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How Adult Learners Learn Celtic Traditional Music: An Exploratory Case Study

Janice Waldron
University of Windsor, CANADA

Abstract
This study was based on interviews and observations of ten adult learners at the 2005 Goderich Celtic College (GCC), a North American"summer camp" for adults wanting to learn Celtic traditional music (CTM). There was an equal gender mix, the average age of participants was 45 years, and each had been learning CTM between 4 and 15 years. With the exception of one, all had learned to play an instrument at school, but had discontinued playing their school instruments after graduation. They were attracted to CTM and traditional instruments for various reasons, and learned through the medium of "tunes," rather than scales and exercises. Because CTM is an aural/oral culture, most valued learning "by ear," but did regard written notation as a useful aid. Information about this kind of informal learning practice has implications for formal school instrumental learning.

Music education researchers have only recently begun to consider the many ways that people make music informally for application in formal contexts. While ethnomusicologists and music scholars have a tradition of examining music learning in various cultures (Bayard, 1956; Blacking 1976; Booth & Kuhn, 1990; Cowdery, 1990; Feld, 1988; Finnegan, 1989; Frisch, 1987; Hew, 2006; Hopkins, 2002; Kearns & Taylor, 1998; Konig, 1980; Lilliestam, 1995; McCann, 2001; Moloney, 1992; Nettl, 1983; Rapuano, 2005, 2001; Reiss, 2003; Rice, 1995, 2003; Symon, 2003; Taylor, 2003; Trew, 2003), they have not considered the relevance of informal learning for formal contexts. Folkestad (2006) maintains that, "informal music learning outside institutional settings has been shown to contribute to important knowledge and aspects of music education" (p. 135). Music learning that occurs in informal contexts should therefore be considered as important as that which takes place in schools.

Various music education researchers have examined informal music learning among children (Harwood, 1998; Campbell, 1991a, 1991b, 1998) and in different genres (Burton, 2008; Campbell, 1995; Dunbar-Hall, 2000; Dunbar-Hall & Wemyss, 2000; Clark, 2005; Cope & Smith, 1997; Garrison, 1985; Green, 2002; Jaffurs, 2004, 2006; McCarthy, 1999; Veblen 1991), while others have specifically targeted informal adult music learning within genres (Higgins, 2007; Green, 2002; Kerlin, 2004; Karlsen, 2007; Louth, 2004, 2006; Snell, 2005, 2007; Waldron, 2007, 2006; Walrond, 2007). Research on non-enculturated adult informal music learning in folk traditions is limited but is becoming more common among music education researchers (Cope, 2005; Dabczynski, 1994; Kerlin, 2004; Veblen & Waldron, 2008; Waldron, in press; Waldron & Veblen, 2007, 2008, 2009).

It is precisely because most adult music making occurs in settings outside of academic institutions that Mark (1996) recommends them as a worthy study topic. Like Folkestad, he believes that an examination of music learning that occurs outside of formal schooling could better inform practice and re-define what it means to teach music (Mark, 1996). Based on these justifications, this paper explored the development of instrumental skills among North American adult learners of Celtic traditional music (CTM).[1]

This study took place at the 2005 Goderich Celtic College (GCC), an annual, weeklong "summer camp" that took place in the town of Goderich, Ontario, Canada. The school, aimed at adults, provided musical instruction on various instruments and types of Celtic music.[2] Research questions included: What were the various attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of the participants with regard to the teaching and learning of CTM? How did the participants learn CTM? What implications could be drawn for formal music education practices in general?

Literature Review

Cope (2005) contended that most music education research on instrumental music learning has focused on formal classically based music schooling and not informal music learning, particularly among adults. He found this dearth of research surprising as a "large number of active [adult instrumental] musicians acquire their musical skills informally" (Cope, 2005, p. 126), citing Finnegan's landmark sociological research in 1989. While music education researchers have examined informal instrumental music learning among adolescents (Campbell, 1995; Jaffurs, 2004, 2006), few have explored informal instrumental music learning with adults. One recent exception to this is Green's (2002) study on how popular musicians learn. Her participants included both teenagers and adults, and the focus of the study was to discover the ways in which musicians "pick up" the skills necessary to become Western popular musicians. These "informal music learning practices" – Green's designation – include aurally/orally "picking up" musical skills and knowledge from family, friends and peers, and recordings.

