

Forskningsnoter *Research notes*

Rhythmic music education as aesthetic practice

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ABSTRACT

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The study presented is a case study of rhythmic music teaching; an oral approach to teaching, where rhythm, participation, movement, improvisation and playing together are essential. The purpose of the study was to examine how rhythmic music teaching was constituted as aesthetic practice, meaning socially instituted action related to appreciating, performing and teaching music. The theoretical point of departure is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social practice, also Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body and John Dewey's pragmatism is applied. The study concludes that participating in music teaching is participating in aesthetic practice, which implies an incorporation of aesthetic values. Incorporating aesthetic values is incorporating guidelines for taste and action, which has both ethical and epistemological implications: It forms the perception of what is legitimate, and, consequently, what the individuals may be required to learn, know, believe and think, as well as what they may require of themselves and of others. Some implications of the study are discussed, focusing on the notion of musical belief, and also on the question of placing the aesthetic within a social and cultural perspective.

Introduction

The study presented in this research note is my PhD dissertation, *Rhythmic music education as aesthetic practice: a case study* (Christophersen 2009). The empirical foundation is a case study of a teacher at a Danish rhythmic conservatory, based on participant observation, interviews and document studies. In the following, I will give a brief summary of the study, and discuss some of its implications.

Background: “Rhythmic music”

“Rhythmic music” is a construction of terms that is rarely used outside of a Nordic context, and is not always understood even within the Nordic countries (Michelsen 2001). The term can have different, but interrelated meanings: First, “rhythmic music” can be understood as a genre notion which includes a variety of popular or vernacular music genres, such as rock, pop, jazz, techno, reggae, hip hop, soul, and so on (Danielsen 2002, Hagen 1996). Second, it can be a political term when related to cultural political struggles for legitimacy, recognition, prestige and funding. In such a context, “rhythmic music” is often defined in terms of what it is *not* – rhythmic music is not classical music, and it is not folk music. Last, it can be associated with a particular way of teaching music, which most likely, but not necessarily, can be labelled “rhythmic”. The term “rhythmic” then refers to the teaching style rather than to the musical style. This particular meaning of the term is rooted in music education practices in Denmark in the last century. The term was probably first used as early as the 1930s by music and movement teacher Astrid Gøssel, writer and literature critic Sven Møller Kristensen, and composer and music teacher Bernhard Christensen (Michelsen 2001). These three were part of a cultural leftist movement, in which jazz was perceived as a potent contribution to the creation of free, natural, authentic, creative and playful human beings (Thing 2002). Gøssel and Christensen later created an oral music education practice where rhythm, movement, improvisation and musical interaction were emphasized (Christensen 1983). Over the years, similar approaches to music education have been increasingly important in Norwegian schools and teacher education. However, the rhythmic way of teaching and learning music has been implemented to a much larger degree in the Danish educational system. Denmark was therefore chosen as the empirical site of the study.

Purpose of the study and research questions

The main purpose of the study was to *examine how rhythmic music teaching is constituted as an aesthetic practice*. The specific research questions of the study were: (a) How are aesthetic values expressed in rhythmic music teaching, and (b) How are these values constituted as self-evident?

In this context, aesthetic practice means socially instituted action related to appreciating, performing and teaching music. The concept of practice enables an investigation of how aesthetic values are constituted, that is how something appears as “good”, “important”, “desirable” and so on, while other things appear as “wrong”, “bad”, or even “ugly”. The essential, then, is then not the music itself, but what

Danbolt et al. (1979) call the “art-relevant” behavior; that is *how* music is referred to, performed and taught. From this perspective, “aesthetic practice” denotes common ways of relating to music within specific social, historical and cultural contexts (Berkaak 1983, Danbolt et al. 1979, Ruud 1996). This implies that aesthetic practice also concerns the exercise of culturally constituted musical values and codes; a cultural competence that is acquired within a social space (Bourdieu 1995). In other words; the aim of the study was to investigate how such cultural competency was learnt in a rhythmic music teaching context, and which “truths” such learning produced.

Design and methods

The empirical study was a case study of the teacher Tobias at a rhythmic conservatory. The data collection was mainly based on observation of Tobias interacting with students in class, formal and informal interviews with Tobias, and informal conversations with students.

In order to contextualize the classroom activity, observations of conservatory life were included in the material, as well as a group interview with two other teachers who shared personal stories from the time when rhythmic music education was institutionalized in Denmark. Various historical documents about the rhythmic tradition and the establishment of educational institutions were also studied. In this way, everyday classroom action and conservatory activity could be related to a broader social, cultural and historical context.

Theoretical perspectives

The theoretical framework of the study is based on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social practice (Bourdieu 1977, 1990, 1999). According to Donald Broady, Bourdieu poses Marxist questions, which he tries to answer phenomenologically (1991: 186-187). Marxism is collectivistic, subjecting the individual to social and historical forces (especially the forces of production), thereby also constructing the individual as a carrier of external social norms and structures. A major concern in phenomenology, on the other hand, is how the individual perceives, experiences and makes sense of his/her world. Bourdieu, in his theory of social practice, roots the social, collective and cultural dimensions in the human body. In so doing, he resembles the French body philosopher and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, by whom Bourdieu is admittedly very inspired. This mixture of Marxism and phenomenology creates a characteristic bifocal

perspective on human life and action: We inhabit the world, and the world inhabits us, thereby making the world a very natural and self-evident place (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1993: 112-14).

