

Biographical Research in Education and the European Lifelong Learning Discourse

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Lifelong Learners in Music; Portraits of Generations

With a research group which I am currently leading, we work on the topic of *Lifelong Learning for Musicians* on behalf of the Prince Claus Conservatoire in Groningen and the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. I will go into the rationale and background of the research. Then I will address the aims and methodology as well as some first outcomes.

Background, aim and methodology

Musicians today face major changes in the cultural life and the music profession, and the question rises how future professional musicians are going to deal with this.

The changes are manifold. New developments in technology emerge, which can lead to new ways of creating music. A changing nature of consumers (think for example of the change in the age pyramid) leads to different artistic programming and to new audiences. The multicultural society asks for cultural awareness, gives new artistic opportunities, and also leads to new audiences.

The changing cultural landscape leads to a *changing nature of the career* of musicians: they have no longer a job for life, but a *portfolio* career, and entrepreneurship and other generic skills become increasingly important.

Musicians have to function in different contexts, in varying roles that can be applied to all kinds of practitioners in the music profession and they are challenged to respond accordingly to the variables in their environments. In addition the standards of excellence required keep rising: higher artistic quality, higher educational quality etc.

All of this is reason enough to explore a conceptual framework of Lifelong Learning to underpin curricula in the conservatoire or music academy of today, which does not tend to keep pace with, nor to respond full heartedly to all these developments.

Lifelong Learning is a dynamic concept whose key characteristics can be critical for the emergence of new creative and adaptive educational approaches for musicians. Hence the Lifelong Learning concept and its implementation are being investigated on the level of educational organization, curriculum, teachers, students and graduates. Doing so implies creating *adaptive learning environments* in which music students can be enabled to function optimally in a continuously changing professional practice.

The core research questions are:

- How do musicians learn and in what domains?
- What knowledge, attitudes, values and artistic/creative skills are necessary to function effectively and creatively as a (contemporary) musician?
- What is the necessary framework of Lifelong Learning for musicians and its implications for education and learning environments?

Underpinned by this research I am investigating the lifelong learning of professional musicians by means of interviews held with musicians from different generations, leading to explorative learning biographies.

From the biographical research results should be obtained that show how concepts of Lifelong Learning are used by musicians. Examples include informal learning in non-formal educational settings; an emphasis on 'learning' rather than on 'training'; reflective practice and context related assessments. And, last but not least, the relationship between personal and professional development.

A theoretical and conceptual framework of Lifelong Learning is the point of departure for the interviews. The framework is flexible and leaves room for new findings and information that can emerge on the basis of analyses of the learning biographies. The interviews are 'lightly structured' (Knight 2002); given shape by means of a number of key questions.

The outcomes of the analyses of the learning biographies can give new information on behalf of the conceptual framework of lifelong learning in music, and subsequently legitimise educational interventions that have not been mapped before.

Contexts of the interviews and relevance of the choices

Today most musicians have *portfolio careers*, which combine different professional roles. Musicians who are mainly active in one single branch of professional practice are found in two areas: that of 'the soloist', the musician who (almost) exclusively has a performing career and secondly 'the music teacher'. Hence three categories emerge: soloists, music teachers and musicians with a portfolio career. Musicians were identified through national and international networks, exemplifying divergent careers and balancing the amount of men and women.

Four reference moments in the lifespan were established: after graduation (ca. 25-35), then ca. 35-45, the midlife period (ca. 45-55) and the period from 55 years onwards.

The content of the questions for the interviews is informed by the research questions and concern life span, educational span, career span and interactions between these three domains.

Some outcomes of the research

The 32 learning biographies aimed for have at present been completed. Currently the analyses need to be given shape. For this paper I have chosen one target group, namely 'the soloists' and used three key themes to illuminate:

- Learning through experience and artistic learning
- Learning environments
- Teaching and learning

The eight learning biographies central in this paper are of:

Cat. I Ingmar, guitarist; Tina, jazz saxophonist

Cat. II Jonathan, jazz saxophonist and composer; Andreas; jazz guitarist and composer

Cat. III Michael, cellist; Richard; pianist

Cat. IV Francine, pianist; Joseph, pianist

I will first consider some critical issues of 'Learning underpinned by Biography'. Then we will look at some outcomes of the biographical research, which I will connect to concepts of Lifelong Learning.

