

# How Can We Incorporate Informal Learning and Formal Learning in Music Education

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**Abstract:** *With the continuous development of politic, economy, and culture, the importance of education around the world is rapidly increasing, and the methods of education are constantly being updated. Music as a strong comprehensive discipline often needs to be taught through the constant exploration of new methods, so this article will discuss how formal and informal learning methods can be combined into music education. This paper first analyzes what formal and informal learning is, and then finds the use of the two learning methods in learning, and finally explores that the zone of proximal development proposed by Vygotsky can provide an important aid to the combination of the two methods. In the future, this paper hopes to demonstrate more new forms and new methods to throw into the cause of music education through more practice.*

**Keywords:** *Formal learning, Informal learning, Music education*

## 1. Introduction

As we all know, the education system has lots of learning methods and currently the most commonly used teaching method is formal teaching in the world. Formal learning methods dominate how to teach students in a good and effective manner, providing the basic knowledge for a wide range of teaching practices, and also suitable used in school which can teach a large number of students meantime. It will reduce the use of manpower of teacher, but can cultivate many talented people with the basic professional knowledge [1]. On contrast, a significant feature in the use of informal learning methods is self learning, it needs students to have ability in self-conception. Recently, the use of this method has a gradually increased, that's because of the progress of society and the changes of the times. So, we should try to combine the advantages of the two teaching modes for teaching so as to create more different teaching contributes to the world [2]. In addition, we should pay attention to combining the two teaching methods in the teaching context and finding the high quality combination method from practice. For music, a comprehensive discipline, the teaching methods of folk music, popular music, classical music, music history, and music philosophy are all diverse, so which subject is more suitable as the beginning of the combination of the two learning methods, we can conduct in-depth investigation and learning [3].

## 2. Main body

Formal learning is learning conducted in a systematic and conscious way. It is planned and guided by teachers, usually in a face-to-face manner or through online learning platforms. These types of training require set up lesson plans in advance and have a clear structural framework, deadlines, and clear goals and always happen in school. While, informal learning is on the opposite way. It is unstructured, usually unintentional, and occurs outside of the traditional learning environment. The important thing is that it is self-directed, with no real goal, but happen suddenly [4-5]. It can emerged anytime, anywhere. So specifically in the study of music, how do we define the study as informal learning?

The famous educator Lucy Green (2008) gave five relevant definitions to informal learning in music. The first one is that the music to be learned is chosen by the learner [6]. It means teacher should give back the right of option to children, rather than select the topic at first. The second is the learner need to use their ears to acquire skills through hearing, rather than learning theoretical knowledge in school. And, it will become very difficult to the children who do not have the training in music when he was young. Because someone who listen the sound unconsciously, he will not feel and realize any necessary knowledge. The third is self-directed and self-regulated learning or discussing with friends to gain knowledge. This step is not only need children have some friends to talk with and believe a team strength, but also the ability in thinking rapidly. The fourth is the knowledge acquired inadvertently, such as when

some people were have a common communication, and one person absorb something new, this can call as informal learning and this person need to make a development with it in detail at a later stage. The fifth is to integrate improvisation, performance, composition and use the creativity. It can be looked as studying in the creating progress [7]. The above five points can show that the learning method is an informal learning mode.

There are actually many benefits of combining these two learning methods. Because in many high schools, lots of teachers always want pupils to learn the knowledge from books, in order to get high marks in examinations, but the students may not absorb the real knowledge into their minds, only just handle the test. Many times, the teacher uses formal learning to teach them but ignores the motivation of students which is informal learning, which may violation of the principle of following the development of the student's personality [8].

