

Seizing the dynamic moment in situation-originated learning:

The origin of songcrafting examined through Dewey's theory of inquiry

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ABSTRACT

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In this article we argue that learning initiatives could be better recognized and mediated in order to support meaningful learning and agency in music education. We base our argument on John Dewey's notions as to how learning initiatives emerge from indeterminate situations as impulsions and how learning as contextual inquiry towards a practical conclusion proceeds. The view proposed is not teacher-centered, student-centered, nor tradition-based, but situation-originated, indicating the significance of the learning situation as a pedagogical point of departure. From this standpoint, the teacher's task is not primarily to realize the goals of the written curriculum, but to inquire into possibilities for interlacing her and her students' intentions along the curricular aims. This view calls forth the teacher's capability to seize the dynamic moment: to recognize, inspire, and mediate impulsions towards pedagogically meaningful directions with the help of her previous experiences, curricular understanding, and pedagogical tact. We also elaborate on the more field-specific issues of music education, especially as concerns music teacher education and creativity in the musical classroom. Throughout the article, we use songcrafting as a case to illustrate how a situation-originated perspective can be applied in actual classroom practice. Keywords: composing, inquiry, situational learning, music teacher education, John Dewey

Introduction

A teacher-directed Finnish language lesson in a first grade primary classroom was flowing smoothly. The students were learning how to write the letter T. They were practicing this by writing the letters rhythmically from top to bottom, from left to

right, on each other's backs, in the air and on the table with their fingers. Suddenly one of the students, Minna, suggested: "Why don't we make a song about this!"¹

Generally, within school practices it is customary for the teacher to consider that she is responsible for governing the learning situation. This attitude is also familiar in school music education, where the teacher designs the learning situations according to her habituated ways: choosing content, procedures and repertoire to transmit the norms, standards, and values of a particular musical-cultural tradition. Music teaching is often designed as a series of 'imposed situations', focusing on preselected musical materials and working methods to transmit these materials. This emphasis is partly due to music teacher education, in which tried and trusted methods and repertoires often take the place of novel and creative approaches. While common practice provides a didactic focus, making it easier for the teacher to realize the goals of a written curriculum, it may lead to overlooking the possibilities of the learning situation, including student initiatives.

In this article we look for an alternative to this *tradition-based learning* in music education, using John Dewey's philosophy as a theoretical lens. Committing ourselves to Dewey's views, we do not hold education to be a mere transmission of tradition, but consider it to be a social function in which the learner has an active role (Dewey 1916/MW 9: chapt. 2).² From this standpoint, learning takes place when one actively seeks the conditions of equilibrium by resolving an indeterminate situation through conjoint inquiry, resulting in a meaning-relation actualized in practice (Dewey 1910/MW 6: 234–242, 1938/LW 12: 105–123, 1938/LW 13). The aim of learning is to build up meanings as new habits, or as new ways of thinking and acting in subsequent situations (Dewey 1938/LW 12: 117). We shall argue that a Deweyan point of departure is worth considering in music education today, specifically as it concerns the guiding of creative music making (see also Väkevä 2002, 2004, 2007, forthcoming, Westerlund 2002).

Any learning situation has a plethora of possibilities. As we see it, *seizing learning initiatives* has the potential to shape learning in new, yet unknown, but potentially valuable directions. In what follows, we shall also examine how seizing the *dynamic moment* of an unexpected initiative may launch a change in classroom practice when inquired into collaboratively.

Throughout the article, we use *songcrafting* (Muhonen 2004, 2010) as an illustration of how learning can proceed from an indeterminate situation towards a meaningful conclusion. By 'songcrafting' we refer to a specific collaborative practice of classroom composing that resulted from seizing the initiative presented at the beginning of this article. As a composing practice, songcrafting involves the intentional, collaborative and conscious creation of music and lyrics in a shared situation with the aid of sensitive support and guidance from others (e.g. peers and the teacher), resonating with Lev Vygotsky's (1978: 84–91) notion of 'scaffolding'. The emphasis is thus rather on nurturing and facilitating than on teaching composition. The students are seen as active agents, who learn about music as well as about their co-participants within songcrafting

which includes both the activity (the shared process of creation), and the song-product (an account of collaboratively negotiated decisions). A more detailed analysis of songcrafting as a practice is presented elsewhere (Muhonen, forthcoming).

