

# *Whose agency matters? Negotiating pedagogical and creative intent during composing experiences<sup>1</sup>*

Research Studies in Music Education

*Research Studies in Music Education*

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Society for Education, Music

and Psychology Research

vol 30(1):43–58 [1321–103x

(200806) 30:1; 43–58]

10.1177/1321103x08089889

<http://rsm.sagepub.com>

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**ABSTRACT** Drawing on observation and interview data collected from a case study of learning and teaching in a music technology lab, this article focuses on the nature of feedback and compositional intent during a soundtrack composing experience as viewed through the lived experiences of a teacher (Mary), a student composer (Ellen) and Ellen's peers. Tensions embedded in their shared experiences are analyzed for insights that may help other teachers of music composition in schools provide more successful feedback through valuing and responding to the student's musical agency and compositional intent. These insights illustrate the complex interplay among teacher feedback, learner agency and students' compositional intent, with particular attention to implications aimed at helping teachers to facilitate and design composing experiences in more inclusive ways.

**KEYWORDS:** *composition pedagogy, learner agency, peer feedback, teacher/student interaction*

## *Introduction*

A review of practitioner, researcher, and theoretical perspectives on composing in schools, collected by Hickey (2003), reveals conflicting suggestions for how teachers should provide feedback during and after composing experiences. One approach to feedback advocates asking students to revise their compositions as a natural and embedded part of the authentic processes of professional composers (Webster, 2003). As such, teachers should ask students to revise their work at a 'teachable moment' when 'children have the materials close at hand and "in their heads" . . . This is especially true if there is no evidence that a child . . . has actually thought in these terms' (p. 63). However, Wiggins (1999) cautions that 'criticizing and altering students' work can give students the impression that they are composing for the teacher and not for themselves. They tend to lose ownership of the work, which is a critical part of engaging in the composition process' (p. 35).

Since the adoption in the USA of National Standards in 1994, there has been an increasing interest in learning and teaching music through composing experiences. Recent research on student composing has primarily focused on analyses of students' compositional products and processes in collaborative, individual, classroom-based and non-interventionist contexts (Ruthmann, 2006; Wiggins, 2007). At the same time, few researchers have studied the processes of pedagogical interaction among teachers and students during composing experiences in schools. Yet, how teachers should provide meaningful feedback to student composers remains a key issue in practice (Allsup, 2003; Reese, 2003; Younker, 2003).

In his work with student composers, Bizub (2007) found that providing opportunities for shared reflection after the composing process, rather than requiring revision to be part of the process of composing, helped the teacher and students to 'negotiate and renegotiate the meaning of their composition' (p. 66) while contributing to meaningful learning. 'When educators and students listen to another student's musical composition, they are entering into that person's way of looking at the world' (p. 83). 'For me', said Bizub, 'these moments have been both wonderful and fragile for my students' (p. 83). Because composing is an intensely personal process of meaning-making (Barrett, 2003), the potential for feedback to impact on these 'fragile moments' negatively is increased.

Gromko (2003), offering personal strategies from her practice as a teacher-researcher, suggests that orienting:

to the children's individual needs and interests requires the teacher not to do as much overt teaching in the traditional sense, but to be more keenly aware, socially astute, and musically flexible in response to the children's direction and ideas. (2003, p. 89)

This facilitative approach to teacher feedback has the potential to help avoid the appearance of omniscience from the 'disembodied voice' of the expert teacher (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997/1986, p. 215).

### *Pedagogical inclusion and learner agency*

In music classrooms in the USA, the word 'inclusion' is often used narrowly in reference to the social inclusion of students with disabilities (Jellison, 2006). Recently, however, scholars in music education have called for the adoption of more inclusive approaches to learning and teaching music for all students, and not just those with disabilities (Regelski, 2006). In particular, recent research emerging from the phenomenological study of the lived experiences of learning and teaching music has outlined the importance of honoring the personal voice, agency and creative intentions of students (Allsup, 2003; Barrett, 2003; Blair, 2006; Davis, 2005; Ruthmann, 2006; Stauffer, 2003; Wiggins, 2007).

