Celebrating the use of African music: Change in motion

Dawn Joseph, Deakin University

Abstract
I undertook a research project regarding the use of African music at both primary and secondary school level with Victorian teachers in Melbourne in 2004. This study grew out of my first project, which examined the effectiveness of using African music with non-specialist primary teacher education students at Deakin University, Melbourne (see Joseph, 2002, 2003). In this paper the concept of ‘change’ in relation to teaching and learning is explored regarding practising teachers’ teaching and learning of African music in Australian schools. According to Campbell (2004), a guiding principle for shaping educational experiences designed to promote students’ musical and cultural understanding is for teachers to make music both meaningful and useful in their lives. She further contends that such an experience can ‘come alive’ for students if teachers promote active involvement for them as music listeners as well as makers of music. This paper discusses some of the findings in relation to why and how teachers are engaging with African music and what are their students are learning from it. It may be argued that both students (Deakin University student project) and teachers (Victorian music project) perceived African music to be an effective way to transmit and engage with a ‘new music and culture’.

Background
From my own tertiary teaching and study with Deakin University students (see Joseph, 2003 and 2004) I find the use of African music is an important function in the acculturation process for students. The experience and appreciation of African music and culture was ‘new’, ‘interesting’ and ‘different’ as most students had only experienced Western music. African music as a new genre became a platform for dialogue that promoted ‘change in motion’—celebrating change in content, attitudes, beliefs and understandings. In changing my teaching practice, I reflected on my own teaching of music and I had to ask what I wanted to transmit to my tertiary students—questions like: Why change? What can change? and How can change take place? Also trying something new in teaching at tertiary level, exploring and finding meaning in a new way takes time, effort, trust and risk. Guskey (2002,) draws ones attention to the reality of the risk that “change means to chance the possibility that students might learn less well than they do under current practice” (p.387), I also wanted to reflect on bigger questions in relation to my teaching: How would such drastic changes in content affect how I was going to teach and what my students learn? and How am I going to teach this? Further, would this affect their beliefs and attitudes about how to teach music in primary schools? What are my students learning? Bearing in mind these questions and the findings from my tertiary teaching project, I went on to enquire about what Melbourne teachers are currently experiencing in their teaching and learning of African music at Primary and Secondary level. This paper offers some personal perspectives on the notion of ‘change’ as part of educational reform, provides some theoretical perspectives about African music as part of cultural transmission and concludes with a discussion from the music teacher project. For the purpose of this paper only three focal aspects will be highlighted: how and why are teachers teaching African music and what are students learning from it.

Brief Overview on “Change”
There are many facets of teacher change and change in practice can change what children actually learn. Teachers who want to change have decided that they need to change, whether from personal or classroom experience, social interaction with colleagues, or participation in professional development programs. Teachers who want to change are teachers who want to grow, they do not believe that the status quo is adequate. They are reflective and are continually trying to do what is best for their students. Schubert and Ayers (1992) argue “it is only reflective teachers (not those who teach by recipe, technique, or doctrine) who are able to grow continuously”. It seems that a pervasive factor of teacher change is ongoing reflection.

Change is often a complex phenomenon. Imel (2000) supports this view and contends that like learning, change is a complex process and understanding the relationship between learning and the change process can help adult educators be more purposeful in assisting with change. As a change agent in my teaching at the tertiary level, I not only had to pay attention to the music content but used my teaching time as an opportunity for my students to be proactive in performing, creating, analysing and debating.
social issues. Since learning and change are interconnected, the use of African music gave my students the opportunity to reflect and discuss wider social issues than just what they aurally or visually experienced in terms of sound and movement. Williams (1992) aptly describes such a strategy for deeper analysis of and critical reflection upon issues as “peeling the onion”. As African music was a “new genre” it served to unlock several perspectives to my Australian students (see Joseph, 2003, 2004).

**African Music and Culture**

In Africa, music is part of all human life; the word ‘music’ is commonly a verb rather than a noun, referring to music as making and doing. By exploring African culture, society and music, ‘windows are opened’ thereby encouraging dialogue and infusion which in turn promotes intercultural perspectives about music, society and culture. Thus Miller (1989) affirms that understanding the differences between cultures not only opens the way to a deeper appreciation of the people who create and use that music, but it also brings a new perspective to the Western musical world.

Hall (1984) believes that members of a given society internalise the cultural components of that society and act within what is ‘culturally acceptable for that society’. In his view, we become only aware of this control mechanism when it is severely challenged, for example by exposure to a different culture. At the very rudimentary level the concept of culture can be viewed as multi-layered. For this reason, it is such multi-layers of culture that is experienced and expressed in the visible (behaviour and artefacts) and in the not so visible (values, beliefs and attitudes). African music and culture are inseparable. For an African, music is life and life is music from birth to death. The notion of culture as an expression through African music can be aligned to “as culture often as subconscious” (Hall 1984, p.230).