Because classroom composing is by no means a new research subject, we begin our article with a short review of the relevant literature, focusing specifically on research on the initial stages of creative processes. We will continue by discussing *impulsion*, a concept that Dewey used in his later philosophy to refer to the “general organizing activity” that channels experience and expresses the learner's initiative to learn (See e.g., Dewey 1934/LW 10: 64).³ We shall then consider the teacher's position in facilitating *situation-originated learning* and discuss the role of the curriculum within the latter. After this, to interweave these ideas into practice, we will examine our case of the origin of songcrafting against Dewey's theory of inquiry, considering the five phases of inquiry as dimensions of the musical learning process. As a conclusion, we will discuss the more field-specific issues of music education and music teacher training, arguing for a view in which situation-originated learning can help us to conceive of music education as a creative endeavor. The main focus of our article is thus to illuminate through songcrafting how the notion of learning initiatives may be developed to create agency in music education.

Research of initiatives in classroom composing

An abundant body of research on classroom composing has emerged over the last decades, stemming largely from the fact that musical creation has become an integral part of the school curriculum in many countries (e.g. Breeze 2009, Burnard & Younker 2002, Clennon 2009, Kaschub & Smith 2009, Wiggins 2011). Composing has been seen as important as it “promotes music cognition and a deepened understanding of the theory and practice of music; provides training for the beginning composer; leads to greater sensitivity to and appreciation of contemporary music and its techniques; and provides a means to exploring creative experience.” (Barrett 2006a: 195, see also Dogani 2004, Mills & Paynter 2008, Strand 2006.)

There are a number of possible theoretical frames against which classroom composing can be examined. For instance, such scholarship can address creativity, methodology, technology, and the bodily bases of musical creativity (Kaschub & Smith 2009). In our case, the most interesting approach is to examine classroom composing (and its pedagogy) from the standpoint of *problem solving or inquiry*. The reflective process then becomes the primary interest: how composition proceeds through various interlaced phases identified as belonging to all intelligent thought-processes.

In the research on composing, the terms “idea”, “impulse” and “inspiration” have

been used to describe the initial phase of creative activity (e.g. Heinonen 1995: 12). Researchers have also highlighted the meaning of exploration and elaboration in the initial phase of composing (e.g. Barrett 2006b). There seems to be differences in how the initial stage emerges depending on the age and previous experience of the young composer. For instance, on the basis of research into preschool classroom composing, it has been argued that it is more natural to build composing pedagogy on the children's spontaneous creative impulses before societal expectations begin to inhibit their creativity (Kaschub & Smith 2009: 37). As the student composers grow older, it becomes more important that the "desire to create" is "matched with the window of opportunity" (Ibid.)—in other words, that pedagogical influence becomes more focused. Previous research also indicates that the teacher can have a substantial role in encouraging and channeling the students' creative impulses towards composition (e.g. Muhonen 2010, Ruthman 2007, Wiggins 2011).

While there are indications that the process of composition begins from reactions to musical materials that provide "sound inspiration" (Kaschub & Smith 2009: 37), the impulses of composition do not have to be restricted to musical initiatives. Moreover, we do not have to take inspiration, understood as an abruptly emerging creative idea, as the necessary precedent of the creative process. However, it is often from situations that afford unexpected ideas that children take their lead when making inquiries in terms of musical sound, as a way of exploring the world and expressing themselves (Burnard 2006: 354, Papousek 1996). When composing is examined as inquiry, it becomes plausible that multiple factors can intrude on a creative impulse.

