Appraising composing in secondary-school music lessons

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The aim of this paper is to define music appraisal and to explore the role that talk plays in the process of helping pupils in secondary school music lessons to develop their appraisal skills. This paper offers a definition of appraisal, and traces its developing role in the National Curriculum in England since the early 1990s. The role of appraisal as an evaluative tool is linked to the need to develop the quality of children's talk. The author's own research on pupil talk and the identification of six main types of talk: exploration, description, opinion, affective response, evaluation and problem solving, is briefly described, and suggestions are made to enhance the nature and quality of talk as part of appraisal in the classroom. Appraising as a classroom process is also discussed alongside the current interest in both the importance of 'dialogic teaching' and of 'assessment for learning'.

Keywords: appraising; talk; dialogic teaching; formative assessment; assessment for learning; music education

Introduction

Music lessons in English secondary schools1 are based on the idea that children will learn skills, gain understandings (concepts) and apply knowledge through activities which integrate composing, listening and performing. Appraising skills are developed through analysis, comparison and evaluation of pieces of music, through allowing children to express feelings about music, and through the communication of their ideas about music, using appropriate terminology in order to justify opinions. Appraising skills are also used when children refine and improve their own performances and compositions, when they adapt their own musical ideas, and when they peer assess other children's work. Appraisal is one of the four distinctive skills outlined in the National Curriculum programmes of study in England (DfEE 1999),2 yet ‘there has been relatively little research into appraisal per se’ (Welch and Adams 2003). These authors define appraisal as ‘an integral part of musical behaviours as defined within the school curriculum, including the act of composition. The term is meant to imply more than listening, and suggests a critical self-reflection and awareness of musical and non-musical features’ (18).

Appraising is often linked to listening and these two processes have often, in the past, been considered synonymous by teachers in school. Discriminating and internalising (listening skills) involve the identification of the music elements, styles and genres already learned. The analysis, evaluation and comparison of pieces of
music (appraising) involve high-level skills, and are linked to discrimination and listening skills. Communicating ideas about music (appraising) requires some knowledge of musical vocabulary together with conceptual understanding, and could occur in response to a piece of music heard, to a performance (similar to that of a music critic), or to a composition. Particularly relevant to children in secondary-school music classrooms at what is known in England as Key Stage 3,³ is the appraisal of peer compositions for the purpose of improvement. Changing a composition as a result of peer discussion or hearing the composing work of other pupils in the class, which inspires a new approach to their work, are both ways of appraising. The thinking involved by the pupil, as a result of hearing someone else’s composing work, inspires a new response prompted by the music and dialogic interaction in the lesson.

In both primary and secondary schools, music lessons are for the most part practical, and tasks are undertaken in small groups as well as with the whole class when reviewing work in progress. One of the most common means of appraisal is for pupils to demonstrate practically their work and to talk about the pieces heard. Philpott (2001) describes a typical music lesson in which children are working on small group activities and are brought back into the whole-class situation, ‘where they can be called to account for their work by: performing it, rehearsing it, appraising it, (and) appraising the work of others’ (78). Such practice is common in secondary-school classrooms. An example, taken from an earlier study (Major 2001), observed pupils aged 12–13 composing in groups of three, using an electronic keyboard, a glockenspiel and a drum to explore the components of traditional Indian music. They replicate a simplified tala drum pattern, a melodic drone together with an interesting rhythmical improvisation on a set of notes from a raga scale. During the lesson, the teacher paused the rehearsing to hear an example from one of the groups. Other pupils are encouraged to listen and to think critically about the performance, and to make comments which might help others to make further progress. During this process, children’s talk has to be managed skilfully by the teacher. The National Curriculum level descriptors for music assessment⁴ require pupils to ‘describe, compare and evaluate different kinds of music . . . suggest improvements to their own and others’ work commenting on how intentions have been achieved (level 4)’.⁵ At level 6, pupils are expected to additionally analyse and have an awareness of the context of creation and performance and to reflect this in their own composing work. Whether oral or written, a competence in the ability to reflect, analyse and criticise is clearly required for attainment of these outcomes. Such skills have to be learnt. The Key Stage 3 National Strategy ‘literacy in music’ document (DfES 2004) suggests that the achievement of these outcomes will almost certainly require engagement in speaking and listening activities (2). The nature and quality of appraisal talk is therefore an important aspect of the process of appraising, and this is the subject of the research reported here. The findings of this research may also help to clarify the definition and use of the term ‘appraising’ in the context of classroom music lessons.