For Blair (2006), 'learner agency' is fundamentally the students' 'intrinsic desire' to 'understand and to be understood.' This perspective is rooted in the 'students' desires to grow in musicianship' and to be 'valued for their musical ideas' (Blair, 2006). This may be facilitated by implementing 'pedagogy that both supports and respects the identity and voice of young composers' (Stauffer, 2003, p. 109), encouraging teacher and students to 'value multiple perspectives and student knowings'

(Blair, 2006), and through guiding students toward ‘profitable goals whilst enabling them to retain their independence as composers’ (Berkley, 2004, p. 6). As such, the quest for an inclusive pedagogy of composition is deeply connected to valuing learner agency. It is incumbent upon the teacher, then, to seek out and connect to students’ musical goals. In practice, this may take the form of asking questions of students (Allsup, 2003; Younker, 2003) in the process of providing feedback.

The interrelations between learner agency and inclusive pedagogical approaches to teacher feedback during composing experiences are major issues for music teachers. This paper shares an analysis of the lived experience of a teacher and her student as they negotiated the composition of a movie soundtrack. Tensions embedded in their experiences were analyzed for insights that may help other teachers of music composition in schools to provide more inclusive and meaningful feedback connected to students’ agency and compositional intent.

### *Methodology*

This study was conducted using a multifaceted qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), integrating techniques from hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990), intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995), and narrative analysis (Barone, 2000; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The focus of this study was the lived experiences of the teacher and her students throughout a 10-week exploratory general music course taught in a music technology lab. The school in which I collected data was located in an ethnically diverse suburban school district located at the fringe of a major metropolitan area in the upper-midwestern USA. I chose to study one of Mary’s classes because her school location was close enough that I was able to observe her class every day throughout the duration of one 10-week course (total of 43 class days), because of the collegial and trusting relationship we had developed through our work on a statewide music technology committee, because she had personally developed the curriculum and technology lab (three years prior), and because Mary had been recognized as an exemplary music technology teacher by being featured in a national music education technology periodical. The combination of these attributes suggested to me that Mary’s classes had the potential to be rich sites for inquiry.

In consultation with Mary, I selected her fifth-hour music technology class as the focus of the case study. For Mary, fifth-hour directly preceded her lunch break and preparation hour (sixth-hour), which enabled me to stay after class each day and debrief with her about what happened in the class. The enrollment for her fifth-hour class included 16 students (ages 10 and 11), of which nine were boys and seven were girls. This class was a smaller one for her. In contrast, her fourth-hour class had an enrollment of 29 students, filling her 16-station music technology lab almost to capacity. Even though her lab was designed to accommodate up to 32 students sharing 16 stations, frequent computer problems tended to disable from one to three computers on any given day, creating complications for large classes.

Each station in the lab consisted of a Korg X5D<sup>®</sup> synthesizer and a Microsoft<sup>®</sup> Windows<sup>®</sup>-based computer running Cakewalk<sup>®</sup> sequencing/digital audio software. Each station was designed to be shared between two students and was also networked to the teacher’s station at the front of the classroom using a group education

controller student interface box that enabled students to communicate with the teacher without leaving their station via a microphone embedded into their headphones. The curriculum for this course began with a historical overview of music technology and production, and included daily listening/journaling experiences, synthesizer exploration experiences, creation of a rhythm-based composition, study of traditional piano and theory skills, and creation of an original music soundtrack for an excerpt from a popular movie as the students' culminating project.

### *Data collection*

I attended and collected data during all 43 class sessions in order to have prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wolcott, 1997) with the participants within the 'bounded system' of the intrinsic case (Stake, 1995, 2000). During each class meeting, I took 'copious field notes' (Barone, 2000, p. 195) throughout all class sessions. My purpose in taking field notes was to enable the writing of 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973, p. 3) of the 'experiential meanings' that Mary, her students, and I would 'live as we live them' (Wolcott, 1997, p. 11). In addition to the written descriptive accounts of my observations, I also included personal reflections, thoughts and interpretations within my field notes. These reflections served as useful tools during data analysis, as a record of my thoughts at the time of writing. During the 10-week class, in my role as a participant observer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wolcott, 1997), I situated myself at various points around the room in succession to experience the class from a variety of physical perspectives.

As a means of capturing data that reflected the teacher's perspective, I situated a video camera with a wide-angle lens at the front of the room to record each class. The camera documented events from the perspective of the teacher, who most often worked from the front of the classroom. This video-recording was supplemented with daily debrief interviews with the teacher after each class. These interviews were audio-recorded using my laptop computer, then transcribed for later analysis. Three in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the teacher were also conducted. These occurred before the course began, five weeks into the course, and after the course had concluded. The focus of these interviews was to gain insight into the prior musical and educational experience of the teacher, information about the development of the music technology lab, curricular goals and plans, reflections on the students' experiences, and finally, personal reflections on the entire course.

