

# Exploring Transformative Music Engagement Through Songwriting and Video Production with Inner-city Youth

Gordon Cobb – Simon Fraser University (gwcobb@sfu.ca)

Susan O'Neill – Simon Fraser University

---

Symposium:

Young People's Transformative Music Engagement in Today's Digital Age

8<sup>th</sup> International Research in Music Education Conference

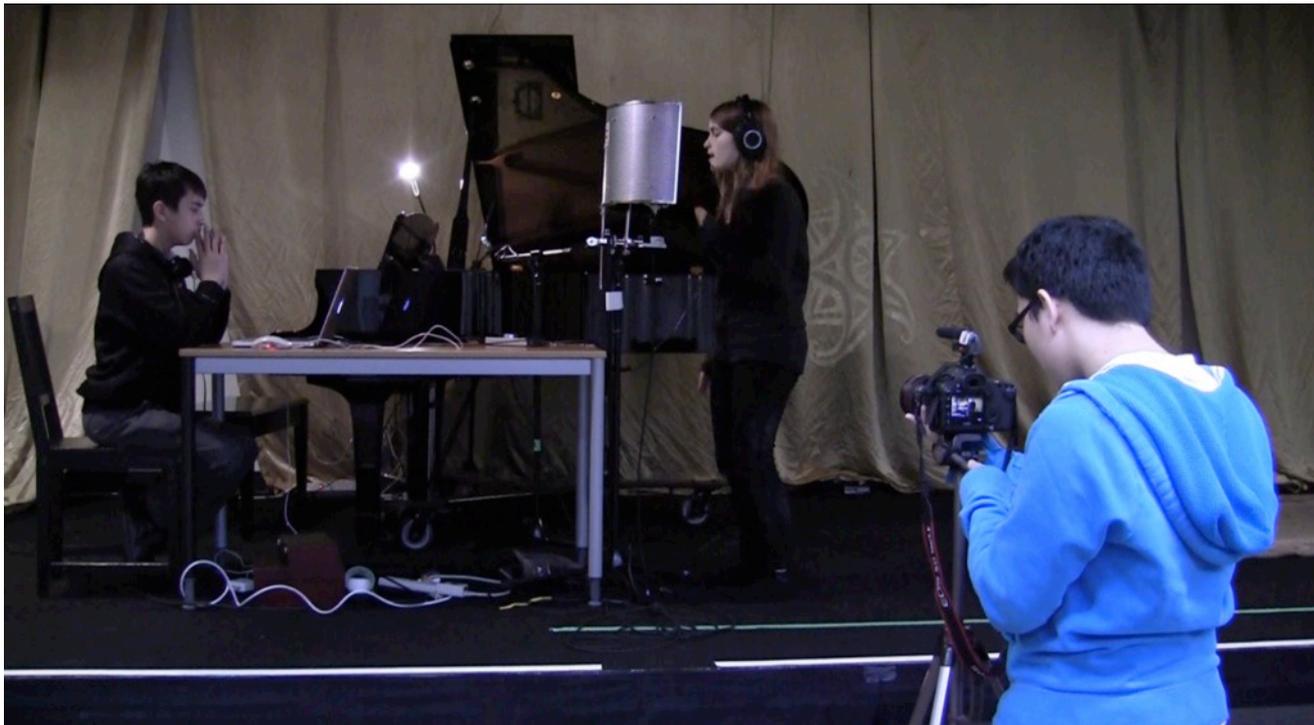
University of Exeter, UK

# Youth, Music & New Digital Media

- New digital media has transformed young people's music learning landscape (O'Neill, 2010).
- In many countries throughout the world, more young people have access to digital media devices as they continue to become more affordable and prevalent.



- As more young people grow up immersed in digital media, it is necessary for educators to consider the impact they have on music learners, music making, and music education practice.
- Today's youth are employing digital technology that affords new modes of creative expression and new genres of music composition (Gilje, 2010).
- There is a need for research that examines digital media multimodal composing practices and how these practices impact on the lives of youth.



