

Supporting the Educational Process: the Necessity of Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is a word that we hear time and again, a word with many definitions. What does lifelong learning mean? Why is it necessary and important? What makes a musician a lifelong learner?

I would like to share with you research that I have carried out into lifelong learning for musicians and tell you about musicians' experiences of their learning processes and what we can learn from that as institutions of higher music education in terms of what it could mean for our educational processes and curricula.

First of all, I will give some background and definitions, then I will tell you about what I tried to find and share my findings with you and finally I will address some conclusions that I drew.

Let us first have a look at the definition of lifelong learning. What is *lifelong learning in music* and why is it important? We all know that the musicians of today face many changes in their cultural environment; that these changes are taking place at an ever-increasing pace and that they are a major influence on the development of the profession. More than ever before, the future professional musician is confronted with questions of 'how can I function in a flexible way and exploit opportunities in new and rapidly changing cultural contexts'? This is why it is worthwhile to explore the concept of lifelong learning and its implementation, because lifelong learning is in a nutshell: *a concept of learning that enables us to deal in a confident way with change.*

Lifelong Learning may be defined as a concept spanning an entire lifetime in a process of "...transforming experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and the senses" (Jarvis 2002). It is not 'just' continuing education, it is much more. We can say that it is an important conceptual

framework for the improvement of musicians' *employability* and *adaptability*. The innovative dimension of the Lifelong Learning concept lies in a new approach of the process and context of learning (Fragoulis 2002).

Characteristics of the concept of Lifelong Learning include:

- The distinction between formal and informal learning;
- The emphasis on 'learning' as opposed to 'training';
- Different approaches to learning, including learning in settings outside the school;
- The interconnection between professional and personal development;
- The role of critical reflection and reflexivity – or reflecting *on* your action, bringing about change, and reflecting *in* your action. (This happens e.g. during improvising with other musicians).

When we try to understand the Lifelong Learning concept, it is helpful to first take a closer look into the definitions of *formal*, *non-formal* and *informal learning*. These definitions come back later in relation to the findings of the research.

Formal learning is learning within an organised and structured context, explicitly designed as learning and leading to a formal recognition (Collardyn 2002). Formal learning in the conservatoire is based on a structured curriculum, with fixed learning objectives, fixed duration, content, method and assessment, and aiming for skills and competences that are specifically relevant for the music profession. The learning is primarily *intentional* and the knowledge is mainly *explicit*.

Non-formal learning can be defined as any organised educational activity outside the established formal system, for example in collaboration with an

external partner. Non-formal learning, we can say, is embedded in planned activities that contain learning elements.

Within *informal learning* all aspects of learning – what to learn, how to learn and for how long – are in the hands of the individual learner, in general without interference of teachers. Learning experiences can include interactions with other musicians or learning by development of self-teaching techniques. The learning of pop musicians who practise in the garage is an excellent example of this.

Links between formal and non-formal or informal education/learning are critical for the concept of Lifelong Learning. Learning in non-formal situations can, in principle, generate the same competences as learning in a formal learning environment (Duvekot 2002). That is the part on definitions.

Within the study on ‘musicians as lifelong learners’ which I did, I used biographical research to examine the developments in the professional lives of 32 musicians. I focused on the relationship between their life, educational and career span and especially on the question how they learn as a musician. The outcomes of the research could result in a deeper insight into the concept of lifelong learning in music, and lead to recommendations for change in learning environments of the conservatoire and for continuing professional development of musicians.

These were my research questions:

- What knowledge, skills and values are considered necessary to function effectively and creatively as a (contemporary) musician?
- How do musicians learn and in what domains?

- What does the necessary conceptual framework of lifelong learning for musicians entail and what are its implications for education and learning environments?

They were underpinned by three subsidiary questions, which first needed to be addressed:

- What are the main changes for the European music profession?
- What are the likely implications for the professional training of musicians?
- In what ways do conservatoires respond to these developments?

We will first have a look at these latter questions.

As we all know too well, the changes and trends in the European musical landscape are manifold and in this research I drew, in addition to research that is carried out by my own research group, on an extended research which was done by the working group on the Music Profession of the first AEC Polifonia project. I was member of this group.

One of the major changes in the landscape of the European music profession today is the emergence of the *portfolio career*. The musician of today is rarely employed in one job for life (or even one job at a time), but is increasingly an entrepreneur who has a portfolio career, combining several forms of professional activities.

Having a portfolio career does not at all mean that a musician is not employable; rather this reflects societal change. Holding a portfolio career with overlapping activities in the colourful professional practice requires the musician to have many *roles* at the same time. A British research project on the work, education and training of present day professional musicians and their changing

career patterns looked at the areas of engagement for the present day musicians and more than 50 multi-related roles or skills were identified. These were divided into related areas, and from there four central roles were defined; those of *composer, performer, leader* and *teacher*. These roles are overlapping and relevant to all genres of music. This approach is certainly applicable to the European situation.

