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Musicians’ Profession-related Health Issues and their evolving transformative Learning through Biography

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Abstract

Within a study on ‘musicians as lifelong learners’, explorative biographical research was used to examine the developments in the professional lives of musicians, focusing especially on the relationship between their life, educational and career span and their learning styles. Understanding was to be gained into the role of the concept of lifelong learning within musicians’ personal and professional development. Musicians from different age categories working in the creating, performing, teaching and/or entrepreneurial domains were all covered in the interviews and divergent careers were elucidated. Lightly structured interviews (Knight 2002) led to a collection of narrative learning biographies in which critical incidents and educational interventions that might be of exemplary value were described. This paper focuses on biographical findings on musicians’ generic leadership when coping with profession-related health issues and the transformative learning evolving from it.

When analysing the learning biographies informed by grounded theory, the emergence of profession-related health issues was striking. More than half of the portrayed musicians suffered from both physical and psychological problems, the latter mostly consisting of performance anxiety (stage fright), which was often connected to low self-esteem. However creative coping strategies were also frequently found by the musicians, showing their extensive use of metacognitive skills. This paper addresses the coping strategies found and relates it to musicians’ transformative learning (Mezirow 1990). Musicians’ transformative learning, sparked off by critical incidents or interventions related to health issues led to strong results of knowledgeability and in some cases to a career shift which was perceived by the biographers as liberating, valuable and matching their identity. In addition biographical and transitional learning turned out to be highly related to musicians’ values and attitudes.

The experiences of engaging in transformative learning processes appear to be highly relevant to the quality of learning in music. Within a supportive and experiential context of a community of practice the conditions of a ‘holistic’ laboratory can arise, where teaching musicians can share their experiences with students, or in peer-to-peer settings

of continuing professional development with other musicians. Technical coping strategies can be shared, as well as resolving stage fright through improvisation or other high quality settings of music-making with trusted peers. In this way biographical learning is allowed to take place in an institutional environment while re-appraising forms of one-to-one teaching as a master-apprentice relationship, but within a totally different context of shared authority.

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Background

The main trends and changes in post-modern life, with its reciprocal relationship between the local and global, are found extensively in the arts and in music. New art forms, new music and new artistic languages, often using new technology, are beginning to shape a new cultural landscape. Perceived threats (like loss of identity) and opportunities (like the possibilities of the virtual world) both arise. All these changes lead to a paradigm-shift in learning, and the emergence and relevance of the phenomenon of lifelong and lifewide learning become clear. Its implications embrace the *macro* level of society at large, the institutional (reflexive) *meso* level, and the individual *micro* level, relating to individuals in society.

Within this new context of learning biographical knowledge becomes relevant, where the interrelated development of the life, educational and career span can give us important knowledge, understanding and insight. The transitions in people's lives are of special interest, leading to change and decisions that underpin their reflexive biographies.

In the frame of a study on 'musicians as lifelong learners' (Smilde 2009), explorative biographical research was used to examine the developments in the professional lives of a number of musicians, where understanding was to be gained into the relationship between musicians' personal and professional development. The main thread throughout the research was the question of how musicians learn and in what domains. Musicians from different age categories and with different careers were covered in the interviews, leading to a collection of narrative learning biographies in which critical incidents and educational interventions that might be of exemplary value were described.

The analysis of the learning biographies of the musicians was informed by 'grounded theory' as originally devised by Glaser and Strauss (1967). After analysing the biographies three inter-related key areas in the narratives emerged, which can be described as musicians' different forms of leadership; the interconnection between their varied learning styles and third, their need for an adaptive and responsive learning environment within a reflective and reflexive institutional culture. These three key areas of knowledge and understanding seem to enable and inform each other. We will focus here on biographical findings on musicians' leadership and in particular on their *generic leadership*.

What do we mean by leadership and in particular generic leadership?

The word 'leadership' is mostly understood as connected to the institutional meso level. However it can also be perceived on the individual micro level. Leadership is dependent on authority and the ability to exercise authority. A sense of *shared authority* through collaborative (artistic) practice, underpinned by a cluster of qualities, like informed decision making (including those taken reflexively on a tacit level), adaptability and flexibility and generic qualities like committed values and attitudes define this kind of leadership. Such leadership takes place at the individual and institutional level, cutting through the artistic, personal and professional development. The musicians show various forms of artistic, educational and generic leadership and processes of development towards gaining leadership. Their leadership is closely connected to their learning styles, which appear quite informal and highly experiential.

Generic leadership entails the ability to lead by example and by attitude and includes the development of life skills, transferable skills and social leadership as well as issues of identity, self-esteem and musicians' coping strategies. The interconnection between personal and professional development is highly relevant within musicians' learning and leadership. The ability to be reflective and reflexive is of course connected to this.

