

MUS 782

Discussion 11 – Oxford Handbook Ch. 24

Jim Novak

11.4.21

Read a chapter of your choice from Section V of the textbook. Express your understanding of this chapter.

Chapter 24: On informalities in music education

For the past 200 years, music education has largely occurred in public with a predictable “form” requiring a particular shape, design, discipline, system, organization, control, teacher-led instruction of a student, and particular outcome. Some women find themselves disconnected from this systematic approach as it was created by and for men. Formality has been used to describe public, institutional programs of music education found in schools, conservatories, colleges, and universities.

Informality is viewed by many as a way to move music education forward and a viable option for a classroom pedagogy. Informality, which is much more likely to occur in the private sphere (i.e. home, social situations, Montessori schools), focuses on process, idiosyncratic, rhapsodic, unsystematic, learner-generated, divergent in outcomes, and possibly more favorable to girls and women. Informality can be both a defining quality and a significant support for various metaphorical models of music education.

Now that informality is described, the author describes the pros and cons of informality with respect to its musical, teaching, learning, instructional, curricular, and administrative aspects. He uses two metaphors for this: 1. Metaphor of the Home and 2. The Web and Connectivity.

The metaphor of the home is both a spiritual and literal place which is required to have love, desire, affection, and faithfulness, as well as members who have intimacy, tact, safety, and respect. Home affords us the opportunity to experience a wide range of emotion, learn from our family and closest peers, and define social morals, beliefs, and practices. It helps to define our place in the larger world. In relation to music education, informality means surrounding yourself during ordinary life with ordinary people who can teach you practical skills in a certain music tradition. This is basically the definition of a mentor and has been practiced for generations as a way of passing down cultural beliefs and music. It is the passing of knowledge from a more experienced person to a lesser experienced person.

The teacher's role is less formal in that the students often seek out the teacher of their choice. In this model, the student's interest and desire to learn drives the process rather than following a systematic or conceptual approach. They see what they need to know, demonstrate competence, and then move on to the next area of interest.

It is difficult to use informality uniformly in a public education setting, but components can be incorporated that lead to a figurative "home": create and sustain a humane environment where all its members are valued and designate spaces and times to meet individually and in small groups. The work of informal music education must fall on additional community organizations besides public schools, including commercial, political, and religious institutions.

The metaphor of the home has several pros and cons when discussing music program components of music, teaching, learning, curriculum, and administration. Regarding music, its organic connection to relevant life experiences help keep music traditions alive. However, it is driven more by practicality rather than theory, which may weaken the tradition.

Teaching informality leads to a strong mentor-mentee relationship, leading to more care, compassion, and paying close attention to development. On the con side, the style may be too serendipitous and uneven since it relies heavily on the ability of the mentor.

Advantages in learning include tying music in with other aspects of life, lifelong learning, richer/wider experiences, as well as a sustained commitment to learning since it is student driven. Disadvantages include relying on student impulse too much, watering down the music learning process, and an unfortunate situation of a classroom where students are not treated equally or humanely.

Informality in instruction allows choice and intimacy in smaller groups, which can increase compatibility and positive working relationships. But, it can run the gamut between being too fair and inclusive to being too narrow in its focus depending upon the teacher.

As for curriculum, informality can be great because it is largely constructivist and is so practical that it can be put to use in everyday life immediately. Curriculum disadvantages include having too narrow of a view, ignoring broader societal/global perspectives, and being too amateurish to create quality music traditions.

Informality in administration is advantageous because its small-scale and informality allows it to adopt and change courses quickly. Also, including other institutions and entities widens the scope of music education and can even promote the happiness and morale of those involved.

However, the metaphor of home may prove problematic if individuals have suffered trauma in private situations. Additionally, viewing music education as a private versus a public matter may lower its overall societal and cultural value.

The author then completes this entire analysis again with a second metaphor of the Web and connectivity, which emphasizes values of individualism, communitarianism, internationalism, populism, technophilia, and virtuality. Basically, he argues that the Web/connectivity is a double-edged sword in that it can widen our view, but also dilute our view of what music education is and why it is important.

In summary, the author says that formality and informality are forever linked and neither can or should function alone. We should take the best aspects of both camps and do our best to provide a balanced view of music education. And most importantly, while we stress about what ideas/theories to use, we should cut ourselves some slack, because nobody is perfect and there is no perfect answer.