

# Jonathan Savage asks WHOSE VOICE ARE YOU LISTENING TO?



Listening to pupils is one of the most important skills in being an effective teacher. While many of us like the sound of our own voices, listening to what our pupils have to say about their learning – and, if we are brave enough, our teaching – is usually time well spent. Surely it goes without saying that music teachers should aim to do as much listening as teachers of any other subject.

Take a few moments to break away from reading this column to think about a lesson you need to plan. Whose voice do you listen to when you plan opportunities for musical learning? And who decides the lesson's shape, form and content?

The obvious answer is that it is you who makes the decisions – after all, you're the teacher. But underpinning this initial response are various competing voices that you may consciously or unconsciously listen to and act upon.

You may listen primarily to the voice of your experience. You were once taught yourself, and most likely you will have taught a range of pupils before. Your own experiences of teaching and learning are therefore an important voice to listen to.

Alternatively, perhaps you listen primarily to the voice of an experienced colleague or mentor. This could be a skilled instrumentalist, composer or teacher you know well: someone whose opinion you respect or whose work you admire.

Maybe you attune yourself to the voice of the subject itself. Music has its own historical legacy, and contained within it are many different approaches to teaching and learning, many of which are useful to draw on.

But would you ask your pupils for their views on what to learn and how you might teach it?

For those not used to seeking out the pupil voice it can be difficult to know how to begin. A good way to start is to establish how rigidly defined the outcome of your lesson needs to be. If there is more room for flexibility of outcome, there may be more room in the planning process for pupil voice.

Two terms, first coined by Keith Swanwick in his book *Music, Mind and Education*, can help broaden one's thinking in this area. The first of these is **classification**, which describes the content of the music lesson. Strong classification means that the teacher decides what is to be studied. Weak classification leaves choices open to the pupil.

The second term is **framing**, which relates to the approach taken by the teacher. A strongly framed approach means rigidity in the way that pupils learn. We might say that a traditional, didactic teaching style is an example of strong framing, whereas weaker framing gives pupils a

what if your analysis shows that the majority of your teaching is strongly classified and strongly framed, perhaps because you are driven by exam targets? Should you then accept that there is little room for pupil voice in your teaching? Or should you change the way you teach? The answer to this last question is not necessarily yes, but it is a question that all teachers should ask themselves.

In her book *Between Past and Future*, Hannah Arendt writes that 'education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it'. As teachers we have a responsibility to design and deliver quality musical experiences for our young people, to enable them to assume responsibility for their own learning and development. My contention here is that we will do this most effectively by listening carefully to our pupils and acting wisely on what they say. After all, education is about empowerment – why not introduce this as soon as possible?

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chance to find their own way through the lesson content, making it more flexible and easier to explore.

The Musical Futures approach, profiled in January's MT [Q&A, page 18], could be described as an example of weak classification and weak framing. It provides students with a significant degree of choice in terms of what they want to learn, and gives them space and time to engage in musical learning on their own terms and in their own ways. In contrast, the ABRSM theory syllabus is strongly classified, but could be strongly or weakly framed depending on the teaching approach adopted.

Ideas such as classification and framing can bring clarity to the process of choosing how to incorporate pupil voice into your teaching. But

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