So, can informal learning using in school? Lucy Green did an experiment of informal learning teaching in the classroom. The experiment is to let the teacher stand back in the classroom, and the students need to choose other children to form a group. Students are also required to listen to the music they are interested in, and after listening through their ears, to play the music in various forms by themselves. No one will help them in the process, they will make their own adaptations to do some creation without study. If the children cannot do some composing, they will needs to listen to the performance and try to imitate the music of others (Green, 2002). This sounds very difficult to children. But the teachers found that students really have a lot of unexpected musical abilities, and they can be inspired by music [9]. They realized before that they did not provide enough trust for the music organized by the students. Sometimes a child can play a musical instrument without learning, even if it is simple, such as a drum or other percussion, but this is the potential of the child. All in all, informal learning can make us discover more surprises on children.

According to the professor from London College Lucy Green (2008) composed "such learning practices could possibly enhance motivation and increase a range of musical skills in ways that are largely missing from pedagogy and from the school textbooks". However, there is also a disadvantage in this teaching method. Because this situation would cause the teacher to be nervous, because they did not know what the next step was, this means that the development of the curriculum is unknown. In particular, they were used to controlling the environment before (Snead, 2008) [10]. So it is important to find a suitable method which can incorporate these two ways.

Hess (2020) conducted a survey of the informal and formal learning experiences of 20 radical musicians who come from different countries with different ages, genders, social status and musical styles. The survey found that more than half of the radical musicians believed that they were self-taught, because at first, some of them just fell in love with music while they got an instrument and started to try it alone. Later, in order to figure out a certain musical style that they wanted to know, they conducted the research. It turned out that they completed the learning of that musical instrument unknowingly. Actually, these musicians who experienced informal learning possess the spirit of "self-learning", "self-discipline", "self-determination" and "wondering". Although their informal music learning experience is very successful, they still regret not taking part in formal music learning. Because the knowledge base lays a high level of personal development. But we can't rule out the development of a new form of music language [11]. Right now in the exchange of music, there always need "symbols" that everyone knows to communicate, this can be understood as "music language".

Western music education is usually centered on "symbols" (Bartel, 2004), because it helps people communicate better. Green (2002) once said that some pop musicians lack some important skills because they lack the learning of "symbols". Many students also believe they need these symbols to improve their various aspects, such as writing and reading some musical knowledge. However, some radical musicians say that while they advocate finding ways to balance formal and informal learning, popular music education programs often don't use these "symbols" for teaching, because they think the "symbols" will limit their performance and development. Most scholars believe that the right to choose whether or not to use "symbols" should be left to students, allowing students to choose from their own point of view (Feichas, 2010) [12].

But the real combination is on the premise of theoretical foundation, while students have basic knowledge and then they can perform improvise better. So before turning to free play, we need to understand the necessary theoretical basis in order to better combine our own insights with theories. Although theory cannot be the entirety of music education, it is an important part of the broader understanding of music. While, someone argued that "Music theory is related to music creation, just like astronomy is related to the telescope you use. We focus on these telescopes, we do not focus on the stars."

Thinking from another angle, the lack of music theory may provide people with some freedom to innovate. So actually the best way is to get the balance between formal and informal learning, so that students can participate in different musical experiences in their life (Dean, 2019).

In the United Kingdom, a music teaching method based on personalized informal learning and formal learning was developed in 2003, called Musical Futures (Crawford, 2017). It was designed by middle school students, and later turned into a system in allowing students to build new knowledge and develop skills in a social environment (Anderson et al., 2000). During the development of Musical Futures, while meeting the curriculum requirements, it is needed to use a balanced teaching method to cultivate students' interest in music and classroom participation, develop students' potential, and surpass the previously "fettered" teaching and learning. And this is a necessary process to balance formal and informal learning. This kind of developmental effect on students that can meet the curriculum requirements to a large extent is because the policy advocates the use of popular music and completely informal teaching methods to attract and motivate students. Meanwhile, teacher will build a foundation structure of music knowledge to students.

Under the influence of constructivist philosophy and thoughts in contemporary education, many scholars have shown that every student has different learning methods and abilities, and teachers should provide students with a real learning experience to attract students' interest. What is more, teachers should understand their students in order to better expand their knowledge and skills (Dewey, 1944). Generally speaking, the teachers stated that the improvement of students' musical skills exceeded their expectations, and then students are more likely to realize their musical potential (Hallam et al., 2008). Although some experimental data supports the above findings, people do not know how to determine these musical skills which learned by students and how to measure them yet. Therefore, we need to carefully mention these musical skills in detail to let students recognize which they have already knew it, and also the important impact on students' learning is also need to find out explicitly.

