



1 Dec 2011 – Plymouth Music Zone's Executive Director Dares To Use the 'V' Word

The National Plan for Music Education – how's the dust settling for you?

So, following the publication of the NPME, the commentary has started, organisations are providing their official response, campaigners are blogging and meanwhile the world carries on. Perhaps it's just me (is it?) but I was hoping for something far more radical to shake up the silo driven music education sector that seems to exist. Sure, hubs might be part of the answer but I reckon this won't tackle the biggest issue of them all i.e. the inability of the sector to collectively articulate a shared vision in terms of what a fantastic music education is. I think it was David Miliband who apparently commented at a meeting of the sector at Downing Street some years ago: "This is all very confusing." Tell me about it. Polarised, outmoded opinions about what is good & bad music still seem to exist, organisational self-interest peddling their wares is evident for all to see. Should we take a step back and ask...what difference will the construction of a hub really, genuinely make to the lives of children and young people?

How often have you sat in meetings where all sorts of odd language is used e.g. 'access' or 'excellence', 'formal' or 'informal', 'process' or 'product'. I've been back in this sector for just over a year. In coming back, I've noticed the dogma continues. My response to the language is as follows:

All activities for children starting out in music should be excellent. All activities for advanced young musicians should be excellent. All activities for all young musicians regardless of their backgrounds and circumstances should all be excellent. End of. It's all about context and access and excellence is for me one and the same thing. Is it 'formal' or 'informal' – dare I say, who cares? It's music. Is it 'process' or 'product' - surely it's both? Let's put this unhelpful language in a box and bury it away once and for all.

I guess my starting point is the belief in the ability of the young person to achieve remarkable things relative to their context given the opportunity, right support and guidance every step of the way. This requires a skilled, broad minded, non-defensive music education workforce who can provide that guidance, whether through direct teaching, leading, coaching or mentoring. To provide that tailored, personalised learning experience for the young person they need to have the courage to admit that sometimes they won't have the answer but know somebody who does. How often do you meet friends and family who will often tell you about giving up music as a youngster due to a bad or dull experience at school or for their instrumental lessons. Do you think this will keep happening for the current generation of young people involved in music-making? I really hope not.

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MUSIC MAKING A DIFFERENCE

In all the recent reviews / plans / funding programmes I've seen of late, the word 'vision' very rarely seems to appear. What's happened to what is for me that all important word? It's the starting point to express the ultimate goal, the end in itself, the purpose for doing what we do. Without an agreed vision, it's never clear why we're doing what we're doing. More vision please from all of us within our organisations and collectively as a sector. But not comments from Plato etc looking back. Instead, vision looking forward. Let's articulate what will look different in 5 / 10 / 15 years time to make some sense of the point in getting involved in hubs. The slightly hackneyed expression "what will success look like" needs to be answered locally, regionally and nationally to give us all something to aim for.

My overall take on it is music is music. Let's get rid of the silos, outmoded language and move on. Young people are, so can we 'grown ups'. If we are genuinely able to respond to the aspirations and ideas of young musicians, whether starting out or about to enter the profession, we've got a lot to do. Let's get on with it, with a vision in mind. I really like the well-used quote by Joel Arthur Baker:

"Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without Vision just passes the time. Vision with Action can change the world."

I buy that every time. Do you?

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