Learning underpinned by Biography

Autobiographical awareness

meaning a person's idea of his or her identity, is of central importance (Antikainen 1996). Significant parts of a life story actually form the identity. Giddens (1991) phrases this as follows, "self identity is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography." Within the relation between education and self identity it is, according to Antikainen, of importance to look at the interviewee's assessment of his or her education: do they feel they have acquired skills and attitudes which they consider part of their self concept?

Significant learning

Rogers (1969) describes significant learning as a change of the self in which "the whole person, both his emotions and the cognitive aspects are involved in the learning." It is learning making a difference in terms of actions chosen, attitudes and personality.

Significant learning experiences

can be seen as pivotal moments in the biography. Antikainen (1998) describes them as "those which appeared to guide the interviewee's life-course, or to have changed or strengthened his or her identity." A significant learning experience is always a change event and the situations from where the learning experiences originate are important. They can take place in informal, non formal and formal learning situations. It means that the context where the experience took place needs to be taken into account.

Significant others of learning and empowerment

(Antikainen 1998) play a role in this context: referring to supportive personal, professional and social relations with people.

In relation to significant learning experiences and significant others in learning the concept of *empowerment* emerges, referring to "an experience that changes an individual's understanding of him or herself and / or the world." (Antikainen 1998)

Critical incidents

in the biography can be described as events in the life-, educational- or career span that have led to transformative learning processes and to changes in the identity of the learner, interactions forming a lifelong process of experience.

Reflexivity and Reflection

Reflexivity and the degree of *reflection* are of importance in the learning biography. Reflexivity is closely related to learning and the development of the 'self-identity' as described by Giddens. Reflexivity entails "constantly putting what one learns in relation to oneself, to one's understanding of oneself and what meaning the influences one faces have for oneself (Illeris, 2004)."

In his seminal work 'Educating the Reflective Practitioner', Schön (1987) makes a distinction by connecting reflexivity to *reflection-in-action* and critical reflection to *reflection-on-action*. We *reflect-in-action*, according to Schön, when we can still make a difference to the situation at hand, reshaping by means of our thinking what we are doing *while* we are doing it. Like knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action is a process we can deliver without being able to say what we are doing.

Communities of Practice

In his study *Communities of Practice*, Wenger (1998) focuses on learning as social participation, where participants construct their identities in relation to communities of practice. Wenger distinguishes four interconnected components, *meaning* (which is learning as experience), *practice* (learning as doing), *community* (learning as belonging) and *identity* (learning as becoming). A community of practice integrates these components. Wenger points out that learning transforms who we are and what we do and speaks in this context about a "transformative practice of a learning community" as one which offers an ideal context for developing new understandings. Furthermore, he states that the combination of *engagement* and *imagination*, or two 'modes of belonging', results in *reflective practice*.

Learning through experience and artistic learning

Starting at an early age

All five classical musicians started playing their instrument at an early age, ranging from three till seven years old. Two of the pianists learned aurally initially. Richard's parents offered him short informal piano lessons at the age of five. Joseph improvised as a child and toured South Africa as a famous little jazz pianist. The three jazz musicians, with the exception of one, all started at a young age with classical tuition, and later changed to jazz.

Learning by doing

All musicians feel they are 'learning by doing' throughout their lives. Specifically in this area significant learning experiences took place. Ingmar got a lot of stage experience in chamber music because he won a competition, resulting in a major enrichment of his performing career. Jonathan never practiced during adolescence, but learned by playing with his bands. Michael gained much experience because at his parental home there was a lot of music making going on "with whoever was there". Richard got a place in a concert series with his teacher: first turning her pages, gradually performing on stage. He feels it formed his greatest lessons.

