

## Research note

# **Dissertation review: Johan Nyberg's Music Education as an Adventure of Knowledge: Student and Teacher Experience as Conceptualizations of Musical Knowledge, Learning, and Teaching**

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At a ceremony to graduates, the American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson communicated an ideal that is central to public education in a pluralistic democracy. “Each age,” he told his audience, “must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding” (Emerson, 1849: 84). By emphasizing a sense of mutuality between past and present, and present and future, Emerson calls attention to the acute tension between preservation and invention that sparks not only new forms of expression, but renewed or reconstructed ways of being with others in the world. This central tension, between adaptation and renewal, between the continuity of experience and its subsequent modification, is the starting point of Johan Nyberg's dissertation, *Music Education as an Adventure of Knowledge: Student and Teacher Experience as Conceptualizations of Musical Knowledge, Learning, and Teaching*. In this dissertation, for which I was privileged to be his opponent, Nyberg embraced this imperative, challenging his research participants to write *their* own books, to understand and conceptualize knowledge as unrepeatable, yet historically constructed. Of course Emerson, a great influence on John Dewey (as Dewey is an influence on Nyberg), speaks of books in more than a literal sense, conceptualizing lived experience as historically situated but always troubled (and revitalized) by change and surprise.

So here is the deceptively simple starting point of Nyberg's research. How does one generation of Swedish music teachers and students—inserted into this moment in time, and woven into the fabric of a particular context and its place—conceptualize the work they do? All research is animated by a hunch. And Nyberg's hunch was that if we listened to teachers and students as they grapple with the problems of their day, we might be better poised to modify classroom spaces so that education may become a so-called ‘adventure of knowledge’. In three peer-reviewed studies, Nyberg asked a

series of inter-related research questions, which I have paraphrase like this: (1) How do music students conceptualize music knowledge and learning? (2) Likewise, how do music teachers conceptualize music knowledge and learning? (3) How is the work of teaching and learning understood and experienced in an educational environment that is hostile to adventure and openness?

Nyberg's inquiry is profoundly philosophical. His questions assume that all persons regardless of age or training are dignified and enlarged by deep reflection. But Nyberg admits that by choosing research questions that deal with conceptualizations and understandings, he will not arrive at a compendium of 'best practices'. I commend him for choosing the path of contradiction and ambiguity over the path of evidence-based discovery. Still, this is both Nyberg's success and his limitation. In his defense, I am tired of 'rosy' qualitative research studies where magical transformation occurs over a treatment of ten to twelve weeks. I don't find these kinds of studies plausible. More to the point, I also find the very notion of 'conclusions' difficult to accept if you believe in qualitative research, especially studies that deal with teaching and learning. I think we need more empirical studies like Nyberg's in which the voices of real teachers and real students are heard, even if a conclusion is not available, or even sought after.

We live, however, in an educational domain that is driven by scientific evidence, hard data, and secure outcomes. Nyberg's appreciation of ambiguity is also his limitation, and in the eyes of many who make and enforce educational policy, this appreciation may be a critical limitation. Reformers in the United States (and perhaps Sweden) would show very little patience for a study such as his, preferring easy sound-bite findings or the closed format of a Ted-Talk over lengthy philosophical deliberation.

Thus, the context of Nyberg's study is critically important. Nyberg's teachers and students are working within a global educational reform movement (what Pasi Sahlberg calls GERM) that is being driven by a system of market governmentalities, specific modes of control and inspiration that are rooted in entrepreneurial values, competition, and decentralization. Neo-liberalism has become a structuring structure, an ideology that celebrates individual empowerment as understood through 'rational choice'. Regarding schools, this includes the setting of quantitative targets, the close monitoring of learner outcomes, and the creation of individualized performance-based work plans, all under the auspices of a particular concept of freedom.

