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## **Geoffrey Lowe: Edith Cowan University**

### **Students voting with their feet: The values students attach to class music learning activities in lower secondary school**

#### **Abstract**

Retaining students in elective class music programs is an issue in Western Australia, particularly in lower secondary school. While class music can enjoy relatively high enrolments in the first year of secondary school (Year 8 in WA), numbers decline sharply into the second year and continue to decline into the post compulsory years. This paper investigates the role of class music learning activities in shaping student motivation towards class music, because values have been found to be accurate predictors of students' future enrolment decisions. Specifically, this paper reports on a study into the values and beliefs of 222 Year 8 students in their first year in secondary school in WA towards class music learning activities. The initial study indicated a statistically significant decline in 10 out of 12 values measures across the course of Year 8. Follow-up focus group interviews with 56 students from the same schools then explored reasons student attribute for the declines. Based upon focus group responses, the paper concludes by presenting a brief overview of the types of activities which enhance students valuing of class music, and those which contribute towards a decline in students' values.

#### **Introduction**

Retaining students in elective class music programs beyond the first year of secondary school (Year 8 in Western Australia) is an ongoing issue for Western Australian music educators. This paper reports upon the values Year 8 music students attach to their class music activities, because values have been demonstrated to accurately predict future student enrolment decisions (Eccles, 2005; Wigfield & Wagner, 2005). Specifically, the study examined the values of 222 Year 8 music students from eight secondary schools across the Perth metropolitan area. By using task values as the basis for the study, it was hoped to gain some understanding of the impact of class music learning activities upon Year 8 music student's motivation to continue, and uncover learning activity design principles which may enhance student motivation for class music. Finally, this paper concludes by offering recommendations for teaching practice based upon the findings of the study.

#### **Background – setting the scene**

Class music is generally offered as an elective subject in secondary schools in Western Australia. Some secondary schools offer compulsory general music in Year 8, but often only on a term or semester basis as part of an 'arts' taster program. Relatively healthy numbers of students enrol into class music in the first year of secondary school (Lowe, 2008). However, classes can often comprise

mixed ability groups of instrumentalists and non instrumentalists. Therefore, classes can include students with a degree of proficiency on a musical instrument and who can read music, and students with no music instrument experiences and no music reading skills. Some schools separate Year 8 classes into ability streams; thus the instrumental students are 'quarantined' into 'specialist' music classes, and the rest into 'general' music classes. Students enter secondary school with a range of previous musical experiences from primary school. While some students have no previous school music experiences, others come from primary schools with strong music programs. As a result, teaching and motivating students in Year 8 class music can present a considerable challenge to music educators.

### **Problem Statement**

While the numbers of students undertaking class music in Year 8 can be encouraging, the numbers of students electing to continue class music into Year 9 can decline by as much as 50% (Lowe, 2008). Ultimately, only 3% of the state cohort in Western Australia complete post compulsory examinable class music (Curriculum Council, 2008). Therefore, this paper considers whether the low numbers of students electing to continue class music beyond Year 8 are symptomatic of issues associated with student valuing of Year 8 class music learning activities, given the diverse musical backgrounds and experiences of many Year 8 students.

### **The research context - student values**

The construct of values as defined by expectancy-value theory was selected as the theoretical foundation for this study. Eccles (2005) defines values as 'Why should I undertake this task?', and differentiates them into attainment (importance), intrinsic (interest) and extrinsic (usefulness) components. Attainment value is defined as the personal importance of doing well, including the challenge and relevance of the topic to the individual. Tasks have a higher attainment value if they conform to student beliefs about the subject. Intrinsic value is defined as the inherent enjoyment the individual gets from undertaking the task, and their subjective interest in the task. Finally, Eccles (2005) defines extrinsic values as how well the task conforms to current and future goals.

Values are shaped through engagement and interaction with learning activities (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Accordingly, this study set out to measure student valuing of class music learning activities over the course of Year 8 as a foundation for exploration of class music learning activity design principles which enhance or decrease student task values.

### **Method**

The project examined the values of 222 Year 8 students drawn from eight secondary schools across the Perth metropolitan area. Schools were selected through a stratified random selection process (based upon school districts). Student values were measured at the start of the academic year (pre-test) and at the end of the academic year (post-test) via a researcher designed questionnaire

instrument. Four questions per values component (12 values questions in total) were included on the questionnaire, and for the purposes of this paper, results have been combined to create one values measure per values component. Data was then subjected to two-tailed paired sample *t*-tests, allowing the researcher to examine whether there had been any statistically significant differences in value component ratings from pre to post test.

The questionnaire was followed by focus group interviews comprising six – eight students in each of the eight research schools (56 students in total). The aim of the interviews was to examine aspects of class music learning activities which may or may not have contributed to changes in the values ratings, and establish learning activity design principles which enhance and decrease motivation for class music. Interviews were semi-structured to allow for a degree of student directed discussion, and focus group questions were based upon expectancy-value theory constructs.