Dynamic moments: Impulsions as points of departure for learning

Impulsions are the beginnings of complete experience because they proceed from need; from a hunger and demand that belongs to the organism as a whole and that can be supplied only by instituting definite relations (active relations, interactions) with the environment. (Dewey 1934/LW 10: 64)

Students' learning initiatives – when being constructive – are momentous, for they indicate the need to learn. In what follows, we shall examine learning initiatives basing our deliberation on Dewey's notion of impulsion and his theory of inquiry. Within this frame *impulsion* refers to the "general organizing activity" that channels experience and the learner's initiative towards a meaningful conclusion, mediated through the process of inquiry (Dewey 1934/LW 10: 64).⁴ We agree with Dewey that all learning is based on a situation, when the latter is seen to mark an active, dynamic field of power, in which we find ourselves as intentional agents. Learning aims at interpreting specifically

the kind of situations that present themselves as problematic or indeterminate and that, thus, demand an interpretation (Dewey 1916/MW 10: 332–335, 1938/LW 12: 72–74). In this way, learning is always situation-originated.

Dewey conceptualizes the process of the interpretation of a problematic situation as *inquiry*. Inquiry refers to an experimental attempt to locate a solution to the problem at hand, to determine an indeterminate (and, thus, problematic) situation (Dewey 1938/LW 12: 108). In this determination process, inquiry calls forth meaning as a pragmatic function of the suggested solution, amassing the storage of our meaningful relations to the world and to each other. Meanings manifest in new practices driven by new habits of action, thus leading to new situations to be inquired into. In other words, we inquire in order to find ourselves better equipped to face new situations.

It was in terms of increasing meaningfulness that Dewey also characterized *growth*, the ultimate value goal of social-cultural life. There is an important link between Dewey's accounts of how we learn and how we come to live meaningfully. The mediating link is education, understood as a social practice that creates optimal conditions for the kinds of inquiries that further the meaningfulness of experience and thus contribute to the quality of life. (Dewey 1916/MW 9: chapt. 1, 1938/LW 13.)

When learning is considered from this situational perspective, what counts most is whether a learning initiative is surprising and ambiguous enough to warrant the multiple interpretations that can feed growth. When the initiative fulfills this criterion, a process of inquiry is launched, and conditions are ripe for meaning to emerge. Impulsion thus marks the initial indeterminate phase of this process, the *dynamic moment* when someone, in the middle of doing something, becomes aware of an acute need to inquire into the situation to find out new meanings (Dewey 1938/LW 12: 109). From the pedagogical standpoint, impulsion also marks the need of the learner to get an active response from the educator and other learners. It depends on the nature of this response as to how the inquiry proceeds and what kinds of meanings emerge. In our case of the origin of songcrafting, it became vital how Minna's initiative was taken.

The teacher's role

"What a good idea Minna! Let's explore it further!"

Recognizing impulsions, the teacher is consciously taking the risk of altering the planned course of events inscribed in lesson plans. Yet grasping impulsions provides the participants of the learning situation—the teacher included—with an opportunity to commit themselves to new inquiries, making them more alert to new possibilities of meanings. As contingency and uniqueness characterize all situations (Dewey 1938/LW

12: 74–76), no situation can be thoroughly planned beforehand. In these circumstances it becomes important that the teacher is able to make the most of the situation. This requires flexibility; the teacher's pedagogical strategy must allow potentially fruitful impulses to emerge and to be interpreted in their full meaning-potential (Dewey 1897/EW 5: 173, 1899/EW 5: 142–143). It is critical that the teacher can guide and channel the learner's interests towards constructive actions along the curricular aims that yield new habits of action (Dewey 1930/LW 5: 321).

Recognizing the kinds of impulses that *could* be channeled into appropriate directions makes teaching as much an ethical as a pedagogical endeavor. A teacher should recognize herself as part of the learning situation, and accept full responsibility for channeling inquiries towards their determination. To heed the dynamic moment requires utilization of the teacher's tacit knowledge (cf. Polanyi 1967). Situational awareness is important for a teacher in order to both *learn of* and *with* her students, but also for her to become conscious of her tacit knowledge and to be able to reflect on it critically.

According to Dewey (1938/LW 12: 76), a situation is never entirely within the reach of conscious judgment; it is more “had” than “known”. Most of what we experience thus remains at the fringe of consciousness (Dewey 1929/LW 1: 227, James 1890: 258). With the continuing stream of events arrives a state of uncertainty, a feeling of having to cope with a world in flux (Dewey 1934/LW 10: 22). To make conscious decisions, a teacher needs to feel emerging situations hands-on; she needs to trust her instincts and previously accrued experience when trying out different solutions to a problematic situation. Also, Minna's teacher reacted first by detecting a new situation, working as much by gut instinct as by conscious reflection when trying to see its potential significance.