# Multimodal Composing Practices

- Multimodal composing practices are situated in multimodal literacy pedagogy (Miller, 2010; Miller & McVee, 2012).
- A key assumption underpinning these new multimodal literacies is that they are '*purposeful* literary practices' that are '*meaningful* to users as *social communication*' (Miller, 2010, p. 255, original emphasis).
- There is a lack of research emphasis currently on the *specific role of music creation and expression* within multimodal composing practices.



# Transformative Music Engagement

- Affordances of digital media include expansive music learning opportunities that are autonomous, self-directed and capable of acting as a vehicle or catalyst for *change or transformation* across a diverse group of music learners (O'Neill, 2012).



# Agency and Stance

- Larson (2011) describes the need for youth to engage in conscious processes of developing “abilities to organize and regulate actions over time to work toward a long-term goal, as an individual or with others, in complex real-world contexts.” (p. 318). He describes this goal-directed behaviour as a form of human **agency**.
- Taylor (1994) describes how people lose the capacity to listen to their inner voice “partly through the pressures of outward conformity” but also because we do not value and develop originality – “each of our voices has something unique to say” (Taylor, 1994, p. 32). There is an essential link between identity and being oriented in a moral space – “a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary” (Taylor, 1989, p. 28). He refers to this as **stance** - developing and voicing one’s own opinion, outlook toward something valued.
- We were interested in young people’s sense of agency and stance and how they related these concepts to their sense of identity within the context of their own songwriting, filmmaking and life-worlds.

Drawing on a transformative music engagement framework (O'Neill, 2012), this study explores these expansive forms of music learning with inner-city youth during weekly songwriting and music video production classes.



The focus for this paper is on the following question:

How might a transformative music engagement framework provide a conceptual context for interpreting the expansive learning opportunities associated with songwriting and video production with inner-city youth and how might it be used more broadly to inform music education practice?

# Participants and Music Program

- Participants were 5 females and 5 males (aged 13-16 years)
- At-risk youth from an inner-city area
- Attended a 32-week community-based music program taught by the first author



- The mandate of the school is to accept 80% of students who are socio-economically at risk and 20% of students who are socially, academically or emotionally at risk but may have the means to study music
- The school aims to provide as many styles of music education as possible (classical, jazz, rock, hip-hop)
- Students attend weekly group classes in their chosen discipline: piano, guitar, voice, choir, percussion, ensemble, music theory, songwriting, Hip-Hop, and music video production
- Most disciplines also provide biweekly private lessons
- Tuition for students is free, and students within instrumental disciplines are provided with an instrument to use at home
- Students of all experience levels are admitted without having to audition
- Age range is grades four through twelve
- The program is run independently of the public school system

# Student Participants

- Class consists of students from music disciplines (adders) and students from outside the regular program
- Equal numbers of males and females in a technology–based class
- Range of backgrounds and interests



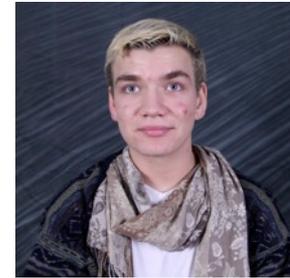
Richard: percussion



Kat: writer



Zoe: voice



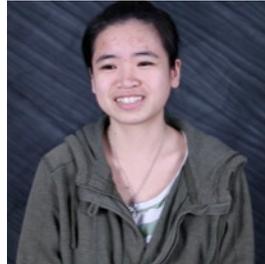
Finn: voice



Daisy: songwriter



Steven: guitar



Jade: piano



Clyde: actor



Jeremiah: photographer



Brooklyn: percussion

# Research Procedure

- The classes were video recorded.
- Participants were interviewed at various points during and at the end of the program.
- Interview questions (written by the students)

1. How did you end up in this class?
2. How would you describe peer to peer relationships?
3. Now that you have collaborated on a number of music and video projects with your classmates, do you feel more or less socially grounded in the class?
4. How has this class impacted or changed your world or your experiences at the school?



