

# MUSICIANS AS LIFELONG LEARNERS: DISCOVERY THROUGH BIOGRAPHY

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## Introduction

Today's musicians face major changes in their cultural environment; changes that are taking place at an ever-increasing pace and which are a major influence on the development of the profession. More than ever before, the future professional musician is confronted with questions of how to function flexibly and exploit opportunities in new and rapidly changing cultural contexts. To this end, the lifelong learning concept and its implementation were investigated; lifelong learning being seen as a dynamic concept that responds to the needs generated by continuing change.

Within the study, 'Musicians as Lifelong Learners: Discovery through Biography' (Smilde 2009), which is central in this paper, 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. This resulted in a collection of narrative learning biographies, in which critical incidents and educational interventions that might be of exemplary value were described.

The working hypothesis underpinning the study was that research into musicians' learning styles, attitudes and values should lead to the notion that informal learning and related modes of learning, in both formal and non-formal educational settings, should play a more prominent role throughout different stages of learning in music education. The outcomes of the research, emerging from the analysis of the learning biographies, could result in concepts of legitimate educational intervention that might lead to developing models for adaptive learning environments. Secondly they could inform recommendations for continuing professional development. Future musicians would then be given the opportunity to acquire a reflective and reflexive attitude in responding to cultural change in society and developing into true 'lifelong learners'.

## Research questions and approach

The following questions were central:

- 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?

Three subsidiary questions underpinned these core questions:

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

By means of lightly structured interviews (Knight 2002) undertaken with professional musicians with varied professional practices and in different phases of their life, understanding was to be gained into the role of the concept of lifelong learning within their personal and professional development. Musicians from different countries, working in the creating, performing, teaching and/or entrepreneurial domains were all covered in the interviews and divergent careers were elucidated. As career types show much overlap, highly flexible categories were established:

- Category I: Soloists  
Performing musicians whose professional lives consist mainly of giving concerts;
- Category II: Music pedagogues/educators  
Musicians engaged (almost) solely in teaching;

- Category III: Musicians with a portfolio career  
Musicians combining different roles within various areas of engagement.

Four age categories were taken into account:

- years after graduation (up till 35 years); adulthood, centring on personal identity and the period of professional integration;
- between 35 and 45 years; adulthood and further professional development;
- between 45 and 55 years; life turn and mature adulthood;
- from 55 years onwards; mature adulthood.

In the group of 'soloists' and 'music pedagogues/educators', two persons per age category were portrayed and in the group with portfolio careers, the largest career group in the European music profession, four persons per age category. In total this led to 32 narrative learning biographies. Choices for interviewees were made based upon opportunities for optimal contrasts and constant comparison within a variety of contexts.

### **Underpinning frameworks related to the research questions**

Post-modern life at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is directly and indirectly influencing the arts and cultural life in Europe. Its main trends and changes, 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 shaping a new cultural landscape. Perceived threats (like loss of identity; Giddens 1991) and opportunities (like the possibilities of the virtual world) both arise within the arts. Moreover, within the increasingly global context it is felt as fundamental that artistic processes have the transformative potential to make sense in a complex world, giving a feeling of a shared sense of community (Renshaw 2001).

Bauman (2005) stresses that in no previous time has the necessity for making *choices* been so prominent, one reason being that people fear to be 'left behind' or excluded because of failing to commit to new demands. This has major implications for education. Learning, Bauman says, should indeed be lifelong, because lifelong learning equips us to make our choices, and it especially helps us "to salvage the conditions that make choice available and within our power" (p. 128).

There is, also in the arts, thus a need for a paradigm-shift in learning, and the 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.

It can be argued that the concept of learning changes and within this shift biographical knowledge and learning play an important role. Biographical learning includes people's experience, knowledge and self-reflection; in short everything people have learned throughout their lives and have absorbed into their biographies. From biographical learning a new understanding of people's learning processes can emerge, both in terms of emotion and cognition. The transitions in people's lives are of special interest, leading to change and decisions that underpin their reflexive biographies. Biographical knowledge can move from the local to the global; there is a 'transitional potential of biographical learning' interwoven into social structures and cultural understanding (Alheit 1994) when self-awareness of people's directions and choices within their life course can also provide the possibilities for changing them.

