



Aspects of Snow

Benjamin Bolden

Abstract: In this article the author describes how a snow day sets the stage for a transformational music teaching and learning encounter. The author deconstructs the experience, identifying and analysing key aspects such as teacher-learner collegiality, one-to-one teaching, and slowing down.

Where I am now we have a lot of snow. And I love it.

I love to watch it fall, trudge through it, taste it, build with it, toboggan on it, throw it, jump in it and even shovel it. And I love what a mess it can make of even the best-laid plans; snow can change everything.

The power of snow became evident to me while I was in high school. A majority of students came to school by bus. If there was too much snow, the buses were cancelled, and so were classes. We were afforded a magical reprieve from on high (literally). Snow days meant freedom, and the glorious gift of time.

And as much as I appreciated snow days as a *student*, when I became a teacher, the value of snow days shot straight through the roof.

I have heard teaching likened to a speeding train, hurtling down the track: an all-consuming, all-confusing, never-ending ride at break-neck speed. No time to eat, drink, or go to the bathroom. No time to stop and think. Certainly no time to smell the roses!

Unless you are blessed with a snow day.

On one such gifted day I was sitting in my band room, feet up on the podium, smiling gleefully to myself as the snow fell outside the window. I was idly looking at the pictures in Joseph Machlis's 18th attempt to convince people to enjoy music... when what to my wondering eyes should appear, but a student.

I blinked my eyes rapidly a few times to make sure I wasn't seeing things. Charles was still there.

"Mr. Bolden... is it OK if I practice here for a while? All my classes are cancelled."

Having recently arrived at our school from another continent, Charles was not yet fully enculturated; he still came to school even though he didn't have to.

"Of course!" I exclaimed, valiantly pretending not to mind that my stolen moment was being stolen.

Charles set up his clarinet and began squawking. I gave a long-suffering sigh (quietly) and turned to the never-ending and oft-neglected task of organizing scores and parts in the filing cabinet.

After a while I stopped what I was doing and listened to Charles. He actually wasn't squawking at all; in fact, he was really playing remarkably well, given the short time he'd been acquainted with the clarinet. As new to the English language as he

was to our school, I had noticed Charles taking great pleasure in this musical version of his voice. I imagined it must be particularly satisfying for Charles to be able to say things with music, when speaking in English was so difficult and fraught. With his musical voice his lack of familiarity with the English language was irrelevant; for once he could speak without becoming tongue-tied, and even speak out above and beyond his peers.

I opened another drawer of the filing cabinet, hunted about a bit, and miraculously found what I was looking for: duets for clarinet.

I found an instrument, put it together, and sat down next to Charles. He stopped playing and looked at me expectantly. I blew into the clarinet. It squawked.

Charles grinned.

I placed the book of duets on the stand. "Would you like to play with me for a while?"

Charles nodded. "Sure, Mr. Bolden."

And so we played. And played. And played some more. And finally, Charles turned to me and said, very seriously, "Mr. Bolden, this is fun."

I suddenly felt as though a dam had burst. I smiled at Charles, and nodded my agreement, but inside I was rocking with the power of an explosive epiphany. It *was* fun. It was fun for Charles and it was fun for me. *This* was why I loved music and why I wanted to be a music teacher in the first place! This was music learning at its best.

That little monumental experience has stayed with me and fired my teaching efforts ever since.

There are three aspects of this teaching and learning encounter I would like to explore further.

Aspect One: Teacher-Learner Collegiality

The first is the aspect of teacher-learner collegiality. As Ruth Wright explains in this issue of the journal, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970)

proposed a view of the relationship between education and emancipation, focusing upon the concept of power sharing within learning. Education is exhorted to move away from a 'banking' model in which 'deposits' are made by the teacher in the mind of the learner. Instead all aspects of learning processes are negotiated between learners and teachers, students being empowered with control over their own learning. A collegial atmosphere is advocated, featuring mutually respectful dialogue between teachers and learners.

I believe one of the reasons my encounter with Charles felt so right and resonated so strongly with me had to do with the collegiality of the teacher/learner relationship. Charles had come into the music room to learn on his own terms, on his own time, and in his own way. I asked if I could join him, suggested a slightly different path, and we continued on together. Charles was not playing for me; we were playing together. We were learning together, too. This aspect of the encounter was emphasized every time I made a mistake or asked Charles to start again at measure X so I could have another crack at the tricky part. Our dialogue was collegial, mutually respectful, and largely carried out through musical means. We effortlessly negotiated how to work, learn, and achieve together. And the end result was the creation of something tangible – music – deeply satisfying (and fun) for both of us.