# Findings: Multimodal Meaning Making & Communication

- Behind-the-scenes mini-docs: an example of how personal narratives were transformed into multimodal communication
- Different modes provided semiotic resources for meaning making that resonate with young people



Christmas Alone behind-the-scenes mini-documentary  
Created by the students and edited by Finn



# Findings: Transformative Music Engagement

## Agency

We found evidence of goal-directed behaviour to organize and regulate actions over time as the youth worked towards a long-term goal, individually or with others, in a complex real-world context (Larson, 2011).

“I feel like it’s really opened up my opportunities and my horizons [...] I mean I have a music video. Not a lot of 15 year old girls can say that.” *Daisy, age 15*

“It’s definitely a place where like all the skills that I’ve learned musical and non-musical can converge and I can reflect on those things with my finished project.”  
*Richard, age 13*

“I get to know more things about the camera, and [...] teamwork and working with other people.”  
*Jade, age 16*

“I really wanted to learn all aspects of the music industry to like really succeed.” *Daisy, age 15*



# Findings: Transformative Music Engagement

## Stance

We found young people were expressing and voicing their own opinion, outlook toward something valued both through their music videos and in their interviews (Taylor, 1994). Stance emerged in relation to diversity.

“This class has allowed me to express myself Through...made it easier [...] for me to express myself because I had different artistic ways to do it I guess you could say. Well, I now feel I have the ability to express myself in all different forms of art.”

*Daisy, age 15*

“This class has given me the chance to express what I believe in. And in this case it’s that everyone is equal and everyone has the same right to be happy and free.” *Zoe, age 14*

“There’s so many different people in the class. Everyone is so unique it’s hilarious. We’ve got all the stereotypes, but it’s good. It’s great.” *Jerimiah, age 16*



# Findings: Transformative Music Engagement

## Empowerment

We found stance was closely related to the notion of empowerment as a multi-dimensional social process that helped youth gain a sense of control over their own lives (Bailey, 1992). The music video creation process fostered a sense of capacity to implement change or transformation in people, for use in their own lives, by acting on issues that they define as important.

“Well, it definitely feels like I can do more. Like, I feel like I could maybe plan my own thing someday, like independently, and it just kind of gives me the strength to think ‘oh, hey, I have all these ideas, maybe I could do them myself one day.’” *Zoe, age 14*

“I guess the fact of me being in the class and the community aspect has given me a sense of how I want to continue in [music school]... I want to come back.” *Jeremiah, age 16*

“It hasn’t changed my world, but it will...I’m sure of it.” *Brooklyn, age 16*

# Findings: Transformative Music Engagement

## Connectedness

A key aspect was that the individual and community were seen as fundamentally connected within this specific context. This connectedness took the form of creative collaborations that emerged through social practice, dialogical interactions, and intersubjectivities, whereby existing ideas and artifacts are co-constructed and transformed into the creation of new ones. We learn from each other in collaborative endeavours: ‘by teaching what we know, we engage in mutual appropriation [...] We can live better with temporary failures as we rely on our partners’ strengths’ (John-Steiner, 2000: 204).

“When you work on projects like this everybody has to take a part in it. Everybody is really different, and everybody has their own opinions and they have their own ideas and they put them all together. It’s good to get to know how everybody is and what they’re good at and like, when you work on projects like this you get to know people more, yah. And like, I guess I am a lot closer to them.” *Brooklyn, age 16*



# Findings: Transformative Music Engagement

## Connectedness

“Cause we all have different strong points, and we’re all learning from each other and taking different things from each other, and it’s just a really cool atmosphere.” *Zoe, age 14*

“I guess we all have kinda just a little mutual respect for each other and we all have our different views in what we want to work with and what we want to do with whatever we’re given.” *Steven, age 16*