The changes and trends in the European musical landscape were examined in this study from the point of view of audiences, cultural policies, technology, teaching in music schools and community work. The implications of these changes for the music profession have a significant impact on the contexts in which musicians work, where they have different roles that require skills and attitudes of adaptation and responsiveness (Amussen and Smilde 2007). Rarely employed in one job for life, the musician in Europe is increasingly an entrepreneur having a *portfolio career*, combining several forms of professional activities. Musicians have to function in different contexts, with roles that include those of performer, composer, teacher, mentor, coach, leader and many more. These diverse roles require the musician to be a(n) innovator (explorer, creator and risk taker); identifier (of missing skills, and means to refresh them); partner/co-operator (within formal partnerships); reflective practitioner (Schön 1983), engaged in research and evaluative processes and able to contextualize experiences; collaborator (working in partnership with

other practitioners); connector (in relation to conceptual frameworks) and entrepreneur. In sum, musicians need to learn to respond to the variables within different cultural contexts (Smilde 2006).

Musicians move in increasingly international contexts. This given is also reflected in new European educational policies and developments relating to Higher Music Education and lifelong learning, the most important being the impact of the Bologna Declaration and policies on lifelong learning which started taking shape in the last decade.

The main characteristics of training and development in today's Higher Music Education institutions however still differ widely. Nevertheless they have in general in common that they touch global issues in only a marginal way and do not adapt sufficiently to the requirements of today's profession, nor to the specific demands of their students and graduates. It is clear that institutions of Higher Music Education still determine their provision in the curricula and for continuing professional development mainly by means of their own perception, hardly taking the changing society into account and rarely consulting stakeholders, let alone their former students (Lafourcade and Smilde 2001). In addition, the institutions' definition of quality is 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.

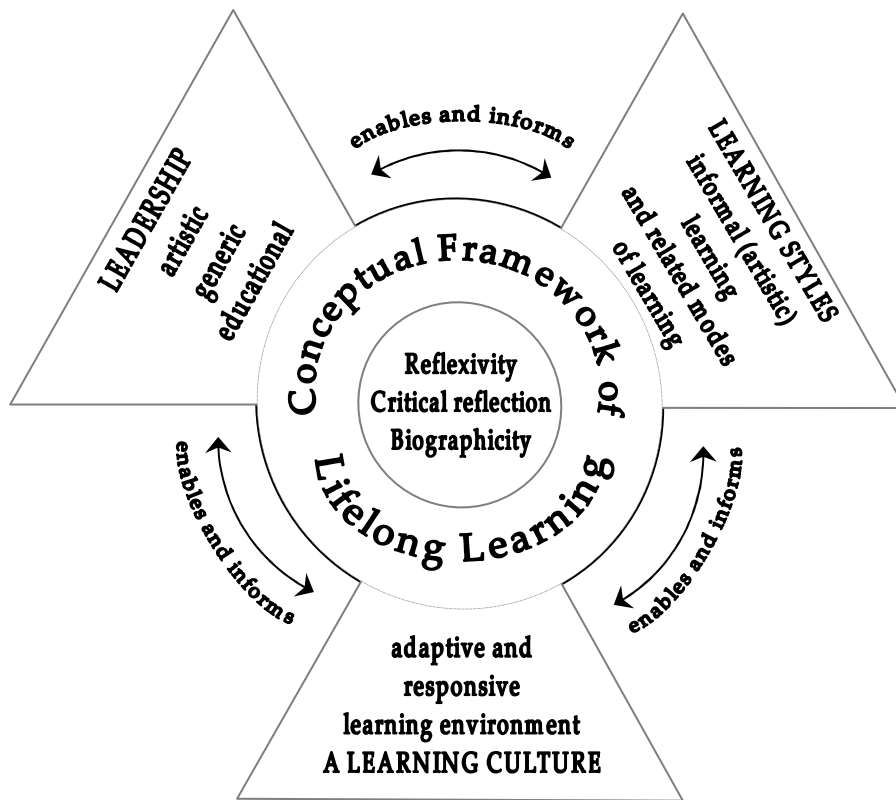
In order to make an attempt to defining the concept of lifelong learning in music, the core research questions of the study were worked out through the design of a flexible theoretical and conceptual framework, leaving ample room for new findings and information that could emerge from the analysis of the learning biographies. The framework explored the concept of lifelong learning, its approaches to learning and reflective practice as well as the relationship between personal and professional development. Moving into the field of professional musicianship, the required skills, attitudes and values for today's musicians were examined.

