ASME 2015 Conference Report
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The 2015 Australian Society for Music Education (ASME) Conference was held at Prince Alfred College from the 30th September to the 2nd October 2015. With the theme ‘Music: Educating for Life’ the conference provided participants with the opportunity to engage in both seminar papers and workshops, centred on the benefits of, and advocacy for, music education for all students.

I am currently employed as a music teacher in a South Australian secondary school and am also a post graduate research student investigating the effective use of technology in South Australian government high schools. To reflect my research interests, I attended many sessions exploring the different ways Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can be used in music education. In addition, I also attended sessions on teaching topics about music from other cultures to continue my development in this area.

The keynote presenters for the 2015 ASME conference presented some insightful and thought provoking comments on music education in a range of contexts. Professor Graham Welch spoke about the importance of music in special education within a United Kingdom context. He spoke at length about the ‘Sounds of Intent’ projects where students with special needs engaged in music education. Professor Welch also discussed how music is multi-sited in the brain and that different parts of the brain are responsible for different musical behaviours. Interestingly, Professor Welch discussed that musical understanding begins to develop before language, with children experiencing sound in the third trimester of pregnancy. He then went on to show the conference, videos of children with ‘atypical’ brains (eg students needing additional classroom support) engaging in musical activities. In these case studies, students were described as having profound and multiple learning difficulties however, they were able to engage in complex musical behaviours. Professor Welch encouraged conference participants to consider music to not only be music for life, but music as life.

The second keynote was given by Richard Gill, who spoke with great passion about the teaching profession and arts advocacy. He encouraged music educators to teach all musical styles, rather than teaching only the pop genres, with the perception that these are the only genres that engage students. He also encouraged ASME to consider a corporate
membership to allow other musical organisations to band together to create a united group for music advocacy.

The third keynote presenter was Katie Wardrobe. Katie Wardrobe is a music technology trainer and consultant. The language of gamers inspired her keynote. She showed examples of technology-based activities that reflect the cultural background of 21st century learners. The ideas shared by Katie Wardrobe link closely with my research topic with her suggestions for technology use in classroom music having a strong focus on engaging student in active music making. As I was familiar with the work of Katie Wardrobe I also selected to attend two elective workshops that she ran, as I felt they would link strongly with my research topic. The first elective session was about live looping with an iPad. In this session Katie Wardrobe shared appropriate apps to use for live looping and also inexpensive hardware that could be used in conjunction with an iPad to improve the overall product. She highlighted that projects involving live looping require high level arranging skills to create a satisfactory product. I hadn’t considered this factor in creating live looping projects for students. I found this concept to be an interesting link to the higher order cognitive processes I am exploring through my research. The second elective session explored strategies for flipping the music education classroom. This was of particular interest to me because it is a strategy I have wanted to try with my own music classes. In this session Katie shared appropriate software for creating videos for flipped classrooms. She also made suggestions for iPad applications that could be used to create videos on theoretical concepts for students that would be helpful for multiple ability level classes. As always, every time I attend a workshop run by Katie Wardrobe I leave with additional skills and strategies I can try with my own classes immediately.

The final keynote was the closing presentation by Dr Anita Collins. Dr Collins spoke at length about the impact that engaging in musical activities has on brain development. She highlighted that students who engage in active music making have highly connected brains. Dr Collins suggested that her research indicates however, that the benefits of learning music were only apparent if the musical activities met certain criteria. Specifically, the students should be actively engaged in making music, the study must be done for an extended time (a minimum of two years), it must be formal, scaffolded learning and the learning must be social. It is only when these criteria are met that executive function is developed. Dr Collins’ inspiring closing keynote encouraged conference participants to consider the long-term benefits of learning music, explaining that two years of music learning at five years of age leads to healthier brains in seventy-five year olds. In this way she suggested that if every child had access to formal music learning, we could change an entire generation of people.
In addition to attending the keynote presentations, I also attended a large number of seminar presentation and workshops throughout the conference. One of these presentations was given by James Humberstone who is a lecturer in Music Education at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. He highlighted statistics from the United Kingdom that suggest that only 2-5% of students choose to study music, even though the vast majority of students consider listening to music to be a hobby. James Humberstone suggested that the role of the teacher in education has changed and his presentation explored music making through electronic methods (eg computer generated) in classroom music. Also exploring the concept of electronic music making, Phil Heeley presented a range of technological solutions to allow students in special education to engage in practical music making. Also of interest was a seminar presentation by Andrew Sutherland that explored a study he completed investigating the musical activities that influenced students in engaging in music making post secondary school. Of these factors a strong theme emerged in musical communities. Andrew Sutherland highlighted that students who engage in extra curricular music activities and excursions were more likely to persist in music education. This highlighted to me the importance of excursions and camps in music education.

I also attended several workshops that demonstrated practical music making activities that I could use in my classes. In one of these workshops Jane Nicholas explored an Orff approach to teaching Indigenous Australian Music in a secondary context. This session provided a great range of resources to explore with my students including examples of Indigenous Australian music and examples of ways to explore improvisation and composition using images as inspiration. Likewise, Ben Fuller also presented a workshop, which explored composition in a band context for secondary school students. The approach adopted by Ben Fuller allowed students with limited experience on their instrument to engage in compositional tasks to demonstrate their understanding of theoretical concepts. Ben Fuller’s session provided a great range of resources and ideas I could use in my classes immediately.

My learning from the 2015 ASME Conference will be distributed to the broader education in a number of ways. At the site I am employed at I have shared my learning with the students by showing students Anita Collins’ TED Ed animation on music and the brain. This has led to interesting discussions with students on the benefits of learning to play a musical instrument. I have also written a short article for the school’s website highlighting that I was fortunate to receive a Teacher Registration Board sponsored place to attend the 2015 ASME conference. In this article I highlighted some of my learning from the conference that I
considered might be relevant for parents. I have approached my line manager to negotiate to share my learning within the Arts faculty at my site. This will be done as a part of the next appropriate Arts meeting. At this meeting I hope to share parts of the conference that might be suitable for a cross curriculum approach as our Arts department is a multiple discipline team. I also participate in a professional network of music teachers from the northern region of Adelaide called ‘NESMEA.’ I have approached the coordinator of this network and negotiated to share my learning from the ASME conference at our next professional development session.

The 2015 ASME conference has been a fantastic opportunity to engage in professional learning specific to the curriculum area I teach. Often music educators work in isolation with only small numbers of music educators at any given site. In light of this, the ASME conference has also been a good opportunity to network with other music educators within Australia. I would like to thank the Teachers Registration Board for sponsoring my place within the conference. I gained great insight into current music education research and also new teaching strategies that I look forward to sharing with my classes in the future.