

# **Musicians working in Community Contexts: Perspectives of Learning**

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## **Musicians' changing professional roles in a changing landscape**

Navigating in a rapidly changing cultural landscape is the main challenge of today's musician. Major societal changes take place and they are a major influence on the development of the profession. New art forms, new music and new artistic languages, often using new technology, are shaping a diverse cultural landscape. Musical diversity is the response to the changing cultural landscape, and music education needs to resonate with where people are.

Lifelong learning is required, which we can define as *a dynamic concept of learning that enables us to respond to the needs generated by continuous change*. Characteristic for the concept of lifelong learning is in a nutshell that there can be different approaches to learning, and, very important, the interconnection of professional and personal development.

Lifelong learning and its implications clearly range from the macro level of society at large, to the meso level of the institution and learning environment, and on the micro level of the individual in society. The role of education is no longer restricted to the first phase of people's lives but is more and more of importance throughout the life course. Education is permeating all life phases. This is why the concept of 'lifewide' learning is important as well, because people do not learn only throughout a lifelong process but also in an often intensive way from transitions in their lives. Learning cannot be seen apart from people's biographies.

The changing cultural landscape shows itself in the changing careers of today's musicians. Transferable 'life skills' are important and it is clear that musicians need to take up various interrelated generic roles in order to be able to do their work in a

successful way (Smilde 2006, p. 76). They need to be entrepreneurs, innovators, connectors, partners and reflective practitioners.

### **The rise of the community musician and the leadership it requires**

The most important feature required within today's music profession is indeed the need to *connect to the context*. Any musician who wants to make sense of today's complex world and connect to new audiences must be able to respond artistically to changing societal contexts. A good community musician is able to do this. Let's use the word for the sake of clarity, but I don't like the word as for me every musician is a community musician.

'Community musicians' devise and lead creative workshops in health care, social care, in prisons and the like. These creative workshops are participatory, underpinned by the notion that the improvisational nature of collaborative approaches in workshops can lead to people expressing themselves creatively, instilling a sense of shared ownership and responsibility both in the *process* and in the final *product* of the creative workshop (Gregory 2005). Exchange of ideas and skills among the participants ('participatory learning') is an integral part of the process. The work of the community musician shows clearly that musicians today have to respond to the variables within different cultural contexts and take up the various interrelated roles which I just pointed out and which include those of performer, composer, teacher, mentor, coach, leader and many more. Listen to the account of Sean Gregory (Smilde, 2009a):

*The roles can differ. You can be a leader, a facilitator, a composer, arranger, a supporting instrumentalist, you can be the person who just makes it happen; you can shift roles. Artistically it comes back to this trying to capture both the essence and the practice of this work, what it actually is, without putting it into a box, and at the same time defining it enough so that it stops being just called 'outreach' or 'educational and community work'. The principle is the notion that you are with a group of people, that you encourage them to come*

*out with their own ideas (...) The key part is that together you develop something into something else. That can go for young children with no skills whatsoever or a highly trained dancer or a West African musician, searching and exploring new meeting points, new languages and possibilities.*

In order to function as a community musician, a musician needs to be able to exercise leadership. What do we actually mean by musicians' leadership? The word 'leadership' reminds us of an institution like a school or an orchestra, with a head of the school or the conductor leading it. However leadership can have meaning on an individual level as well, and that is what we are addressing here. Leadership is dependent on authority and the ability to exercise authority. Within musicianship we can speak of *shared authority* through collaborative artistic practice, which is underpinned by qualities like informed decision making (sometimes in an implicit way), adaptability, flexibility and committed values and attitudes. The ability to lead by example and attitude, while developing and using transferable (life) skills and social skills is highly relevant when you want to connect as an artist to different cultural contexts. I call this generic leadership. This requires a lot of reflective practice and the ability to act in the moment with an implicit reflective stance (in other words: to be reflexive).

