

Music education research: what's the point?

TIM CAIN PONDERS....

This question was circling round in my head as I drove through the early morning countryside to the Research in Music Education (RIME) conference in Exeter. 'I should know the answer to this' I thought; 'I'm a researcher'. And I admit it: although this is my eighth year as a university tutor, I had nineteen years as a classroom teacher, and still haven't completely converted. I still find that research has varying degrees in it that are puzzling, esoteric or simply meaningless to me. I still ask, 'What's the point?'

I suppose this cynicism started early. My initial teacher training prepared me well in the art of being sceptical. Lectures in educational psychology told me what I already knew, such as pupils do things if they think that they will be rewarded for doing them, and punished if not. (Actually, if I remember rightly, it was mice or dogs, not pupils.) If you wanted to properly train the mice (sorry, pupils) the rewards and punishments had to be established consistently at first. All of this had been carefully established by researchers in laboratories, and it was all pretty irrelevant to my school, in which the available rewards and punishments were almost entirely meaningless to the kids.

My own journey into research happened by stealth, during an in-service course run by George Odam. George didn't say, 'Research shows that ...' but asked us to examine our own lessons and answer questions such as 'What did the pupils do?' 'What did they learn?' How do I know?' and, most challenging of all, 'How worthwhile was it?' Although I didn't

know it, it was a practical introduction to action research, and I loved it. I made audio recordings of six Y8 lessons in contemporary art music (Harrison Birtwistle and all that) and wrote down everything that the kids and I said. Most of them disliked most of the music, but listening over and again to the recordings of the lessons, I began to see how to improve my teaching. I so loved George's course that I signed up for an MA in music, and later did a PhD in education which required me to read absolutely loads of research which, as I pointed out earlier, is usually hard and often deeply puzzling and/or frustrating. At the same time, the public perception of educational research changed and the government became committed to 'research-based teaching' which was quite nice for researchers but daunting too, because it's pretty obvious that research won't solve all the problems in education. So if you're still reading, I'll give you my personal view as to what research can and can't do, and tell you, by way of example, some things I learned at the RIME conference.

In my view, (informed by Dewey) most of our knowledge is not produced by research but by other means, including thinking, acting, and thinking about our actions. Most of our actions are necessarily habitual – we do things without much deep thinking because the feedback we get is positive. Teachers are pretty good at doing things, getting feedback from the learners and responding appropriately, so research doesn't add a huge amount to their knowledge about teaching as such. The point of research is that, because the knowledge produced is based on

careful analysis of data, it tends to be more firmly grounded than knowledge produced by other means. Good researchers tell you what they know, how they came to know it, and how this knowledge relates to lots of other knowledge. (There is also poor research, with dubious claims and insufficient evidence for the claims.) Research can add to teachers' knowledge by (among other things) analysing practice, by challenging perceptions and by generating and developing 'big ideas'. These things are not mutually exclusive – some research does all three – but in the next three paragraphs, I shall explore them separately, in order to articulate my answer to the question, 'What's the point?'

At its most functional, research describes and documents innovative practice. Some of the RIME presentations were of this type. Miikka Salavuo (from Finland) told us about the development of an on-line community for young musicians. On his site (www.funkdammen.fi) musicians upload their own songs and download, remix and review others' tracks. (A similar, English, site is www.numu.org.uk.) Among the findings was that young musicians found reviews by peers and experts to be particularly motivational. Andrew King (University of Hull) researched the learning of first-year undergraduate music technology students. To complete a task, half the students were offered a manual, and the other half were given the same information on computer. The use of the computer encouraged problem solving, reduced trial-and-error learning and speeded up the learning process. (Several students

who were offered the manual didn't actually use it.) Betty-Anne Younker and her colleagues in three American universities offered their students, at the end of each lesson they taught, a blank card on which they could write anything they wanted. The teachers collected in the cards, wrote replies on the back, and returned them in the following session. The research found that the students were positive about the use of the cards, and concluded that they provided a safe space for individual students to comment on their learning week-by-week. For me, each of these research presentations provided a practical idea that I could adopt and adapt in my own teaching.

Some research challenges our (or at least my) taken-for-granted perceptions by presenting findings that show that things are not necessarily as we thought they are. Lucy Green (Institute of Education, London) presented an aspect of her work with the Musical Futures project (www.musicalfutures.org.uk), which had been heavily influenced by her research into how popular musicians learn music (Green, 2001). In observations and interviews with pupils in Hertfordshire schools, she found that pupils learned to cooperate together in group music-making, with all pupils joining in eventually even when they had previously stated that they wouldn't. She observed many instances of pupils playing music non-stop for five minutes or longer and found that each group of pupils became 'an organic system', with its own leader(s). According to the pupils, the major factors for their cooperation included the fact that they were able to choose both the people they worked with and the music they learned. However, the research suggested that teachers find it difficult to switch from teaching pupils to observing them, and that there was often a period, around 3 or 4 weeks into the project, when they felt particularly negative about it. It appeared that the teachers had firm ideas about what it is to teach, and found it difficult to let go of these ideas, even when the research showed that pupils might learn better from each other than from the teacher. Meki Nzewi

(University of Pretoria), having researched the theory and practice of African traditional music, believes that much music in contemporary societies is driven by base commercial considerations, producing 'plastic knowledge infestations' and contributing to what he calls 'psycho pollution'. Contemporary research, he contends, is driven by a desire to dehydrate the holistic nature of music by splitting it into its component parts. His keynote talk was a powerful call to return to more traditional values in which music is seen as promoting mental, physical and societal health. He sees research as a means of exploring the innate musical disposition of learners, in order to fire up a lasting and fulfilling enthusiasm for music.