Defining appraising through research studies

The term ‘appraising’ was introduced into the National Curriculum for music in England (DES 1992) to replace the word ‘knowing’, which many felt might suggest a
return to a study of the history of music rather than ‘audience-listening’ which ‘appraising’ implies (Swanwick 1992, 26–8). ‘Listening and Appraising’, together with ‘Performing and Composing’, became the two ‘attainment targets’ for music in the English National Curriculum. The Welsh National Curriculum of 1991 (DES, Welsh Office) dispensed with the term listening, and appraising became the third attainment target alongside performing and composing. In the Welsh curriculum, appraising was interpreted through pupils’ own practical experiences of composing and performing as well as through listening skills. Appraising in the English music curriculum however, at this early stage, was primarily to provide a means of assessing pupils’ ability to appreciate and understand music by listening to recordings of well-known composers. Listening became the first strand in the attainment targets in England and so existed as the link between performing, composing and appraising, thus strengthening the idea of a holistic curriculum. The importance given here to appraising provides us with evidence of an early definition: ‘The processes and activities to which this term refers include not only hearing music and paying attention to it, but also internalising it for subsequent recall, and the whole aesthetic dimension of interpretation and evaluation’ (DES 1991a, 14). The curriculum orders also stated that the assessment of this attainment target would be judged ‘on the basis of written work or individual and group discussion’.

In England, there was little clarification of what was meant by the term ‘appraising’ at that time. The non-statutory guidelines devised by the National Curriculum Council (NCC 1992) described appraising music as ‘appreciation of live and recorded music’ (C17). The term ‘appreciation’ here might suggest a formal study of music, and indeed the 1992 Curriculum confirmed this to be ‘the ability to listen to and appraise music, including knowledge of musical history, our diverse musical culture and a variety of other musical traditions’ (DES 1992, 8). The suggestion here of ‘live’ music is not qualified and could relate to professional ‘live’ performances rather than, as in the later revised curriculum, ‘their own and others’ compositions and performances’ (DFE 1995, 3).

For many teachers at that time, appraising implied a critical, analytical response to recorded music. Critical here implied a ‘knowledge and understanding of musical history and theory, including the ability to listen to and appraise music’ (DES 1991b). Many musicians and educationists attempted to get this changed before the publication of the curriculum orders in 1992. Their argument was that knowledge and understanding is not the transmission of information about music, but should be related to children’s experiences in performing and composing. However, in teaching the curriculum, teachers were left unsure about what the word ‘appraising’ implied. The Research into Applied Musical Perception (RAMP) project at Huddersfield University (Flynn and Pratt 1995) found that primary music teachers particularly felt confused about the meaning of the term ‘appraising’, and their project explored ways of appraising recorded music. Appraising music with children aged 5–11 years may involve different processes to those involved with older children. In the RAMP project, appraising music often involved listening to recorded extracts of music and responding to it in a variety of ways. The primary teachers in the project identified nine ways of responding to music. In contrast, the appraising explored here in some of my own research in secondary classrooms occurred where children were appraising their own or others’ composing tasks during the process of invention.
The National Curriculum Music Working Group (MWG) used the definition of appraisal developed by the RAMP project (Pratt and Stephens 1995). Appraising was defined as that what happens when children ‘listen purposefully . . . respond thoughtfully . . . think actively . . . [and] make choices and evaluative judgements about music’. Flynn and Pratt (1995) clarified these global aims by referring to the comments of the RAMP project teachers, who suggested that children ‘listen purposefully’ so that they can change something that is not quite right in their music. They listen in order to develop a greater awareness of what is happening in the music, or they simply listen in order to enjoy the music. They ‘respond thoughtfully’ to music by creating something extra-musical, such as a dance or a poem.

