Community Opera and the Artist

Lifelong Learning in Music – a Conceptual Framework
Rineke Smilde

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). The Lifelong Learning concept goes further than ‘permanent education’: it is an important conceptual framework for the improvement of people’s employability and adaptability. The innovative dimension of the Lifelong Learning concept lies in a new approach to learning.

Characteristics important to the concept of Lifelong Learning include:

- a distinction between formal and informal learning;
- an emphasis on ‘learning’ as opposed to ‘training’;
- different approaches to learning, including, for example, learning ‘on the job’ or ‘applied to the setting’;
- professional and personal development;
- context related assessments (through work-related situations).

When considering the Lifelong Learning concept, it is important to take a closer look at the definitions of formal, non-formal and informal learning. **Formal learning** can be defined as: learning within an organized and structured context that is explicitly designated as learning and may lead to a formal recognition. Learning is primarily intentional. Knowledge is mainly explicit. Formal learning takes place in Conservatoire contexts (Mak, 2004).

**Non formal learning or education** can be defined as any organized educational activity outside the established formal system, “covering flexible and informal education, (and that is) highly contextualized, and highly participatory” (Rogers, 2004).

**Informal learning**: Green (2002) defines informal learning as: “a variety of approaches to acquiring musical skills and knowledge outside formal educational settings”. She sees informal music learning as a set of ‘practices’, rather than ‘methods’, which can be both conscious and unconscious. Learning experiences can include interactions with other musicians who do not act as teachers as such or by development of self-teaching techniques.

Links between formal and non-formal or informal education and learning are critical for a conceptual framework of Lifelong Learning. Learning in non-formal situations can, in principle, generate the same competencies as learning in a formal learning environment (Duvekot, 2002). Key qualifications of lifelong learners lie less in their knowledge of facts, theories and rules (knowing *that*) than in their ability to apply this knowledge to specific social, organizational and technological settings (knowing *how*) (Bjornavold, 2002).

As a musician one has to function in different contexts, with roles including those of performer, composer, teacher, mentor, coach, facilitator, and leader. A musician will thus need to learn to respond accordingly to the variables in environmental contexts. This is why a conceptual framework of Lifelong Learning is important. Doing so implies creating adaptive learning environments in which music students can be trained to function effectively in a continuously changing professional practice.
Pilot project ‘Animateurs’
Ninja Kors

Introduction
YO! Festival includes a community opera project in close collaboration with Utrecht’s company for public transport, Opera in the Bus, with, amongst other things, six bus operas. One of the buses, number 5, is manned by vocal students of the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague, who engage bus travellers in a short creative musical workshop. They will be equipped for this during a number of training sessions by singer-animateurs Nia Lynn and Natalie Williams, and Jos Zandvliet, a community musician. The project in bus 5 is a pilot of the lectorate Lifelong Learning in Music of the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague and the North Netherlands Conservatoire in Groningen. Through this pilot the lectorate not only aims to contribute to the personal and professional development of music students, but also to look into a number of issues that are important to the conceptual framework of lifelong learning: key competencies of the music animateur, context-related assessment and reflective practice. Therefore the pilot project is monitored and described as a case study.

The Project
The pilot project involves about twenty fourth year students from the vocal department of the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. The project takes place within the methodology training, taught by Gerda van Zelm. On September 22, the students receive a full day workshop by two singers, Nia Lynn and Natalie Williams, who were trained at the Professional Development Department of Guildhall School of Music & Drama, London. The training day takes place under supervision of Sean Gregory, head of this department. The workshop day focuses on the various aspects of animateurship and includes practical workshops as well as moments of reflection. The day is concluded with a creative workshop on a public location in The Hague. Afterwards, students are requested to write down their reflections, which include a record of the activities as well as a personal account. These reflections feed directly into the case study.

From the twenty participants on September 22, ten are selected to participate in the YO! Festival. The selection is carried out by Gerda van Zelm, Sean Gregory and Jos Zandvliet (who will be leading the next stage in the project), and advised by workshop leaders Nia and Natalie. Criteria for selection are specified beforehand. The ten selected students explore the role of the community music animateur further under guidance of Jos Zandvliet, a community musician from Amsterdam. Jos worked with theatre group the Dogtroep for many years and specialises in building choirs out of inexperienced (and often unsuspecting) singers. Out of these ten students, four will actually be working with the passengers in the bus. The other six will be involved in the evaluation of the project, reflecting on their peers’ interaction with the bus passengers and monitoring response.