Data documenting the students' perspective was primarily obtained via the use of two video cameras set up at the workstations of key informant students (Wolcott, 1997) to record the close-up lived experiences of the students and to capture the social interactions, ambient audio, audio from a student's computer and synthesizer, as well as video of the computer screen and keyboard (Erkunt, 2001). In addition, all computer files created by the students were collected along with all classroom handouts, assignments and other artifacts completed by students throughout the course. Lastly, two focus groups were held with all students in the class to gain their perspective on what aspects of the class were interesting and of meaning to them. The first focus group was scheduled midway through data collection, and the other after the course

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had ended. Additional follow-up in-depth interviews were also conducted with students who were key informants during the study.

### *Data analysis*

The data were coded, transcribed when salient and analyzed throughout the study using a constant comparative method looking for places of resonance and tension among participants' experiences and perceptions. The techniques of member check and peer-debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), along with data reflective of the teacher's, students', and researcher's perspectives, were further analyzed through a process of 'crystallization' (Richardson, 2000). This process involved viewing and vetting data and interpretations through collecting data from multiple perspectives. This process enables the researcher to transfer the focus from the data as objective and discrete to that of the situated understandings and meanings reflected in the data and as seen through multiple facets of lived experience.

Zooming in on one experience drawn from the case study described above, this article focuses on the interactions between the teacher (Mary), a student (Ellen) and Ellen's peers with whom she interacted as they negotiated the culminating movie soundtrack project. It is presented mostly as a dialogic narrative 'so that readers can vicariously experience [the] happenings and draw [their own] conclusions' (Stake, 2000, p. 439). The descriptive and interpretive sections are written from my perspective as a researcher/observer in the classroom. Thus, these sections are necessarily reflective of my own biases. As Barone (2000) has said, the 'author/critic may depict transactions between children and the curriculum that are typical across certain contexts, but it is left to the reader to judge whether any generalities can be safely transported to foreign situations' (p. 58).

### *Ellen's movie soundtrack*

The selected movie scene to which Ellen chose to compose music was excerpted from the end of the movie: *Lord of the Rings: Into the West*. The scene begins with Frodo exchanging longing and bittersweet glances with his friends as he boards a boat. The camera switches to a long shot of the boat sailing away into a bright light. The scene concludes with the boat disappearing 'into the west' and the bright, white light of the horizon filling the entire screen. The music during this scene consists of a background of long sustained string chords with a meandering ocarina melody on top. A feeling of happiness and sadness is conveyed with a final cadence synchronized to the final fade to white on the screen.

To prepare the students for this project, Mary led the entire class through an analysis of music from a variety of movie clips. My field notes recorded the process:

Mary began by presenting the concept of dissonance and tension and release. After sharing a short clip from the opening to the movie *Jaws*, she provided a definition and contrasted it with consonance. Mary shared a 'new age' contemporary song by Jim Brickman to illustrate consonance. These examples were chosen to help show how John Williams used dissonance as a tool to achieve tension in the movie, where Brickman uses consonance as a tool to achieve calm.

Mary then asked students to imagine that they were hired to be sound designers for a movie and had the students watch a scene from *Lord of the Rings* without sound to imagine what sounds (not necessarily music) might be in the background. I observed that students are, for the most part, silent and attentive during this process. When the students did talk, their discussions and comments to their peers centered on the film and what they imagined the sounds to be like. Mary started asking students questions while the movie continued to play. Some students talked about using strings in the background. Mary asked the students whether or not the string part should be high or low. The students seemed very engaged in the process of listening. I also noticed that a lot of peer disciplining was going on. Students were telling other students who were being loud to 'shut up!'

After the movie clip reached the end, Mary, continued to ask what students thought the music should sound like. The students had different ideas for what should happen. They seemed to be well aware from their prior experiences of musical clichés. I think they are well prepared to use the sounds on the synthesizer to create their own soundtracks. (Field Notes, Day 38)

At the beginning of the next class, Ellen loaded the *Lord of the Rings* movie clip into the Cakewalk software, pressed play and began to improvise melancholy melodies on top of the existing musical soundtrack. Ellen's melodic improvisations were very similar in tempo, contour, and mood to the ocarina melody in the movie soundtrack. Ellen continued to improvise along with and on top of the existing soundtrack throughout the entire clip. After the clip ended, a large grin enveloped Ellen's face and she clapped her hands together shouting 'Yay!!!'