These teachers were conscious of the need to include aesthetic or affective responses as well as those which highlighted technical elements of the music (Flynn and Pratt 1995, 138). Children appraise when they ‘think actively’ about what they want to achieve and then try to achieve it. They will try out, revise and refine until they are satisfied that they have achieved the musical effect that they are seeking. This development includes choosing certain ideas and rejecting others: valuing others’ opinions about music: and evaluating ideas according to their suitability for the context or task which has been set. This form of evaluation involves children giving informed opinions based on musical knowledge or terminology which they already know. The RAMP project acknowledged the need for such accumulated experience and knowledge in effective appraisal, viewing it ‘as a way of coming to know and understand the processes involved in music and musical thinking’ (Pratt and Stephens 1995, 17).

It is clear that the evolution of the appraising process, as a central part of the music curriculum, has been slow: since the work of Pratt, Stephens, and Flynn in the early 1990s, surprisingly little has been written about its use in the music classroom. Burnard’s (2000) exploration of the processes involved in music making and thinking about music, while not primarily focussed on appraising activities, nevertheless shares an interest in reflecting on what pupils are doing and what they think about what they are doing. Mellor’s (2000) work on the language used by pupils in the appraisal of each others’ compositions investigated their assessments of these compositions, such that appraisal was synonymous with assessment. This paper proposes that the term appraising, as used in the National Curriculum for music in England, involves a form of evaluative thinking which is accompanied by dialogue, social interaction and reflection, is part of the process of improving musical composing work in progress: as such this might also be described as an aspect of the process of formative assessment.

**Children as music critics**

In music lessons at Key Stage 3, it is not uncommon for teachers to ask pupils to evaluate their practical work in progress, or at the end of the task, in written form. The use of music terminology is expected, and some teachers provide key words which are relevant to the task in order to be able to assess whether they can use these appropriately in their evaluations. It is also common practice for teachers to question pupils verbally to seek their understanding of a previous lesson, and to reinforce the
terms and concepts learnt. Evaluative thinking about their own or about others’ music is a form of appraising. Understanding the concepts involved in the task, and being able to apply terminology to spoken or written evaluations of their work, will inevitably improve their appraisal skills. Music critics would hardly be credible without knowledge of the terminology associated with the pieces of music they are writing about. The National Curriculum stresses the need for older children in secondary education to use terminology to communicate their ideas about music. The assumption here is that the role of music criticism and appraising are linked.

The role of the music critic often involves opinion, and an affective, feeling response to music. Appraising, as defined in the National Curriculum, involves children’s expression of feelings about and opinions on pieces of music. It is therefore important that the development of appraising skills should involve intuitive, affective and emotional responses to music. Mellor (1999), writing about children’s appraisals of music, warned against the teaching of musical vocabulary and an emphasis on the music elements to the detriment of intuitive responses to music. For Swanwick (1994) when, ‘intuition and analysis meet’, valued knowledge emerges in, ‘meaningful discourse’ (41–2).

Swanwick (1994) refers to ‘intuitive knowledge’: a term which in certain respects appears to be oxymoronic. His epistemological approach rejects intuition as valuable in teaching and learning because of its tenuous role when providing a rationale for music in the curriculum. This does not mean that he rejects all forms of feeling or intuitive responses to music: rather, that intuition has a different kind of relationship with analysis. For Swanwick, understanding how something is composed allows us to listen with a new level of meaning. Swanwick identifies a state of wordless (intuitive) thinking about music: this, along with reflective discourse about the same music, can lead to new insights. His claim that intuitive thinking about and critical reflection on music lies at the heart of music education has had huge implications for the importance of appraisal and its development in recent years.

My own action research study, conducted over a period of five years in a comprehensive secondary school in north-west England (Major 2001), collected video recordings of children talking about their compositions during the process of invention. As a teacher–researcher in the school, I was able to explore a number of strategies for investigating talk in the classroom, in different contexts, through different cycles of the action research process. The study used Elliott’s (1991) model of action research to investigate children’s talk with the teacher in whole-class discussions about their music composing, and when working on a composition in a small group without the teacher present. Other children were interviewed by the teacher about their composition folio at the end of their course, which was part of their formal assessment for the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE). Through interpretative methods of analysis (Shipman 1997), a typology of pupil talk was formulated which identified six categories of talk derived from classroom activities with children aged 11–16 years. The research methodology and details of the data collection, together with examples from the transcripts, are described in more detail elsewhere (Major 2007).