No matter what their primary area of engagement is; musicians today must take up various interrelated roles that require many skills and attitudes of adaptation. Their roles include those of performer, composer, teacher, mentor, coach, leader and many more. These various roles require the musician to be innovative, reflective and entrepreneurial. In short, musicians need to learn to respond to the variables within different cultural contexts (Smilde 2006).

Conservatoires' response

How do conservatoires respond to this? The question of what is required to obtain successful professional integration for musicians, especially in the light of all the changes in the social and cultural landscape is of key importance. How successful are European conservatoires in addressing this question, while preparing their students for a future professional life, which is so complex and multi-dimensional? What do graduates need once they enter the profession and how do conservatoires respond to these needs?

In the beginning of 2000 the AEC carried out a major research project which investigated the professional integration and continuing professional development for musicians and the needs of recent graduates of European conservatoires (Lafourcade and Smilde 2001). I was involved in this research project. This research showed that graduates encounter a variety of problems.

Former students of conservatoires in the European Union were asked about their professional life and needs after graduation. A wide variety of issues were raised in the responses, nearly all of which related to finding (or generating) work. The students mentioned the fact that they had not gained enough experience in the professional world before graduation.

The top skills that they had missed *during* training at the conservatoire were health-related skills, improvisation and participation in chamber music and larger ensemble performance. The main thrust in the response upon the question what they needed *after* graduation was a strong need for *life skills*, being generic or transferable skills, like networking, presentation skills, entrepreneurship; dealing with health issues; teaching skills and improvisation.

In addition we assembled information about what provision for continuing education existed in conservatoires, and whether there was a match between these needs of graduates and this provision. The outcomes were striking: the highest priority in needs felt by the students, namely life skills, was the lowest priority of the conservatoires, in terms of provision.

| Conservatoires | Former students |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Information Exchange | Life skills |
| Performance skills | Performance skills |
| Pedagogical skills | Pedagogical skills |
| Life skills | Information exchange |

One of the explanations for this mismatch might be the low value given by the conservatoires to the opinion of former students when deciding on provision. It showed that conservatoires gave more priority to their own perception of their former students' needs instead of asking questions directly. A small scale research of the AEC among former students and employers in 2007 still endorsed

our finding that not sufficient attention is paid to health issues, improvisation and pedagogical skills.

The core questions leading to the interviews

So far this background. The core research questions, as we remember being the question of what knowledge, skills and values musicians need in order to function effectively and creatively as a (contemporary) musician; the question how musicians actually learn and third, what this knowledge means for the concept of lifelong learning and what its implications are for education and learning environment, underpinned my interviews with 32 musicians (Smilde 2009a). I held in-depth interviews with professional musicians throughout Europe with varied professional practices and in different phases of their life and I tried to gain understanding into the role of the concept of lifelong learning within these musicians' personal and professional development. What kind of lifelong learners are they? I interviewed musicians working in the creating, performing, teaching and/or entrepreneurial domains, with divergent careers. I looked for musicians ranging from those having a more or less traditional career path, like for example orchestral musicians and music teachers, to musicians who perform and create on the cutting edge of various genres, areas of engagement and disciplines. I also tried to find musicians with different learning paths, ranging from having continuous formal education from early childhood on to a completely informal learning path, with all kinds of mixed learning paths in between. I took four age categories into account: 1. the years after graduation (up till 35 years); between 35 and 45 years; between 45 and 55 years and from 55 years onwards.

The interviews took place by means of open key questions, which addressed musicians' life, educational and career span as well as its interactions.

In the interviews I tried to aim at finding determining moments in the life and career span (critical incidents) and I explored educational interventions (by teachers, parents or the musicians themselves). The main thread throughout the interviews was the question of how one learns as a musician and the transitions and transformations in learning which could be observed. The interviews led to 32 learning biographies.

Analysis and findings in the biographical research

What did I find? While analysing the learning biographies, three key areas in the stories of the musicians emerged. They can be described as

- musicians' different forms of leadership (artistic, generic and educational);
- the interconnection between varied learning styles of the musicians, and
- their need for an adaptive and responsive learning environment within a reflective and reflexive institutional culture.

These *key areas of knowledge and understanding* are highly interconnected and they enable and inform each other. Let us have a look at them.

Leadership and learning styles

First we will look at 'leadership'. The word 'leadership' is mostly understood as connected to the institutional level (the leader is the director of the school, or the conductor of the orchestra). However it can also be perceived on the individual level.