Research can also generate and develop 'big ideas'. I suppose current examples might include Assessment for Learning (AfL), individualised learning, and inclusion. I'm not sure how many big ideas were first generated at the RIME conference for only time will tell, but the big ideas under discussion included informal learning, authenticity, and musical identities. Martin Fautley (University of Central England) provided a memorable example of exploring a 'Big Idea' in a report on a small-scale piece of action research. He had taught his PGCE trainees to use AfL techniques in composing lessons, specifically to delay the 'How can you improve this composition?' question by involving other types of questions. He then observed their practice as trainees, finding that it developed pretty well. However, in follow-up visits after they had become NQTs it seemed that they had moved from a concern with AfL to Assessment of Learning, and specifically with National Curriculum levels. He suggested, somewhat ruefully, that music teachers were naturally quite good at AfL (after all, the DfES video on AfL had featured a music lesson) but might be getting worse, because of the emphasis that school management teams place on reaching NC levels. Ruth Wright (University of Wales Institute, Cardiff) drew on Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' – the

taken-for-granted cultural norms of groups in society – and explained that for Bourdieu, different societal groups struggle to influence what counts as cultural capital (for example, what knowledge is considered important). She used this concept to analyse one secondary school music teacher with one Y9 class and found that, although the teaching was successful (the teacher had achieved a 25% take-up of GCSE music) a majority of pupils still didn't consider their school music to be 'real' music. She concluded that culturally relevant music education is provided only when teachers fully enter the habitus of the pupils.

And there was more. I was fascinated by Gordon Cox's (University of Reading) analysis of the theories and practices of early Salvation Army bands; stimulated by Katie Strand's (Indiana) reading of action research reports as 'romances'; challenged by Ali Daubney's (Roehampton University) account of teaching styles in composing lessons. As I drove back, the papers and the questions and the people and the drinks and the conversations were chasing each other round my brain until the obvious answer popped up: research makes me think. So why was I so sceptical about it when I was a class teacher?

Perhaps it has to do with the complexity of research. As a teacher I wanted to know questions like, 'Which works best, method A or method B?' Research approaches such questions very cautiously. Good researchers ask, 'What does "best" mean?' and, when they've thoroughly explored their theory about what is 'best', they describe in detail what they did, in what contexts, what they discovered, and how these discoveries might be interpreted. They address the question, 'How do you know your findings are true?' and they'll usually be pretty tentative about their findings because they understand, better than most, the provisional nature of knowledge. As a teacher, I didn't have the time to engage very thoroughly with all of that. Instead, the DfES sent a brief and glossy summary of some research findings to my Senior Management Team, who probably

read it the night before presenting it at a staff development day. Thus I ended up with a half-digested account of the most understandable bits. To give a practical example: if we are serious about individualised learning, it's helpful to have a good theory of learning styles. Personally, I find Kolb's theory (which is embedded in a theory of experiential learning) has a lot going for it. But it seems that schools tend to work with 'VAK theory' (DfES, 2003) although no published research describes how it was generated; it says nothing about how people process visual, auditory or kinaesthetic information, relate it to other information, store or recall it. Its great virtue is that it's simple, and can be related easily to what people already know. (Guy Claxton says it stands for 'VAKuous'!)

So, our knowledge isn't always well founded. Our habitual ways of thinking can mislead us, and so can the knowledge that is fed to us by policy makers. In this context we need research to analyse practice, to challenge perceptions, to generate and develop the 'big ideas' and to make us think. And from personal experience, I know that it can be rewarding to engage with research. But it isn't easy.

References

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 Green, L. (2001) *How popular musicians learn: a way ahead for music education*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

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EXAM HOWLERS

Johann Bach wrote a great many musical compositions and had a large number of children. In between, he practised on an old spinster, which he kept in his attic.

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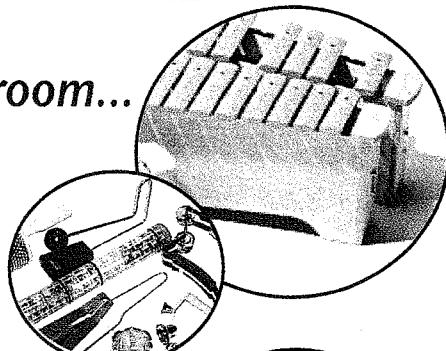
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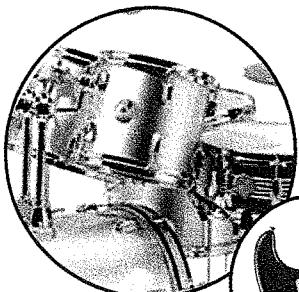
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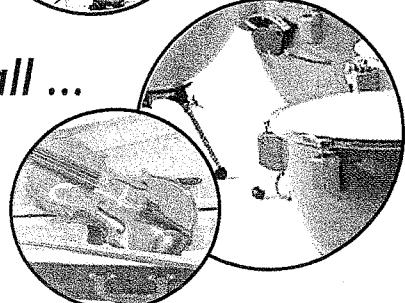
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