The typology identified six categories: exploration, description, opinion, affective response, evaluation, and problem solving. The results of the study suggest that as children become more involved in what they are doing, they take ownership of their work, grow more confident, and are then able to talk more confidently about their
music. A further cycle of the study attempted to get the youngest children (aged 11–12 years) to be more evaluative in their talk by choosing a task that would engage them fully, and allowing them to use their imaginations to the full. This cycle sought to challenge the hierarchical appearance of the typology. One group of pupils demonstrated their group piece to another group of pupils who were invited to ask questions or to guess what was happening in the music. This stimulated a more critical approach which was reflected in their talk, and which enabled younger children to be more analytical and evaluative in their responses. Table 1 shows this typology, together with annotations on the nature of the knowledge displayed and evidence of pupil learning or change.

**Musical knowledge, conceptual knowledge and analytical knowledge**

This typology of talk shows pupil's responses to music they have composed, from an intuitive or feeling response, to an affective engagement in which the emotional aspects of the response to the music are expressed more effectively through a greater understanding of conceptual ideas. In the fourth category of the typology, they talk with enthusiasm and confidence about their work, believing in what they have composed. In the fifth category, 'evaluation', pupils demonstrate not only affective engagement and conceptual understanding, but are also able to evaluate problems or/and identify changes which are needed. The sixth category, 'problem solving', represents the mature, analytical response to music, which embodies affective and cognitive responses together with a conceptual understanding of the subject: in this form of appraisal, pupils display personal satisfaction in a complete composition which they know is valued. They are willing at this stage to receive criticism in order to revise their work. They are able to talk about their work in relation to structures and conceptual ideas. Intuitive, affective engagement is still present in analytical responses at this stage. Despite the suggestion of a progression or hierarchy in this typology, the final stage of the research demonstrated that it is possible to encourage younger children to produce evaluative types of talk.

For the purposes of comparison, it is interesting to consider this typology of talk with other existing models. John Paynter (1997) views musical perception (where music as ‘thought’ is evident) as hierarchical: from a sensuous response, through technical understandings about structural features, to a ‘complete’ understanding (Paynter 1997, 10). Swanwick’s ‘intuitive knowledge’ also forms a bridge between sensory and analytical knowledge (Swanwick 1994). ‘Knowing’, for Swanwick, involves constructing meanings which incorporate cognitive as well as affective responses. Symbolic understanding is seen as being important, as learners move from intuitive to analytical stages. Swanwick sees this process of development less hierarchically than Paynter: as more of a dialectic relationship. He links these responses to the development of critical music perception, which is seen as ‘educating for informed listening’ (Swanwick 1994, 26–44).