A constant challenge we face in a changing world is being inclusive of other types of music. The question to ask is why should we as educators provide such an experience of ‘the other’ to our students? Thompson (2002) raises the point that ‘the other’ is often constructed as a homogenised category, which she refers to as that which is “static to geographical spaces” (p. 16). In relation to this ‘other’ is the notion of music being understood as an aspect of the culture which it is part of. This point is further highlighted by Nettl (1992) who affirms that “understanding music in turn can help us to understand the world’s cultures and their diversity” (p. 4). It is only when we move out of our own framework and into ‘the other’ that we begin to cross boundaries and make the cross-cultural connections that are absent in the music of our own culture.

According to Nketia (1988), what appears to be different cross-culturally may operate in similar contexts, hence the discovery of common principles, usages and behavioural patterns. He contends that it is not just the music we hear, but a knowledge of the culture of music makers, their lives, what they do, and the occasions when they make music that enables us to explore their music (p.101). Nketia also maintains that “practical experiences of a simple aspect of the music process that we can manage, such as singing a simple song, clapping or stamping... or some simple movement, helps in our efforts to get to know and understand the music” (p.103).

**Melbourne Teacher Project (2004)**

‘Small Steps Into Longer Journeys’ was the title of my Melbourne teacher project. This was set up as a pilot survey to investigate the extent to which effective teaching and learning of African music takes place at both primary and secondary schools in Victoria. The findings from this project aims to support the research and development initiatives of the Australian Musical-Arts Action Team (MAT) cell for which I am the national coordinator. This MAT cell was approved by the Pan-African Society for Musical Arts Education (PASMAE) in July 2003 as the only overseas MAT cell outside of the African continent to date.

Through a web-based survey directed to primary and secondary music teachers, the research aimed to identify:

- the reasons why teachers include African music in their school music curricula
- the nature of African music curriculum content
- sources of existing teacher knowledge and skills in African music
- sources of curriculum materials and resources supporting the teaching of African music
- the perceived needs of teachers for professional development in African music
- examples of effective teaching of African music in schools
- exemplary practice in teaching of African music by visiting artists in schools
the applications of African music in the school curriculum—for example, as a music discipline study, as part of an integrated arts program, as part of a cross-curricular program, etc. (see URL http://education.deakin.edu.au/music_ed/afr_mus-survey)

Although the survey yielded much informative data on the above points, only a few aspects will be discussed in this paper.

Methodology

A web-based anonymous survey over two months (June–July 2004) provided the data that informed my African music teacher project. This type of sampling is what Colwell (1992, p.117) refers to as “purposive sampling” whereby the researcher seeks individuals with a particular characteristic of interest—in this instance, the teaching of African music in schools. I sought to gather information about the teaching and learning of African music at both primary and secondary level at Victorian schools. I used two professional organizations the Australian Society for Music Education (ASME) and the Association of Music Educators (Victoria) Inc (aMuse) to invite their members to participate in this pilot study. I also invited those teachers on my African music teacher email list to respond to the survey. Web-surveys—which Dillman (1998) refers to as the one type of “self-administered” survey—are an extremely promising method of data collection (Schillewaert, Langerak, & Duhamel, 1998).

One concern identified in relation to using this instrument is what Solomon (2001, p.2) refers to as “coverage bias or bias’ resulting from people either not having access to the internet or choosing not to use it. Thus, my sample of respondents does not represent all or even a cross section of the music teachers in Victoria. All teachers who wished to participate completed and submitted an online questionnaire survey through an online pro forma linked to a database associated with the Deakin University web-site. Only the responses to the survey items were emailed to myself from the website and none of the details of the respondents email addresses or places of employment were included in the data provided. Complete anonymity was therefore assured. The survey took approximately twenty minutes to complete and elicited both qualitative and quantitative data.

It must be noted that the teacher findings reported represented only a small percentage of opinions and therefore generalisations cannot be drawn from such a small sample, neither can statically conclusions be drawn.

Change in Motion: Discussion and Findings

This section of the paper I refer to as ‘change in motion’ (where participants are experiencing ongoing change in terms of their learning and teaching of African music), it focuses on a few aspects from the findings in relation to why teachers are engaging in African music, how are they engaging with it and what are their students learning from African music. My web-based survey consisted of forty-one questions. In total seventeen teachers responded to the survey (fifteen from inner Melbourne and two outside of Melbourne). The age range of respondents was from 25 to 51 years and over, four male and thirteen female.

All respondents were very highly qualified (from graduate diplomas to Masters degrees in music and music education), 60% of respondents received their African music training from sources outside their tertiary or education programs, mostly from professional development workshops, fellow teachers and musicians. Only seven of the respondents played an African instrument although thirteen indicated that they would like to learn one. Though most respondents stated that they taught at upper primary and lower secondary level, all stressed the need for tertiary institutes to train students about non-western music.

Why and how are teachers engaging in African music?

Respondents were asked why they taught African music. From the seventeen respondents, common themes emerged including using African music to integrate with other Key Learning Areas (teaching through music), experiencing another culture and society and teaching African music as part of world music. From the data it was apparent that African music gave students the opportunity to experience another culture through music. As one respondent remarked, “African music instils rhythm and excitement into any program … it is emotive and usually accompanied by movement”. “By engaging students with African music, students also came to understand how music and dance are inseparable in African culture”. This view is supported by another respondent who stated “We do not specifically teach African music in our school but rather use concepts from African music to teach and make
cultural connections”. A few respondents saw the link of teaching Africa music with the SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment) area of teaching as significant. Some respondents stated that it was part of the Victorian Curriculum and Standards Framework to make cross-cultural comparisons in the Arts and SOSE curriculum areas.