Acquiring competences, which can be described as learning achievements that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, requires in addition to gaining knowledge and 'know how' also a reflective and reflexive attitude. The question how musicians learn and in what domains thus becomes relevant and was addressed by the exploration of musicians' learning styles, like informal, experiential and metacognitive learning. Learning underpinned by biography is considered highly relevant in this context and was hence illuminated. Finally the theoretical and conceptual framework addressed the implications of the concept of lifelong learning for the aggregate levels of musicians' education in terms of institutional culture and learning environment; attitudes and competences of teachers and students and related educational issues, one of the most important being mentoring.

## **Analysis and findings**

The analysis of the learning biographies took place by empirical testing informed by 'grounded theory' as originally devised by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The emerging middle-range theory (Alheit 2000) was generated as a dialogue between the initial concepts as described in the theoretical and conceptual framework, and the empirical evidence derived from the biographies, where the concepts were enriched with new information, and changed into a subject-related theory.

Three key areas of knowledge and understanding in the narratives emerged. They can be described as musicians' different forms of artistic, generic and educational leadership; the interconnection between musicians' varied learning styles and third, their need for an adaptive and responsive learning environment within a reflexive and reflective institutional culture. These three conceptual entities are non-hierarchical and they enable and inform each other. Together they form a holistic conceptual framework of lifelong learning in music which has at its heart a core of reflexivity, critical reflection and biographicity (Alheit 1994) and can be visualised as below:



The interplay between these conceptual entities reflects a community of practice (Wenger 1998), where participatory practice, informal learning and identity are at the core, as can be shown as below:



Key to the conceptual framework of lifelong learning in music is the notion that it is underpinned by musicians' biographical learning, showing in their transformative and transitional learning.

Transformative learning during the life span is clearly highly influential in musicians' learning processes and career development. In connection with transformative and transitional learning many examples of biographicity were found, often as a result of crises in life, leading to "surplus meanings" (Alheit 1994, p. 290). Biographicity is a "key qualification of modern times, relating to people's lifeworld is such a way that their self-reflexive activities begin to shape social contexts" (ibid).

The strength of biographical learning, where musicians can act as their own change agents is clearly shown. 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).

The three areas of knowledge and understanding within the conceptual framework of lifelong learning in music as visualised in figure 1. can be considered more in-depth, starting with the notion of 'leadership'. Drawing on Max Weber (1947) it can be argued that 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 interconnection between personal and professional development is highly relevant within musicians' leadership and this is closely connected to their learning styles.

Within the area of artistic leadership, tacit understanding in the context of artistic laboratories constitutes the core, requiring a lot of trust between musicians. Within generic leadership, which can be defined as the ability to lead by example and by attitude and includes the development of transferable skills and social leadership as well as issues of identity, self-esteem and coping strategies, the emergence of health issues was striking. Musicians suffer from both physical and psychological problems which are profession-related, the latter mostly consisting of performance anxiety, often connected to low self-esteem and high perfectionism. However creative coping strategies were frequently found by the musicians, showing an extensive use of metacognitive skills. Educational leadership finally, showed first and foremost in a holistic approach of teaching and mentoring, which was demonstrated by some of the musicians.

Moving to the area of musicians' learning styles, it could be observed that informal learning is a very important mode of learning in music, no matter whether it is in childhood or later in life, including the period in the music college. Informal learning appears fundamental to the holistic and transformative learning processes in the course of the development of the musician, in which formal learning also plays a significant role. Participatory learning in a community of practice (Wenger 1998) is the bedrock of all this learning, starting in childhood. Collaborative music making, singing together and playing together in, for example, a wind band, ensemble or orchestra shows to be of great significance to children and adolescents, as well as improvising together. Participatory learning, guided by a teacher who has an encouraging and enabling role as a mentor in the master-apprentice scheme of the community of practice could lead to strong intrinsic motivation. In addition, peer learning, taking place in a setting of trust among friends, was a second important aspect of musicians' informal learning. Musicians clearly learn in a reflexive way, by playing together, but also by listening, observing and conversing.

Strong informal learning processes were observed within formal settings, sometimes within non-formal contexts. Learning taking shape in this way clearly strengthened the musicians' sense of ownership of their learning as well as their sense of belonging. Opportunities for experiential learning in formal settings, especially in the conservatoire, were often created through educational interventions of the musicians themselves.

