EXPLORING TASTE IN MUSIC AMONG EACH OTHER: AN EXAMPLE FOR A RESEARCH-ORIENTED TEACHING STRATEGY

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Abstract

This short paper is about reflecting on pre-conceptions as a tool of research among students in tertiary education of any research field connected to music. Some new insights show interesting applications of music psychology generated through the students' discussion after they were confronted with their own pre-conceptions about situations and people.

Everybody agrees researchers should know about the state of research in their field. This seems to make up less than half the story, though. Research also requires to know oneself. The more the better. Not only a profound knowledge of one's own pre-conceptions, all of them culturally patterned, many of them like words unspoken and sights deliberately unseen, but also the ability to step out of these, at least temporarily. The paper is about how to teach this ability.

Having one's musical preferences peer-reviewed implies an effective way to focus on joint acquisitions of new knowledge. This approach not only involves lecturers and students likewise, but also group experiences in general.

In much the same way as processes of othering are based on attributions, students had to reject or accept their colleagues' attributions concerning some of their allegedly best loved or most avoided youtube-clips. This is how we worked at Salzburg university. In the end it all came down to re-study each other's pre-conceptions and attitudes. Many of them were worked out via partner interviews.

Exploring each other's musical preferences as well as each other's listening behaviour makes students train as researchers, especially for ethnographic interviews. It helps them understand their past and current self, and how experiences shaped their world views.

Keywords

Musical Preferences, Listening Behaviour, Group Dynamics, Reflecting Pre-Conceptions

Introduction

Everybody agrees to that researchers should know about the state of research in their field. This seems to make up less than half of the story, though. Research also requires the researcher 'to know oneself'. The more the better. Not only a profound knowledge of one's own pre-conceptions is worthwhile, all of them culturally patterned, many of them like words unspoken and sights deliberately unseen, but also the ability to step out of these, at least temporarily. This essay is about how to teach this ability, considering that old ways won't open new doors.

In fact, there are strong links between teaching and research as both strategies may have to overcome states of mind known as 'eyes wide shut'. We can think of 'eyes wide shut' merely as an oxymoron, i.e. a figure of speech in which apparently contradictory terms appear in conjunction.

It means, simply, that people refuse to see something in plain view. Fuelled by preconceived notions of what this something should be like, people rely on their personal and always culturally patterned strategies of data-reduction. This is necessary to cope with everyday life. As a consequence, according to Kahneman, people tend to prefer to think too fast (Kahneman 2011)[1]. Furthermore, 'eyes wide shut' does not apply only to naive individuals, but especially to those who may choose to take on something but are not used to or simply do not dare to think 'outside the box'. By way of contrast, doing research will always imply paying respect to the possibility of otherness as an indispensable and essential condition, achievable by thinking slowly (Kahneman 2011), and trying out new ways of thinking. To train students in this respect, teaching has to tame intuitive predictions, even to provoke concerns. As a result, cognitive unease may very well occur. In the end all these classroom experiences will help to facilitate changes of perspective concerning one's self-perceptions and self-images. Accordingly, the ability to work out misunderstandings, errors or even grave mistakes, let alone failures, will always make or break any serious research project. Altogether, there is hardly any good research that does not go back to good teaching in this respect. This insight does not yet appear to be spreading widely, the more so in schools and universities still ruled by traditional teacher-centred courses of instruction, as caricatured by the German humorist, poet, illustrator, and painter Wilhem Busch (1832-1908): "Everybody's asleep except one who is talking. This is what is called teaching." (Translation by the author. In German original: Wenn alles schläft und einer spricht, so nennt man dieses Unterricht).

Hypothesis

The teaching strategy proposed here not only involves lecturers and students alike, but also includes group experiences in general. It encourages to focus on group dynamics and use them in a constructive way. Having one's musical preferences peer-reviewed implies an effective way to focus on joint acquisitions of new knowledge. Doing research implies experimental as well as experiental learning. Documenting these processes of learning via introspection on one hand and various types of feedback (video, audio) on the other helps to achieve a valuable research materia.. Making students discuss these materials among each other, i.e. from a more intracultural point of view, small differences, especially those who seem to defy logic, will help to explore preconceived ideas and notions, presupposition, as well as prejudgements. In other words: The teaching strategy will help to point out conventions that are normally assumed to be all too obvious, each one of them taken for granted.

Methodology

All the experiences, findings and insights mentioned here stem from a seminar in musicology on musical taste, conducted by myself at the University of Salzburg in the winter-term of 2014/15 (14W316321). More than 10 students were to take part, all of them having studied Brandl's rather short outline (very few pages) of the characteristics of musical taste beforehand (Brandl 2005: 37; hereinafter translated by the author). Ten essays were completed. Four of these were to inspire extended master theses (see the references for further details). Lisa-Marie Hirsch's role was a bit different, though. She did not attend the seminar as a student, instead she worked with us as a participant observer. She also took the role of a co-supervisor (Hirsch 2015). Frederic Luftensteiner deserves mention because he deepened on the ethnographical skills he learnt in this seminar not only when preparing his master thesis but also when exploring new horizons of data acquisition for the dissertation (Luftensteiner 2015, and forthcoming).