Next, Ellen watched the movie scene again from beginning to end. After watching it, she deleted the existing soundtrack, pressed 'record,' and layered in her own melancholic ocarina melody. When she was finished, she called the teacher over to her station to listen to her composition. After listening to her composition, Mary shared her thoughts with Ellen:

- Mary: That's nice. Which of those notes that you played would be the resting place or home [*do*]? Would you consider this to be home? [Mary plays a note on the synthesizer.]
- Ellen: Well, it's between these and these [referring to middle C to the E an octave above.]
- Mary: Well, what was the last note you played? [Ellen does not respond. Mary grabs Ellen's mouse and cues up the end of the movie to listen back for Ellen's last note and plays it back.]
- Mary: Let's see . . . which note is that? [Mary gets distracted by two other students and suddenly stops working with Ellen.]

While Mary talked to other students, Ellen cued the movie back to the beginning and started to play along, creating what sounded like a harmony part. She tried some long sustained notes, then stopped and rested for a while. In the meantime, Mary left Ellen's station to help another student. Ellen called out to her friend Amber to come over and help her with her composition, but Amber was busy and did not come. Ellen started exploring with the Ice Rain sound using three-note dissonant clusters. After a short time she stopped and started singing to herself.

Just before the end of class, Mary returned to Ellen's station, donned the extra set of headphones and continued to work with Ellen:

- Mary: Now, your piece is beautiful. I want to see if you can make it even more beautiful, okay? Can you slide over just a bit [in order to be centered at Ellen's piano keyboard]? Now, what was that last note you played? [Ellen plays the keyboard searching for the last note.]
- Mary: [Grabbing the mouse and cueing up the movie] I think it was this [plays the G above middle C on the keyboard]. Yeah, I think it's right there [nodding head]. So, usually

the last note you end up on is 'home'. It creates a feeling of completion. You start out at home, you walk away for a while, explore melodically, and then you come back – especially with something like this. If the scene were something scary you would intentionally not go home, right? You'd leave the listener hanging. But, with something like this that's warm and fuzzy, you'd make them feel safe and secure – at home. So, that's [playing G above middle C] a very important note, and you used it a lot. You explored a lot of different places with your melody. What I'd like for you to do is to consider the direction of your notes. Remember how we were talking about the direction of your notes, did we go up or down when we were happy?

Ellen: Up.

Mary: A lot of times your notes go up, and [during this Mary is playing melodic motives that ascend] what if you're sad? [Mary plays soft, descending motives.] A different feel, isn't it? So you might say that this scene has both emotions. What emotions do you think are in the scene?

This was the first time Mary had asked Ellen about her intent or thoughts about her composition. All prior comments had pertained to Mary's vision for the composition and interpretation of the director's intent for the movie clip. Even though Mary was asking questions and attempting to be supportive through praise-like statements, the intent of these questions was to guide Ellen to Mary's interpretation of the work, rather than to discover and help scaffold Ellen's composition based on Ellen's intent. By asking guiding questions, Mary was not including Ellen as a partner in the conference.

Ellen: Sad and happy.

Mary: Yeah, I think it's both. They [the characters in the scene] are wonderful friends. They've had wonderful experiences with each other, so that's very positive. But he's leaving them too, so it's bittersweet. You could actually explore that a little more . . . [Mary plays examples on the keyboard] . . . and maybe time the movement of your notes, because you had some wonderful melodic lines in there, to go with what's going on with the screen, what's happening. Well, maybe at the end you did do that and you brought it back down to home, and that was very good, very appropriate. But, I want you to think about those easy harmonies I showed the class a few days ago [plays harmonic thirds on white keys] or you can add other notes. See if you can add other notes that might go here.

At the beginning of class the following day, Ellen asked if I wanted to listen to and watch her composition synchronized with the movie clip. I recorded what I heard in my field notes:

Ellen's piece at this point has an ocarina melodic line with a solo violin background part. It's kind of a lamenting minor feel with the parts moving contrapuntally with a free sense of time. The harmonic language in her piece is similar to the original music, reminiscent of Shostakovich in some ways. (Field Notes, Day 41)

When the piece finished, I told Ellen, 'Nice job.' She smiled in return and went back to watch and listen to her piece again. As she played back the piece, her eyes were focused on the screen. At the end of watching, she asked Mary to come and listen to her piece, but Mary was busy collecting worksheets from other class members. Ellen went back to listening and took some time to look at the graded worksheets from the theory portion of class that Mary had just handed back. After the movie clip ended, she immediately called her friend Amber to come over and watch and listen to her piece.