Let us explore this generic leadership more in depth focusing in particular on a striking finding in the biographical research, which is the emergence of physical and mental profession-related health problems, the reflective and reflexive way musicians dealt with it and the transformative and transitional learning that evolved from it.

Physical health problems and transformative learning

That musicians suffer much from both physical and psychological problems which are profession-related, the latter mostly consisting of performance anxiety, is much endorsed in the biographies. Health problems can be very distorting, and are often experienced as an attack on musicians' self-identity. Two examples will be explored; they are of cellist Mike and French horn player John, both middle-aged male musicians and highly skilled performers.

Mike had an accident which brought him into a crisis, which in the end also contributed to substantial changes in his life, including a divorce.

What happened in this completely disastrous time is that I cut my left index finger off. My wife was in the opera house, I was cooking, the phone kept ringing. I was with the children. I was preparing frozen fish and tried to sever them with a knife and then it happened. And I knew in that second that this was it. I said to myself, '*Okay, this is the end. That's it.* This is my career. I did some interesting things and that is that' (...) The accident happened in June, and I think I accepted a concert in January after that (...) I told myself, '*If I can play this concert well, I am going to keep my job, if not I'll change profession*'. My surgeon came to Switzerland to hear me play again. It was such hard work... a life-altering experience I think. Objectively maybe not, but subjectively I took it very badly. *I told myself that I could come back from this once, but not twice.*

Mike feels that in the end this accident has improved his playing. He says:

I had to think again, and think ahead. Well, actually, my mind made me improve. My mind created the problem and that made me improve. My background made me use my brain. It made me think, how I could deal with turning it around (...) The technical ability came back fully, but I had had to deal with the problem more deeply.

Clearly Mike refers here to mental coping strategies as well. “My background made me use my brain” refers to the parental background, the way Mike was raised in a wise and supportive way. We will get back to him shortly.

Performance anxiety and transformative learning

Performance anxiety or ‘stage fright’, connected to high perfectionism and a low self-esteem is found a lot. A number of the musicians state that they work extremely hard and that it is never ‘good enough’. It makes us think of Gardner’s (1993) “obsessive commitment” (p. 364).

Admitting to having performance anxiety is still often a taboo (Wynn Parry 2004). The example of John, principal French horn player in a world-famous orchestra is illuminating. He suffered a major break-down caused by a collapse through stage fright which had been building up for years and he consequently developed strong coping strategies. His narrative is a core story of a critical incident which led to important transformative learning.

(...) at the beginning of this season it went wrong. I was in Salzburg and had to play a solo, and for three seconds I had a severe black out. No sound whatsoever came from my instrument. Over and done with. *I thought ‘this is it’*. I felt the moment arriving, but the moment it actually happened I confronted myself, so to speak. *Those few seconds made me decide that I would stop playing, but not before I had done everything I could to find out what had happened and whether I could cope with it*. I had played very well for the last few years, but also I had often left the artist foyer with a feeling like, ‘thank God, I have survived it again’.

John’s coping strategy was quite powerful. He knew that, like him, other musicians suffered from stage fright, although it was never openly discussed. He took on leadership by attitude and example by taking a ‘risk’, which was being open with the management of the orchestra and then the second one, which was discussing his problem openly with his colleagues and peers, in order to help and empower each other.

A lot of transformative learning emerged through using this coping strategy. John can, while still being in the process himself, address his stage fright, reflect on it through a process of biographicity and transform his experience into something useful for his students. The social construct this implies echoes Mezirow’s (2009) statement that transformative learning creates the foundation in insight and understanding essential for learning how to take effective social action (p. 96).

Also cellist Mike suffered from stage fright. He addresses it in practically the same wording as John who says “Of course I am nervous when I play. Who isn’t?” by saying:

“But then, who is not afraid to play? People who have no head.” Mike already had to cope with nerves when he was a child. Also as an adolescent he used to be very nervous, up to the point that he could not even eat. He now thinks that his stage fright developed because he had to fight against himself as he had an ideal about how the music should sound. A great feeling of perfectionism underpinned this. Mike has learned to cope with it and also feels that the fact he gets older helps, making reflexive discoveries:

(...) there is also the problem that if you are very, very nervous, sometimes *you are basically nervous about the view that you have of yourself*. And the audience is this mirror, so you don't want to see yourself. So you don't accept something in yourself. Now I feel a little better, because I have nothing to lose. I have the age I have and I play. And okay, one evening is a little less good, another is better. It is human and everything is relative. By now I've learned to accept some shortcomings. And I can have great moments. I am not talking about great music, but about great moments as a person. What I mean is feeling really fulfilled.