We will now explore an example of this more in depth. It is a project of British musicians who work with people living with dementia and their care staff.

**Example: musicians working with people living with dementia and their care staff**

*If music be the food of love, play on...* This is a quote by Shakespeare from 1601, from the play 'Twelfth Night', but it was also cited in December 2009 by Hannah, a woman in the last stages of dementia. When the music in the workshop that I was observing in a nursing home in London, was finished, and there was silence, this was broken by the loud voice of Hannah, who quoted Shakespeare. She was not able to use her hands and legs anymore, but was clearly intensely involved in what was happening.

She used to play the violin, her carers told me. Hannah radiated pleasure after the music she had heard, and in the making of which she had probably participated in her mind. Just before the workshop began she had been in tears: 'I just learned that my sister has died' she told. Reliving a great sadness, again and again as *new* sadness, what could be more cruel?

The music workshop I attended in London was a project of the organisation Music for Life. Music for Life has been developed since 1983 by Linda Rose, a music educator, who used to work a lot with orchestras in outreach programs. Last year the programme was formally 'adopted' by Wigmore Hall in London. 'Music for Life Wigmore Hall' as it is called now, organises interactive music workshops in nursing homes and day care centres for people living with dementia. During a period of eight weeks three musicians work with a group of eight residents and five members of the care staff, and they use musical improvisation as a kind of catalyst in order to, in a nutshell, bring about communication in the widest sense through music. This happens at various levels. One of the objectives is strengthening the relationships between people with dementia amongst themselves, and also those between people with dementia and the care staff.

The musicians use a wide range of verbal and non-verbal ways in order to reach the individual residents and the residents and care staff as a *group*. Both the pleasure in making music and the reflection of the care staff on the impact of this are important. The insights the care staff sometimes gain from this, as well as the motivation, can result in positive long-term effects on their work with the residents. This is why, simultaneously with the project, a professional development trajectory for the care staff takes place, led by a trainer who works in close connection with the workshop leader.

One project takes eight successive weeks. Three musicians, among which one is the workshop leader, work in the project together with the trainer of the care staff. At the beginning of each weekly session, which lasts an hour, and during which the residents and a few members of the care staff are in a circle together with the

musicians, the musicians play a short piece that they composed especially for this group. From there, through improvisation, an hour of shorter and longer pieces of music follows, in which the residents are activated to participate, or sometimes even make their own piece, together with one of the musicians.

In the middle of the circle there are a number of instruments that are easy to play and the musicians try to reach the residents by having their antennae on at full alert.

What you see and hear the musicians do is what you could term 'the art of reading your audience'. The smallest verbal and non-verbal signals of the residents can be picked up by musicians, in which the care staff join in more and more. Once there is musical communication, for example when one of the residents holds a baton and the musicians respond to the most minute movement, often a very special kind of interaction is created. Without exception people start smiling and are visibly enjoying themselves. I have observed really amazing processes.

Quite a lot of research has been conducted which shows that musical communication can have positive effects on people with dementia. In his book 'Musicophilia, Tales of Music and the Brain', Oliver Sachs writes that music may have long-term effects on people with dementia. He speaks of improvements of cognitive functions, mood and behaviour, which may last for hours or days after they have been activated by music (2007: 319). Evaluations of the Music for Life projects underpin Sachs' observations and moreover show results in the area of an improved interaction between care staff and residents. An interaction which also takes place on a deeper, implicit and non-verbal level. The projects therefore are especially concerned with finding, or rather 're-finding' the person behind the dementia.

