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Musical Knowledge, Critical Consciousness and Critical Thinking

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People are fulfilled only to the extent that they create their world (which is a human world), and create it with their transforming labor. The fulfillment of humankind as human beings lies, then, in the fulfillment of the world. ... if their work does not belong to them - the person cannot be fulfilled.
(Paulo Freire)

INTRODUCTION

The concept of critical thinking is understood in a number of ways. In some definitions it is close to the idea of metacognition - 'thinking about thinking' - whilst in others it describes a process of 'logical thinking' involving the gathering, assimilation and analysis of evidence from which emerges a 'reasoned' conclusion. In his book *Democracy and Music Education* (2005) Paul Woodford suggests that although critical thinking is supposed to 'develop independence of mind' it is almost always equated in curriculum documents 'with the application and development of abstract thinking skills and abilities divorced from social, moral, ethical or political considerations' and that 'Few music teachers realize that this separation of mind and matter is a perversion of what Dewey, one of the fathers of the contemporary critical thinking movement, intended' (Woodford 2005: 95).

In this chapter I will explore critical thinking as part of the framework of critical (social) theory and examine how, as I have written elsewhere, 'properly embedded, critical thinking and understanding enables pupils to make connections between their musical learning in school and their lived reality, and thus empower them as learners' (Spruce 2009: 36). Critical thinking is here conceptualized as a key element in the development of a more socially just society in which all are enabled to fully participate. I will argue however that in order to create the conditions within which critical thinking can flourish, we need to examine the ways in which knowledge is conceptualized and understood and how knowledge, particularly in school, is positioned in relation to the 'knower' or 'learner'. I will suggest that such a reconceptualization will inevitably present challenges to some pedagogical approaches.

I begin the chapter by exploring the philosophical underpinning of some commonly-held conceptions of the nature of knowledge and the relationship of the knower to knowledge; noting through examples from music education the impact these relationships can have on young people's experiences of music in school. Drawing on the ideas of Paulo Freire (1970; 1974) I will then explore how through a process of 'conscientization' leading to critical consciousness, and supported by a critical pedagogy, critical thinking might be nurtured and 'independence of mind' developed within the music classroom. At various points in the chapter I will exemplify the points being made with brief examples or more worked out 'case studies' from music classroom practice.

CONCEPTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE AND KNOWLEDGE–LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS

Commonly held understandings of knowledge - and ones which inform to a greater or lesser extent many aspects of education in western society - are founded upon two philosophies both of which have their roots in the Enlightenment. The first, sometimes referred to as *transcendental rationalism*, contends that knowledge is objective, 'out there' and transcends time and place. What is true is true at all times and in all places and is unaffected by any aspect of the sensory world. The second, and arguable diametrically opposed philosophy, is that of *empiricism* or *scientific materialism*, which invokes the sensory world in a mechanistic way, holding that what is true is that - and only that - which can be experienced through sensory observation.

The abstract nature of transcendental rationalism, which contends that knowledge is separate from, and unaffected by, any context in which it might be applied, denies the possibility of knowledge and understanding being developed 'in action' i.e. that learning and understanding might occur through the act of *doing*. Scientific materialism/empiricism on the other hand may tell us the way the world is but, as Regelski says, '... no amount of knowledge of the ways things are, can tell us how they ought or could otherwise be' (Regelski 2005: 7).

Although rationalism and empiricism are differing conceptions of the nature of knowledge, they both hold that knowledge exists independently of the knower and is simply awaiting discovery by them and that the knower plays no part in the construction of knowledge. Both of these philosophical positions promote what Woodford refers to as the 'separateness of mind and matter' (Woodford 2005: 95) and are, as Giddens puts it, knowledge which is 'void of self' (Giddens in Schmidt 2005: 5).

Abstract and socially decontextualized knowledge that is 'void of self' reveals itself in music education in a range of ways. These include music theory or instrumental techniques taught and learned separately from any musical application or context and stylistically 'neutral' composing tasks where the stimulus or template does not project or reflect a recognizable musical style or tradition. A consequence of these approaches is that children do not recognize what they are being taught and how they are being taught it as connecting to the lived reality of their everyday lives. As a consequence they experience alienation from musical learning in school.