Swanwick views intuitive knowledge as a bridge between sensory and analytical knowledge (Swanwick 1994). In listening to music he maintains that we ‘hear’, ‘feel’, then ‘analyse’. He views these processes as having a dialectic relationship with each other. Analysis, he maintains, depends on the presence of the other two. For Swanwick, analysis involves both intuitive thoughts and reflective discourse, which lead to new insights. Swanwick’s explanation of stages of musical response (1988),
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type/Characteristics</th>
<th>Musical knowledge</th>
<th>Evidence of change and musical learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exploration:</strong> Pupils are mainly dependent on praise and encouragement from the teacher in their comments.</td>
<td>Basic terminology and concepts used. Conceptual knowledge is not fully developed, often partial understanding of concepts.</td>
<td>Pupils are given reassurance or correction and therefore are able to ‘keep going’.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Description:</strong> Pupils are able to offer accounts of what they are doing – respond to questions – often briefly – heavily teacher led.</td>
<td>Varied musical knowledge levels but pupils with a good knowledge of musical terms and concepts sometimes have this level of appraising because of lack of engagement with their composing work.</td>
<td>Teacher intervention allows pupils to improve work and to change direction. Teacher help may allow them to give opinions or to identify problems.</td>
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<td><strong>Opinion:</strong> Pupils are making statements about their work, though not necessarily linking these to musical criteria – tends to be teacher led.</td>
<td>Varied again in age/command of musical knowledge even at this stage. Other factors cause pupils to be appraising at this level when they might be expected to be talking with more evaluative/affective responses to their music.</td>
<td>Here, opinions are qualified or related to criteria. Pupils consider why they think or feel something in relation to their composition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affective response:</strong> Pupils are expressing affective qualities or responses to their work – more evidence of pupil engagement – comments may be spontaneous.</td>
<td>A better command of terminology and conceptual understanding together with affective engagement with the composing product produces some talk, which is interesting and productive.</td>
<td>Talk reinforces pupils’ affective engagement with their musical compositions giving them more confidence in their own work.</td>
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<td><strong>Evaluation:</strong> Pupils are making detailed evaluative comments about their work, using musical criteria – pupils are able to take some lead or work in groups independent of teacher intervention.</td>
<td>This level of evaluating demands a good command of terminology related to the task as well as conceptual knowledge. Also essential at this level is engagement with the composition at an affective level. Some confidence in own work.</td>
<td>Pupils produce effective and satisfying pieces of music that reflect previous or original intentions. There is evidence that affective involvement with the music informs their evaluations or responses. Appraising relates to the degree to which intentions are realised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem solving:</strong> Pupils are able to identify problems and use group processes to negotiate solutions – groups can work independent of the teacher, or can develop single questions into extended analysis of their work.</td>
<td>Mature conceptual understandings and a wide background knowledge of structure, texture and unity of elements of composing. Confident of own work as being of value. Personal satisfaction in own work. Willingness to receive constructive criticism.</td>
<td>Identification of problems with new targets to be met which will allow a composition to change and grow. This will tend to be a more substantial piece or extended piece of work and will involve structure and unity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
which are based on his spiral model of musical development (Swanwick and Tillman 1986) shows intuitive, affective responses following on from a basic ‘sensuous’ or exploratory response to music. It is interesting to note that affective responses appear to occur most when discussing compositions which are almost complete. Affective responses are important for mature musical criticism. Ross et al. (1993) found a similar engagement of artists with their own pieces of music, and with their feelings about the pieces. Both the current findings and those of Ross et al. demonstrate a reciprocal teacher–pupil relationship in which the partners have equal status: the teacher’s advisory role is based on the composer [pupil]’s willingness and confidence in sharing and talking about the work, and appraisal at this level is based on implicit ownership. Table 2 summarises the relationships between musical, conceptual and analytical knowledge and compares the types of talk with Swanwick (1994) and Paynter’s (1997) levels of perception and musical knowledge.

The findings of my own study do not necessarily imply that progression comes with age and maturity, however. The data suggested that children of all ages are capable of attaining ‘higher’ levels within the typology. However, the improvement of appraisal skills does appear to be linked both to an increasing use of musical terminology and to higher levels of conceptual understanding. As musical terminology and conceptual understanding increases, and as pupils become increasingly confident in their composing, so their ability to talk about their work reflects this growing knowledge. The data showed that affective engagement with the task also marked a developing ability to articulate. This need for intuitive responses of engagement with the music is also seen in Swanwick’s writing on intuition and analysis (1994) as a developing analytical knowledge. In the empirical study, all of these factors marked the development of talk and therefore of a student’s ability to analyse and evaluate, and therefore to appraise.

Table 2. Summary of the relationship between musical, conceptual and analytical knowledge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Musical knowledge</th>
<th>Analytical knowledge</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Exploration</td>
<td>Basic terminology</td>
<td>Sensuous, feeling responses (Swanwick 1994; Paynter 1997)</td>
<td>Level of musical knowledge not always displaying appropriate level of appraising.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Descriptive</td>
<td>Varied – often partial understanding of concepts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Opinions</td>
<td>Varied – as above</td>
<td>Intuitive knowledge informs responses (Swanwick 1994)</td>
<td>Musical knowledge and conceptual understanding necessary for engagement with music.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Affective</td>
<td>A good command of terminology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Evaluative</td>
<td>Conceptual knowledge</td>
<td>Analytical knowledge (Swanwick 1994; Paynter 1997)</td>
<td>Mature conceptual understanding of context of composition necessary for analysis to take place.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Problem solving</td>
<td>Mature conceptual understanding and wide background of related musical issues.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Implications for the music curriculum

Talking about composing is already a common feature of music lessons in many secondary schools: it serves both the evaluative purposes of improving work, and the process of formative assessment. If this is the case, then appraising has to be capable of development and improvement through teaching. Listening to recorded music and responding to it using appropriate terminology learned through practical activities is one way of developing skills of appraising. Since listening activities seem not to be a significant feature of good practice in the music teaching, other ways need to be found to develop appraising skills through experiential learning.