According to neoliberal principles, universities and schools are markets like any other, and should be treated that way. A public invests in the development of human capital and rightly or wrongly they expect accountability, if not leverage. Once upon a time, students were accountable to teachers. A public generally trusted the professionalism of teachers. Today, teachers are accountable to students. Teachers are accountable to the public, to the media, to the market. In this sense, teachers at both

the university and public school have been reduced to mere service providers; their relationship with learners and their funders is necessarily contractual, which means transparent: providers teach agreed upon skills as outlined in a course syllabus and learners are credentialed upon satisfactory demonstration of these skills. The school is judged effective by the degree to which all parties live up to their end of the contract. Teachers' lives (and students' lives, I will add) have become 'intensified' in this environment, leaving both parties with little time to explore non-instrumental desires. The notion that education might be—or should be—an adventure of knowledge is strongly felt, at least by me.

Logically, it follows that within an educational context where outcomes and predictability are privileged and little time is afforded for wonder and reflection, the way a teacher or student conceives of knowledge and learning must be changing. This is an open question—we actually don't know—and thus Nyberg's inquiry qualifies as research. Here, once more I would like to commend Nyberg on asking an important set of questions, though questions that are decidedly not sexy. On-line learning, digital music communities, punk rock in church basements—these are sexy topics that young scholars like to turn to. But, Nyberg suggests, *shouldn't we "check in" on our concepts?*—concepts change after all, and they change when unanticipated forces impinge upon what once was a secure reality. If knowledge and learning look differently today than they did a decade ago, then so does teacher professionalism, and then so do common sense notions of student roles and teacher roles. Dewey writes,

To isolate the formal relationship of citizenship from the whole system of relations with which it is actually interwoven; to suppose that there is some one particular study or mode of treatment which can make the child a good citizen; to suppose, in other words, that a good citizen is anything more *than a thoroughly efficient and serviceable member* of society, one with all his powers of body and mind *under control*, is a hampering superstition which it is hoped may soon disappear from educational discourse. (Dewey, 1980: 270)

Two problems emerge that Nyberg seeks to address. First, our conceptualizations of teaching and learning have changed as we decouple schooling from citizenship; and second, we have failed to articulate that change.

In "Professionalism in Action—Music Teachers on an Assessment Journey," Nyberg wants to know how assessment-driven teaching has changed the way music teachers do their work. He begins with a *very* familiar story, the always-depressing story of a student who mistakes the assessment of an exam for learning. No sense of adventure

awaits this student. *What score did I get? Did I pass the test? I got 38 out of 47—that should amount to an E, right?* Like the prisoners in Plato’s allegory of the cave, happy with so many shadows on the wall, this student is okay staying put, happy (if we wish to follow Plato’s parable) in her chains, happy with her illusions, unaware of her alienation—and why not? Her contract, in the form of a syllabus, credentializes her efforts upon the successful completion of an exam. Little else matters, really. As I see it, the primary relationship in schools today is between the student and the State. The teacher is an intermediary. As of yet, she is an irreplaceable intermediary. But like all middlemen, she is expensive and inefficient, and will soon (with the appropriate app) be subject to Uber-ization.

Refusing to accept the deprofessionalization of their work, a team of teachers, with Johan, embarked upon an ‘assessment journey’ by studying their work and their ideals in relationship to external demands, disciplinary expectations, and student needs. This refusal was theoretically located in the Deweyian notion of teacher agency, whereby schooling’s famous binary of doing versus reflecting is actively resisted and growth is seen as a moral imperative. Through participatory action research, teachers were seen as both experts and learners, committed to their own growth as well as their students. The questions which animated their professional development self-study group dealt with goal-related achievement, fairness and reliability regarding assessment and a notion of equivalence regarding diversity and difference.

Nyberg’s study shows us a community of teachers grappling with State requirements from multiple perspectives. To illustrate, he starts with a debate about notation, what it means to “decode and realize simple musical notation” (Nyberg, 2015: 189). Each teacher/researcher brought an example that spoke to their instrument-specific expertise and demonstrated how realizing this goal looks different across the curriculum. How they conceived of their work “represented several aspects of knowledge and learning and also of teaching . . . setting the stage for a relative and not criteria-based assessment practice” (ibid.: 315). Nyberg writes “The conclusion in the group was that they would probably be able to agree upon a piece of ‘traditional notation’ as an example, but that instrument specifics call for different but equivalent examples” (ibid.: 316). Further illustrations of professionalism include illustrations of teachers debating how closely to collaborate with students in the realization of their syllabus. In this sense, the syllabus was not seen as a contract between student and State, but a living document that needed the consultation, expertise, and professionalism of the teacher. In the end, Nyberg’s music teachers saw knowledge as co-constructed and dependent upon knowing students’ abilities and desires. Teachers were likewise decoding the language their students used, honoring their perspectives while introducing

them to disciplinary norms. If, however, adventure is understood as moving outside norms and standards, I didn't see Nyberg's teachers doing that.