Case Study
The case study focuses on the role of the musician as an animateur, defined by Animarts (2003) as: ‘a practicing artist, in any form, who uses her/his skills, talents and personality to enable others to compose, design, devise, create, perform or engage with works of arts of any kind’.

The goal of the pilot project for the lectorate is to translate the role of the animateur into defined skills that can feed into training programmes for musicians – primarily vocal students in The Hague and Groningen. In doing so, the project addresses a number of issues that are central to the concept of Lifelong Learning in Music. They are described below, together with the research questions that are connected to these issues.
Key competencies of the animateur
To the animateur, workshop leader skills are essential. Sean Gregory explains the multifaceted role of the workshop leader as ‘a skilled musician who can perform many diverse roles, such as composer, arranger, facilitator, improviser, performer, conductor, teacher and catalyst’. Obtaining a high level of performance in all these aspects is no small feat. The key lies in a number of generic transferable skills that can be applied to a variety of contexts.
The research question here is: how do we translate the key competencies of the animateur into ingredients that can be used in training future professional musicians?

Context-related assessment
Community Opera by nature takes place in a wide variety of contexts: social, practical, musical, etc. Assessment criteria that are commonly used for vocal artists are not standard applicable in each of these situations. Thus criteria are needed for assessment that relates to the actual context of the artistic practice, in order to determine of the practice is indeed ‘fit for purpose’.
This leads to the question: which conscious and unconscious interventions took place and how did the leader use them for the benefit of the group?

Reflective practice
Peter Renshaw clearly states in his article below that reflective practice is crucial to musical leadership. Given the wide scope of contexts in which community opera may take place, reflection is instrumental in evaluating and ensuring quality on several levels of the project.
The question to be dealt with is thus: how does reflective practice take place in the pilot project. How do students relate to this process and which support do they need in feeling confident?

Outcomes for Lifelong Learning
For the vocal students of the Royal Conservatoire, the pilot project will provide an opportunity to explore a different way of communicating with music. The project is part of the students’ personal professional development, which aims to lead to recognition of their talents and interests. The students are challenged to develop a new area of skills and expertise that will enable them to lead a creative workshop, using their skills as a musician in diverse ways, and consequently make them responsive.

Community Opera and the Artist; the Place of Reflective Practice and Professional Development
Peter Renshaw

The importance of reflective practice
Community opera, with its commitment to cross-arts, cross-cultural and cross-sector projects, presents a tremendous challenge to professional artists, especially in the areas of musical leadership and assessment of quality. Effective workshop leaders have to be multi-skilled, able to carry out many diverse roles including those of composer, arranger, facilitator, improviser, performer, conductor, teacher and catalyst. As workshops and performances are rooted in different social, educational and cultural contexts, artistic leaders have to be able to speak a number of musical ‘languages’ simultaneously and be able to exercise artistic, generic and tacit leadership skills. (For further discussion of leadership, quality, reflective practice and professional development see Renshaw, 2005a and 2005b).

The many varied contexts in which community opera takes place also indicate the complexity of evaluating and assessing quality. Projects have to be judged by the appropriateness of their aims and the way in which they make meaningful connections to
the particular context – i.e., by their fitness for purpose and by their relevance to context. (see Youth Music, 2002, p.11, para.4.3). For example, the criteria used for evaluating a creative project such as a community opera are determined as much by the workshop/performance context (e.g., shopping mall, bus, youth club, prison, hospital, school) as by the shared values and expectations of the participants and their leader.

In Creating a Land with Music, the Report for Youth Music (2002), Rick Rogers observed that there is an urgency “to produce a common framework for evaluating and assessing quality that accords with diversity of need and purpose across all music genres (p.11, para.4.4)”. But by itself, an external frame of reference is insufficient. It has to be underpinned by a commitment to reflective practice in which each music leader engages in a continuing process of self-assessment.

In his seminal work Educating the Reflective Practitioner, Donald Schön (1987, p.26) emphasises the importance of the reciprocal relationship between ‘reflection-in-action’ and ‘reflection-on-action’. Both processes are integral to reflective practice. ‘Reflection-in-action’ focuses on the quality of listening, attention and awareness that enables processes and performance to be monitored and modified from the inside. As Schön indicates, “our thinking serves to reshape what we are doing while we are doing it (p.26)”. Often this knowledge cannot be put into words – it remains tacit in the form of implicit understanding (see Schön, p.31; Polanyi, 1966, p. 4-5).