In the biographies there is an abundance of examples of the musicians just "jumping in" and learning from it. Wenger uses the term 'legitimate peripheral participation' in order to clarify the changing connotation of the concept of apprenticeship (e.g. the master and the student) to one of learning through participation in a community of practice. Renshaw (2006) mentions as one of the key criteria that help to delineate experientially based learning activities, the fact that the learning should be personally significant and meaningful, resulting in a strong sense of ownership.

Artistic learning

It is interesting to observe how these musicians learn artistically and how this is connected to values concerning the relationship they have with other musicians. Most of the musicians first and foremost learn artistically from peers.

For Jonathan artistic learning takes place on the stage and is closely related to the relationship with fellow musicians and trust:

It took time (.....) but in the end I am given their trust. They had to grow with me, and I had to grow with them. You have to listen to each other and learn from each other, non-stop. Once things are developing well the only thing you have to do is follow the music, because the music tells you what needs to happen. Good musicians understand that.

Andreas, the jazz guitarist, relates about how he composes, rather preferring the word 'groove design' and the critical role the other musicians he gives the composition shape with, play in it. He describes the process as having the material available, then transforming it into something of your own and making yourself indispensable.

Thinking together is wonderful (....) In a composition you shape together; I make a guitar part for the thematic part. You design angular points, like in improvisations, you establish when you join or don't join the group.

Verbal deliberation is not necessary, Andreas finds. Michael shares this view and even goes further:

It's a real dialogue. It's the same thing as having a good discussion with two or three friends. We don't analyse the score; we play. When I play with friends, it happens, the concept emerges. So I would never walk on the stage with three or four people unknown to me to play Beethoven.

And:

In chamber music I don't like to talk too much (...) I just play. And I notice that just by playing, things will be added. I do not want it to become an objective thing, *I want the beauty of uncertainty*. Words are a phenomenal media, but not here. (...) So it's sometimes necessary to discuss in chamber music rehearsals, but it's restrictive. We should maybe *think* or just *feel* or *smell* (.....) When I explain what I'm doing in rehearsal, I am not free anymore.

An other interesting point of view on *cognitive* artistic learning comes from the pianist Richard:

When looking at the important harmonic and melodic components in a musical phrase three levels of perception emerge: the *planning* (which is the musical concept), the *executing* (the right key to be pressed at the right moment) and the *reviewing* (the judging). Actually all these roles have to be performed by one person, the performing musician, and they have to be in balance. This is the analytical road. The other one is the intuitive road. The best thing is when the one road helps and fertilizes the other road. And of course there is always the evaluative interaction: I have this plan, I have executed it like that, it worked well, so was my plan all right?

Reading and writing in order to form opinions about artistic approaches turn out to be influential. Two pianists, Francine and Joseph read psychology at University and

graduated. Ingmar and Richard are engaged in practice based research. They feel it is useful to their reflection 'on' and 'in' performance and teaching.

A lot of *tacit knowledge* is at stake in artistic learning: giving shape to a performance without needing any words to make it happen. Renshaw (2006) draws upon the philosopher Michael Polanyi (1966), "Basically, some knowledge cannot be put into words. Tacit knowledge, that is hidden or latent knowledge, is central to the whole process of coming to know experientially within any practical context. Echoing Polanyi, the creative energy or spirit embedded in tacit knowledge can only be *caught* and not *taught*."

Schön's (1983) *reflection-in-action* is relevant in the case of Michael's, Andreas's and Jonathan's example: we can think about doing something while doing it. Schön gives the example of improvising jazz musicians. They are reflecting-in-action on the music they are collectively making and on their individual contributions to it, thinking what they are doing and, in the process, evolving their way of doing it. They reflect not in words, but "through a feel for music". In such processes reflection tends to focus interactively on the outcomes of the action, the action itself, and the intuitive knowing implicit in the action. In Schön's concept of *reflection-on-action* critical reflection is emphasised. Reflexion-on-action happens clearly in the approach to cognitive artistic learning as explained by Richard.