The fact that 'it is human and relative' is (now) recognized by John as well. Mike's great moments as a person, despite shortcomings, echo in a similar statement of John, who says:

I feel privileged that I am able to *share with other people what is close to my heart*, and that I am allowed to do it the way I do, *including my shortcomings*.

Interestingly, both musicians use a (perhaps unconscious) coping strategy here which is highly transformative. They let go of the idea of connecting their own self-identity to perceived 'failure' or 'non failure', but place the communication through music at the core. Mike has great moments through music and John feels empowered through the sharing of his great moments, which may include shortcomings. Mike acknowledges the fact that stage fright somehow gets more resolved once one gets older, letting go of the direct relationship with self-esteem and high perfectionism. We can certainly regard this as transformative and even transitional learning, leading to a new quality of reference to the self and the world.

The comparison with Mike's reaction goes further when we hear John telling how he reacted immediately when having his blackout: he basically decided that he would stop playing unless he would find out why it happened and how to cope with this in a satisfactory way. Mike did practically the same: he gave himself a certain span of time to prove that he could recover. John says:

I thought 'this is it' (...) Those few seconds made me decide that I would stop playing, but not before I had done everything I could to find out what had happened and whether I could cope with it.

Mike says practically the same:

And I knew in that second that this was it. I said to myself, 'Okay, this is the end. That's it. This is my career (...) I told myself, 'If I can play this concert well, I am going to keep my job, if not I'll change profession'.

Without any doubt, the two incidents had so much impact on both musicians that they developed strong coping strategies out of self protection. Mike realised afterwards that he had taken it quite badly: “I could come back from this once, but not twice.”

Both Mike and John had to start rethinking their musicianship and thus their self-identity after their crises. They both connected these critical incidents to their childhood, where Mike relates that “my background made me use my brain” and knew that “I had to deal with the problem more deeply”, whereas John immediately knew that he had to connect the emergence of his stage fright also with certain life-experiences.

John showed generic leadership, consisting of leadership by example and attitude, by creating a change through his own reflexive intervention in the institution he was part of, in his case the orchestra. He realised how he could have built this continuously growing performance anxiety and what he needed, which was in the first place professional help and in the second place sharing this with colleagues who suffered (in secret) from the same. It took time to build it up; it also took time to start to realise how this all came about. It was most probably his age, the life phase he was in, which made him aware and which also enabled him to be reflective and reflexive about it.

However, there is another layer of metaphorical understanding why John could feel empowered to act as he did. In order to tackle this it is relevant to draw on Wenger’s (1998) theory of social learning. Addressing the (tacit) dimension of trust in the orchestra, John says:

(As a musician in this orchestra) you learn to develop antennae that receive everything and transmit this to you so that you can respond. All these antennae in our orchestra are directed towards each other. (...) We have a tremendous feeling of musical empathy (...) Everyone recognises each other’s colour and sound, everyone listens to each other’s sound (...) *Listening to each other’s sound is the secret of everything. You catch someone’s sound and the sound catches you.*

Various layers of meaning can be explored in John’s narrative, in the first place the community of practice, where there is a deep tacit understanding between the musicians, but also the metaphor of ‘sound’ which stands for the shared identity of this community and its sense of belonging. John addresses this sense of belonging literally elsewhere in relationship to his membership of the orchestra. It is not surprising that upon John’s mental break-down the trust that is required for having tacit understanding in a group showed itself. John took up generic leadership by starting to cope with his stage fright through breaking a taboo within a community of peers in the orchestra who suffered from the same.

We find the same sense of trust in Mike’s narrative when we hear him address the tacit understanding when performing with other musicians on the, sometimes dreaded, stage:

It's a real dialogue. It's the same thing as having a good discussion with two or three friends (...) When I play with friends, it happens, the concept emerges. So *I would never walk on the stage with three or four people I don't know to play Beethoven.*

We can certainly consider the 'dialogue' a metaphor for what Schön (1987) terms "the intuitive knowing implicit in the action", which Schön himself connects to the metaphor of a conversation (p. 56 and 31). For both musicians the relationship with other musicians is clearly of crucial importance.

The perception of being in a community of trusted peers has a basis in another layer of the biographies of Mike and John, which is the informal music-making throughout childhood which had a strong impact for both musicians. Mike tells about playing as a young child in ensembles with other young children, guided by a much loved teacher, thus discovering his love for music and John relates about his huge impressions while playing at a young age in the village brass orchestra with his family and neighbours, which underpinned a strong emotion.