Several recent music education studies have examined informal music learning among adult traditional musicians. Cope (2005) explored how Scottish adults learned that country's traditional fiddle music. He interviewed and observed 13 adults at two music workshops and concluded that, while the ability to read music notation was considered a valuable skill by all participants, being able to play "by ear" was regarded as the "normal [way to] access playing traditional fiddle music" (p. 132). It was therefore, valued by the participants more than the ability to read notation. Written notation was, however, perceived as a useful tool. A similar study was undertaken by Kerlin (2004), who primarily explored traditional song music learning at the Irish Arts Centre in New York City, which offered Irish traditional music classes to adults. His conclusion was similar to Cope's in that Kerlin's participants valued aural/oral learning over written notation. Waldron and Veblen (2009) and Veblen and Waldron (2008) explored aspects of music transmission in one traditional music pub session in London, Ontario, Canada. They also concluded that, while their participants viewed written notation as a useful aid when learning CTM music, being able to play "by ear" was more highly valued than music reading ability by the participants.

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[1] For this paper, CTM is defined as instrumental dance music from Ireland, Scotland, Brittany, Newfoundland, Cape Breton, Quebec, and Ontario. All have a tradition of aural/oral music learning (Cope, 2005; Garrison, 1986; Trew, 2003; Veblen, 1991; Waldron, 2006). Musics taught at the GCC included the same.

[2] Instruction was available on Irish flute, tin whistle, bagpipes, concertina, accordion, fiddle, mandolin, banjo, guitar, piano, and *bodhran* (an Irish drum).

Methodology

This study blended the qualitative research strategies of ethnographic description, case study, and participant observation with narrative inquiry. Ethnographic description was employed because Szego (2002) contended that it was the "most appropriate" research tool for researchers studying music teaching and learning within the broader context of music transmission, and this was the case with this study. This research also contained elements of a case study as it was conducted in and bounded by a specific location and time frame. Defined as "a detailed examination of one setting, single subject, or one particular event," case studies were "often undertaken because there [was] clearly a scientific value from investigating some single category of individual, group, or event to gain an understanding of that individual, group, or event, and they [were], to some extent, generalizable" (Berg, 2007, p. 284). This was also true of this research.

Further, I have been an instructor at GCC for the past ten years, and, as an "insider," had an *emic* perspective that informed my role as a participant observer.[3] My particular role as an insider at GCC allowed for a much higher degree of ecological validity than would normally be expected when accessing any field site–a potentially valuable trade-off for the allowance of a moderate degree of researcher bias. Last, because I felt it was important for each individual's voice to be heard, I incorporated narrative inquiry into the research.[4]

The Research Landscape

At the GCC, students took four 90-minute classes per day, and could, along with their primary instrument, study a second or third instrument, join a Celtic ensemble, and/or a singing or a dance class. When the school day was over, the GCC community moved to a theatre venue to attend nightly teacher concerts. After the concerts were finished, students and teachers spread out to various establishments throughout town to participate in or observe scheduled jam sessions, dances, and/or impromptu sessions. The latter often lasted until 3:00 a.m. or later, sometimes continuing until sunrise.

Research Participants

Ten adult student participants were selected based on an email invitation, sent by the GCC's administration, asking incoming students if they would be willing to be interviewed and observed during the

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[3] According to Berg (2007), "some researchers seek to understand the worldview of native inhabitants' social environments, or what may be called the *emic* world view. This *emic* or insider's view of the world can be contrasted by the *etic* or outsiders worldview" (p. 173). Ethnomusicologists Steven Feld (1988), Bruno Nettl (1983), and Timothy Rice (2003) also discuss the value of an *emic* perspective in field research.

[4] Creswell (2003) listed a variety of narrative forms, including "the use of the narrative approach in the qualitative strategies of inquiry like a case study or ethnography" (p. 197). At the specific level in ethnography, one example of narrative convention was "the use of long, short, and text-embedded quotations" (p. 197) like the ones in this paper. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discussed the idea of "nested stories" (p. 1) of participants and researcher relative to the same research landscape, and this was also applicable to this research.

GCC week. I did not interview all of the students who responded because there were an overwhelming number who wanted to be study participants. I narrowed the selection of students to be interviewed to those whose schedules did not overlap with one another, and this immediately winnowed the number of potential student participants to ten. I also wanted to include a mixture of returning and new students; this occurred naturally within this group of ten students. Participants played a variety of Celtic instruments; many also sang and were involved in traditional dance as well. Participants were given pseudonyms in order to retain their anonymity, indicated in Table 1, below.

Table 1
Characteristics of Study Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Years learning Celtic music
Laura	F	48	10
Stefan	M	47	9
Sal	M	32	5
Robert	M	50	4
John	M	46	15
Betty	F	53	4
Anne	F	44	7
Dana	F	29	7
Tony	M	52	11
Lynn	F	54	8

Data Collection Devices

Individual interviews and observations. Interviews took place throughout the GCC week and were scheduled after participants were observed either in classes and/or at one of the nightly jam sessions. Session observations were, by necessity, more serendipitous due to the osmotic nature of sessions. Observation data also served, to some extent, to triangulate data obtained through interviews. Because I had *emic* status as an instructor, observation was relatively unobtrusive, and I participated in musical activities when appropriate. To clarify data from the initial interview and observations, follow