Ellen: You wanna switch? You listen to mine and I listen to yours?

Amber: I only recorded one thing. My other track got lost somewhere.

Ellen: Mine is kinda long.

Amber: Yeah, mine is kinda the same, too.

Ellen left for Amber's station and Amber sat down and began to listen to Ellen's piece. After listening, Amber got up and walked over to Ellen:

Amber: Wow, that was so beautiful! That was SO good!

Ellen: Really?

Amber: I can't believe it! That's so cool!

Ellen: I added the ending.

Ellen returned to her station to wait until Mary was available to listen to and watch her piece, this time with the addition of a new harmony layer.

Mary: That is so pretty! You know, there's still something I'm thinking that you might want to think about. I'm not saying what you did is wrong, but I'm looking for a way to develop it. [Ellen's face tightens and becomes blank.]

Mary: You know how we were talking about home, home base, going back to home? A lot of times when you have things that are positive . . . Can you hear me at all? [Ellen nods yes.]

Mary: In the original soundtrack, the music keeps coming back to home. It's coming back to that. [Mary plays a cadence on the keyboard.] I'm wondering if there is some way that you can . . . it's hard for me to establish [here in Ellen's piece] home in this music in places. I mean, there's beautiful melodic lines, but it's hard to tell where home is. And that might add a little more comfort, upliftment, or looking to the future, looking 'into the west'. [Mary is trying to get a response from Ellen. Ellen continues to stare blankly at her.]

Mary: It might provide more of a comforting feeling. Do you think that might add a little more to your tracks? [Ellen shrugs.]

Mary: [Reaching over Ellen to grab the mouse.] Where is home? Did we establish that? [Ellen grabs the mouse and clicks the movie back to the beginning.]

Mary: [After Ellen looks to her.] Just play it. Play the end . . . let's figure it out. [Mary selects a sound on the keyboard, plays back Ellen's piece and starts to perform cadences on top of Ellen's music.]

Mary: Is that the key we're in? [Ellen shrugs.]

Mary: Is it this?

Ellen: [Thinking a bit.] Yes.

Mary: Is it this? [Ellen points to a key.]

Mary: Or is it this? Yeah. Yeah, it's this. [Ellen nods in agreement.]

Mary: This is how you can establish what key you're in by playing this note on the bottom. [Ellen continues to stare blankly.]

Mary: Remember, when I was showing you the chord? [Plays harmonic thirds similar to those Ellen recently added to her composition.]

Ellen: [Snapping at Mary] I did do that!

Mary: Find the places where you really want your audience . . . [Mary takes control of Ellen's mouse and plays the piece back] . . . to feel an overwhelming feeling. What do you want your audience to feel when they're watching this?

Ellen: Sad, but happy.

Mary: OK. So you want them to feel both? [Ellen nods yes.]

Mary: OK.

Ellen: But, that's why I put the violins soft and the melody . . .

Mary: [Interrupting] . . . and that is beautiful what you've got there. It's gorgeous. I'm trying to figure out a way to have it have a little bit more impact, perhaps, because it's

hard for me to feel home base. The melody moves nicely, [Mary plays another cadence] but I don't feel a real solid feeling of home very often ... I do occasionally. I'm just wondering if there is another way you can add to that. I'm not saying to change that, keep it definitely. But, if you could add something to it where we can really feel the key. The way to do that is to use these notes ... this note at the bottom [plays a G at the low end of the keyboard]. So, maybe listen to that and see if there's any place where you might be able to add something.

At the end of the course in a follow-up interview I asked Ellen to elaborate on what she was trying to express with her movie soundtrack. Ellen interpreted the mood as:

Ellen: Sad, but happy. Sad, because he's leaving his friends, his most dearest friends. But happy because it's now safe for him to leave.

AR: What did you feel at the end of the movie clip? Did you want it to go to an ending, or did you want it to continue?

Ellen: I personally wanted it to continue, but they didn't make another movie. I wanted them to make another movie, so I kept the music going, so that if I had to make another movie then they would continue.