Role of curriculum

– – to help the students find their objects of interest in music, to encourage them to engage in musical activity, to give them means of expressing themselves musically, and to support their overall growth. (FNCC 2004: 230)

Even if one accepts the situational view of learning, one may still ask how is it possible to follow a predefined curriculum in practice if one has to constantly pay attention to student's initiatives. While this would perhaps be possible in one-to-one teaching or in small groups, is it not impossible in a regular classroom where the amount of students seems to necessitate teacher-centered practices? This implies a more general concern that child-centered learning and a teacher-enforced curriculum might be incompatible. Furthermore, it might be argued that not all learning initiatives support the goals of the curricula; in these cases, the teacher is in a key position to find meaningful ways for learning to proceed along curricular lines.

However, to put the weight at either end of the educational scale—either at the child or the curriculum—would be to neglect the fact that all education is tied to experience and depends on the educational channeling of the latter into directions that support growth (Dewey 1902/MW 2: 279–280, 1938/LW13: chapt. 1). This naturalistic account of learning reminds us that a pre-written curriculum can never wholly determine the content of learning. As Dewey argued, a curriculum must be based on, and amount to, the student's experience, otherwise it will be left inert (Dewey 1902/MW 2: 279–280). The role of the curriculum becomes evident only when considering the complexity of these relationships in society; it is the task of education to help the learner to cope with this complexity by providing a sound and structured frame in which the connections between the immediate experience of the learning situations and the more extensive social environment are made explicit.

From this perspective, it becomes important to ask how impulsions become visible to the teacher who is embedded in the situation with her students. Here the teacher's primary skill is in making observations and being constantly alert to new suggestions that could develop into new conjoint inquiries. This alertness to the situation does not mean that the teacher's previous knowledge is irrelevant; it is precisely because of her accrued knowledge, aided by her understanding of the learned subject and the curriculum that she is able to build on impulsions. This also means that the teacher, together with the students, is responsible for the actual curriculum, as it is realized in the classroom.

To this end it becomes essential how the teacher relates to students. As Westerlund (2002: 234–235) has noted, “the continuity between the student's everyday life and his or her music education — — — should be understood precisely as a deliberate and also constructed continuity and not as a mishmash without any distinctions or clarity.” This necessitates an ethical commitment from the part of the teacher. In his ethical theory, Dewey argued that a person who wants to take heed of social situations and draw out their meaning-potential in a community setting must possess the moral characteristics of open-mindedness, sensitivity, conscientiousness, and sympathy (Dewey 1932/ LW 7: 187, 271, 1933/LW 8: 136, see also Pappas 2008: 187–201). These kinds of characteristics also help the teacher to stay alert to the possibilities of the learning situation. The possession of pedagogical tact helps her to further channel inquiry into appropriate directions (van Manen 1991a, 1991b). It is in these conditions that the curriculum can be realized as a *living connection between the potentials of the present and the possibilities of the future* as it is actualized by individual learners participating in community of inquiry. In pedagogical transactions guided by the ethical characteristics mentioned above, every student has the chance to become heard as herself within the community. This makes learning more extensive and holistic compared to a situation where it would be guided merely by a predefined curriculum or by the idiosyncratic needs of individuals (Kinos 2002). It is only in these kinds of transactions that the curriculum can become alive, a function of the learning process.

Impulsion leading to collective inquiry: The case for songcrafting

In order to point out the theoretical possibilities of seizing learners' impulsions and initiatives we shall next examine the pedagogical process that followed Minna's suggestion of composing a new song in light of Dewey's five-phase theory of inquiry (Dewey 1910/MW 6: 236–241, 1933/LW 8: 200–207, 1938/LW 12: 109–119). The five phases are to be understood as logical aspects of an ongoing reflective process rather than as distinct stages. They indicate the partly overlapping functions of every complete act of thought that the teacher has to take into consideration in order to channel the learners' growth. Hence, the phases can be also seen as layers, building one upon the other, as processes of inquiry overlap and constitute higher-level inquiries.