The main concept of the theory of social practice is *habitus*, which is a socialized subjectivity, an incorporation of the social world (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1993: 111). Bourdieu calls the habitus “a system of dispositions” (Bourdieu 1990: 53), meaning that our reactions and actions are neither random nor innate, but rather culturally learnt in social settings. Showing “good” taste, “sound” judgment, and performing “logical”, “suitable” and “reasonable” actions indicates a cultural competency that originates in participating and belonging in certain contexts. In this way, the categories for perception, classification, judgment and action are socially constituted. This is due to the double nature of the habitus; us being-in-the-world and the world being-in-us. The merger of the individual human being and the social world thus generates common and “natural” ways of understanding and acting. In the analysis, the concepts of habitus, practical sense, doxa and *illusio* were utilized in order to explore the relationship between the subjects and the social space, thus also shedding light on the cultural learning of aesthetic values in rhythmic music teaching (for details, see Christophersen 2009: 51ff).

In spite of the influence from phenomenology, Bourdieu’s portrayals of individuals are somewhat clinical, his subjects appearing as more or less socially determined, as examples of social categories, in some cases even as pawns in a social game, rather than as living, breathing, thinking and feeling human beings. Therefore, in order to describe and understand the presence and the actions of the participants in the rhythmic teaching settings, I also drew upon pragmatism and body phenomenology, in particular John Dewey’s concepts of experience (1916) and aesthetic experience (1934), and Merleau-Ponty’s concept of pre-reflexivity (1994). Pragmatism and body phenomenology offer tools for focusing on situation, action, experience and bodily presence. This seemed well suited to explore how the participants expressed and exercise aesthetic values within the typically oral and corporeal approach to music as represented by rhythmic music teaching. From this perspective, the connection between the body and the immediate surroundings creates a space for “meaningful” and “right” action and experience, allowing the subject to act in accordance with situational requirements. Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and practical sense therefore function as historical and social foundations for Merleau-Ponty’s reflexive body and for Dewey’s aesthetic experience.

The combination of these three theoretical perspectives is unusual. However, Bourdieu points to the connection with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (see Bourdieu 1977:20, 1999: 148), and also to his theoretical kinship with Dewey (see Bourdieu 1999: 37, Bourdieu & Wacquant 1993: 107-108). In the study, the combination of these three perspectives gave the opportunity to examine the actions, interactions and aesthetic values of the conservatory teacher Tobias and his students from their own point of view,

as well as identifying and discussing the social, cultural and historical framework that enables these values and actions.

Results

The purpose of studying practical everyday teaching situations at the conservatory was to identify aesthetic values, as seen from the agents' points of view. Using phenomenology and pragmatism as basis for the analysis of observations and interviews, I identified several aesthetic values:

First, body, movement and sensuousness were emphasized as crucial to learning and knowing. Existential meaning was ascribed to the body, which made body control and body coordination crucial skills, whereas reading music was perceived as creating distance and alienation between person and music. *Second*, creating musical experiences were stressed, also when only practicing technical skills. This is because musical experience can create a sense of meaning, as well as musical insight or even improved understanding of your own life; a hallmark of aesthetic experience, according to Dewey. *Third*, the criteria for selecting and utilizing musical material were said to always be relative to the musical situation. There is no such thing as "good music" per se; music can only be more or less useful or appropriate, depending on the situation. This also means that an existing piece of music is not a finished work to be emulated, but rather a point of departure for improvisation. *Fourth*, there was an emphasis on musical and educational value as always being instrumental. When practicing music or music educational skills, the exercises must not only contribute to musical experiences in the present, they must also clearly reflect some relevance for a future career as a musician or music teacher. *Fifth*, music was seen as inherently social, which means that interaction and communication were stressed as crucial for musical performance and for music teaching and learning. *Sixth*, holism and continuity in music education were considered crucial. The modern society was described as fragmented and specialized; creating barriers between people and also between people and their surroundings. As a consequence, musicians and music teachers that can be versatile, creative and flexible are much needed, thus helping pupils or audience to make connections between music and their own lives.

I labeled these principles as aesthetic values, because they were emphasized as "good", "right" and "important" in rhythmic music performance and rhythmic music teaching, thereby also functioning as imperatives governing choices and actions.

Subsequently, utilizing Bourdieu's theory of social practice as analytical tool, I examined how these aesthetic values were constituted as self-evident and "natural". According to Bourdieu, the aesthetic "eye" is always historical and culturally constituted, and can therefore never be pure: "The "eye" is a product of history reproduced by education" (Bourdieu 1995:47, my translation). The way aesthetic values are expressed,

exercised and upheld is therefore closely connected to cultural competence, where the individual incorporates cultural actions and values. To explore this, I therefore studied so-called “objective structures” (Bourdieu 1990, 1999) at the conservatory, that is the structuring and organizing of educational activities and settings, for instance in classes, in narratives of the history of rhythmic music and the Danish rhythmic teaching tradition, and also in the physical and social space of the conservatory.