Wright suggests that the disadvantages that accrue from such alienation are not equally distributed in terms of access and barriers to the acquisition of social capital. Drawing on Bernstein's 'Code Theory' she points out how abstracted and socially decontextualized knowledge particularly disadvantages working class children:

Bernstein ... argued that working class children were more likely than their middle-class counterparts to use relatively restricted codes which, while not deficient, were primarily context dependent. This derived from the communication systems of families, themselves the products of the divisions of labour. In other words, manual workers acquire different properties of their language orientated to the here and now, compared with the more decontextualized world of the middle-class professionals or employers. Similarly, the middle classes as social and cultural reproducers and repairers rather than producers, require a context-independent, elaborated code. This gives them the vocabulary required to discuss matters beyond those occurring in particular contexts. The fact that schools adopted this elaborated code meant that some working class children tended to be disadvantaged by the dominant of education. The 'fault' however lay with society and its schools, not children or their families.

(Wright 2010: 14)

Transcendental and empiricist conceptions of knowledge are supported and promoted by pedagogical approaches which are characterized by what Freire calls the 'banking concept' of education. Here 'Education ... becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor' (Freire 1970: 53). The teacher's role is 'to regulate the way the world "enters into" the students' by organising and controlling 'a process which already occurs spontaneously, to "fill" the students by making deposits of information which he or she considers to constitute true knowledge' (Freire 1970: 57).

The 'banking concept' of education is sustained and supported by, and closely connected to, the commodification, objectification and reification of knowledge that occurs as a natural consequence of knowledge being perceived as something that is independent of the learner/knower. It (along with its objectification and commodification) allows for pedagogies and curriculum content to be appropriated by dominant ideologies resulting in unequal access to, and distribution of, social capital and the perpetuation of inequalities. As Freire writes:

The banking concept (with its tendency to dichotomize everything) distinguishes two stages in the action of the educator. During the first, he recognizes a recognisable object which he prepares his lessons in his study or his laboratory; during the second, he expounds to his students about that object. The students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher. Nor do the students practice any act of cognition, since the object towards which that act should be directed is the property of the teacher rather than the medium evoking the critical reflection of both teacher and students. Hence in the names of the 'preservation of culture and knowledge' we have a system which achieves neither true knowledge nor true culture.

(Freire 1970: 61)

Certain models of music-education-as-aesthetic education (MEAE) promote the transcendental-rationalist philosophy and 'banking concept' of education in that 'musical works'- which is the usual starting point for MEAE - constitute knowledge that is 'out there' and 'fixed', transcending both time and place. The ideology of music as being 'out there' is promoted particularly in the western classical tradition through the idea that the objectified forms of music - the scores and recordings - are synonymous with 'the music'. Music - or one of its objectified forms - then becomes an object to be taught. Teachers prepare their analyses or descriptions of works of music and 'expound' on these to students in the classroom who are then required to cognitively process and understand (in the sense of memorising and reiterating) the knowledge that has been imparted to them. Students engage with music as an abstract 'object of beauty' which is to be appreciated in a distanced way rather than as something to be actively engaged with and in. However as both Schmidt (2005) and Allsup (2003) point out, MEAE *imposes* on students perceptions and values of beauty that are not necessarily their own and thus such knowledge remains 'void of self'.

Regelski suggests that the study of music as an object - which characterizes MEAE -leads to the teaching of music through 'concepts' which are then treated as 'theoretical abstractions'- they become a form of transcendental rationalism where concepts are perceived as being and meaning the same in every time and place. Regelski contends that '... when concepts are taught or defined their action potential is denied and more often than not it would seem, never get put into musically productive ways' (Regelski 2005: 14).