My own research on pupil talk suggests that when pupils display more mature types of thinking, they also appear to engage more effectively with the music that they are composing or performing (see Table 1). The findings of the study suggest that at the earliest stages of appraising, the optimal outcomes, in terms of musical learning, rely on the teacher to guide, steer and ask the right questions. Teachers’ praise is needed to move pupils forward at the first stage of exploration in order to allow pupils to keep going or to ‘keep on course’. At this stage an understanding of the concepts involved in the task is part of what they need help with from the teacher. Most pupils are able to describe what they have done in evaluations of their work, and teacher intervention allows pupils at this stage to further improve their work, to refine it or try something new. Pupils may give opinions about their work to their teacher, but are often unable to give reasons for their opinions. Teacher intervention can prompt pupils to relate their opinions to criteria related to the task or to the learning outcomes.

When children display affective engagement with their piece of music, their feeling response is usually supported by musical knowledge and conceptual understanding. Talk about their work reinforces this engagement with their music, and pupils further grow in confidence. At this stage the role of the teacher becomes more equal with the pupil, and children often reach this point at around 15–16 years (when they sit the GCSE in England). Ross et al. (1993) discovered that talk could encourage pupils to understand art work further by exploring its moods, its expression of feelings and its contexts. They encouraged students to question the significance of certain elements, and were able to demonstrate that involvement in arts can generate further ‘dynamic, engaging, creative talk...’ (156).

Evaluative comments can occur without real engagement with the music: at the level of opinion, pupils may be willing to discuss how they can improve their work. Evaluation can also be seen when the teacher tries to find out what strengths and weaknesses pupils are able to identify in their work. For evaluation to be independent, however, pupils should be able to constantly reflect on their work, and be willing to revise and refine it. At the highest level described in the typology in Table 1, pupils are engaging in analytical (logical) thought in relation to their work, and this is a further development of evaluative thought. Work is usually longer term and more substantial for this kind of analysis to be applied. It is also usually intended for a specific purpose, and its fitness for that purpose is part of their thinking. Students working at advanced examination levels (17–18 years), or students in higher education, might work at this level.

Secondary-school teachers need to consider how they can develop some of these higher level skills in younger secondary-aged pupils. My own study (Major 2001,
2007) investigated this dilemma and revealed some interesting outcomes. The typology of appraising as talk (Table 1) suggests that in order to reach the higher levels of appraising, the pupils need to engage affectively with their own composing work. They need to feel confident and enthusiastic about what they have composed, and to develop a command of musical terminology and conceptual understanding. Swanwick (1994) saw reflective discourse about music as leading to new insights in the process of extrinsic analysis of music, believing that this reflective discourse lies at the heart of music education. The extensive and influential writings on the role of talk and dialogue in the classroom by Mercer (2000), and the recent work of Alexander (e.g., Alexander 2005) places talk at the heart of pupil learning. The National Key Stage 3 Strategy (2002) has also highlighted the importance of classroom talk as a means of furthering learning.

**Dialogic teaching and music appraising**

Alexander (2005) describes dialogic teaching as collective, reciprocal and supportive. It requires teachers and their pupils to build on the ideas of others, and it allows teachers to steer the classroom talk ‘with specific educational goals in view’ (26–7). Dialogic teaching involves ‘the exchange of ideas with a view to sharing information and sharing problems’ (29). Occurring between the teacher and the whole class, between the teacher and a group or between pupils with their peers, it involves ‘achieving common understanding through structured and cumulative questioning and discussion’ (34). This description concurs with what is involved when children appraise their work together in music lessons. Here, the educational goal of the teacher is the reinforcement of the concepts and musical terminology learnt by the pupils in experiential music-making activities. The common understanding is furthered through pupils’ sharing of constructive suggestions of how the work of others might be improved, or of praise for the achievements of others. This reinforces their thinking about the conceptual knowledge required for the task. An example from a classroom discussion about work on composing a **raga** melody might further illustrate this process and illustrate the similarities with dialogic teaching. Fiona is playing her drum rhythm (**tala**), in sequence with the drone. The teacher suggests that she should try to find an independent rhythm which fits with the others. Fiona cannot get it right and at first it looks as if it will have to remain as before. Further efforts with the teacher’s help pay off and Fiona manages to play a contrasting rhythm with the teacher counting with her. Back in the classroom, Fiona manages to keep an independent rhythm when her group perform their piece to the class. Fiona has moved her skill learning here a stage further on (Major 2001). Collective classroom appraisal of children’s group compositions allows thinking to be shared with the rest of the class through dialogue about the pupils’ musical performances.

