joshua ponders why teachers might be restrictive in music education, and associates it with a lack of confidence and a tendency to rely on “how I was taught,” even if this contradicts the theory and approaches visited in university study. Joshua notes that constructivism survives when there are conditions that support it – including a supportive curriculum, and supportive teacher.

In conclusion, Joshua has very clearly defined ideas about constructivism and “best practice” (he sees the two aligned). He has reflected on the ways that creativity and constructivism (particularly through composition in the classroom) should be integral to good educational practice. He also has engaged critically with thinking about others' practices, particularly in terms of adherence to methodologies and approaches in music.

Points for discussion

In this article, we engaged with just two teachers' perspectives of constructivism in practice. In doing so we have illuminated some of the intricate complexities of constructivism and the way that teachers (out of necessity) often wrestle with the competing demands and structures, in delivering the best education that they can. It is often difficult for teachers who claim to be constructivist to teach constructively all the time, when dealing with the realities in the classroom. Indeed, as

teacher educators, we are sure that we often fail to be as constructivist as we would like, given the constraints and expectations of our own institutions and timetables.

From our participation in this study, we note several imperatives about constructivist teaching strategies and designs for learning.

We recognize that the *scaffolding* and *facilitating* of learning are important components of *all* good teaching and that these are not solely confined to a constructivist teaching practice. The question is raised whether scaffolding and facilitating within a constructivist practice have different ideological functions than when the two are part of a more traditional context. If we consider a metaphorical, epistemological continuum line (after Golding, 2007) drawn between radical constructivism and objectivism, we suggest that it would be productive for teachers, through reflection, to philosophically position themselves on the continuum. For example, with regard to facilitation, if knowledge of music is assumed to be a construction by the individual mind (an assumption lying closer to radical, subjectivist constructivism) then students will be facilitated in building constructions (*their* realities) through acknowledgment of subjectivities, individual interests and identities in music. On the other hand, when placed further toward the objectivist end of the continuum, with assumptions of knowledge as a mind-independent reality, then the intention will be to lead students towards objective, fixed musical standards. In this case, facilitation is included but it assumes more control of the direction and “becoming” of the student.

It is also helpful to know the epistemological positioning expected by the teaching context as the professionally placed music teacher may be left with vague assumptions about purpose and the complexity of “fitting in.” The result may be tensions created by issues, expectations and contrasting purposes that eventuate from the degree of distance between points on the continuum. Additionally, as Seline had indicated to us, some teachers may prefer to adjust the degree of constructivist strategies, believing that different age groups require different levels or degrees of personal autonomy over learning and hence teacher control.

We suggest that navigating the issue of whether a teacher/curriculum-centered or student/learner-centered approach will be appropriate will require broad and wide epistemological understandings of classroom issues. These will include due regard to knowledge transmission (“blank slate” and “banking system” theories); teacher power and learner agency; education as development of “independence and autonomy;” the way meaning is creatively generated from factual information; the social and individual nature of learning and also “democracy in the classroom” – to name but a few areas.

Importantly, we also recommend that dialogue must continue about the flexibility required from contemporary educators. Pre-service teachers from traditional, curriculum-driven and methodologically-trained backgrounds might consider including informal ways of learning. On the other hand, music teachers from informally-trained backgrounds might consider strategies suited to those students who respond more to teacher-directed activity, and who naturally gravitate to structure and analysis.

Coupled with the requirement of flexibility is that effective music educators today (in a post-modern, technological landscape) must pay attention to assisting student agency in “constructing an identity in music” rather than simply focusing on “training” students to become a particular kind of musician with particular skills. This comment is intended to break the shackles of the Expert/Novice, Master/Apprentice tradition in music teaching and learning, only insofar as it asks us to evaluate what might be outmoded, undemocratic structures when using such traditional concepts. Additionally, we should also acknowledge those traditions that determine that “what is important is the experience of submitting to the discipline of a subject and becoming the kind of person it is supposed to make you” (Young, 2008, p. 20). This can often be included as the hidden agenda within curriculum structures.

Supporting these claims, Wiggins (2009) reminds us that

Constructivist teaching is more about a way of being than it is an approach. It is genuinely seeing yourself (as a teacher) as working side-by-side with thinking individuals whose ideas matter – in fact whose ideas are central to the learning/teaching process in which you are engaged. Traditional visions of learning and teaching can skew this relationship despite our best intentions. (p. 23)

Recognition that constructivism is a “way of being” is an important statement about the depth at which one is required to be embedded in the principles. It is interesting to note that this concept has been largely abandoned by many national, state and local authorities who now mandate a return to traditional visions of “one-size-fits-all” learning and teaching standards that potentially will “skew the relationship” with thinking individuals (teachers) whose ideas matter and whose personal music teaching identity should be respected. The democratic component of constructivist education is at stake and we have concerns about the impact this will have on teachers already embedded in constructivist principles – but more importantly on future music students and music education in general.

Implications for practice.

In this study, certain issues have surfaced and it is recommended that pre-service music educators might consider these issues in order to develop their own perspectives. Firstly, we conclude that in order to close potential gaps between theory and practice, constructivism is best not studied as isolated, technical and methodological theory abstracted from reflective, self-inquiry. Areas to more closely evaluate could include: one’s personal understanding of power relationships in the classroom; discovery of one’s teaching “personality;” recognizing and acknowledging one’s individual history, enculturation into music and identity *in* music and music education; defining the purposes of music education and the requirements of particular contexts and also one’s inclinations toward teaching strategies and learning designs. To outline this recommendation further, we suggest that professional development should include *teacher performativity* – consideration of “who (teachers) are, what they value and why they establish their classroom culture and climate in the ways that they do” rather than concentrating on *teacher performance* – “what (teachers) actually do in classrooms” (Burnard & White, 2008, p. 674). Importantly, performativity will help foster the development of a well-grounded personal ontological and epistemological position. Outcomes of this process would hopefully be commitment to practice, flexibility when managing different professional contexts and also the understanding that will help develop creative and alternative pathways to managing the future and rapidly changing educational landscapes. Additionally, the conceptual ideas that underpin traditional and progressive music education designs should be judged carefully against the mobility of social, cultural, political, technological and economic factors. If we ignore the place where our ideas and these factors converge (the point of intersection is *the student, the classroom*) then the effectiveness of music teaching and learning will be compromised.

We recommend student agency in decision making about constructivism *per se*. It is notable that there is literature that suggests, for example, that constructivism is not working and “there is absence of empirical evidence of its effectiveness” (Mathews, 2003, p. 51) and also that learner-centered teaching in fact inhibits academic achievement and the “. . . noble ideals (of learner-centred education) do not translate themselves into reality” (Horn, 2009, p. 512). In addition, many texts both discuss the objections to and problems with implementing constructivism in the classroom (see Selley, 1999, p. 37, as an example) and instances where the “exclusive inclusion of

constructivism is not needed because demonstration and imitation are appropriate” (Selley, p. 35). Contentions such as these can be studied – presented as problems to be engaged with (albeit “constructively,” we contend). In the same way, student-centered and curriculum-centered theories and designs can be contrasted and evaluated in individual and collaborative inquiry. Pre-service music educators should critically position themselves with regard to these views.

Our work with Seline and Joshua raises philosophical contentions and further puzzlements. These may enact a beginning where others interested in this topic could create a broader and more diverse dialogue.

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