Take for example the musical concept of triple time. A teacher, adopting a transcendental-rationalist view of knowledge, may believe that a student's understanding of triple time is demonstrated when they can describe triple time as having three beats in a bar and write triple time rhythms on the whiteboard using crotchets, dotted crotchets and quavers. A teacher adopting a scientific-empiricist position might think that students have demonstrated the same understanding if they recognize music with three beats in the bar when they hear it and can clap 3/4 with an emphasis on the first beat. However as Regelski says, none of these examples are 'musically productive ways' (Regelski 2005: 14) of engaging with musical concepts and in the sense in which they are abstracted from any musical context the knowledge gained is 'meaningless'.

Regelski argues that '... in the real musical world concepts are 'open': that is to say that there is not 'one stage at which the concept is addressed once and for all' (2005: 14). The meaning of triple time in a Strauss waltz is a great deal different to triple time in *Danse Macabre* or the theme to *Last of the Summer Wine* or *One hand, one heart* from *West Side Story* or indeed any other musical context in which it appears. Furthermore that knowledge - that understanding - is not passively received as inert knowledge but knowledge and meaning actively constructed within the context of their personal historicity, musical biographies and musical enculturation. Where 'knowledge' of triple time is most acutely demonstrated is through knowledge that is not 'void of self' but 'full of self'. Students then respond to music in 'triple time' in a nuanced and sensitive way recognising the subtleties of difference in its use in different works of music and across different musical styles and traditions. Their performances demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the nuances of triple time within the different music styles in which they perform and in the personal ownership they take of the concept of triple time in their improvisations and compositions. When these occasions occur, 'knowledge' is no longer independent of them but *part* of their being - of their consciousness. Here, knowledge and the relationship of knowledge to the learner has been reconceptualized to one where it does not exist independently of them but is created by them.

TOWARDS A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF MUSIC

Reconceptualizing the relationship between knowledge and the learner/knower such that knowledge is no longer 'void of self' necessitates a radically different approach to pedagogy from that promoted by the 'banking concept' of teaching and learning. It requires a 'critical pedagogy' which supports the process of 'conscientization' whereby one's perception of reality and relationship with the world changes from what Freire refers to as one of 'magical consciousness' (which is fundamentally passive and fatalistic in nature, apprehending the world as 'a given' and immutable) to a state of 'critical consciousness' (Freire 1974: 39). Critical consciousness recognizes the world as a dynamic phenomenon, with inherent contradictions and conflicting ideologies, but within which a person has the power to act and engender change.

Critical pedagogy is characterized by McLaren, and quoted in Abrahams (2005a: 6) as 'a way of thinking about, negotiating and transforming the relationships among classroom teaching, the production of

knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society and nation state' (McLaren 1998: 45). Here, critical pedagogy, is seen as means enabling students to become critically conscious of the power, ideological and relationship matrices that impact on the world. By enabling students to recognize these matrices, critical pedagogy shifts 'the emphasis from teachers to students ... making visible the relationships between them' and affords students opportunities to '... engage in a culture of questioning that demands far more confidence than rote learning and the application of acquired skills' (Giroux 2010: 3).

Allsup (2003), Regelski (2005) and Abrahams (2005a) also offer additional and valuable perspectives on the attributes and characteristics of, and connections between, critical pedagogy, conscientization, critical consciousness and critical thinking. Surveying the work of these three writers yields some common principles which underpin and inform critical pedagogy. In **Table 12.1** we identify these and consider how they might emerge from and/or be exemplified through music teaching and learning.

Table 12.1 Critical Pedagogy and Music Education

Attributes of a Critical Pedagogy	Manifestations in Music
Teachers are self-reflective, recognize the existence of their own 'consciousness' as being of value but that implicit in this consciousness is their own worldview which is not imposed but used as the basis for a dialectical relationship with students where teachers and students both learn.	Teachers recognize that their own musical biographies and identity will influence their musical 'consciousness' informing their musical values, priorities and tastes which are not necessarily those of their students. They do not impose these musical tastes on their pupils but use them as the basis of a process of musical learning undertaken with their students.
Teaching recognizes students' consciousness of their world and create contexts and opportunities for this consciousness to be expressed.	Music lessons value and build on the musical experiences and learning students bring into the classroom and provide opportunities not only for students to listen and perform 'their' music but also to discuss its values and purposes.
Teaching connects 'word to world' – or 'music to world'.	Music learning and teaching is not abstracted from real musical contexts. Music teaching is embedded in real musical experiences. Activities that are undertaken would be recognized as musical activities were they to take place outside of school.
No binary opposition is created between 'theory' and 'practice'.	Theoretical understanding is developed through and emerges from immersion in musical practice and is not decontextualized from or allowed to operate as a barrier to direct engagement with music.
Critical pedagogy does not rely on training techniques, methods or primers.	As Giroux says, 'Each class will be influenced by the different experiences that students bring, the resources available, teacher student relationships ...' (Giroux 2010: 5). Training techniques, methods and primers close down the space within which dialectical discourse can occur and where students' consciousness can be expressed.

