

## Musical Futures Comes to Canada: Engaging Students in Real-World Music Learning

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**Abstract:** This article reports on a research-practice collaborative work that combined informal music learning practices and youth-led participatory action research with Grade 7 beginning band students at Southridge School in British Columbia. Using real-world music learning experiences, inquiry and reflection, we expanded the scope of a Musical Futures project and helped students develop listening and performing skills, increase their engagement in music learning, and develop leadership skills as they acted as initiators of the music making, learning, and reflective processes.

### What is Musical Futures?

Musical Futures originated in the UK and is growing into an international music education initiative (O'Flynn, 2010). It is an approach that brings informal music learning practices identified in Lucy Green's (2001) book *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead for Music Education* into the more formal context of school music programs (see also Green 2008a and 2008b where she dispels the idea that informal music learning approaches eliminate the need for a music teacher). Musical Futures engage young people in the 11-18 age range in music learning that is relevant to their everyday lives and that helps them connect in-school and out-of-school interests and experiences. It makes use of aural learning that fully integrates listening with practical music making, improvising and composing. It also helps to develop leadership skills as students act as peer leaders and initiators of the music making and learning process. Specific projects are tailored to meet the needs of participating schools and students. In our project, we combined the informal music learning practices of Musical Futures with real-world inquiry and reflection involving youth-led participatory action research.

### Informal and Real-World Music Learning

Musical activities are a significant part of young people's everyday lives and their music engagement largely occurs outside of formalized music education contexts (O'Neill, 2005). Informal music learning has been defined in a variety of ways that are often considered in contrast to what takes place in formal education (Frier-

son-Campbell, 2008; Jaffurs, 2004). However, this need not be the case. Mans (2009) describes informal learning as a form of enculturation that enables learners to make informed choices about what they learn based on their understanding of a particular social context. Green's (2001) definition of informal music learning includes four main criteria: (1) *encountering* knowledge and practices outside of a formal educational setting; (2) *enculturation* in musical practices, through lived experience in a musical environment from both conscious and unconscious listening; (3) *interaction* with their peers, family, and others who are not acting as teachers in formal capacities; (4) *self-teaching* by developing independent learning techniques, acquiring skills and knowledge. Although informal music learning is often conceptualized as taking place outside of formal educational settings, the Musical Futures project uses informal music learning practices to engage students in school-based music education. Activities include "purposive listening" and copying recorded music, memorizing songs and "playing by ear", self-teaching and learning with peers, as well as improvising and creating musical compositions.

Learning through "real-world" inquiry and problem-solving has been recognized as a key part of integrated or interdisciplinary teaching (Nagel, 1996). Real-world, situated, problem-based, project-based, inquiry-based, constructivist, and experiential learning all draw on the work on John Dewey, one of America's most renowned philosophers of education, and his 1933 classic publication *How We Think*. Central to

Dewey's work is that student learning should be tied to 'lived experience' and achieved through experimentation and investigation of practice by learners acting in the world in real situations. According to Dewey, the challenge of learning is *learning to think* and this ought to be the aim of education – to make possible for students to engage in conscious meaning making about real world problems – otherwise practical activity is "mechanical and routine, morals are blind and arbitrary, and aesthetic appreciation is sentimental gush" (p. 78). Similar to Dewey's philosophy, real-world learning strives for "wide-awake, careful, thorough habits of thinking" (p. 78) that require "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge" (p. 16). Real-world learning is situational, open-ended, and social, and it cultivates the four attitudes defined by Dewey as: (a) *open-mindedness* and an active attention to alternative possibilities; (b) *whole-heartedness* and following a passion with undivided interest; (c) *responsibility* and the ability to derive meaning from what is learned; (d) *directness* that is based on the belief that something is worth doing and that the act of addressing a problem is better than being resigned to it. At its core, real-world learning is about meaningful, engaged learning that requires pedagogies that move beyond direct instruction or the "banking" model of education through the creation of imaginative spaces for learners to pursue knowledge and discovery.

The Project at Southridge School  
Musical Futures came to Canada in the