“...after we worked on the first video and we all got used to each other, it was really fun, and its’ a really comfortable environment now, and it’s all very artistic and everyone has their own opinions and it’s really fun.” *Daisy, age 15*

“...everybody somehow contributes, somehow we all work together, which, uhm,...I’m not sure...I guess it does cause we are all working on the same thing and even though we have different ideas it seems to come together as one.” *Jade, age 16*

## Parental Feedback:

“I am sure you hear from parents all the time but I felt it was important that you know how the school has positively impacted Daisy and her emotional and mental health. She does well academically and does not drink or do drugs but is very sensitive and from a mental health perspective she was “at risk” of various mood related disorders. Last year was particularly challenging. Daisy was seeing a counselor weekly and while it was helpful - I was not seeing significant gains. Fortunately, her outlet was music and an ability to write her feelings into her music but it is pretty solitary activity and did nothing to address her social anxiety and negative feelings of self worth.

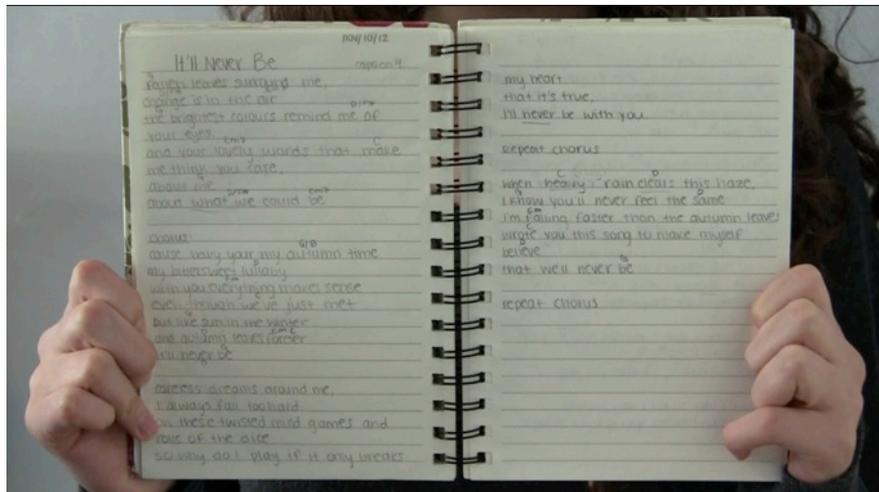
Daisy started at the school in September 2012 and the improvements I have seen in her confidence, her sense of belonging and connectedness and feelings of self worth this year have been huge. From a development perspective she is maturing but she has said that the biggest change for her this year has been being part of the school. She made friends from her class but also by being part of the Christmas video. She feels acknowledged and “known” which is so important to teenagers. Daisy has often described feeling invisible and alone but those comments have been much less frequent this year.”

# Summary of Preliminary Findings

- The findings indicate that the affordances provided by music and video editing software and multimodal composing practices provide highly engaging learning opportunities for youth to produce music videos that transform their personal narratives into a form of multimodal literacy.



- We found that a variety of different modes provide semiotic resources for meaning making that resonate with young people who have grown up using digital technologies.
- These affordances also create expansive learning opportunities associated with transformative music engagement, with prominent characteristics including **agency**, **stance**, **empowerment**, and **connectedness**.



# Challenges for Music Education Practice

- Technology
- Time (lack of) for production



# Next Steps in the Research

- Data is currently being analyzed using multimodal composing and analysis (e.g., Gilje, 2010) and multimodal composing pedagogy (Miller & McVee, 2012).
- We are also focusing on a thematic analysis of the interview data that explores instances of participants' meaning making and evolving understanding of the concepts of agency and stance.





## **MODAL Research Group**

Multimedia Opportunities,  
Diversity & Artistic Learning

**MODALresearch.com**

Thank you!

Please feel free to contact me  
with questions, feedback, or suggestions:

[gwcobb@sfu.ca](mailto:gwcobb@sfu.ca)

[www.cobhousestudio.com](http://www.cobhousestudio.com)