Having established the characteristics and attributes of a critical pedagogy in the following section we explore how the principles and application of critical pedagogy can help achieve a state of critical consciousness.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Freire argues that true knowledge can only be gained through the development of ‘critical consciousnesses’. Critical consciousness is the state of being that enables critical thinking to occur. In this section, and with the help of some case studies, we explore Freire’s concept of critical consciousness and how this might be manifested and developed in the music classroom supported by the principles of critical pedagogy as set out above.

Critical consciousness has resonance with Kant’s belief that ‘reason is not a passive endowment that discovers logically necessary relations among given ideas (as in rationalism) or among sensory data (as with empiricism)’ but rather that ‘reason actively constitutes knowledge’ (Regelski 2005: 2). Critical consciousness holds that knowledge is not some kind of objective or abstract entity, which is out there and waiting to be discovered or perceived, but rather is actively constructed by the learner. In playing a role in constructing knowledge, rather than simply passively accepting, uncritically ‘ideology, doctrine, orthodoxy and mass thinking’ (Regelski 2005: 2) the learner can envisage the world not just as something that ‘is’ (fixed and immutable), but rather as it might be, or should be. The development of critical consciousness therefore represents a challenge to ‘authority’ and dominant ideologies.

The concept of critical consciousness is predicated on the world as a dynamic phenomenon upon which, and within which, a person consciously acts in the construction of knowledge and understanding. Critical consciousness allows the learner to enter into a dialectical engagement with their world whereby knowledge and understanding are in states of constant change and development, emerging as they do from the ‘fruitful collisions of ideas from which a higher truth may be reached by way of synthesis’ (Bullock and Trombley 1977; 1999: 222). Critical consciousness recognizes that ‘information’ is not, and cannot, be perceived in an ideal or pure form but is inevitably mediated by the social and cultural context of the person’s consciousness and their personal historicity. As Martin puts it, ‘We do not simply register ‘objects’ but constitute them in ways which can only reflect the particularities of your biographies and our cultures’ (Martin 1995: 83).

The development of critical consciousness within music education takes place (at least partly) through a dialectical relationship between teacher and learner where students and teachers are no longer the objects of the educational process but subjects within it. The relationship between the teacher and students changes from one where the teacher teaches a predefined body of knowledge to one where, through a dialectical process, students and teachers together negotiate and construct knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy as a manifestation of the critical consciousness of their worlds.

Allsup, drawing on Marx’s definition of ‘praxis’, provides a starting point for such a process when he suggests that perhaps we should seek to ‘uncover the real worlds and real lives of our students ... by simply listening to our students’ stories’ (Allsup 2003: 9). **Box 12.1** takes such an approach as foundation for a dialectical process between teacher and students.

BOX 12.1: THE DIALECTIC PROCESS AS TALK

Martha has just taken over as head of music in a non-selective, mixed school in London. Students’ attitudes to music in the curriculum are very negative and behaviour in lessons is sometimes poor. Very few students continue with formal music education in school beyond the age of 14 and there is a danger that the school will decide that it is no longer a viable part of the curriculum at this stage.

Martha talks with the students about why they dislike music in school and finds out that they see little ‘connect’ between the music they do out of school and what they are asked to do in music lessons. Their opinions and views about what they want to do, learn and experience in music lessons have not been sought. Martha realizes that her own music education as a ‘classical’ cellist has not provided her with the knowledge and skills she needs to engage with the music

that these students value.