Musicians' artistic learning also happened in a highly informal way, though, especially in the case of classical musicians, underpinned by formal, knowledge-based learning. It could also be seen that significant others (Antikainen *et al.* 1996) often played an important role in musicians' artistic learning and that this learning is highly transformative. Experiential and cognitive learning are distinctive within this context. It is important to note that these learning styles are relevant for all genres of music. Furthermore, no significant differences were found within the different age categories or gender related to learning styles.

When considering the area of institutional background it was observed that where musicians encountered an adaptive learning environment in the music college 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, hence when power-play or even tendencies towards abuse were encountered in the one-on-one relationship, this had a strong and long-lasting effect on the musicians.

All in all, the observation that 'the life span as an institution' (Alheit and Dausien 2002) addresses the 'societal curriculum' which is ever changing and is regulated through both formal learning and biographical learning (ibid, p. 8) was 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.

Transitional learning like these musicians showed through their awareness of learning in relationship to going through one's life cycle thus seems a powerful given within the relationship between lifelong learning and continuing professional development and highly relevant for the notion of lifewide learning.

### **Implications for teaching and learning: biographical learning on the meso level**

Key principles and directions for teaching and learning can be extrapolated and consolidated from evidence in the learning biographies which has been unlocked and analysed.

As argued earlier, individuals have moved into post-modernity, but institutions often have not. On the same level it can be considered that the arguments for a paradigm-shift in learning have moved on, but the culture in institutions has remained static. It seems that those individuals who are asking fundamental questions in institutions are only significant in such an environment "up to a point", finding themselves on the periphery of perceived change. The music college continues to be rooted in the old traditional thinking which effectively cuts it out of the debate on changing perspectives. However, globalisation is crying out for the ability to make new connections and the establishment of the dialogue between the local and the global on a meso level.

As the concept of lifelong learning in music has implications for teaching and learning throughout life, both lifelong and lifewide, starting from early childhood and lasting till far beyond graduation over a lifelong period of continuing professional development, it thus entails education in music ranging from early years through pre-college training and training in the music college till many years beyond. The voice of the Higher Music Education in this process is comparatively small within a much bigger canvass; however it is an important voice because it echoes a critical and intensive phase in the musicians' development.

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 (Wenger 1998), with the interconnected components of 'meaning', 'practice', 'community' and 'identity', 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 issues like performance anxiety 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.

Before the 'knowledge osmosis' (Alheit and Dausien 2002) which creates a permanent exchange between individual production and organised knowledge management in modern society can develop further, the 'dysfunctionality of established educational institutions' (ibid) needs to be addressed. "A new understanding of the concept of lifelong learning implies a shift in paradigm for the learning organisation, requiring institutional self-reflexivity and learning processes which need to contain lifewide learning" (ibid, p. 5/6). This creates an enormous challenge for all learners in modern society.

Based on the biographical research, implementation of this emerging conceptual framework for lifelong learning in music in Higher Music Education could include:

- a collaborative learning environment which is non-judgemental, with a strong commitment to quality and knowledgeability;

- curricula, teaching and learning, as well as relevant professional partnerships which are effective, ambitious and innovative and thus establish a strong intrinsic motivation for lifelong learning amongst students;
- the possibility to explore and take risks in a safe environment, thereby leading to increased self-confidence;
- an artistic, generic and educational laboratory whose challenging learning environment reflects the workplace, encompassing informal learning in non-formal learning contexts, connected to strategic partnerships;
- enhanced cross-over between musical, cross-arts, cross-sectoral and trans-cultural disciplines, fostering a capacity to adapt and be flexible, and the development of new communication skills through interactions with different audiences, social and cultural contexts;
- a culture 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;
- increased personal development emerging from an awareness of one's identity as a musician, fostered by self-exploration and self-management;
- continuing professional development integrated into all aspects of life in the music college.

Finally, recommendations for concepts of educational intervention include:

- To create space for informal learning in non-formal contexts within formal learning environments in settings of a community of practice in order to facilitate emergence of personal, artistic and professional growth;
- To create holistic learning laboratories, encompassing artistic, generic and educational knowledge and skills, which cover the conceptual framework of lifelong and lifewide learning and entail a strong integrated strand of continuing professional development;
- To create space for students' own interventions and leadership during Higher Music Education in relation to building their future career;
- To listen and respond to former students, in order to learn for curriculum development;
- To use co-mentoring as a means for broadening horizons on the micro and meso level in order to respond to globalisation from the perspective of self-identity and develop perspectives for change, by strengthening institutions' self-reflexivity;
- To use co-mentoring as a strong means for continuing professional development for music teachers, bringing about transformative learning.

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