Schön's (1987) concept of *Artistry*, which he defines as "the competence by which practitioners actually handle indeterminate zones of practice" is related to tacit knowledge as displayed by musicians like Michael, Andreas and Jonathan. When a practitioner displays artistry, according to Schön, his intuitive knowing is always richer in information than any description of it.

Educational interventions

Important educational interventions took place in the learning process of the musicians when they were young, often at the instigation of the parents, or were initiated by the musicians themselves at a mature age. I will mention some examples: Richard's parents "saved him for music" when due to an uninterested teacher, he lost his motivation. They negotiated with the child to have only 10 minutes of practice per day. When Richard was 11 his father took up organ lessons together with his son. This motivated Richard strongly. The organ teacher was so inspirational that Richard also started playing the piano again. Michael devised a new technical way of playing for himself after a severe accident he had with his hand. "I had to think again, and my mind made me improve." Francine decided at the age of 14 (!) against the wish of her mother, to change her teacher for a teacher she felt she would be at home with.

Sloboda and Davidson (1996) report about research they have carried out on young high achievers in violin playing reviewing educational interventions. Critical appeared: - the parental support, - the perception of the teacher, - an increase of self motivation during the period of learning, and - mostly formal practice, and less informal practice, however improvising seeming important.

Motivation

All the eight musicians have a deeply rooted intrinsic motivation. Music is central to them, for some of them even of critical importance in periods of crises. One of the musicians speaks in this context about music as “an island of sanity”.

Some of them stress that relating to the audience is an important motivation. Michael gives some striking examples of the power of communicating through music.

Nearly all musicians mention the fact that they are very critical about themselves and perfectionist.

Learning environments

Formal and informal learning environments

Every musician learned in a formal learning environment of the conservatoire, some of them in formal pre-conservatoire settings as well. Most of them adapted to the learning environment they encountered. Tina recounts that she benefited from it, because it helped her to structure her aims and to gain discipline. Andreas ignored his formal education in the conservatoire and created an informal learning environment himself, mainly by playing with teachers and fellow students which he chose himself, leading to 70 concerts a year.

Jonathan was infuriated with his bad experiences in the conservatoire and got depressed by it:

The norms and values that are forced upon you by the conservatoire are not the same as those in the outside world. The relationship between the conservatoire and real practice was bad. The conservatoire behaved like the Catholic Church by telling you what was right and what was wrong. I *needed* to resist that.

Michael observes:

It was a completely reactionary system (...) it was the idea that you did things in order to fit into the structure of the conservatoire, whereas in fact the structure of the conservatoire should be there for *you*. (...) There was no adaptation to the students who were there. *You* had to adapt to the system. And that is upside down somehow, it didn't really work.

Francine had utterly bad experiences, even leading to the advice to her students never to go to the conservatoire.

The conclusion which can be drawn here is that apparently for some of the musicians the culture of the institution distorted their experiential learning as soloists in the artistic environment.

How did they cope?

Jonathan coped by the help of two piano teachers of the conservatoire, who saw his talent, understood him, guided and inspired him and gave him the space to develop himself and his own artistic identity. Significant others in learning, one might say.

Andreas created his own world in the conservatoire as he needed it:

I need incentives. Music making is a group event for me (...) It is an organic process: emerging groups of generations of youngsters, sometimes mixed with older musicians who have a mentoring role, imbued with the spirit of the times, fusing together. Such communities need to be found in conservatoires!

Sloboda (1999) makes some crucial observations. He mentions that ‘highly valued experiences’ hardly ever occur during music lessons or in the presence of a teacher, but in ‘time off tasks’. Furthermore he states that “one cannot get fully inside music without becoming musically involved, yet that is exactly what traditional institutions of music education have tended to inhibit.”

It seems that musicians like Jonathan, Andreas and Michael long for a learning environment resembling an artistic laboratory rather than a formal environment. Andreas’s statement of a learning environment needing incentives and the communities needed to be found in conservatoires fit the description of Wenger’s (1998) ‘communities of practice’. The learner starts in a peripheral position and gradually through collective learning in the community of practice, enters the centre of it.