She decides to instigate a short 'pilot' project with a Year 9 class on 'Musical Biographies'. Working in pairs as interviewer and interviewee, and then exchanging roles, the students use the available recording technology to create ten-minute 'radio programmes' about their musical lives interspersed with excerpts from the music they value and giving reasons why. Martha also creates a musical biography of her own. They listen to and then discuss each other's biographies and as they do so Martha moves the discussion forward to talk about how their and her musical interests and knowledge results from their lived lives – their enculturation- how it fits into and reflects their lives and how the music projects a particular view of the world- of what's important to them.

Martha now asks them to think about one recording they particularly value and try and articulate what it is about it that resonates with them so much. She deliberately does not refer to musical elements or concepts as to do so would be to impose a particular musical-world view on their thinking. Some students talk about the recording in terms of how it makes them 'feel', others refer to the meanings behind the lyrics, others the iconic status in their lives of the recording artist, others the particular skills of the performer(s); only one or two make mention of the formal materials of the music. A whole range of different musical values emerge which are contrary to and different in emphasis from those that Martha presupposed were important in music. Martha finally talks about her favourite piece of music and explains why. As a contrast to the students focus she deliberately concentrates on the formal properties of the music. They discuss their different perceptions of what they consider to be important in music.

From this process of musical biographies Martha and the students negotiate a way forward for the music curriculum based on a developing understanding of the different music perceptions of the teacher and the students. She realizes that the 'training' approach that she experienced in her music education will not be appropriate here. She understands that the music curriculum and its scheme of work will need to be ever-shifting and fluid and the starting point for negotiation not something that is imposed and fixed.

Freire's conception of the dialectical process between teacher and student is one based upon spoken language. Music however offers the possibility of a much richer discourse between teacher and student based upon and through music. It is in the process of making music - and making music together - that the dialectical possibilities of music are fully realized. Such occasions can take place in any music learning contexts but frequently occur in workshop-type events where Bullock and Trombley's (1977; 1999: 222) 'fruitful collision of ideas' are most easily facilitated.

BOX 12.2: THE DIALECTICAL PROCESS AS MUSIC

Martin is leading an improvisation workshop with a group of Year 10 students and their teachers (ages 14-15). The students and teachers (and Martin) sit in a circle with their instruments. Martin does not speak but begins with a quiet, syncopated two-bar, Hip-Hop type riff on a bass guitar. After about a minute he signals to one of the group that they should respond to his riff with single answering riff of their own. He then continues with his riff but begins to place the accents on different notes and beats in unexpected ways. As he does this he glances at the group and smiles. They return the smile thus indicating that they are recognising what is going on musically and this recognition motivates them to respond by doing similar things with their answering riffs. After about two minutes, and without stopping the flow of the music, Martin gets them to respond to each other's riffs – the ownership moves from him to them - and they begin a process of extending the music and furthering the dialectical process.

Freire proposes that this kind of dialectical relationship can form the foundation for the emergence of 'problem-solving education' where education is seen as the process of posing problems in relation to the world of the learners and teachers. He sums up the difference between the banking and problem-solving concepts of education in the following terms: 'The banking method emphasizes permanence and becomes reactionary. The problem-posing education – which accepts neither a "well-behaved" presence nor a pre-determined future – roots itself in the dynamic present and becomes revolutionary' (Freire 1970: 65).

BOX 12.3: ENGAGING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

A group of GCSE (age 14-16) students work on a composing and performing project based on English Folk Song. The teacher has placed the project in the hands of the students. He has suggested albums and traditional musicians they might listen to and has talked to them briefly about the musical characteristic of English folk music, including a tendency towards modality, the instruments typically used and the social purposes of the songs. However this information and suggestions for listening are presented as starting points which they can choose to use or not.