It was apparent that African music was something these teachers wanted to engage with and they were interested in changing the content, teaching through a ‘new’ and ‘different’ genre. Most respondents stated that they changed the setting by having African musicians or artist-in-residence teach African music not only to their students but they themselves also received a form of professional development which impacted on their beliefs, attitudes and pedagogy about African music. It would seem that those respondents who had visiting African music artists at their schools benefited greatly and learnt as much as their students. In the main they felt that having an artist-in-resident authenticated the experience, even more so for their students. As educators, we have to give due attention to how we transmit the experience, sound and culture of African music to students. Some respondents stated that having the visiting artist/musician at school, filled the knowledge, skills and understanding gap necessary for such cultural transmission to take place. The inclusion of so called ‘outside guest’ is a positive move for systemic change and ongoing development. Despite the fact that Australia is a multi-cultural society, as Campbell (2001) rightly points out there are continuing concerns about access, respect, preservation and renewal regarding such enculturation experiences in most multi-cultural settings. She further expressed the need to seek a balance between the preservation of music and the use of music as a launch for creative musical development in our classrooms.

When asked ‘how does African music particularly engage students in such a learning experience’? one respondent stated, “it gave them [students] a greater understanding of cultural diversity, music history and style”. Such an experience cannot be learnt solely just through Western music only. Given the culturally diverse nature of the population in Melbourne, it was considered, as one respondent stated, “necessary for students to have a wider understanding of dress, culture, social and family life”. African music provides a platform for this type of cross-cultural dialogue.

What are students learning from Africa music?

All respondents agreed that using African music creates a place in the curriculum for performing (singing, playing and moving). As one respondent stated, “it creates an atmosphere of team building” in the class and everybody is involved in making music together. This experience is often not the case in Western music where we play for each other. This making of music “helps children experience and understand the deeper meaning of another’s culture” as one respondent stated. This was further reiterated by another respondent, “one of the most important things that occur during the workshops is that the kids actually meet and play with African musicians”. This experience gave students the opportunity to not only explore music making at first hand but also to hear the ‘story-telling’ behind the music which helps to authenticate the transmission of Africa music to non-African settings. Such learning experience “promotes cross-cultural understanding and fights racism in schools through empathy and understanding” as one respondent stated.

Although respondents stated that students had fun and enjoyed African music, only 4 respondents had African music ensembles at their schools. Nearly all respondents included movement and body percussion in their lessons, generally students saw the relationship between movement and some of the elements they were learning about. A very high percentage of respondents (94%) reported that the use of African music certainly motivated their students learning specifically about rhythm, beat, accent, timbre, duration and pitch. Respondents also stated that the playing, moving and singing of African songs helped students understand music concepts like articulation, metre, texture and form. It seemed apparent that respondents themselves were moved by such music and its forceful rhythms, and claimed that African music added to their student’s experience in a significant extent—in particular, their students “enjoyed playing and singing of the various rhythms”. In the main respondents stated that students experienced most rhythmic learning (beat, accent and duration) through drumming, such an experience was “fun and simple”—“they also learnt about syncopation, ostinati, call and response and poly-rhythms through drumming”.

Conclusion

In the main, respondents stated that the current use of African music in both primary and secondary schools provided them and their students with an understanding and knowledge that encompassed cross-cultural ‘awareness, competence and tolerance’. One significant finding is that teachers have a
definite need for tertiary institutions to provide training for the teaching of non-western music. Teachers also reported that more professional development courses and resources regarding African music should be made available, as this is an area of music teaching practice that is rapidly growing. It was also found that experiencing African music provided a ‘ripple effect’ of interest and participation for both teachers and students particularly through visiting artist or artist-in-residence hence leading to a greater sense of community in the school context.

From both the Deakin University student project and the Victorian music teacher project, respondents stated that the teaching and learning of African music was ‘fun’, ‘new’ ‘different’ and ‘interesting’ and an effective way to learn about ‘a new music, society and culture’. It was also a welcome change from what both students and teachers would normally experience in their learning and teaching. All respondents in the music teacher project stated the need for African music to be included in the curriculum because the students enjoyed it so much—many said, “They love it!” Another respondent remarked “you can feel and see them [students] getting into the groove of relaxing, enjoying and understanding the music”. Such positive comments about transmitting a new music and its culture indicate its worthiness of being taught at all levels in primary and secondary schools. The teaching, acquisition and learning of African music may be seen as ‘change in motion’—‘Small Steps Into Longer Journeys’ as the title of the music teacher project suggests.

Endnote
1. PASMAE (Pan-African Society for Musical Arts Education) is the sub-wing of the International Society of Music Education (ISME), the world body for music education. The Australian MAT cell will provide a different perspective on the teaching and learning of African music in Australia and will “open doors down under” for collaborative research both nationally and internationally.

References