(Interview, 4/4)

Ellen clearly had a vision and interpretation of the mood of the soundtrack. And she had definite musical ideas for expressing the 'sad, but happy' nature of the movie clip. What was particularly striking to me about the help that Mary gave was that she did not ask Ellen her intent before providing comments. Instead, during both teacher feedback sessions, Mary tried to help Ellen express an interpretation of the movie scene that Mary assumed was held in common. This process excluded Ellen from meaningful engagement in the discussion. Nearly all of Mary's feedback was geared toward teaching and improving the *composition* through the imposition of her own interpretation and musical ideas, rather than helping Ellen express her compositional intent.

Mary was improvising and recording the cadential G notes as another layer on Ellen's track. As she played, she commented, 'Oh yeah. That's nice. There's a little tension there.' At this point, Ellen began to look around the room, clearly upset. She had virtually shut down emotionally and was not paying attention to Mary's suggestions.

When Mary finished consulting with other students, she returned to Ellen: 'I'm not saying what you did was wrong. I think that what you have is wonderful. I'm just trying to think, to explore ways you might add to it. To make it ... but, you don't have to change it if you want to keep it the way it is. It's up to you. OK?' Mary put her hand on Ellen's shoulder. Ellen had not made visual contact with Mary during this whole exchange. She was visibly upset and staring forward.

After Mary left, Ellen said to herself, 'It doesn't even sound right with it,' referring to the part Mary added to her piece. Upset, Ellen deleted what Mary recorded and hit the high keys in a cluster of notes. 'I'm not gonna change it!' she exclaimed. 'It doesn't sound like me!'

Two weeks after this class, the course had finished and I asked Ellen to reflect on the creation of her movie soundtrack:

AR: What did you think about the movie soundtrack section of the course?

Ellen: I liked that.

AR: You seemed to get really excited about your movie soundtrack. What did you like about it?

Ellen: I was excited that we were going to compose our own music for the film. I mean ... we weren't actually composing the music.

AR: What do you mean by that?

Ellen: Our music is not going to be part of a real film, but other people in class get to see it and we get to make the music. If we were watching the original movie, I can listen to the music and say, 'Oh, I didn't like that.' In class, we actually got the chance to go back and change the music.

(Interview, 4/4)

For Ellen, there seemed to be a genuine sense of ownership of the music and a generally positive memory of her composing experience. After analyzing Ellen's interactions with Mary, I was surprised that she felt so positive about her experiences only two weeks after the end of the course. However, Ellen chose (and had the choice) not to accept Mary's final suggestions for her soundtrack. When it came to time to share her composition on the last day of class, she had deleted all of Mary's additions and only kept the original recordings of the ocarina line and the background thirds she had added on the second day of creating. Ellen ultimately stayed true to her interpretation of the piece, which had been received so enthusiastically by her peers during the process of composing and after the final sharing session.

AR: What did you think of Mary's suggestions for your soundtrack?

Ellen: I didn't like them. I mean, because, it seemed to me that she was trying to tell you what to do. I want to do my own thing and when she came back and she didn't necessarily hear my ideas. That was kinda irritating.

AR: What would you like her role to be?

Ellen: She could give an opinion. Like say, 'Oh, well that, to me, doesn't sound right, but if ...', I don't know.

AR: Do you feel that she was trying to force you to change what you recorded?

Ellen: No. She was just telling us, but for some people it didn't seem that way.

AR: What do you mean by that?

Ellen: When she told us she didn't like it, that might have been a part that we really, really wanted to be in there. When she tells you to change it, it's kinda like ... [expresses a grimacing face].

AR: Do you feel that Mary tried to understand your intent?

Ellen: She did, sometimes, but not all the time.

(Follow-up interview)

Ellen seemed to value Mary as someone who could help her with her compositions and she did incorporate Mary's suggestion to use harmonic thirds in the background layer. However, Ellen wanted Mary to provide help in the form of suggestions, rather than by 'telling'. Additionally, Mary's choice to take control of Ellen's mouse and record over her composition was perceived by Ellen as exclusionary. Allsup (2003) believes that 'the materials that students choose to explore will represent a world that is theirs, a world they understand, a world that defines who they are' (p. 35). Mary's pedagogical approach appeared to be geared more toward taking advantage of one of many 'teachable moment[s] . . . close at hand' (Webster, 2003, p. 63) than toward finding out more about Ellen's musical 'world'.