What is learnt in these projects and how it is learnt? Hearing the narratives of three workshop leaders we can reflect on some emerging concepts:

## *Communication (of the musicians with residents)*

Joseph

*You know, there's no, they've got no language skills left. But they are still there. And this project does provide a way for them to show that they are still here. And that they want to interact. The incredible basic human need that we have for that, whatever stage you are at, the need to connect with another person and with other people. To be understood, and **to be recognized.***

Daniel (trying to put himself in the place of a person with dementia)

*...when your verbal communication skills are impaired and you know that they are impaired, you know? Obviously you know about dementia, sometimes people are not really aware that what they are trying to say doesn't really come across, but sometimes it's that in-between stage, where people sort of give up, because they know they are trying to but it doesn't work. But if you give them back the power of communication in some way, and **bring somebody out**, you see amazing awareness and ability to control and invite and stop.*

Catherine

*I think when you converse with a person who has advanced dementia, the way you understand what they say, in some ways it can be quite liberating because **you're listening to something that is not tied to the words they use.** For instance she'll say those things about being frightened and the other stream of things she'd say were connected with the idea that she now couldn't do as much as she used to be able to do. It sounded so perfectly reasonable, she was worried about the arthritis in her hands, she used to be able to play music and now she can't, but I think the idea of that loss it's, it's not directly connected to her hands. Partly connected to her hands, most likely. But mostly it's connected to her feeling of loss of things. So maybe you can alleviate that, you can't do anything about the hands, but alleviating the feeling of anxiety might mean she wasn't thinking about the hands for ten minutes or so.*

### ***Identity (of the musicians)***

What has the project brought the musicians?

Joseph

*It has given me a completely new context in which to be a musician. A completely new context, and a whole range of new musical skills.*

Daniel

*Doing this work has been a way for me to connect my musicianship with a deepening sense of who I am in this world, brought about by extraordinary interactions with extraordinary people (...) This work continues to teach me who I am, and is a bench mark against which I judge everything else I do. It's extraordinary how working with people whose version of reality is so vague can in fact be the ultimate reality check!*

Catherine

*...it's very rewarding in different ways. The cycle of it is bigger than just what the residents get out of a session and what the musicians get out of a session in a sort of closed context. Because for me that context is closed, but I'm not closed, because I take what I've learnt and then I take it to the next context and then the cycle becomes bigger.*

### ***Shared leadership (amongst the musicians)***

Joseph

*You need to be able to play your instrument really well. Be comfortable around it. So that you can express what you feel needs to be expressed. And what else do you need? You need incredible listening skills, and watching skills and sensing skills. You need to be able to feel what's going on in a group. You might be noticing one of the participants making a little sign that you want taken up. At the same time one of the musicians in the group might be*

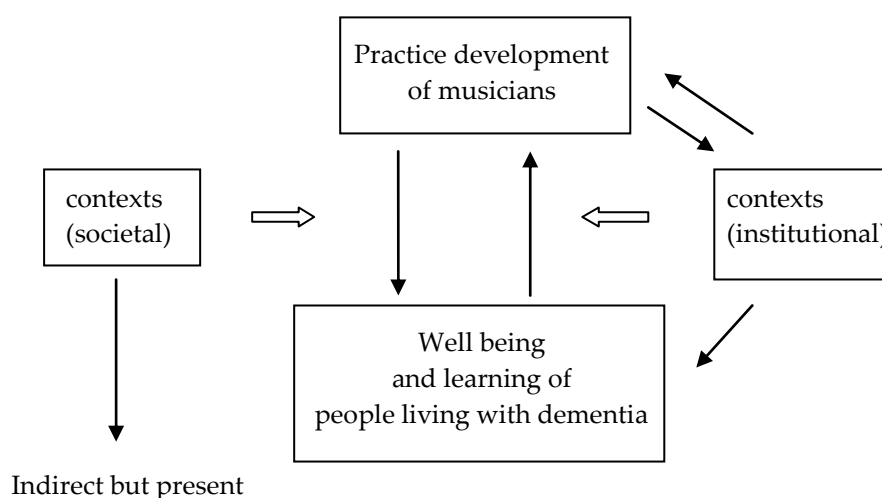
*beginning a piece over there. So you need that sort of skill, of being able to negotiate your way around that as well.*