When discussing talk and its role in the classroom, Alexander (2005) highlights the writings of Vygotsky (see Britton 1989/1994) who viewed spoken language as having a crucial role in a child’s cognitive development through their engagement with adults and other children. ‘Children construct meaning not only from the interplay of what they newly encounter and what they already know, but also from interaction with others’ (Alexander 2005, 11). Pupils in lessons learn through social interaction, through learning from teachers, and through structured interventions, which move a child’s understanding forward (Alexander 2005, 11). Alexander sees
talk as a learning tool with the focus on what pupils say rather than on what teachers say. This moves the view of talk taken by prominent investigations in the 1970s and 1980s (see Barnes 1976; Edwards and Mercer 1987; Edwards and Westgate 1994) from a sociolinguistic skill to a skill which is of vital importance in the development of children’s thinking and learning. As such, it has to be developed and nurtured through opportunities to engage in talk in the context of classroom tasks. The role of talk in the process of appraising and evaluating work in the music classroom is therefore of vital importance, and needs further emphasis and investigation.

Assessment for learning and music ‘appraising’

Alexander (2005) also identifies an overlap between dialogic teaching and the dynamic process of ‘assessment for learning’ (Black and William 1998; Black et al. 2002). In ‘assessment for learning’, dialogue focuses on the learning outcomes and the means by which pupils can achieve them. The monitoring of this process is at the heart of talk in the appraisal of children’s music making in the classroom. It is a reflective process requiring evaluative thinking against criteria set for a given task. Talk in music lessons, since the dissemination of the Key Stage 3 National Strategy for foundation subjects (DFES 2002), has focussed on the evaluation of children’s progress towards meeting the learning outcomes for specific tasks. As such, talk has become a major part of the formative assessment process. Music appraisal skills can be developed through many activities in music lessons and with the increasing emphasis on whole-class talk through dialogic teaching, and through the role of talk in formative assessment (assessment for learning), music appraisal skills through talk are becoming increasingly important. The typology of pupil talk about composing (Table 1) suggests that teachers can nurture and help pupils to develop their appraisal skills through talk. More research is needed in more contexts, and also with younger pupils, to further our understanding of the nature of appraising. Comparisons with research on talk in other disciplines would also be illuminating, as would investigations of the limitations experienced in talking with pupils who experience problems in expressing themselves orally.

Appraising can be achieved in many ways other than through talk; for example, through movement or through painting. These responses are especially helpful in developing appraising skills in primary-aged pupils (5–11 years). As a means of communicating ideas about music composing in the secondary classroom, however, talk has gradually become more important and its links with formative assessment also mark it as a process which requires emphasis and development in children at this stage of their education. Appraising skills have been neglected in music education research, but the increasing interest in talk and dialogue as a form of learning in the classroom shows that it is time to bring music appraising skills to the fore as an important part of pupil learning.

Notes

1. 11–16 years or 11–19 years.
2. Since the submission of this article the Programme of Study for 11–14 year olds has been revised (see www.QCA.org.uk).
3. Key Stage 3 is a term used to describe the first three years of secondary education: 11–14 year olds.
4. The National Curriculum level descriptors are national assessment profiles which describe the knowledge, skills and understandings typically achieved by pupils at eight levels of attainment, from ages 5 to 16 years.
5. The majority of pupils are expected to reach at least level 4 by the age of 11 and at least level 5 by the age of 14 years.
6. Public examinations at aged 16 years taken in a broad range of subjects, including optionally, music.

Notes on contributor
Angela E. Major is a Senior Lecturer in Music Education at Roehampton University, London, where she is responsible for the Secondary PGCE Music course. Prior to taking up this post she worked in secondary comprehensive schools in the north-west of England as a music teacher for over 20 years. She has also worked as a part-time tutor on the Open University’s flexible PGCE Music course. At Roehampton she is an active member of the music and arts’ research group, CIRCLE (Centre for International Research on Creativity and Learning in Education). Her current work is an extension of her doctoral research (Open University, 2001) on talk as an aspect of appraising in the classroom.

References


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