Interview data was manipulated and coded using Nvivo8 qualitative software, and was first categorised under activities which students identified as enjoyable and activities which were not enjoyable. From there, general design principles were extracted, and are reported in the discussion section of this paper.

## Results

Student valuing of class music learning activities were measured at the start and end of Year 8, and results including mean and significant differences are presented in table 1.

Table 1: student valuing of class music learning activities across Year 8

Values components N = 222	Pre-test		Post-test		Mean diff.	Significance
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Attainment	3.85	.76	3.56	.85	-.29	.005*
Intrinsic	3.80	.80	3.38	.97	-.42	.001*
Extrinsic		3.70	.86	3.42	.95	-.28
		.040				

Table 1 indicated a statistically significant decline in two out of three values components from pre to post-test. Of these, intrinsic value showed the strongest decline over the course of the year, indicating that while student valuing of activities declined overall, their intrinsic enjoyment of the activities declined the most. While not present in this table, two of the four extrinsic values items also indicated a statistically significant decline, but not enough to effect the overall result for extrinsic value. Based on the results of the survey, student valuing of class music learning activities, especially their enjoyment, appeared to decline significantly over the course of Year 8.

From the focus group interview data, three activities emerged which students described as enhancing their values towards class music.

### *Performing*

Performing emerged as the most valued learning activity. In short, students described performing as fun and enjoyable. Performing in front of others was seen as a confidence building activity (a life skill), and performing was described as an authentic form of music learning i.e. 'doing' music. In addition, students described group based performing as relating to their experiential world, where they identified with the performance model of the 'rock and pop band'.

### *Composing*

Composing also emerged as a valued learning activity. In particular, students described the value of creating music in an experimental and co-operative setting, leading to group performances. Composing was described as a valuable form of self-expression, although the problem of lack of skills development for realising ideas was raised.

### *Group activities*

Students also described a valuing of 'relevant' project work and musical games. Students defined 'relevant' again in terms of the music of their experiential world. It also became evident during focus groups that the emphasis on communal activities at this age placed less emphasis on 'self' at the fragile emotional time of adolescence. Students almost universally indicated a desire not to be singled out in learning activities.

Given the declines in values reported in table 1, it was evident that students were not being engaged regularly enough in values enhancing learning activities. From the focus group interview data, three activities emerged which students described as decreasing their valuing of class music.

### *Music theory and notation related activities*

Students across all focus groups listed music theory and notation related activities as their least valued activities. The main reasons expressed by students related to: lack of practical application of theoretical knowledge, lack of comprehensibility, relevance to learning in their understanding of how music is created in their experiential world, and repetition (the same types of activities over and over).

### *Aural activities*

Students described an aversion to de-contextualised aural training, namely rhythmic and melodic dictations, especially when they were singled out to respond.

### *Solo performances*

Students did not value performance activities which emphasised the individual. They commonly described feelings relating to lack of competence and confidence, particularly in the solo instrumental performance setting, and many described typical symptoms of performance anxiety.

## Discussion

When focus group interview data was further analysed, three overarching design principles which enhanced student valuing of class music activities emerged. They revolved around notions of relevance & familiarity, achievability and transferability.

In terms of relevance and familiarity, any learning activity content and strategies involving popular music and the use of computers and technology were described in positive value related terms. The enhancing principle of achievability was described in terms of activities in which students felt optimally challenged to succeed. This included the use of music software in the creation of music to overcome their lack of physical performing skills. In addition, learning activities were described as useful when students perceived a direct application to the 'doing' of music, particularly transferability to learning an instrument. Transferability was enhanced when repertoire was seen as relevant. Thus transferability became apparent when class music learning activities conformed with student perceptions of music from their experiential realm.

Conversely, four design principles which decreased student valuing of class music activities also emerged. They related to repetition, incomprehensibility, lack of relevance & familiarity, and lack of achievability.

In terms of repetition, students described little variation in the way some activities were presented, leading to monotony and boredom, while incomprehensibility was described in terms of understanding de-contextualised aural and theoretical activities, particularly where there was no immediate and obvious practical application. Further, students described learning activities and learning strategies not based upon their experiences of music as being irrelevant; and in terms of lack of achievability, students described many learning activities as either too challenging, or not challenging enough. Issues associated with challenge included the need to understand, and the need to have the skills to put understanding into practice. Lack of achievability directly stemmed from the diverse primary school music experiences of many Year 8 music students.

While valuable in understanding overarching design principles from the student perspective, it is more important to consider the direct pedagogical implications of these principles for music educators. Accordingly, this paper now presents five recommendations for teaching practice.

### Recommendations for teaching practice

Performing and composition – That music teachers understand the motivational appeal of group performing and composing to Year 8 students.
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Students in this study described music as a dynamic subject associated with 'doing music'. It is recommended that teachers acknowledge the value of performing and composing in terms of confidence building of musical and general life skills, self expression and sheer enjoyment. Focus groups described performing and composing activities as 'just good fun'. In addition, performance and practical

based composition represent an alternative form of learning closely associated with 'knowing in' music (Swanwick, 1996), and the development of musical intelligence (Gardner, 1983).

