

## **Why working with people living with dementia is so important for musicians**

Evert Bisschop Boele, Vechta, 21-9-2013

I would like to start this talk by showing you a picture. I am not going to talk about it yet. I will at the end of my talk, and I hope the significance will become clear then. Here it is:

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Let me introduce myself. My name is Evert Bisschop Boele. I am associate professor at the research group Lifelong Learning in Music at the Prince Claus Conservatoire in Groningen. Our research group carries out research into the future of the professional practice of musicians. That practice is fast changing, as you all will know. Jobs are never secure. Funding of the arts, at least in the Netherlands, is not straightforward anymore. Musicians will have to learn to work in a variety of places, in a variety of roles. Most of them will probably build up a 'portfolio career'.

Our research group is researching those changes in the musicians' professional landscape. We have been doing that for nine years now. Currently we focus on three topics:

- innovation in professional practice,
- learning music and learning musicians,
- healthy ageing through music and the arts.

You will understand that this last topic is of relevance here. We carry out various projects related to this topic.

We did, for example, a project in which we researched how to teach to play an instrument to people aged over 60. We are carrying out research about creative music workshops in residential homes for the elderly. We are now developing a research project in which we will look into the question how musicians can, through music, work on the prevention of loneliness of older people from cultural minority backgrounds.

And we have been carrying out research into the practice of Music for Life, the wonderful practice you have just heard about. Music for Life/Wigmore Hall Learning have allowed us to perform an in-depth study of their practice the past few years. The result will be a book describing and analyzing this practice, to be published soon. And currently we are in a second phase. In that phase we translate the practice of Music for Life/Wigmore Hall Learning to the Dutch situation, and develop and pilot a training module for our master students.

You have just heard about this practice. I therefore hope you will forgive me if I will not go into the practice of Music for Life in detail. Rather, I would like to talk today

about the reason **why** our research group is so interested in a project like Music for Life. I would like to answer the question why working with people living with dementia is so important for musicians. And I will do that from a more general, lifelong learning perspective.

To start with, let me mention the three reasons why our research group has been taking on research about Music for Life. The first reason is because it is a beautiful and significant practice. It is a practice in which musicians are expected to function at their peaks, artistically as well as socially. It is also a practice in which musicians can deliver a major contribution to society. They do that by using the power of music to foster the wellbeing and quality of life for people with dementia. It is, to put it in slightly economic terms, a pure 'win-win-situation' for musicians and general society alike.

The second reason for researching Music for Life is maybe not very interesting but it is good to mention it. The North of the Netherlands has recently been acclaimed by the EU as a so-called 'Reference Site'. It means that we are a good practice of a region focusing on a theme, and that theme is 'Healthy Ageing'. Healthy Ageing is a theme of the North of the Netherlands. Research universities, universities of applied sciences, university medical centres, hospitals, companies and institutions cooperate around that theme. Our university is one of the key players in the adoption of the theme. Therefore all research groups in our university are expected to also carry out research on healthy ageing. We have taken up that challenge with great pleasure because living in an ageing society is for many reasons of great significance for musicians.

But there is a third reason for researching Music for Life. It is this third reason I would like to focus upon here. The reason is that not only music is important for people with dementia, but people with dementia are important for musicians. This reason is tied to the concept of Lifelong Learning. I hope you will forgive me if I talk about that general concept a bit more, before I return to the real topic of today at the end of this talk.

You will notice that in the concept of lifelong learning the stress is on learning, not on teaching. It is not Lifelong Teaching but Lifelong Learning. We interpret the concept against the background of such theoreticians as Jean Lave, Etienne Wenger, Peter Jarvis, and, in Germany, Peter Alheit. The core of the idea of lifelong learning is that learning is something that people naturally do.

Just take a quick look at this definition of learning by Peter Jarvis:

"The combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person - body (...) and mind (...) – experiences social situations, the perceived contents of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (...)

and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.”

Lifelong learning, in our view, has the following characteristics:

- it is situated: it does not take place in a vacuum or only 'within the head', but always in context: at a certain time, in a certain place, using specific things, related to specific other people, et cetera,
- it is learner-centered and biographical: not the abstract content of learning – 'knowledge', or 'skills' – stands central, but the person whose behavior will change through learning. And that behavioral change is always related to earlier experiences of the person – to his biography,
- it is responsive and adaptive: responsive to the needs of the surrounding world, and adaptive in the sense that the person adapts his behavior to those needs,
- it often works best when it is participative, for example in communities of practice.

Learning, as I said, is situated; it always takes place in concrete situations. It takes place in social situations, characterized by all the background knowledge, convictions, norms and values we share – and sometimes do not share. It is this background knowledge that enables us to understand the situations we are in. But on the basis of this background knowledge, we are also able to change those situations. For example by taking the decision to go into new directions, by shaking off old habits. We are not completely determined by our social understanding of the world. Our definitions of the world, fixed and unchangeable as they may sometimes seem, are changeable. And sometimes they may change fundamentally. Our definition of the world can radically change – our world view can be transformed as the result of a process which might be called, after ideas of such thinkers as Jack Mezirow and Robert Kegan, transformative learning.

This is all maybe rather general and abstract. My apologies. Let me make clear what I try to say by focusing on the musician. The world view of the professional musician in modern western societies like the Netherlands, England, or Germany, is, I would say, mainly based on the idea that music is an artistic phenomenon. Music is essentially an artistic product, brought about by the musician's craftsmanship and expressivity. You might say that this is the musician's definition of musical reality. A definition which is engrained in much formal music education, and certainly within the conservatoire.

