

[In Praise of Music Teachers: Chatting with the good folk from the GMMH](#)

It was lovely to be asked to give a short presentation at the [Greater Manchester Music Hub](#) annual get together at our Faculty of Education campus today. I was asked to give a talk on assessment, which I duly did, albeit following in the shadow of my good friend and colleague Martin Fautley who did the same last year!

The text of my presentation can be downloaded [here](#) for those of you that are interested. In it, I speak about one of the formative influences in my musical life (one of my music teachers – Miss Parry), the attributes of assessing music musically, and introduce a couple of metaphors to help us think about the whole process of teaching music from the inside out.

[Some personal reflections on the recent Ofsted advice on assessment](#)

I first met Martin Fautley at the University of Cambridge in the late 1990s. He was studying for a doctorate there; I was teaching at Stowmarket High School. We were both attending a seminar/study group on music teaching and research led by our colleague Pam Burnard. Martin's doctorate was focusing on a process of assessment for music education. It was, and still

is, a fascinating read.

At the time, there were no levels of attainment in the National Curriculum. The arguments about the the attainment target (singular) for Music (rather than attainment targets as some wanted) from the original 1992 National Curriculum were still resonating amongst music teaching communities. But discussion about music teaching in a generally pre-Internet, and definitely pre-Twitter, world was very different than that today. Networks were limited and in a rural county like Suffolk, certainly, the Local Authority was still a powerful agency. Music teachers lived in fear of a visit from the County Music Inspector!

It was around this time that technology began to impact on the processes of teaching and learning. Whilst teaching at Stowmarket, I remember the introduction of an 'automated' process of report writing. Statement banks had to be written within a spreadsheet that reflected the outcomes of core projects pupils had undertaken. Examples were given, but the writing of these statements by individual staff took a long time. Once done, reports would be generated automatically by selecting a series of numbers about each pupil and, hey presto, reports would be compiled! In practice, this was a disaster. I taught 11 classes of Year 9 pupils and this equalled around 330 reports to write. The first year I hand wrote them all; the second year, the computer spreadsheet took over. It didn't save me any time!

I mention this because shortly after these early experiments of software-based assessment processes, a new version of the National Curriculum was introduced (2000) that did include the infamous level descriptors. In many respects, these levels were a complete muddle and most unhelpful. Whoever was consulted on them, or even wrote them, should be pretty ashamed of their inclusion in the National Curriculum. But the advice that surrounded them in the National Curriculum was clear. These descriptors should have only be used as a

summative assessment statement at the end of each Key Stage.

However, it didn't take schools very long to get completely the wrong end of the stick. What was a summative assessment tool became a formative one. The rise of the spreadsheet was unstoppable; sub-levels were invented by many and the spreadsheet confirmed its place as the dominating location of assessment across all subjects in the vast majority of schools. The results of this careless and unthoughtful approach to assessment are still evidenced in many schools today. You can find examples on classroom walls, in departmental plans, in units of work, lesson plans and, most frustrating, in the content of discussions between staff and parents at consultation events ([which we'll be fined for not attending in the future apparently](#)).

It has taken around 12 years to partially undo the damage, but there is still a long way to go. Ofsted's recent pronouncement on the TES Resources website provides some clear advice. Here's a key paragraph:

Therefore, using levels and sub levels to try to prove pupils' ongoing progress in music doesn't work, as Ofsted has pointed out many times. It is usually superficial, time wasting and neither reliable nor valid. It is most certainly not any kind of 'Ofsted requirement'. To be absolutely clear, our inspectors do not expect to see it. There are no, and never were, sub levels in music anyway, for good reason.

A powerful creative act cannot be contained by a neat spreadsheet of numbers and letters. As national curriculum levels disappear, I'd ask you respectfully not to replace them with another set of numbers.

All good? No. Sadly, I suspect that this advice will go unheeded by many. Why? Partly because the message will be missed unless Ofsted publish this formally and send it as a communication to all schools; but mainly because recent

Government policy (and their complete lack of support for the new National Curriculum to be taught in schools from September 2014) has created an assessment vacuum into which I suspect several things will happen:

1. Schools will continue to do what they think works, particularly because the future of Key Stage 4 curriculum change is so uncertain and they can only deal with a limited number of things at any one time;
2. The opportunity for a subject specific discourse of assessment will be squeezed even further as schools seek to present a 'coherent' (read this as 'limited' or 'straightforward') solution that they can justify to outside agencies (principally Ofsted itself). Ofsted, whilst offering a solution, is a major part of the problem too;
3. Private companies will present 'solutions' to schools for the process of assessment that will almost certainly not take into account any of the advice given by Robin Hammerton, the well-meaning HMI for Music.

Many folk on Twitter have commented that the advice in this article could be applied to many other subjects. But that also misses the point completely. Simplistic solutions to assessment in favour of levels and sub-levels, or not as the case may be, fail to represent the richness of assessment approaches found across many academic subjects. To rule one approach in or out really won't cut it today. Schools need genuine autonomy to innovate in this area. The richness of difference in subject culture needs to be celebrated and debated by teachers and others, including academics with considerable experience in this area as well as knowledge of the educational research, to help find alternative ways forward.

And this moves me to my final point. Since meeting Martin Fautley for the first time in Cambridge our careers have moved on. I moved from teaching at Stowmarket to Debenham, and then

to my current job at MMU. Martin joined me at MMU for a while (working at the Crewe campus) and then got his job at BCU where he has since become a celebrated Professor of Music Education. Martin's [excellent book on assessment for Oxford University Press](#) was highlighted by Ofsted in their article, as was [Gary Spruce's and Chris Philpott's edited book](#) too. All three of these folk are academics working in HEI delivering innovative teacher education programmes. These are the very courses that this Government is seeking to close through its chaotic initial teacher education reforms. Bit dramatic? Really? The HEI that employs one of these colleagues is closing all of its initial teacher education programmes this year. The future of all of us working in this sector is uncertain.

The music education community needs academic colleagues like Fautley, Spruce and Philpott. Yet the very infrastructure that supports their work is being undermined. Once gone, it is hard to imagine that it will be replaced and music education in the UK will suffer an irreversible decline as these voices are lost. Whilst [Harriet Harman is worrying about the lack of a music education in a few Trojan Horse schools](#), perhaps she should turn her attention to the decline in music education across the whole of the UK as this shambolic government's wrecking ball of insensitive and chaotic educational policies leaves a permanent scar on what was a world-leading (but not perfect) model of school-centred music education.