Aspect Two: One-to-One Teaching

The second aspect of the encounter I wish to address concerns the dynamic of one-to-one teaching and learning. Those rare moments when you can focus all your pedagogical intentions on one person only – not a class, but an individual – are glorious. In one-to-one situations, both teacher and learner can bring all their attention to each other and the task at hand. This focus serves to enhance meaningful communication (including feedback), enable better understanding of the learner's needs, and support the development of a productive learning relationship.

Although comparatively rare in *school* music environments, one-to-one teaching is a phenomenon deeply embedded and honoured within many music practices. The medical profession has also recognized the value of learning this way. Writing in the *British Medical Journal*, Jill Gordon explains:

a feature of one to one teaching is the opportunity to adjust what you teach to the learner's needs – “customise” your teaching ... the secret of education is to find out what the learner already knows and teach accordingly. In a lecture, tutorial, or seminar you cannot hope to diagnose and respond to every individual's learning needs, but a one to one relationship provides an opportunity to match the learning experience to the learner. (p. 543)

As I played duets with Charles, I was able to identify and respond immediately and precisely to his learning needs. I could quickly demonstrate a fingering, or rhythm, or phrasing. I could turn the page if he seemed unengaged by the material. I could slow down the tempo, or speed it up. I could ask him what kind of music he liked to listen to, and what he thought of all the snow.

Whether operating in the realms of music or medicine, one-to-one teaching makes a lot of sense. Rather than painfully calculated one-size-fits-all approximations, teachers can provide educational experiences uniquely designed and tailored with one customer in mind.

Aspect Three: Slowing Down

The third and most significant aspect of my encounter with Charles – indeed the aspect that made the encounter possible – was the slowing down. As I bemoaned earlier, and illustrated with the train analogy, my experiences of teaching and learning are invariably rushed. I know that I am not alone:

Time is a consumable that we never have enough of.
[...] We do not have enough time ever to accomplish

what we want or need to. However, what we can do is open up the time we have by recognizing what is real, meaningful and relevant, and allowing time for that. (Cameron & Carlisle, 2004, p. 36)

So somehow, according to Cameron & Carlisle, we need to slow down and ‘open up’ time for the things that really matter. Sometimes, we need to stop the clock. Elliot Eisner expresses a similar sentiment. In his article ‘*What education can learn from the arts*,’ Eisner proposes

that one of the qualities we ought to be promoting in our schools is a slowing down of perception, the ability to take one's time, to smell the flowers, to really perceive in the Deweyan sense, and not merely recognize what one looks at. (p. 8)

I believe that Charles and I, cocooned by the snow day and blissfully ignoring the clock, were not only going through the motions of engaging with music (and with each other *through* music) – we really took the time to do it properly. Working away on our clarinet duets, we found the space to move beyond mere recognition and into the realm of *perceiving* the richness of the music experience. We indulged in “a savoring, a qualitative exploration of a variety of qualities, qualities that constitute the qualitative wholeness of the object or event” (Eisner, 2009, p. 8). We allowed ourselves to sink in and wallow in the experience; as a result, we drew more from it.

I have learned the value of stepping off the treadmill now and again. Of making snow angels, spraying new fallen snow with coloured water, and building snow forts. (I once engaged so fully in building my fortress, reached such a state of flow, I didn't notice my ear being ferociously bitten by frost. To this day the skin of the ear peels as though sunburned whenever it gets cold.) Slowing down enables my senses to come alive.

Dewey argued, and I endorse his argument, that learning how to slow down perception is one of the primary ways in which one can enrich one's experience ... much of human experience is dissipated or weak because of the absence of time that needs to be taken to see, to really see. (Eisner, 2009, p. 8).

I am all for slowing down. I know its value. I know how much better it enables me to see.

But I also know how elusive opportunities to slow down can be.

Thank goodness for snow days.

Thank goodness for snow.

References

- Cameron, L. & Carlisle, K. (2004). What kind of social climate do we create in our music classrooms? In Bartel, L. (Ed). *Questioning the music education paradigm*, pp. 21-38. Toronto: Canadian Music Educators Association.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. New York: Perigee Books.
- Eisner, E. (2009). What education can learn from the arts. *Art Education*, 62(2), 6-9.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: The Seabury Press.
- Gordon, J. (2003). ABC of learning and teaching in medicine: One to one teaching and feedback. *British Medical Journal*, 326(7388), 543-5.
- Wright, R. (2012). Thinking globally, acting locally: Informal learning and social justice in music education. *Canadian Music Educator*, (54)3.