In this definition of reality, musicians traditionally think about their possible 'audiences' – in the broadest sense of the word – in terms of 'target groups'. The traditional target groups of the musician are the music lover and young people. The music lover because they 'consume' the musical products of the professional musician by buying the tickets for their concerts, buying their CDs, et cetera.

Young people because they might grow into music lovers, through for example music lessons in general education or instrumental lessons in music schools as given by professional music teachers; or even, if they are talented enough, into professional musicians.

In that respect, older people in general have seldom been a target group for musicians. Of course, the older music lover is, especially for classical musicians, of enormous importance. But older people in general are, I think, considered by many musicians as a not so interesting group. Apart from the ones who already are music lovers, there seems little sense to invest in the musical learning of elderly people. We associate learning with the young, mostly, rather than with the elderly. If anything, the elderly are a problem rather than a chance. And especially for our students, of course elderly people are often far out of sight. Yes, they have their grandparents, but that's about it.

What interests us is how we can make the domain of the elderly relevant for our students, for our future professional musicians. How can we transform the worldview of our students? How can we bring them from a world view in which the elderly are out of sight towards a world view where the elderly are seen as interesting, as a possible 'audience' – again in the widest sense? How can we make our students learn?

We think that, given our view on lifelong learning and given what is known about transformative learning, there is only one way. We have to bring our students into situations in which they actually **have** to work with the elderly. Learning takes place in real situations, situations in which students are asked to change their behavior and therefore to reflect on their thus far acquired knowledge.

And that is why for us a practice such as Music for Life is so important. We study it and then develop an equivalent for the Dutch situation with a module that teaches our students how to do this work. By that, we give students the opportunity to learn in practice what it means to work with this specific group of elderly – what it brings them. Artistically as well as socially.

This is something which cannot be taught in theory. It is only when brought into new real life situations that students really learn, that they really are asked to transform their world views. And to show you examples: here are two quotes indicating that. The first one is a quote from one of the musicians of Music for Life in England who was interviewed in the framework of our research project.

She stated:

“It gives me a complete new context for my being a musician. A complete new context and a whole range of new musical skills.”

The other quote comes from one of our recent graduates who was active in our research project on teaching the elderly an instrument. He said:

“I took part in this project to learn, to be inspired by colleagues, to work in new circumstances. I wanted to know why this theme was so important. I did not have high expectations of the lessons themselves. Teaching is something I already do for 30 hours a week, and I did not expect much difference. But eventually I have, through working with elderly pupils, found out what music can mean in human life. This project has changed my vision on music and society. Only by reflecting and watching as from a distance I saw, and I **felt**, how important my work and that of my colleagues is.”

To express this in different words, one might say that transformative learning finds place when someone finds the potential to suddenly look at reality as fresh and new instead of as predetermined and filled with prejudices. That is an enormous important capacity for music students. It is something they need in order to respond and adapt to the changes in the music world they definitely will encounter in their professional career.

It is the potential to, again and again, ask yourself in new situations the question formulated so great by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz: “What the hell is going on here?” It is the potential for openness, curiosity and reflexivity, rather than for adopting the already given standard standpoints of the world as we see it here and now.

It is, in my opinion, also the potential to look at other people intensely. To try to understand them. To give other persons room – to not think about other people in general terms. Not to think of someone as ‘a child’, ‘a Turk’, ‘an older person’, or ‘someone with dementia’, but rather as an individual.

Because it is in generalities that much of our set ways of understanding are captured; and it is in the idiosyncratic and the individual that those set ways of understanding may be challenged. As soon as we learn that, any field – including the field of the elderly living with dementia – becomes a field of learning rather than a field of problems.

It is this potential for transformative learning that musicians need. And it is the reason why our research group focuses on small-scale and qualitative research projects in which students learn to work in innovative practices and with new audiences. It is in such projects that we actually see what happens with our students, and with the people they work with and for. And it is great to see what happens with musicians when we bring them in situations where earlier knowledge sometimes is of limited use, and where preconceived ideas lose their meaning.

Eventually, we hope that doing projects such as our project on Music and Dementia will teach our students that they are not a 'product' to be sold to the existing 'target groups', but that they, too, are individuals with a great potential for offering their services to a wide variety of possible audiences. Audiences which they must learn to understand and must learn to 'read'. Audiences which may seem far away from themselves but which potentially can be reached through music.

I return to my slide from the start of this talk. The slide is a slide of Dutch-language local schlager singers in a village not far off from where I live. I found it on Facebook. One of my Facebook-friends, a former student of ours, placed it there and made the following remark:

"Hope that X tonight in Bedum won't have suffer too much from the soundcheck of the festival in the pub across the street (hahaha, look at those artists...)."

For me, this remark of a former student is a sign our education has not been fully successful. If we want to deliver students who will be able to be really lifelong learners, we must aim for students who do not laugh at the unknown. Who do not judge people on the basis of their faces – can you imagine how another student might judge Ethiopian immigrants in a similar way? Or people with dementia?

And that is the reason why a project such as Music for Life is of such enormous importance for us. Because it gives us the opportunity to bring our students into situations in which they can **really** learn. I therefore would like to end this talk by giving you one more quote from our research project into the practice of Music for Life; a quote which shows how transformative working in that project can be:

"Doing this work has been a way for me to connect my musicianship with a deepening sense of who I am in this world, brought about by extraordinary interactions with extraordinary people (...) This work continues to teach me who I am, and is a bench mark against which I judge everything else I do. It's extraordinary how working with people whose version of reality is so vague can in fact be the ultimate reality check!"

Thank you.