Within the biographical research it shows clearly in many life stories that three interdependent incentives appear fundamental to the process of shaping musicians' self-identity: the first being singing and informal music-making throughout childhood, the second improvisation, and the third is engagement in high quality performance. These processes lead to transformative learning in music throughout life.

This finding is corroborated by the psychologist John Sloboda (2005), who looked into young musicians' emotional responses to their own music-making and found that these are likely to occur in particular contexts, which are almost always informal, and can have long-lasting effects on musical involvement. Occasions with significant meaning were informal and took place in a relaxed, non-judgemental atmosphere, and in the company of family or friends. Sloboda did not find a relationship between positive experiences and the amount of prior formal tuition. But what he did find was that often positive experiences preceded the start of formal music lessons and that strong emotional responses to music appeared to underlie the decision to make a career in music (p. 216).

Informal learning is a very important mode of learning in music, in childhood as well as later in life. It is fundamental to the transformative learning processes in which formal learning also plays a significant role in the course of the development of the musician. Participatory learning in a community of practice is the bedrock of all this learning.

A sustained opportunity for informal learning and improvisation brings musicians in a situation where dependence of each other and thus trust and overcoming one's feelings of vulnerability are required. It can lead to musicians' feelings of ownership of their learning, and thus to the development of more positive self-esteem. In all types of (institutional) learning, awareness of this fact might be a strong means for preventing or reducing stage fright. It might also enable musicians to develop leadership which matches their self-identity.

Reflections on musicians' leadership and transformative learning

I hope to have shown the relevance of feeding the stories of Mike and John back to the notion of impact of biographical learning. Also other stories about musicians' profession-related physical problems and performance anxiety which I did not address in this paper clearly cannot be seen apart from their biography and led to transitional learning.

The observation of Alheit and Dausien (2002) that 'the life span as an institution' addresses the 'societal curriculum' which is ever changing and is regulated through both formal learning and biographical learning (p. 8) is endorsed in a fair amount of the biographies, interestingly throughout all age categories. Numerous examples of transformative and transitional learning were found, connected to critical incidents in musicians' life histories and/or educational interventions initiated by the musicians themselves or others, often parents.

Transformative learning during the life span is highly influential in musicians' career development. In connection with transformative and transitional learning many examples of biographicity are found, often as a result of crises in life, leading to "surplus meanings" (Alheit 1994, p. 290).

The "particular construct of meaning" (Alheit and Dausien 2002) which is emerging within transitional learning, can be found in John's biography, who through his life-experience turned into a leader who leads through example in a community of practice (Wenger 1998). Such examples show the strength of biographical learning where musicians can act as their own change agents. Because, "Biographical learning is both a *constructionist achievement* of the individual integrating new experiences into the self-referential 'architectonic' of particular past experiences and a *social process* which makes subjects competent and able to actively shape and change their social world" (Alheit 2009, p.126, quoting from Alheit and Dausien 2000).

The use of strong metaphors can be observed more than once; the earlier mentioned word 'sound' as a metaphor for identity is a returning item in quite a number of the biographies. We also encounter metaphors for transitional learning more than once in the biographies; one musician described his successful but years-taking curing process after physical profession-related health problems as 'Death and Resurrection' no doubt inspired by Richard Strauss' symphonic poem and another talked about 'being newly born again' once he changed the focus of his profession from performing to teaching after having faced and coming to terms with severe physical problems. John and Mike were both definitely 'newly born again', John thanks to his own intervention which worked, Mike because after his accident he realised on a deeper level how he should approach his musicianship and practice in connection with his personal development.

Implications for learning and teaching in music

The experiences of engaging in transformative learning processes and those of biographicity are highly relevant to the quality of learning within artistic laboratories where the various forms of leadership are connected to various modes of learning. Within the supportive and experiential context of a community of practice the conditions of such a 'holistic' laboratory can arise, where teachers can share their experiences with their

pupils and students, or in peer-to-peer settings of continuing professional development with other musicians. Knowledgeable musicians can share technical coping strategies as well as resolving stage fright through high quality settings of music-making with trusted peers. It can enable teachers to become much more knowledgeable and mindful about physical and mental health issues. In this way biographical learning is allowed to take place in an institutional environment.

Institutional reflexivity seems of major importance as the coping strategies musicians show through their reflective and reflexive attitude go far beyond coping strategies found in literature dealing with research into profession-related health issues of musicians, which tend to remain on the surface, avoiding a holistic approach which includes musicians' biographical learning and identity.

In sum, transitional learning like these musicians show through their awareness of learning in relationship to going through one's life cycle is a powerful given within the relationship between lifelong learning and continuing professional development and highly relevant for the notion of lifewide learning.

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