Preceding conditions for inquiry

Minna, 11: "First there was the class song the teacher had composed that was a starting point for all the other songs."⁵

The *preliminary phase* of inquiry may be more 'felt' than acknowledged as problematic. The environing conditions somehow become such that a problem emerges and, consequently, a situation can be seen in a different light. Its problematic nature is expressed by a sense of arising curiosity; something hitherto explicated needs to be inquired into further. This need should not merely be taken as a symptom of a psychological state (in our case, of Minna's personal need), but rather as an indication of the indeterminateness of the entire situation. According to Dewey, "the original indeterminate situation is not only 'open' to inquiry, but it is open in the sense that its constituents do not hang together" (Dewey 1938/LW 12: 109). Thus, there is a holistic sense of imbalance, tension, a need to establish the equilibrium.

We do not face new situations empty-handed; rather we are equipped with previously accrued habits which are put on trial during indeterminate occasions. In our case, while practicing the letter T, Minna made a spontaneous connection to her previous experience. It suddenly appeared to her that the learning of a new skill (how to write the letter T) could benefit from making a song of it. While in that moment this seemed like a new idea, later she was able to give a clear reason for her initiative: the names of the students had previously been learned through singing a song made up by the teacher. Hence, Minna knew from her earlier experience that with the help of singing songs things can be remembered more easily. Thus, while the problematic situation awoke Minna's need to inquire, it also established a connection to her earlier experience, now seen in a new light, potentially pointing at new meanings. A previously reproductive activity, the

singing of ready-made songs was now transformed into a productive need to create a new song, serving Minna's more general-level urge to learn. In turn, creating a letter-T song would itself be a new thing to learn, presenting a new problem.

Framing the problematic situation

Teacher: "OK, let's try! How could it go?"

A problematic situation is first detected as a sense that something needs to be done (Dewey 1938/LW 12: 73–74). Because the initial situation is more felt than known, a situation must be *framed* as problematic in order to chart its potential solutions. In order to do this, the learner must contest her previous knowledge by judging its relevance in the new situation. This also marks the beginning of making sense of the situation: an attempt to find new relevance to what is at hand. As Dewey explains: "to have an aim is to act with meaning, not like an automatic machine; it is to *mean* to do something and to perceive the meaning of things in the light of that intent" (Dewey 1916/MW 9: 110–111, emphasis original). In a pedagogical setting, the framing takes place in the interaction between the participants of the learning situation as teacher and the students are setting out to find the potential meaning of the impulsion.

In our case, in order to subject the situation to inquiry Minna's need had to be recognized and accepted. She expressed her intent aloud. Her outspoken initiative framed a new problematic situation for the teacher: What to do? How to respond to the child's initiative? Does her initiative have potential for further learning? At first, the indeterminate situation may feel as problematic to the teacher as to the students. However, aided by her tacit knowledge, knowledge of her students, and an internalization of the curricular aims the teacher is well equipped to investigate the new situation in its meaning-potential. Thus, she has a central role in framing the situation.

While the uncertainty of the problematic situation is practical and immediate, mediating cognitive elements begin to enter into the process when the inquirers begin to seek preliminary solutions to the problem. The recognition of the problem thus activates pedagogical reflection; it also frames the situation as negotiable, shifting the focus from an immediately felt imbalance to one of communication. Thus, it provides the conditions for a situation to be inquired into as a focused problem that a community of inquirers can examine together.

In our case, had the teacher relied solely on her accrued habits and continued the lesson as planned she would have neglected Minna's initiative and missed the dynamic moment, thus eschewing the possibility of a new inquiry. As it happened, she seized the impulsion and subjected the matter of composing a 'Letter T song' to discussion, helping the learners to frame the situation as a new problem to be solved.

aiming at *forming a meaningful practice* within the classroom (Muhonen, forthcoming). Collaborative creative music making thus became a new frame for ongoing inquiries as the determination of a solution opened up a new classroom practice.

The developing of working ideas is vastly helped by communication in which the learner receives constant feedback from others (Teacher: “*This is a good start! How could we continue?*”). This social give-and-take provides a cultural context, in which the indeterminate situation can find its proper channel of growth. Symbols, seen as vehicles of meaning, become more and more important as the inquiry proceeds through mediation (Dewey 1938/LW 12: 51–65).