One of the artists mentioned by the teacher is Maddy Pryor and one student comes across a recording of her singing My Son John, a song from the Napoleonic wars which, through the voice of the mother, tells of a soldier who comes home having lost both legs. The words are hard and bitter but touched with black humour:

Refrain:

*My Son John was tall and slim
 He had a leg for every limb
 Now he has no legs at all
 For he run a race with a cannon ball*

Shortly after beginning work on the song, one of the students finds on YouTube a version of the song sung by Martin Carthy. In his version, Carthy has reworked the lyrics into a contemporary anti-war song specifically protesting against conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq; the song makes references to cluster bombs and includes lines such as ‘Cool Britannia calling for War’ but retains the original refrain .

The students recognize how, through the changes to the lyrics and incorporating into the backing band Middle Eastern and South Asian instruments and digitally produced sounds with Middle Eastern resonances, the song achieves a tremendously visceral and emotional power through its acknowledgement of the impact of the conflict on people from all sides. The also recognize that its power lies in the way it maintains its links to its original context of creation over 200 years ago.

A second student then discovers another YouTube link this time of Cathy Berberian performing Berio’s Folk Songs. The students search the internet for information about these songs and discover Berio’s account of his intentions in composing/arranging them: ‘I have given the songs a new rhythmic and harmonic interpretation: in a way, I have recomposed them. The instrumental part has an important function: it is meant to underline and comment on the expressive and cultural roots of each song. Such roots signify not only the ethnic origins of the songs but also the history of the authentic uses that have been made of them’ (Berio: 1964). These two musical worlds come together for the students in a ‘fruitful collision’ and through these two examples from different musical worlds, they come to understand the way in which folk songs can be reworked to communicate powerful contemporary, social messages without their essential and original meaning being destroyed or lost. Underpinned by this understanding they work together, with support from the teacher when requested, discussing and trying out and testing of musical ideas and eventually creating a folk song cycle called Our Brave Boys- a title which the songs treat both straight-forwardly but in many cases ironically, expressing a strong anti-war sentiment.

They ensure that each song stays true to the spirit of the original, but is given a contemporary feel. They use all the instruments (electronic and acoustic) that they have at their disposal as well as employing digital technology and, in the manner of Berio, employ different instrumental combinations to accompany each song. In addition they rewrite lyrics to address various perspectives of conflict in the world. They perform the song cycle at the next school concert where all present agree that their knowledge does not represent a ‘well-behaved presence’.

CONCLUSION

In the above case studies, and throughout this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate how, through a critical pedagogy which creates musical contexts within which students can develop and express their own

critical consciousness, make connections with their own world and become active constructors of knowledge, students' musical knowledge becomes replete with, rather than void of, 'self'.

However the attainment of critical consciousness is not necessarily a 'comfortable' place to be. It carries with it a responsibility that doesn't allow for individual acts to be placed at the door of external factors and authority and thus one becomes -at least to an extent- responsible for one's own destiny- one's own musical destiny. Critical consciousness also brings with it a knowledge of 'self' within one's musical world; of knowing what one knows but with an awareness that the paradoxical nature of being fully human is a knowledge of one's essential 'incompleteness'. Critical thinking and critical consciousness lead people to the knowledge of themselves as essentially 'unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality' (Giroux 2010: 3). This incompleteness is inherent in the nature of knowledge as being formed from a continuing dialectical relationship with the world where that world is dynamic and ever-changing in relation to the person as a subject within the world. Students (and teachers) come to recognize learning as a fundamentally unending process. It is through an awareness of 'incompleteness' and the richness of experience that this dialectical relationship with the world emerges the desire for education - and for music education- as a life-long, ongoing and *liberating* process to emerge.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Think back to your own music education. What particular philosophies of knowledge and knowledge–learner relationships do you feel underpinned the way in which you were taught? Do you feel that you were disadvantaged in any way by the conception of knowledge that underpinned the pedagogical approaches of your teachers?
2. Consider your own teaching style. What particular philosophies of knowledge and knowledge–learner relationships do you feel influence the way you teach? Do your pedagogical approaches result from the way in which you were taught or are they consciously chosen?
3. What do you feel are the advantages and disadvantages of a critical pedagogy both generally and in relation to your own teaching? How might you develop your own pupils' critical thinking skills and what impact do you think might it have on them as musicians and their musical development?

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