Leadership, we could say, is dependent on authority and the ability to exercise authority. Within musicianship (e.g. chamber music) we can speak of *shared authority* through collaborative artistic practice, which is underpinned by

qualities like informed decision making (sometimes tacitly, e.g. while playing chamber music), adaptability, flexibility, committed values and attitudes. The musicians I investigated show various forms of *artistic*, *generic* and *educational* leadership. The interconnection between personal and professional development is very important within musicians' leadership and learning. The ability to be reflective and reflexive is connected to this. Both, as we saw, important elements of the lifelong learning concept. Musicians' leadership is closely connected to their learning styles.

What is *generic leadership*? We might describe it as the ability to lead by example and by attitude, including the development of life skills as well as issues of musicians' self-identity, self-esteem and coping strategies. An example of interesting coping strategies which I found was the different way musicians dealt with stage fright.

It showed clearly that within the area of *artistic leadership*, the core is constituted by tacit (implicit) understanding in the context of what we might call artistic laboratories (a chamber group for example). *Educational leadership* refers to the many roles a music teacher can have: an artistic and pedagogical leader, a guide, a mentor and an educator.

Looking at musicians' learning styles, it shows in a fair amount of the life stories that three interdependent incentives appear fundamental to the process of shaping musicians' motivation and sense of self-identity, being *singing and informal music-making throughout childhood*, the second *improvisation*, and the third is *engagement in high quality performance*. Informal learning is clearly a very important mode of learning in music, in childhood as well as later in life.

Another important aspect of musicians' informal learning is *peer learning*, taking place in a setting of trust among friends. Musicians learn in a reflexive

way, by playing together and improvising, but also by listening, observing and having conversations.

In the biographies strong informal learning processes were observed within formal settings, sometimes within non-formal contexts. Learning which takes shape in this way strengthens musicians' feeling of ownership of their learning as well as their sense of belonging. Opportunities for learning by doing, or experiential learning in formal settings, especially in the conservatoire, were often created through educational interventions by the musicians themselves.

Musicians' artistic learning also happens in a highly informal way, though, especially in the case of classical musicians, underpinned by formal, knowledge-based learning.

Learning environment

We now get to the third area which is important to enable musicians' lifelong learning and that is the learning environment and the learning culture in the institution.

What did the musicians need? In short we can say that where musicians encountered an adaptive learning environment in the conservatoire which gave them space for their own 'artistic laboratories' where they could develop their (professional) identities, they then functioned in the best way. This included having supportive, knowledgeable and coaching teachers. Teachers were nearly always very important for the musicians; both positive and negative experiences had a strong and long-lasting effect on the musicians.

Concluding, I would like to share some thoughts on using the concept of lifelong learning educational processes. What strategies could be considered? This is not a matter of simply giving recipes, but it starts with considering the mind set.

To begin with, the learning environment in the conservatoire could be seen as an artistic, generic and educational laboratory that reflects the workplace, and encompasses informal learning in non-formal learning contexts, and with a strong commitment to quality and knowledgeability. This would require a learning culture which is inviting and non-judgemental, leading to increased self-confidence of the student. Training could then take place in a learning environment in which ideas can be transformed entrepreneurially and where the concept of leadership in a variety of contexts is valued and woven organically into the curriculum.

It is however of critical importance to ensure that the institutions' definition of quality is *not* a narrow one, limited to quality of performance, and failing to take into account the contextual variables when making qualitative judgements arising from various processes, projects and performances in different contexts.

Furthermore, if in the conservatoire we want to prepare students for their future career, enabling them to be open-minded, acting as reflective practitioners in an ever-more challenging and interesting professional music practice, it is important to capture their interest from their own starting point when they enter the conservatoire, which is their professional identity as a performer. A fair amount of the musicians I interviewed acknowledged the fact that life skills are of critical importance for a successful career in music. They found this out after graduation. Musicians mentioned the fact that, although formal courses had been offered in the conservatoire, it did not appeal to them at that time. By nature musicians feel themselves performers, and as their performing is at the basis of their intrinsic motivation, much can be achieved if career preparation in the conservatoire also takes place through action learning in a laboratory setting, taking this given as point of departure. If teaching and learning start from there and focus at some point in the educational process on entrepreneurship in an

integrated and relevant (experiential) way, informed by artistic values, this then can have an impact.

I would like to finish with giving a few recommendations for further work on educational processes, based on my findings. They are:

- To give improvisation a fundamental role in music education and moreover use it as a strategy for preventing and overcoming performance anxiety;
- To create space for students' own interventions and leadership during higher music education in relation to building their future career (half of the interviewees started their career during studies at the conservatoire);
- To listen and respond to former students, in order to learn for curriculum development.

This last bit is, I think the most important, I will therefore finish with a quote from one of the musicians I interviewed, who runs a department in a conservatoire. He says:

The real chats with students in conservatoires always happen too late, when students are nearly leaving.

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