“GOING VIRAL”: CONTAGIOUS AGENCY THROUGH LEARNED HELPFULNESS IN A CHORAL ENSEMBLE

Lauri Ann Hogle, Ph.D. in Music Education  
Department of Music  
School of Music, Theatre and Dance  
Oakland University, 2018  
Jacqueline H. Wiggins, Adviser

In this qualitative study, I explored the music learning processes of multi-age learners in a choral ensemble designed as a constructivist learning environment (Brooks & Brooks, 2001; Fosnot, 1996; Wiggins, 2015). Entering this setting as a teacher-researcher (Kincheloe, 2003), I sought to understand the nature and development of the learners’ musical agency (Wiggins, 2011, 2016). Influenced by social constructivist understandings of learning (Bruner, 1986; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998; Wertsch, 1984), I viewed the individual personhood (Elliott & Silverman, 2015) of each learner through the psychological construct of hope theory (Snyder, 1994) and multiple constructs of individual learning processes, such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982), self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Zimmerman, 2002), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Data consisted of videorecordings, teacher journal and lesson plans, student and parent artifacts, and teacher recollection of the experience. To inform the data analysis, I investigated choral music education literature, characteristics of children’s musical teaching/learning processes when adults are absent, and possible pedagogical approaches within a constructivist choral ensemble context.

The multi-age nature of the ensemble fostered peer scaffolding, which flourished and became central to the culture of the ensemble. The prevalence of this phenomenon enabled insight into the nature of peer scaffolding and how it fostered and supported learners’ construction of musical understanding, musical agency, and the personhood of individuals within the group. Analysis of this situation enabled me to describe the emergence of phenomena I described as (a) care/courage and (b) contagious, “viral,” musical agency.

Findings describe a reified community of learned helpfulness, as learners fluidly and dialogically offered their agentive musical selves as teacher-helpers and learner-helpers, continually focused on shared performance goals within in the choral ensemble. Attuned learners provided socially mediated processes of pedagogical tact (van Manen, 2015a) to scaffold individuals’ learning needs, processes, and musical agency. Through this transformative process, ensemble agency, community, and musical performance flourished.