Likewise, in "You Are Seldom Born With a Drum Kit in Your Hands: Music Teachers' Conceptualizations of Knowledge and Learning Within Music Education as an Assessment Practice" Nyberg provides a counter narrative to stories of teacher deprofessionalization, depicting a group of seven music educators in a research and development project. For Nyberg, teacher professionalism is another way of talking about teacher agency. He starts with the claim that teacher professionalism "is dependent on teachers' ability to reflect upon and develop their conceptualizations of knowledge, learning, and teaching practices" (ibid.: 332). Teacher agency is "self-regulating," he suggests, an antidote to "externally produced recipes for teaching or prescribed practices" (ibid.: 333).

If education is supposed to be an adventure—Johan's words, not his teachers—then the deck was stacked against the students. Johan's teacher-study group sought to "increase students' goal-related achievements . . . where the what and how of educational assessment was conceptualized" (ibid.: 338). If I understand the *Swedish National Agency of Education* as summarized by Johan, students and teachers create goals that are informed by aims (which I interpret to mean desires) and core content and knowledge requirements. One immediate problem was that knowledge was conceptualized by teachers as "necessary for grading"—with one teachers saying, "I already know what I want the student to know"—with or without a syllabus. In contradiction with a notion of adventure this teacher goes on to say, "it's no *novelty* what it is they're supposed to know" (ibid.: 340). Making matters worse, teachers expressed a lack of time for thinking about these hows and whats.

Although I would have liked to see this more deeply analyzed, the teachers were able to look both 'atomistically' at the syllabus while considering musical knowledge as holistic, or what I suspect is a closed concept of music. Syllabus requirements were debated and differentialized depending upon instrument or voice, with the teachers trying not to impose personal taste. But the learning was focused on what and how terms like 'real', 'authentic', 'concrete', and 'professional'—again seeming to place more value on knowableness or knowledableness than adventure, on predictability more than imagination. This is in contrast to Nyberg's theoretical frame which borrowed heavily on Dewey's 'holistic' conception of education as both empirical and experimental (By experimental, Dewey is talking about the imagination). In Nyberg's study group, I wanted to know more about the tensions between 'what is' and 'what might be' or between 'how to' and 'why not?' Nyberg writes, "what became clear regardless of approach was the teachers' awareness of learning music as putting together small parts into a bigger whole" (ibid.: 344)—According to one participant, "The same goes

for assessment, you always assess both small parts and the totality” (ibid.: 334). In this sense, music always remained knowable, and thus learnable, and thus teachable (and thus assessable). As someone familiar with schools and schooling, I was not surprised by these conceptualizations. But even when the students were consulted with regard to their aims, these teacher’s conceptions of music – at least from what I could tell—seemed *closed* —not fixed—but closed in a system of mutual agreement.

This may be a missed finding. Nyberg borrowed heavily on Dewey’s critic of education as misleadingly disconnected between theory and practice, a critique I generally agree with. He also leaned a Leora Bresler’s critique of traditional music education practices as placing doing before reflecting. But, as far as I could tell, I saw *great* evidence of teacher professionalism that *integrated* reflection and doing and *integrated* theory and practice. You could provide no better proof that teachers, when given space and time, *are* professionals and that teachers, given time and space, will embrace some of the most difficult problems that have faced educational philosophers from Plato to Dewey. The notion of adventure, however, seemed far from their concerns. The problem for me was one of open versus closed, not theoretical versus practical. Both teachers and students seemed happy to know what they wanted to do and how to do it. This seems logical, I suppose. Students, based on their maturity and experience, may have a closed or incomplete vision of what is possible. Teachers, as professional educators and as professional musicians, may have an even more closed concept of musical possibility because of their maturity, training, preferences, and experience. I longed for a disrupting force—some trigger to look or stray beyond borders. If music education is a contract between the student and the state, with the teacher in the middle as an enforcement mechanism, then I worry how such a sense of adventure might take place, and how—like a fuse—it might be ignited. Teacher agency, in this study, is not analogous with a sense of adventure—at least not explicitly.