Data Analysis

Once all of the transcripts and field

aural/oral learning, yet had difficulty with it in practice.[6]

Bi-musical Learners

Although several participants felt that they could learn music either way, two of them expressed equal comfort with aural/oral and visual music learning, and therefore were identified as bi

music only when he “got stuck” aurally
learning tunes on the ban

considered himself "addicted" to note reading. This was his second year at GCC. Based on his experience learning fiddle "by ear" the last year, has adopted his own "call and response" strategy for learning new tunes based on fiddle instructor Pierre Schryer's use of the technique. Robert described,

> Pierre would play one or two bars slowly, and then we'd play it back, and then he played it again slowly, and then we'd play it back, and then he played it again. Then the next two bars, and then four and eight, and he would play the whole tune up front first, at normal speed. Then he'd usually do it again slowly, and then he'd say, "OK, we're going to go through it," and we'd slowly build the tune up chunk by chunk. It was great. I'd never learned like that before.

Another primarily visual learner, John, explained that his first experience at this year's GCC re-affirmed his intuitions about the advantages of aural music rate at which they were adapting to aural learning appeared to be connected to self-confidence as well as the types of learning strategies that they were able to devise. For example, Betty, as a child, was completely intimidated by her father's ability to play piano "by ear." This was something that she was never able to do, despite many years of formal conservatory piano training and hard work. She classified herself as a strong visual learner, and was convinced she would never develop her aural memory to the same extent as her visual memory. However, Betty said,

> I am comfortable with playing by ear now, but it depends on what I'm playing. If it's a tune I know – from my childhood, from my life – then I'm comfortable with it. I can pick it up. I couldn't very well when I started, but now I can pick it up, and I can almost immediately know what note I should start on, rather than having to experiment …. I don't know how I do that, but I do, and I can usually figure out the tune if I know it, pretty well right off. I'll play maybe the odd little flub, but then I immediately know it's not the right note and I can find it.

Because Betty was most comfortable with notation, but also understood the importance of aural learning in CTM, she has devised a learning method that used a combination of standard written notation and recordings of her tin whistle teacher, Loretto Reid – who did not read standard notation – playing tunes. Betty began by calling Reid before her lessons, asking her the names of tunes that they would be working on, then finding and downloading written notation of those tunes from the Internet. At her lesson, Betty marked on the sheet music any ornaments Reid suggested along with any variations in the tune that Reid made. They finished with Reid recording the tune for Betty, who then listened to the tune "as much as I could stand it," beginning by learning the tune as much as she could "by ear," and stopping when she became too frustrated. At this point, Betty resorted to sheet music, and added that, in addition to finding the right notes, it was useful for her "to see" where Reid had marked the spots where ornaments could be inserted. As frustrating as this

because a peer had told them that it was "the right way" to learn CTM. All of the participants – even those who claimed not to be aural learners – did eventually come to understand why learning "by ear" was necessary if one was to become a proficient CT musician. In other words, they experienced their own "paradigm shift" as to how written notation functions in CTM compared to Western art music.

With the exceptions of Lynn and Tony, who learned only through written notation, there was a wide variance of strategies among the participants. Their abilities toward aural/oral learning varied from each individual, and personal discrepancies – strengths and weaknesses – resulted in the development of each participant's unique learning strategy. Strategies often included some type of written notation –for example, standard musical notation or guitar tablature – some type of recording technology, and, in the case of two participants, watching other CT musicians' fingers while playing at sessions. Green's (2002) participants also developed personal learning strategies, as did Veblen and Waldron's (2008).

Participants who were the most satisfied with their own musicality, and who also expressed the most comfort with their own music learning abilities, were those situated at the middle of the "bi-musical" continuum. In other words, those learners who were both proficient aural/oral and visual learners were glad that they were able to learn in either mode, because the ability to do so made CTM more accessible and easier to learn than music learners who were restricted only to one learning mode. Like Cope's (2005), Kerlin's (2004), and Waldron and Veblen's (2009a) participants, all of the participants in this study valued the ability to "learn by ear" more than being a "good" sight-reader, and this was because aural/oral learning was perceived as a more "authentic" and musical way to learn CTM. The one participant (Dana) who did not read written notation maintained that she wished that she could read notation as well as learn music more proficiently "by ear."

With the exception of Dana, all of the participants had either been members of their secondary school instrumental ensembles or were enrolled in private lessons through the Royal Conservatory during their school years. All of the participants who were members of their schools' instrumental performing ensembles had positive memories of the experience, but the participants who had taken private lessons through the Conservatory reported experiences that ranged from mildly negative to outright disparaging. Based on participants' experiences with Conservatory lessons, and in particular, piano instruction, instructors in that institution should at the very least consider adding aural/oral learning to the curriculum in the early years

We usually assume that “music

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