On the other hand, ‘reflection-on-action’ entails adopting a critical perspective about the reasons and consequences of what we do in different contexts. By focusing on the why rather than the how, this process becomes fundamental to the evaluation of what we do and helps to inform subsequent action. Critical reflection, then, helps to transform our learning and change the way we make sense of our experience, our world view, our understanding of people and knowledge of ourselves. This perspective becomes integral to our conception, planning, delivery and evaluation of community and educational projects.

A framework for self-assessment
Central to reflective practice is the process of self-assessment. There is no one template for framing self-assessment because the way it is approached must be determined by the purpose and nature of the particular project. Nevertheless, three procedural principles might act as a useful guide:

- **recording**: keeping a diary, for example, to describe and record the thoughts, reflections, observations, feelings and responses experienced by the leader during the project.
- **self-assessment**: at the end of each project to complete a profile that reflects on the effectiveness of the process and product. The following categories could act as a frame of reference for such a profile:
  - quality of process, project and performance;
  - quality of leadership skills;
  - quality of communication skills;
  - quality of interpersonal skills;
  - quality of management skills;
  - quality of creative skills – improvising, composing and arranging;
  - quality of performing skills;
  - quality of evaluation skills;
  - quality of own personal development.
- **collaborative assessment**: a sharing of the self-assessment observations and comments with colleagues, mentors, co-workers and participants involved in the project.
These processes not only help to determine the effectiveness of one’s own practice, but they also provide an opportunity to reflect on the quality of the project and on the ways in which observations might help to inform and enhance the quality of future practice.

Such an approach to self-assessment would only be effective in practice if music leaders are provided with the appropriate conditions for their own musical, personal and professional development. Opportunities have to be created for different forms of continuing support and development that will challenge the leaders both artistically and professionally with the aim of raising the effectiveness of workshop practice in educational and community contexts. The key to the future lies in the quality and provision of professional development for musicians.

The need for professional development
Although the need for the continuing professional development of artists is now more widely accepted, as is reflected in the Lectorate Lifelong Learning in Music (see Smilde, 2004), there is still a long way to go before arts organisations and higher arts education institutions begin to develop training programmes that substantially affect the quality of professional arts practice in education and the wider community. There is an urgent need for musicians to be given the opportunity, support and funding to participate in training programmes that extend them artistically and personally, as well as pedagogically. A more developmental approach, in which there is an emphasis on creating and making music together in an environment that encourages critical reflection (e.g., an artistic laboratory), would be one way of guarding against the trap of musicians falling back on well-worn recipes and formulae.

One possible way ahead is to establish practice-based models of professional development that provide a crucible for engaging in creative processes and different forms of performance practice. The principles underlying such programmes might include:

- the need to focus on artistic, personal and professional development;
- an emphasis on creating, making and performing music in different educational and community contexts;
- a commitment to developing generic, artistic and tacit leadership skills;
- a belief in self-assessment and critical reflection as tools for raising the quality of artistic and educational practice;
- an understanding of the centrality of collaborative practice – e.g., cross-arts, cross-cultural, cross-sector, formal and non-formal educational contexts;
- the need to establish informed dialogue through mentoring circles involving music leaders, teachers, co-workers, community leaders and students;
- an increasing commitment to working towards a laboratory approach to collaborative arts practice and professional development.

Development programmes will vary depending on their purpose, context and the needs of the participants. But one thing is certain: the quality of creative practice would benefit from well-coordinated programmes of skills training within a collaborative arts context. The following elements might form part of this training:

- Voice, body and percussion;
- Improvisation;
- Ensemble work: group composition and creative practice;
- Performance and communication skills;
- Leadership: workshop-leading skills, project co-ordination and management skills.

Experienced artists working in community opera will readily be able to identify other areas of need that have to be addressed through further training and development. By its
very nature this will have to be approached collaboratively and in partnership with other agencies committed to action within different local contexts. This could generate a creative dynamic that helps to develop the art form, rejuvenate the work of artists, unlock the creative energy of participants and perhaps most importantly, it would provide an opportunity for individuals and community groups to find their voice within a contemporary living culture.

References
Animarts (2003) The art of the animateur: an investigation of the skills and insights required of artists to work effectively in schools and communities. (www.animarts.org.uk)