Nyberg’s third study, “The Majorest Third Ever Played—Music Education as an Adventure of Knowledge” focused on student conceptions of musical knowledge and learning, “to find and highlight pathways to student learning in Swedish Upper secondary school music programs” (ibid.: 270). Consistent with the findings from his previous studies, the students understood musical knowledge as a holistic—“a three-part combination of theory, practice, and expression/emotion that cannot be fully separable; knowledge that is manifested through action and valued differently depending upon the surroundings—hence contextualized. Musical learning in school is dependent upon action . . . and made possible through the will to practice” (ibid.: 279). Students showed great appreciation for the opportunity to talk about how and what they wanted from their music education, claiming they had never been asked these questions before. I wonder if the music teachers in Johan’s previous studies

would find that surprising, given that they seemed to believe that they provided opportunities for students to express what they wanted to do and how to do it. The point here is that students could be likewise characterized as professionals, agents of rational choice who are empowered to take charge of their learning.

Students as *professional* students are at once inspiring and a bit scary. I am inspired by the eloquence of their discussions. These students appear to take their education seriously and appreciate a stake its outcomes. This is a different kind of learner role than I knew growing up, and it is probably better than the passive and mostly obedient role that I played as a student. Like these students I was never asked my opinion about how my studies could be conceptualized. But I wonder if my responses would have been so rational, or so instrumental—or so in tune with the school's learning objectives. For some students the combination of "theory and practice were seen as tools and compared with brushes, paints, and canvasses enabling you to paint a picture for yourself and others to see" (ibid.: 281). Nyberg already describes the sophistication of his student responses as Deweyian, "seeing action as something related to both thought and bodily movement. . . learning through action is discussed and defined in terms of singing and playing as well as reflection and dialogue, but also in terms of dwelling. To exist in an environment where music is present . . . is seen by the students as leading to a development of musical knowledge – this as long as the experiences are reflected upon through action" (ibid.: 282). The students later expressed a profound need and appreciation for the teacher as a means to realize these imperatives. In this sense, a notion of informal learning was not mentioned as desirable; rather, the teacher was a service provider who helped students with rational and realistic goals they set for themselves.

I close by returning to the word dwelling, which is poetic and evocative. Nyberg's students and teachers saw and understood music as a place of dwelling, a kind of contentment that school seemed to interfere with. At the same time, schooling moved teachers and students to think of knowledge as task-driven or exam-driven, which necessarily changes how knowledge and learning are conceptualized. Students and teachers didn't dwell in knowledge as much as they were (to return to Plato's parable) chained within a knowledge-system of illusion or alienation. This tension may be the defining character of school-based knowledge of our time, and answers the profound research questions that Johan set out to ask. I think the nature of knowledge—at least as it relates to schools and universities—is changing. If we cannot dwell or linger in knowledge, then knowledge is changing, or something is changing. If we cannot stray afield from knowledge, we cannot stray beyond ourselves.

We become professionalized bodies, unwilling to stray, but unprotected by market forces that seek the de-professionalization of life, work, and study in the name of

rational choice. Neoliberalism has shifted the responsibility of personhood away from the collective, the school community, or corporate body in general to the individual as agent, the solo agent. And we are free, I suppose, to choose among competing options. The credentialing of the professional non-professional—maybe some call this the entrepreneur—is the result of these new functions—these governmentalities—in which knowledge is being made. An adventure in knowledge? What does that mean? I think it means thinking about knowledge and how it has changed, how we use knowledge, and whether and if we wish to explore its borders. No one ‘dwells’ without sooner or later leaving—no one lingers in one place for all time. I would like to see Nyberg’s next research project explore more directly what he means by learning as an adventure. In a sense, Nyberg’s research is a lesson for of us. We can only dwell within what we know, but sooner or later, we must move on. This is the adventure of knowledge.

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