Daniel

*...it requires individual freedom, and not to be so fixed in what you're doing, but to be very flexible to go with somebody else's ideas. Because the balance is very fragile. And in the rehearsals, and the preparation hour we always do some playing where we have to develop our sensitivity to each other and a sort of responsibility about where the music is going. It's very easy to just improvise freely, and just sort of let the music go wherever, but **when you have a particular agenda**, you have a person who is playing that music with a particular resident, you have to incorporate them into what you're doing. So you can't just think, 'o well, I feel like playing it like that'. Because then that's **your** thing, you know? So it's really floating, **we float around each other** in that way, and that is why the people we have in the project are really special.*

### **Perspectives of musicians' learning**

It is evident, also through this example, that it is important to have both a deep and a wide understanding of the social context. The interconnections of what is happening in such a project can be shown as a kind of landscape:



- Practice development of musicians influences institutional contexts (care staff) and vice versa (*meso* level).
- The institutional contexts influence the well being and learning of people living with dementia.
- Practice development of musicians (*micro* level) influences learning of people living with dementia and vice versa. Societal and institutional contexts influence this process.
- The societal context (*macro* level) is indirect but definitely present!



*What kind of learning?*

*What kind of learning* takes place for the musicians when they want to reach a person living with dementia and their care staff? Key for any community musician engaged in any project is her *transformative learning* which is expressed in changing her frame of reference (a way of knowing) when she connects to the context. Transformative learning is based on gaining new understanding emerging from critical reflection on one's own assumptions and presuppositions. Jack Mezirow (2009) states that transformative learning creates the foundation in insight and understanding essential for learning how to take effective social action (2009: 96). Kegan (2009) addresses transformative learning as 'knowing differently' (p. 49). Reflecting back to the narratives on communication for instance, it is clear that the musicians have changed their frame of reference in terms of understanding the different layers of 'language' of people living with dementia. Joseph also tells that the new context he is engaged in has led to a whole new range of musical skills which he has acquired.

For the people living with dementia and their care staff, 'learning in transition' is the type of learning which underpins the practice. Transitional learning is linked to biography, because it shows people's awareness of structures that have underpinned their life course 'up till a moment' and their realization of the possibilities of changing it. It is a process that changes both the learner and his environment (in small amounts). When a member of the care staff changes her relationship with a resident as a result of an interaction through music she has learnt in transition.

Also the musicians learn in transition; remember Joseph saying: "It (the project) has given me a completely new context in which to be a musician." Or Daniel: "Doing this work has been a way for me to connect my musicianship with a deepening sense of who I am in this world." And Catherine: "...I take what I've learnt and then I take it to the next context and then the cycle becomes bigger." In sum, transitional learning leads to a new quality of self- and world reference.

In terms of the practice development of the musicians we can say that the learning of the people with dementia and the care staff needs to mirror in the competences required for the transformative learning of the musicians. The musicians must be able to reflect on that, on their roles, and be responsive to it.

We can thus link transformative learning, changing one's frame of reference (knowing differently) to *lifelong* learning and transitional learning to *lifewide* learning. Because whoever the learner, she always brings her biography in.

## **Concluding**

The role of art (and music) in society is about touching people in their deepest being with and through art. Musicians can play an important part in these processes, not as pseudo-therapists, but by means of their own artistic identity and drive. These can be leading for an approach in which musicians wholly *understand* the different social contexts in which they move, and respond to.

It is thus clear that it is irrelevant to consider artistic practices as *either* 'l'Art pour l'Art' or as 'social work'. Key is the 'knowing differently' of the artist, when she

engages with a social context, and she will always leave her individual artistic fingerprints on the work of art she creates, together with others. And so the words of Howard Gardner, when addressing the concept of ‘multiple approaches to understanding’ are so very true:

“I want my children to understand the world, but not just because the world is fascinating and the human mind is curious. I want them to understand it so that they will be positioned to make it a better place (2009: 115).”

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