Symbols can mediate inquiry in different ways. When Minna first conceived her idea, it could not yet be defined as a distinct problem. When she expressed the idea aloud, it became more concrete and established, and framed a new potential meaning-relation, or a new possible way of proceeding towards forming a new habit. However, in order to be taken to its full account, this initial naming had to be developed into a working idea that could be used to organize the constituents of the situation into a coherent whole. Negotiation is an important part of this development of an idea.

In our case, negotiation emerged as the participants began to discuss the potential meaning of Minna’s suggestion (Teacher: “*OK, why not...I had planned that we shall have music later, but let us create a song now while we are all interested*”). Because of the elementary classroom context, the teacher eventually took the initiative and decided in which direction the lesson should proceed. Here she was helped by the advantage that Finnish classroom teachers have over their subject teacher colleagues – she was able to change the educational subject at a moment’s notice according to a new emerging ‘issue’.⁶ As the teacher judged Minna’s utterance to be interesting enough to facilitate a new process of inquiry, it became a new concern for her as to how to bring forth collaborative songcrafting practice in the classroom, and how to offer a proper environment, or a “medium”, for this (Dewey 1916/MW 9: 13). Because of this new determination, the original matter of learning the letter T through singing was transformed into a further, and more extensive, one: that of learning collaborative creative music making.

Reasoning

Minna, 11: “Someone had invented a few words, and others wanted to come along, and some asked their friends to participate, and it (then) developed further with the teacher’s support.”

In addition to framing the problem and determining a preliminary solution, the inquirers need to elaborate on the issue by relating the possible meanings of the ideas to each other. Dewey refers to this process as *reasoning*. In conjoint inquiry, reasoning amounts to relating the preliminary ideas (“suggestions”) to the observable conditions of the situation (“things”) in order to make a rational choice among the ideas (Dewey 1938/LW 12: xvii).

The goal of reasoning is to find the best working idea, or the best way to proceed in a situation as judged by its potential to fit into similar situations in the future. In our case, the teacher and the students began actively to seek out new solutions to the problem, each taking part in negotiation and suggesting new ideas to be considered. The initial solutions gradually developed into the practice of songcrafting in which negotiation became an integral element. The students were conscious of their role in the learning community: when interviewed later, they were able to reflect on the distribution of power within the group, which made the subsequent inquiries also cases of recognizing agency (Muhonen 2010). While we do not here have space to elaborate on the matter, it should be noted that in a Deweyan scheme, reasoning does not have to be seen merely as a case of the logical ordering of facts and propositions: it can be taken as an ongoing communal negotiation, during which subject positions are constantly issued and reissued. In our case, the conjoint negotiations took place both verbally and in musical action: musical ideas were suggested, tried out, put together, accepted and rejected, sometimes argued over, sometimes worked upon without speaking.

Reasoning proceeds when ideas are compared to previously formed ideas in order to find out their relationships, which can then suggest new solutions to new problems. This requires that the inquirers anchor their reasoning to some existing meaning-system, bound together by symbols. By anchoring ideas to a meaning-system, the inquirers set out a path that leads to the choosing of one specific operation to try out as the solution in practice (e.g., composing a new song to learn the letter T). However, this is not the end of the inquiry: even if the operative solution settles the original problem and balances the situation, any balancing is doomed to be temporary because new factors emerge constantly that establish new inquiries in the future. Thus, working ideas have to be constantly contested in order to actualize their meaning-potential (Dewey 1933/LW 8: 205–207). The whole point of inquiring into something is to find out its practical meaning and its implications for new practices, leading to new interpretations of meaning.

Operational phase

Minna, 11: “It was not so difficult after all!”

Experimentation with ideas is crucial for inquiry, for to arrive at a specific conclusion is also to arrive at the verge of a new concrete experience, and it is in the field of experience that meanings perform their ultimate function. Because the whole scheme of inquiry is based on an active, hands-on working in a situation, *operationalization* overlaps with the earlier phases. In our case, operationalization first began to take place when trying out Minna’s idea in practice. Only by trying it out, were the inquirers able to grasp the meaning of her initial idea. The application of an idea in operation is not merely a singular event, but involves a new general habit of action that equips the inquirers to better face new situations. Therefore, we may say that when being

successful, operationalization amounts to new practices, new shared systems of coordinated actions.