This combined teaching method was also introduced to Australia from the UK, but ACARA (2016) stated that although this method has many unexpected surprises, it does not meet the Australian curriculum framework. Because to train a comprehensive music learner, music education system is essential. So what is not applicable in Australia maybe suitable or not be applicable in other countries, it means that we have to think about how to develop an integrated teaching method that is tailored to national conditions.

Looking more at it, most informal learning takes place in popular music, because this is a daily occurrence for popular musicians. So for other music styles such as classical music, how to integrate it into informal learning is still a difficult problem. Furthermore, how to integrate formal and informal learning into schools to become an usual teaching way is also a difficult problem, because some scholars believe that once a curriculum goal is established, this is no longer informal learning. However, Musical Futures took the first step to combine informal learning with formal learning pedagogy, and it has already achieved a certain degree of success. We should take a positive attitude towards it.

For combine the two learning modes, we should also have a standard. In 1998, Baker proposed four important teaching attributes, namely content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and emotional attributes, and compared teaching results in teaching. Content knowledge is the basic. Pedagogical knowledge can be understood that teachers can clearly express the knowledge structure, and can use different teaching methods for different students. Emotional attributes refer to the related factors that affect students' learning process and learning effect, such as interest, self-confidence, and cooperative spirit. To compare teaching results, means the learning result of the students. For formal and informal learning, we should regard the first point and the fourth point as the two teaching jointly required, and let the second point used in formal learning, and the third point corresponds to informal teaching. And Finally obey the rule, to find the coalition of two teaching modes.

From a philosophical point of view to think about this integrated study method, Lev Vygotsky's (1896-1934) zone of proximal development area may provide ideas for the combination of the two teaching modes. He said it is believed that there are two levels of student development, one is the current level of the student, which refers to the level of problem solving that can be achieved when independent activities. The other is the possible level of development of the student, which means the potential obtained through teaching. The gap between the two levels is the zone of proximal development area. Teaching should focus on the student's recent development area, provide students with difficult content, mobilize students' enthusiasm, develop their potential, surpass their recent development area and reach the level of the next stage of development, and then proceed to the development of the next development area on this basis. So teach students some basic knowledge, make them interested, and explore the next step by themselves. The ultimate goal is to make sure that students already have basic knowledge and they were able further

to learn some complex things spontaneously. This is the best effect achieved by balancing formal and informal learning. And some scholars said that understanding the zone of proximal development area of students is very important in the process of learning (Crawford, Year 2014), meantime in the combine of formal learning and informal learning. And Lucy Green indicated that incorporating informal learning principles into schools can connect young people's music world with school music, making learning more relevant, in-depth and enjoyable.

### 3. Conclusion

In summarize, formal learning has many benefits, and its norm makes communication between learners less difficult, but it often ignores the developmental autonomy and diversity of students. While informal learning can develop students' potential abilities, the height of development may be limited without a theoretical basis. Then, if we use the auxiliary hints of Vygotsky's recent development zone, we can conclude that after students have a certain amount of knowledge through basic formal teaching in schools, teachers can make students have a strong interest in the subject through some novel models, so that students can conduct their own research, which is to combine formal and informal learning and can be used in practice. Music is of great significance to people, almost every place in human life has music, and music is also a different way of communication, music can make different groups of people on different emotional levels to get different feelings. The definition of music philosophy is to develop students' musical abilities through experience and practice, and in fact, the arguments of both formal and informal learning methods need to be derived through practice. Therefore, practice leads to truth, and teachers should constantly learn how to give learning more opportunities for development on the basis of theory. Meanwhile, innovative teaching has been continuing, as teachers, we should also continue to develop our own potential, to create more new forms of teaching methods for students.

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