It is important to note that Mary did provide some feedback in response to Ellen's intent, but what seemed to contribute most to Ellen's negative reception of Mary's

support was Mary telling Ellen she needed to change something in her composition before finding out Ellen's interpretation of the movie scene. Had Mary started out with a more inclusionary approach to her feedback that valued and sought to understand Ellen's interpretation – Ellen as *composer* (Wiggins, 2003) – perhaps Ellen may not have shut down physically and emotionally to Mary's suggestions.

### *Issues and implications*

#### TEACHER FEEDBACK AND COMPOSITIONAL INTENT

In Mary's feedback to Ellen, she imposed her own vision and intent of the movie soundtrack on Ellen. Rather than helping Ellen develop her own 'musician voice' (Stauffer, 2003), Mary's comments were geared toward having Ellen conform to her interpretation and understanding of common musical conventions in music for film. As a result, Ellen's agency as a learner was compromised resulting in negative physical and emotional reactions to, and disengagement with, Mary's scaffolding. At play here is Ellen's desire for freedom of choice – essentially the freedom to express and make meaning through composing.

The exchanges between Ellen and Mary raise questions as to how teachers can honor and support students' agency and intentions. The main insight I gained in reviewing these interactions was that teachers should first ascertain the student's reason for asking them to provide feedback. Are students sharing the piece in celebration? Do they want additional feedback from the teacher? Do they want a critique? Do they want praise? Do they want suggestions for a trouble spot? In the above exchanges, Mary did not take the time to find out what role Ellen wanted her to play in the feedback conferences. Instead, Mary assumed the role of 'teacher' and 'expert' when responding during conferences, when perhaps Ellen only wanted a 'guide'.

Wiggins (2003) believes that 'discussion of a student piece needs to start in a place that is most meaningful to them' (p. 153). Though Mary began with a statement of praise, she followed up with suggestions furthering *her* vision for Ellen's composition. Perhaps more could have been achieved if Mary had, instead, begun from a place that was meaningful to Ellen. Wiggins (2003) offers suggestions for how teachers can find these meaningful starting places:

1. look at student work contextually and respect the complexity of its contextuality;
2. respect what students bring to the situation, including their musical and social expertise;
3. learn to interpret student work through the meanings that students intend; and
4. respect and value student perspectives on their own work.

(p. 162)

Starting pedagogical feedback from the perspective of the student is also advocated in 'process writing' approaches (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994) in the language arts. Calkins (1994) suggests teachers begin by asking the following questions after reading students' written work:

1. Can you tell me about how you wrote this?
2. How's it going?

3. What problems have you encountered while writing this?
  4. When you read over your text, how do you feel about it? If you were to lay out all your finished drafts and then sort them into piles of 'very best,' 'good,' and 'less good,' which pile would this be in? Why?
  5. What are you planning to do next? If you *were* going to do more with this piece, what *might* you do?
  6. What kinds of writing are you trying to do? Do you have a sense of how you want your writing to be in the end?
  7. How long have you been working on this draft?
- (p. 226, emphasis in original)

The questions that Calkins (1994) shares do not begin with the teacher's vision or opinion of the student's work. Instead, she advocates asking questions about process, problems the student encountered, the role the student would like her to play as teacher, future directions, as well as 'big picture' questions about creative intent. Applied to a music composing situation, comparable questions would invite a composer/writer to share his or her thoughts, decisions, challenges and questions with the teacher. Calkins formulated this set of questions in order to highlight aspects of the students' compositional process, rather than to comment on the product, and to focus on the *student-as-composer* or the student's compositional thinking, rather than the student's *composition-as-product*. As initial questions, these do not prescribe ideas or suggestions and are not judgmental. Rather, these questions are designed to help the teacher better understand the student's compositional intent and the preceding decisions and tensions that have led up to the student's *invitation* to the teacher to listen to his or her composition. This practice is necessarily inclusionary in that it starts from the needs and concerns of the student.

This is not to say that teachers should never teach during feedback sessions with students. Instead, teachers might begin by finding out as much as possible about what the student would like help with, then decide how best to teach towards the improvement of the composer. Calkins (1994) shares that:

our decisions must be guided by 'what might help this writer' rather than 'what might help this writing.' If the piece of writing gets better but the writer has learned nothing that will help him or her another day on another piece, then the conference was a waste of everyone's time. It may even have done more harm than good, for such conferences teach students not to trust their own reactions. (p. 228)

For Calkins, it is important that students trust and become able to act upon their creative intent. When pedagogical approaches to feedback consciously or unconsciously exclude or inhibit creative intent, the student can become disempowered as an agent of their own learning, losing confidence and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) as these relate to their composing ability.