In our case, the operationalization of how to compose a song created new pedagogical implications. When a student, or group of students, later expressed a need to compose, the teacher and the students were better equipped to respond. The teacher's task became to find new ways in which Minna's ideas could be put to work in the service of future learning. Songcrafting became the focus of subsequent inquiries, now distanced from the original problematic situation, building on the premise that the suggested operationalization could work in a more extensive manner in further situations. After some time, the songcrafting practice developed into a pedagogical approach that integrated music making with other activities in the holistic primary classroom, supporting several curricular aims—social, individual, as well as subject specific.

Composing musical classrooms

Minna, 18: "I think it was important that we made something together; a joy of doing, it was really fun to make our own songbook, perform those songs, and show what we had achieved. It was very, that I recall, it was very neat, we were very proud somehow of it although we were so small then."

From a Deweyan standpoint, students' initiatives can be interpreted as impulses, as we have done here with our songcrafting case. To take cognizance of the possible meanings of the learning situation is to be able to recognize *the educational potential of impulses* and to *create spaces for inquiries* in which these impulses can be examined in terms of this potential. From the situation-originated perspective, the most important knowhow of the teacher is to be alert to emergent impulses. Hence, the teacher should not let the written curriculum dictate learning, nor should she accept curricular goals that are external to the students' shared experience. Rather, the written curriculum should be seen as an exposition of guiding ideas to be used to channel conjoint inquiry. In music education, this means that whatever musical goals the curriculum posits, the teacher should take care that these goals find their experiential counterparts in the actual musical-pedagogical transactions of the classroom.

A music teacher who is able to take heed of emerging impulses has the best possibilities to further her students' meaningful learning. In this way, the teacher can also help her students to establish attitudes favorable to inquiry. In order for this to take place, the teacher has to situate her teaching subject, for instance, if music is taken as a collection of canonized works to be performed and appreciated in ways standardized within a musical practice, openness to experimentation is reduced to an interpretation of previously fixed possibilities. This kind of tradition-based approach emphasizes "the

transmission and acquisition of received ideas and skills”, instead of drawing “upon children’s natural resources and wonder, imagination, and inventiveness” (Mills & Paynter 2008: 1). Thus it can be detrimental to the students’ motivation to learn new things based on their own experiences.

Instead of being a mere conveyer of tradition, music education can be envisioned as a *meeting place* where musical meanings are reconstructed and renegotiated on the basis of the impact that music has on the lives of the participants. This view sees music as a field of possibilities from which new meanings can emerge as new habits of action in all the kinds of relationships that active musical participation can afford (cf. Small 1998). From this perspective, music can also be framed as a *conjoint field of inquiry* that helps the students to *collaboratively compose new musical experiences* by navigating the changing terrain of their shared musical lives. To stretch the analogy further, by *composing musical classrooms*, teachers can help their students to develop new habits that help them to *compose their lives*. Creativity, in this outlook, would not be something special, reserved for composing classes, but something that penetrates the whole music education practice (See also, Mills & Paynter 2008).

Emphasizing Dewey’s ideas, we suggest that the most important goal of any teacher is to be able to maintain the student’s active interest in learning by seizing the impulses emerging from diverse teaching-learning situations. This necessitates a classroom culture favorable to open, communicative relationships that further one’s initiative and willingness to learn from shared experience (See also Vygotsky 1978, 1986, Väkevä 2004, Wertsch 1991, Westerlund 2002). In order to realize this kind of culture, we need to recognize that what is learned in classroom practice is dependent on the students’ and the teacher’s ideas alike: the students, the teacher and the curriculum are all significant factors in the learning process. When learning is seen as a co-operative process, the nurturing of social interactions becomes crucial. This means that the focus of the teacher—also of the music teacher—should be as much on the students’ ethical conduct as on their skills. A good music teacher is able (and willing) to promote a learning culture characterized by respect for others and an inclination for co-operation, making music part of the shared “dramatic rehearsal” of ethical life (Dewey 1922/MW 14: chapt. 16, 1932/LW 7: 272–275, see also Fesmire 2003).