These structures coincided to a surprisingly large degree with the aesthetic values expressed and upheld in the classroom. For instance, the social orientation of the music and music teaching that was strongly emphasized in the interaction between Tobias and students was also found in the physical organization of the classroom, and of the conservatory building, in administrative decision-making, and in the historical narratives of the rhythmic tradition. In sum, the aesthetic values exercised in the classroom and the “objective structures” of the conservatory mirrored each other, thereby communicating identical messages to the students: “The individual musician is not important; the principal unit is the community. Action equals interaction, play equals interplay”. The fewer inconsistencies, the more efficient is the production of doxic experiences; *doxa* denoting basic beliefs that are taken for granted, and therefore not questioned. It is “that which is beyond question and which each agent tacitly accords by the mere fact of acting in accord with social convention” (Bourdieu 1977:169). The doxas function as commonly accepted ideas, which form the basis for life and agency.

The results from the study showed that the basic message was repeatedly communicated to the students in various ways, thus creating a coherent belief system at the conservatory. Within such a belief system, the rhythmic activity – and thereby also its aesthetic values – will appear meaningful, obvious and self-evident. It then becomes *clear* that improvisation is a very important skill for rhythmic musicians and music teachers, that sheet music is *naturally not* very relevant, and that bodily movement is *obviously* highly important in teaching and learning. Then *it goes without saying* that an improvisational phrase would have to be simple enough to allow all the participants in the group to imitate it. That is *inevitably* so, because the social and musical interaction are *of course* essential in rhythmic music teaching.

Implications of the study

Rhythmic music education is an under-researched topic. One possible reason for this could be a certain lack of research interest in rhythmic educational settings, which are typically not very intellectually oriented. Knut Tønberg’s study (2007) on the institutionalization of rhythmic education at a Norwegian conservatory thus stands out as important, as does Johan Söderman’s study (2008) of hip-hop musicians. Also a few Danish studies are ongoing. Topic-wise, the presented study on rhythmic music teaching

is therefore a contribution to the field of music education. However, when reflecting further on some implications of the study, the perspectives on music education provided by the theoretical framework stand out as the most interesting.

The indirect claim of this study is that being a music teacher or educator means to exercise a musical “belief”, and to try to convince or shape other people to share the same belief through an educational practice. This does not mean that all music education is coercion and suppression; neither does it mean that educational practice is about moulding students to fit a certain form. A conservatory, however, is a special institution, where the purpose is to conserve only certain musical styles and genres, hence the name. You are therefore likely to find that the people within such an institution resemble each other. They are likely to have similar musical preferences and judgments, which is probably why they are there in the first place. In other kinds of educational practice, there will most likely be a greater variety, which also increases the probability of varying and conflicting views among the participants in these practices.

Viewing music education as a Bourdieuan belief system indicates that there is a big potential for the shaping of human beings. If music teaching is a socially, culturally and historically constituted aesthetic practice, then music teaching is, to a large extent, about shaping and educating human beings in accordance with the inherent beliefs of the practice. From this perspective, certain musical and music pedagogical choices, judgments and actions will appear as obvious and taken for granted, while other options may be rendered impossible, or even unthinkable. Thus, the aesthetical, ethical and epistemological dimensions of music education are inseparable.

There are some drawbacks to the use of Bourdieu’s theories. Bourdieu has often been accused of social determinism, also his use of economic and strategic terms for explaining human action and behavior has been criticized (Gartman 2006, Nielsen 1999). Bourdieu’s notion of social order based on symbolic power is seen as problematic (Aakvaag 2006), as is the lack of focus on language (Butler 1999). These points of critique may very well be extended to this study of rhythmic music teaching, and further reinforced by the claim that this is a study of aesthetic issues. Questions then arise as to how one could or should talk about the aesthetic within a social and cultural perspective. One could for instance ask if the explanation of sense and taste in terms of cultural values and social control will reduce art’s value.

Assuming and accepting that encounters with arts and music are valuable, enlightening and educational, goes with the territory for music teachers, educators and researchers. The study presented does not argue against that. What the study shows, however, is that there are a number of material, historical, social and cultural dimensions that contribute to shaping our aesthetic experiences and values. Given the premise that music and other arts can be a source of joy, existential experience, insight and enlightenment; one then has to ask if music and arts have to be exalted into something extraordinary, almost mythical, in order to be of value. Further, if the aesthetic experiences of nature, pictures or music are results of cultural competence, does that diminish the

experience and insight? If the perception, emotion and experience related to dancing or hearing a groove is culturally constituted, does that devalue and weaken the experiences? Do the experiences then become less aesthetic, less insightful, or less educational?

There should be no reason to insist that the arts and arts appreciation are “pure”, that is, separated from the social and cultural contexts within which art can come to exist. If the appreciation and judgment of music is culturally constituted, music is still a source of joy, experience, insight and knowledge. Aesthetic values do not reside in the music alone; they are distributed, exercised and maintained in aesthetic practices such as music teaching practices.

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