After talking with Mary in our follow-up interview, I realized that it was her intent that the students compose their music in service to the director's interpretation in the film clip. However, this was not conveyed by Mary explicitly during instruction and subsequently not understood by Ellen. This tension or gap between Mary's intent for the *Lord of the Rings* movie clip and Ellen's intent in her own work seems to have doomed their conferring session from the very beginning. Had Mary taken the time through her initial questions with Ellen to ask her about her intent, the conference

might have been more successful. By adopting the inclusive practice of taking the time to understand our students' creative and musical intentions, we are potentially in a better position to help them develop as *composers*.

#### INCLUSION IN THE DESIGN OF COMPOSING EXPERIENCES

Another tension highlighted by Mary and Ellen's interactions during the movie soundtrack project resides in the nature and structure of the composing experience. Barrett (2003) shares that the 'dialogic process of meaning-making' when composing music necessarily involves 'freedoms and constraints' (p. 3). In the case of the movie soundtrack project in this study, Ellen viewed the message and intent of the movie clip as open to her personal interpretation. Based on Mary's instructions she saw the composing experience as an open-ended experience where she was free to reinterpret and extend the original intent of the movie scene. As such, she decided that if it were her choice, the movie would have continued and, therefore, she chose to have her music continue beyond the final fade to white and to avoid cadencing. However, Mary viewed the soundtrack composing experience as a 'genre study' of soundtrack composing where the composer is bound or constrained by the creative intent of the film's director.

It is easy to envision a continuum of composing experiences that at one end is entirely rules based, with the teacher dictating definite rules, structures and prescriptions for the final product, and on the opposite end, is made up of totally open-ended experiences bound by no external guidelines and where students are free to compose as they wish. Teachers run the risk of eliminating all creative choice on the part of students if parameters for composing are so strict that these become more of a theoretical or scientific puzzle to solve as opposed to a creative composing endeavor. As well, 'letting students loose' to compose without intervention or boundary is a possible abdication of our role as teachers, and can be perceived by students as intimidating (Wiggins, 2001). Hickey (2003) further suggests that the ideal composing experiences for schools are creative and lie somewhere between highly constrained and totally open parameters. So, as a profession, how might we navigate this continuum in composing experiences? How can we better design composing experiences that are inclusive of, and responsive to, the agency and compositional intentions of our student composers?

Again, drawing insights from 'process writing' classrooms, many writing experiences are structured around studies of a particular genre of writing (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994). Within these genre studies, students are free to express their compositional intent within the constraints of the conventions of the genre. Additionally, students are encouraged to write for their own personal enjoyment in the classroom and at home and not just to fulfill school-based writing assignments. In the writers' workshop, analyses of literature occur through mini-lessons geared toward a deeper understanding of the structures of a particular genre and the issues that writers might face when working within that genre (Calkins, 1994). In advocating for a similar approach to composing experiences, Allsup (2003) asserts that when student composers have:

space to explore freely, to work democratically, they will create (from one of *their* musical worlds) a context about which they are familiar, conversant, or curious ... a workable space, a landscape for exploring the curiosities of a given genre. (p. 35)

This kind of approach provides the freedom for students to express their intentionality during composing experiences.

In this instance, Ellen was a determined young composer who stayed true to her compositional intent and stuck with her own interpretation for the movie soundtrack. And, in fairness, Mary ultimately allowed her to do so. While the majority of Mary's conferences with students did not seem to have the same negative emotional effect as with Ellen, Ellen's case illustrates the tightrope we walk as music teachers in our efforts to facilitate students' creativity. Ellen invested a lot of herself in her composition and viewed Mary's comments as asking her to change something that she felt was really important in the composition. Teachers have their own personal agencies and educational goals for their students and have to negotiate their interactions with students. However, through adopting a pedagogy of composing that begins with the inclusive practice of seeking and understanding their students' musical intentions, teachers may be more successful at supporting their students' development as composers.

#### NOTE

1. This article is based on the author's doctoral dissertation entitled: 'Negotiating learning and teaching in a music technology lab: Curricular, pedagogical, and ecological issues', accepted in 2006 by Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan, USA.

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