This view also has important implications for music teacher education. It inspires one to ask such questions as: How to equip teachers in order to enable to grasp impulses in changing situations? How to encourage them to try out new ideas? And, perhaps most importantly: How to prepare them to cope with the insecurity that necessarily accompanies indeterminate situations? The last question might be the most difficult to answer, taken that most music student teachers have been initiated in their chosen art through a system based on apprenticeship learning and established measures of success. In a way, answering this question might necessitate taking a new look at music, considering it as much as an educational practice—a field of growth—as a domain of highly developed artistic competence. From this perspective, music teacher education would be

about more than just providing student teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to develop similar kinds of skills and knowledge in their students. Rather, it would offer an environment in which the student teacher would be able to face as many diverse situations involving musical problem-solving as possible, and in this way to share opportunities to reflect on these situations from a pedagogical standpoint. In this kind of environment, the student teachers' creative abilities and their joy of musical discoveries would be enhanced and supported in ways that would help them to compose musical classrooms in their professional practice.

To conclude: mediating learning initiatives in music teaching would imply recognizing them as impulses that emerge as dynamic moments in musical-pedagogical situations. If we accept Dewey's ideas that (1) meaning originates in impulses, and (2) it is drawn from the whole situation (rather than from the students' needs alone), it becomes essential that music teachers know how to approach situations in ways that help impulses to be channeled into growth. If we further accept that (3) student initiatives should not be seen as distractions in the curricular order, but as marking the very impulses that feed learning, it becomes essential that the teacher warrants possibilities for inquiry within a learning context that supports agency. Through Dewey's theory of inquiry, it is possible to outline the baseline for how this takes place: by helping students to frame their impulses as problems, determine hypothetical solutions, reason the potential meaning of these solutions together, and operationalize the solutions with the most potential to practice, we are able to stimulate learning from the endless reservoir of creativity that permeates learning situations.

Notes

- 1 The inspiration for this article is based on a real-life situation that the first author of this article experienced when working as a primary school teacher. The research based on this experience has been reported in Muhonen (2010).
- 2 Our references to Dewey (2003) are abbreviated in the conventional manner as follows: EW for The Early Works, MW for The Middle Works, and LW for The Later Works, followed by part and page numbers.
- 3 By Dewey's later philosophy we refer to his *Later Works* (1925–1953), in which he developed a cultural naturalistic viewpoint based on his earlier instrumentalist writings. Of the different phases of Dewey's philosophy, see e.g. Boisvert (1988: 15–16); cf. Rockefeller (1991: 19); Shook (2000: 20).
- 4 Dewey's view of impulsion as the generative point of departure for learning was based on his systemic standpoint on psychology. Already in his well-known "Reflex Arc" article from the year 1896, he argued against the then-current interpretation of perception as the mechanical closing stage of the motor reflex arc (Dewey 1896/EW 5: 96–109). This critique was based on a holistic view of how perception partakes in the more extensive scheme of action. For instance, when one suddenly hears a loud noise, hearing is not just the termination of the neural reflex, but becomes part of a more extensive act of perception, itself partly determined by what the perceiver was about to do in the given situation. Thus, the same sound can have a very different interpretation depending on whether it was heard by a performing chamber musician, or by a factory worker welding metal sheets together.

- 5 The quotes are taken from Minna's two semi-structured interviews, carried when she was 11 and 18 years old. In these interviews, Minna is looking back on her school days in primary school, reflecting on her experiences on songcrafting in the first grade. A more thorough analysis of these reflections is in Muhonen (2010).
- 6 Finnish classroom teacher education includes studies in every teaching subject: teachers are educated as generalists, but can also specialize in some areas. Classroom teachers usually teach at the primary level of comprehensive schools (grades 1–6), whereas teaching in the upper grades (7–9 and beyond) is usually provided by specialized subject teachers. The integration of subjects is emphasized in the Finnish National Core Curriculum (FNCC 2004).

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