It is recommended that teachers acknowledge the value of both solo and group composing and performing, with group activities building social skills both for music and in general, and building self-esteem. In addition, group based activities can be used to overcome physical skills limitations. Further, group composing by experimenting (trial and error) and performing equates with student perceptions of music making in their world.

While acknowledging the value of composing and performing, teachers may need to reconsider the role of musical skills acquisition, and design learning activities which build physical skills on selected instruments as a prelude to meaningful composing and performing in the classroom.

Link to instrumental teaching – That teachers understand that students see class music as supporting playing an instrument, and not the other way around.

In line with student beliefs regarding music as a practical subject, students in this study described playing an instrument as the main rationale for studying music. Therefore, it is recommended that learning activities reflect a higher degree of relevance and transferability to instrumental performance.

Music educators should consider the greater use of students' musical instruments in classroom learning activities, aside from formal concert practice contexts. This may help combat issues surrounding relevance and de-contextualisation in that theoretical activities can be directly applied to instrumental performance.

In addition, the greater incorporation of instruments could aid the transferability of musical concepts back to the instrumental lesson, and beyond, to performance in the wider setting while helping build technical competence and student confidence on their instruments.

Practical application – That music theory and related activities lead to or derive from practical applications

Students described many theoretical activities as being incomprehensible because they did not understand the practical context in which the activities operated. To avoid issues surrounding comprehensibility, teachers should consider the value of integrating theoretical activities into a practical setting.

Further it is recommended that teachers reconsider the order in which theoretical activities and practical applications are delivered. Focus groups described the value in experimenting with ideas. In this sense, it could be appropriate to have student identify a theoretical concept through performance, and theorise later. This method is also closer to the way musical meaning is developed in the contemporary music world, as popular musicians experiment with ideas and formalise them later. Thus, understanding musical concepts derives from aural exploration, not written theorising.

While again acknowledging the limiting factor of student practical and performing skills, the value of computers as a motivational tool needs to be considered.

Content relevance – That music teachers understand the need to relate the relevance of learning activities to the student's experiential realm

With overarching implications for the above recommendations, students described the need for content and learning strategies to reflect their experiential world, in terms of relevance, usefulness and transferability. With regards content, students live in a contemporary music world and many class music programs in this study were based upon the Western classical canon. Students struggled to see the transferability of knowledge from one area to the other in three ways:

- from classical repertoire to their experiential contemporary music world;
- from theoretically driven learning activities to their understanding of musical process in their contemporary musical world; and
- from theoretically driven learning activities to their instruments.

Music beyond the student experiential realm has little relevance to them, and therefore little value. In the instances when learning activities did incorporate contemporary music and contemporary music practices, focus group responses were uniformly more positive.

It is beyond the boundaries of this paper to examine the philosophical, educational and pedagogical issues surrounding repertoire choice and practice in music education. However, in the context of this study, issues surrounding the Western canon and notation based theory were found to have a de-motivating impact upon students in terms of relevance, usefulness and transferability.

Accommodate ability divide – that music teachers acknowledge the diverse range of past musical experiences of Year 8 students, and plan accordingly.

Focus groups described a variety of different or non-existent musical experiences at primary school. Their experiences of class music in Year 8 often resulted in a culture shock, as they were confronted with an unfamiliar, formal, theoretical study of music.

In addition, widely divergent primary school experiences resulted in widely differing levels of ability. Classes comprised students with little or no formal musical experience through to students with many years of formal musical tuition. The divide also manifested itself in classes containing fluent music readers and non readers, resulting in a major ability divide in all settings.

This study found that the ability divide effected student perceptions of the degree of challenge associated with activities. In general, less experienced and non reading students found formal learning activities too challenging, while more experienced and fluent readers described little challenge. Both impacted upon mastery orientation behaviours.

It is recommended that teachers acknowledge the divide and plan learning activities accordingly. Teachers need to investigate methods and strategies which can accommodate a range of ability levels in the same setting, such as the use of group learning activities which accommodate different ability levels in the one activity, and extension activities for more advanced students.

### **Conclusion**

The declines in student values uncovered in this study may be the direct cause of ongoing low retention rates in Year 9 class music in Western Australia. As such, findings would appear to support previous expectancy-value theory assertions that declining values are an accurate predictor of future enrolment decisions in elective subject settings. Further, this study indicated that it is possible to identify overarching learning activity design principles which may enhance student motivation for Year 8 class music. However, it is important to note that the principles and recommendations presented in this study represent an assessment of the motivational value of class music learning activities from the student perspective, and do not represent an educational assessment of them.

Despite this, it becomes apparent that consideration of the educational in isolation of the motivational in an elective setting presents a real and ongoing danger to any subject, as evidenced in the high and on-going drop-out rates from class music in Western Australia. Ultimately, this paper argues that a successful 'marriage' between the educational and the motivational is required if music educators are going to affect real change in retention rates in class music.

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