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[1] Data reduction has to do with human cognition. I'm afraid Kahneman's insights are universal – which made him win the Noble prize as the first psychologist ever.

As a starting point we decided to consider the community of active students (between 40 and 50) of our department for musicology/dance studies as our basic population. According to Brandl "taste creates a distance from one's self, but refers to an ideal community" (Brandl ibid.), in this case to a group of people allegedly united by a common taste, whether this was true or not. In much the same way the seminar participants saw themselves as a random sample of all the tastes that made up our department in winter 2014.

Then every seminar participant was asked to write down, anonymously, two YouTube links on a piece of paper. The first YouTube link was to lead to a musical rendition that was supposedly not liked at all, maybe even thought of as inappropriate, by at least one of our colleagues without naming that person. The second YouTube-link was to be one of one's own favourites of all time, representing a musical genre one would die for - or at least take along to some desert island. All in all we ended up with a pool of 20 YouTube-clips, not knowing whether these musics were greatly appreciated or more or less depreciated. Thus our experimental design took into account that "taste is not causally based on a common sense, but characterises it with an appealing character, which does not have to be understood by everyone, but should be valid for everyone." (Brandl 2005: 37).

In the second step every student had to attribute, again anonymously, one positive (+) as well as one negative (-) video-clip to every single colleague. In the end every participant was confronted with a list of supposed positive (+) as well as list of supposed negative (-) video-examples she or he had been associated with. Brandl resumes: "Indeed taste has to do with sensory perception and intellectual discernment, but manifests itself only in concrete cultural phenomena." (Brandl 2005: 37).

In the third step we randomised pairings of students. In each pair the students were to interview each other, each interview forming the main data-base for the essay all students were required to do as their homework. Role plays served to demonstrate how to ask descriptive questions (Spradley 2001). These were necessary because "taste refers to a culture as a whole, intends to convey it as such. However, the culture does not necessarily have to appear as a whole." (Brandl 2005: 37).

The University of Salzburg requires that research involving human participants is designed and carried out in an ethical and responsible manner. Thus, research integrity and ethics had to be discussed. Respect for persons was paid by implementing the exercise of individual consent: all students were asked to discuss and to sign an interview-consent form to be included in the essay (URL 2018 V.A.), important in case interviews would be recorded electronically, i.e. by video and/or by audio. In some cases, the material was used to analyse facial expressions, body movements, and other suprasegmental activities.

In much the same way as processes of othering are based on attributions, students had to reject or accept their colleagues' attributions concerning some of their allegedly best loved or most avoided YouTube-clips. This is how we worked at the University of Salzburg. In the end it all came down to re-study pre-conceptions and attitudes among each other. Many of them were worked out via partner interviews. Students found it easy to laugh at absurd examples their peers had been attributed to them. Some of them wondered what behaviours had qualified them as hard-core fans of heavy metal, opera or free jazz. Nevertheless, dying of laughter were to lead them to scrutinise the putatively all too obvious. Discussions revealed underlying presumptions as well as simply imagined differences, all of them reflecting implicit levels of adoption, which were seldom approached let alone sorted out in a classic lecture format.

After all, students came to admit that "taste is not justifiable, i.e. it escapes the positivistic judgment as well as the rational-argumentative discourse, since it has no purpose in the sense of the essentials of life." (Brandl 2005: 37).

Recommendations

Exploring musical preferences as well as listening behaviour among each other provides students training as researchers, especially for ethnographic interviews. Furthermore, it helps them to understand their past and current self, and how experiences shaped their world views. According to Brandl, "taste emerges if lasting effects of individual experiences tip over into a lasting, after effect of (sometimes even abstractly conceived) shared experience of all listeners." (Brandl 2005: 37). The research-oriented teaching strategy outlined here implies the ability and attitude not only to admit but also to discuss one's preconceptions. Partner interviews help to create protected spaces in which shyness neither was a privilege nor an option. Some students freely admitted to have talked their hearts out in front of their peers. They all had felt safe as they had been actually safe because the interview-consent forms guaranteed to have all the recorded materials deleted at any time and in case of any doubt. Their maybe most valuable and therefore highly recommendable experience was that

> "Mere reason and logic do not necessarily mean that one respects others in their otherness: as a conviction of the absoluteness of one's own truths, it can also lead to the denial of the justification of the culture of the other with the help of reason. (...) Respect (...) means that while I understand that the culture of the other differs from mine or even contradicts it fundamentally, this otherness is as legitimate as my culture. Only on this basis a dialogue of cultures makes sense." (Brandl 2005a; Translation by the author).

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