Teaching and learning

Experiences with teachers

As one-to-one teaching is common practice in music, the relationship with the teachers is critical and pivotal. The experiences of the musicians differ greatly; ranging from teachers being role models and ‘significant others’ to being ‘the enemy’, or ‘somebody who stole my life’. Ingmar is independent in his choices for teachers, because he knows what he wants to learn, and describes himself as “a good lesson taker”. Tina feels she tends to adapt to teachers. Andreas took his teacher at the conservatoire for granted. He describes him as a ‘gate keeper’. “He has the key to the door and you have to pass through it.” Jonathan’s teacher at the conservatoire was in the first two years an idol for him, then became an ‘enemy’, because he could not cope with the fact that his student wanted to follow his own artistic pathway.

Both Michael and Francine had teachers who had no interest whatsoever in their students. Narrow mindedness, ‘you have to do it my way’ was always at the core. Especially Francine had a hard time as a young girl:

Gradually piano playing started to kill me. I was a very natural player when I was seven, eight, nine years old. But around eleven I started to become nervous. Because they had succeeded in inoculating me. My teacher stole my life. She would make three of us play on three pianos the same Chopin study and she would put metronome marks on 72, 93, 94. How beautiful it that? And where emotion comes, I don’t know.

She was saved by the pianist Wilhelm Kempff, a significant other, who put her on the right track. She feels that thanks to him she kept her motivation.

Michael had a teacher at Yale University who was crucial for him in helping him building his self confidence. This teacher would always stress the strong points of his students, and only after they had gained self confidence, start working on shortcomings. Michael states that he saw people change rapidly in terms of self confidence. “Psychologically, he was a real master, it was phenomenal. (...) The main thing I learned from him was *that*.”

Musicians' view on teaching

Not all of the musicians teach, however Michael, Joseph and Francine are also well known pedagogues. What is for them of importance in their teaching?

Michael finds it critical to listen to the interesting things students have to say and feels they must discover their own way. It is important to leave things open and not push them into directions.

Francine started teaching through a critical incident in her life. When her daughter was born she decided to give up her tours throughout the world and start teaching. Due to her bad experiences Francine has an outspoken view on her teaching:

Teaching is not taking power over somebody. I hate that. You must be able to transform your relationship into something your students require. (...) I don't own students, I don't think one should, one should help people to find their identity musically and emotionally.

Joseph started to teach at a later age, also as a result of a critical incident. He lost his partner, had to leave his house and "build up from scratch". He is now grateful that as a result he teaches. He experiences teaching as a "big resource over all these years of experience, like accumulating and enriching knowledge."

Gaunt (2005) performed a case study into conservatoire teachers' perceptions. The intensity of the relationship between teacher and students often broke down elements of formality and lasting friendships emerged. At its best it was fulfilling, creative and inspiring, but it could also be volatile and damaging. Gaunt noticed that teaching styles can work well for one student and have a negative impact, creating a low self-esteem and a sense of failure, for the other. The degree of distance between teacher and student seemed to be in the control of the teacher.

Musicians' reflexivity

The musicians reflect a lot, and are able to make sense of their personal and artistic development. Ingmar feels that his talent and perseverance make that he is where he is. Tina feels that the process of identification she went through in her first two years of study was important. Jonathan feels that he fulfils his standards and expectations and wants to be in contact with change. Francine feels that she has a strong intuition about what is not good for her: "Probably I survived because I knew how to reject." Joseph reflects on his career, feeling that he can express himself better than ever, and he thinks that this has to do with what he experienced in life.

Significant others

Significant others exist for all musicians and often consist of other musicians. In some cases they are parents, other family members, friends or spouses. Sometimes, but not too often, they are the musicians' own teachers.

Empowerment

Empowerment is also of considerable importance. Ingmar feels empowered by how he dealt with his stage fright. Jonathan changed a lot after a severe illness of his youngest son, resulting in him starting to see the relativity of his career, which led to more pleasure

in performing. Joseph got empowered through his personal experiences: “It took me a long time to realise that life is about other things, about key people.”

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