**Abstract**

During a recent curriculum methods class, one of my students inquired about my musical training. Since the vast majority of my musical experiences transpired outside the forum of formal music education, I was unable to answer the question without getting into my life's story. This experience motivated me to chronicle my lifelong musical experiences and subsequently reflect on them. These reflections ultimately substantiate that the process of rejecting formal music education and engaging in self-teaching has been the primary method that allowed me to achieve a high level of musical literacy. The paper also argues that the process of self-teaching in the musical arena is very similar to the principles of unschooling (a term coined by American author and educator John Caldwell Holt) where learning is based on the student's interests, needs, and goals.

**Biography**

Dr. John L. Vitale is currently Assistant Professor of Curriculum Methods in the Faculty of Education at Nipissing University where he instructs Intermediate/Senior and Junior/Intermediate teacher candidates in the Consecutive Education Program. He has also taught music for both Public and Catholic School Boards in Ontario for 14 years, including two years at the elementary level and 12 years at the secondary school level. At the secondary school level, Dr. Vitale has taught choir, strings, band, guitar, and music technology where he also served as Department Head of the Arts. His current research interests include alternative pedagogy in music education (particularly unschooling), the benefits of music education for at risk students, the politicization of music education, and the role of music in media applications (particularly film music).

As a bass player, Dr. Vitale has recorded and toured internationally with Warner recording artist and Juno Award winner Robert Michaels. Other performance credits include playing bass for Order of Canada Recipient Guido Basso, comedian Joan Rivers, Michael Burgess, and most recently on a regular basis, two-time Juno Award winner Liberty Silver. Dr. Vitale has also opened up for numerous headlining acts including Neil Sedaka, Don Rickles, The Temptations, and Andy Kim to name a few. Dr. Vitale also has numerous compositional credits, including the score to children's animated film Attic-in-the-Blue (first place winner at the Chicago International Children's Film Festival).

# We Don't Need No Education -- We Don't Need No Thought Control: Reflections on Achieving Musical Literacy & the Importance of Unschooling

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## Introduction

The grammatically incorrect double negative used in the second stanza of Pink Floyd's *Another Brick in the Wall* ("we don't need no education – we don't' need no thought control") is ironically, a reaction to the Grammar School teachers of lyricist and composer Roger Waters.

According to Waters (Winterman, 2007), his Grammar School teachers were more interested in keeping the students quiet rather than teaching them[1]. The proverbial *Wall*, therefore, was the imaginary wall Waters built around him because he was not in touch with reality (Songfacts, 2008). I would like to think, however, that a quality songwriter like Roger Waters intentionally used the double negative to read as a positive, indicating that we in fact need an education, but not the formal and conventional pedagogy that tends to be delivered in most Western institutions. If this was in fact the case, Waters is making a very bold statement about education indeed.

As I wear the multiple hats of musician, music teacher, music education researcher, music education advocate, university professor, and parent, the importance and significance of

[1]Winterman (2007) has stated: "Waters was inspired by his own schooling in the 1950s. It was a protest against the strict regime he felt had tried to suppress children, rather than inspire them."

my musical training and education is often forgotten and becomes lost in the shuffle. One of my current students enrolled in the consecutive Bachelor of Education Program (a teacher candidate) recently asked me about my interest in music during a curriculum methods class, specifically inquiring about what instrument I played and where I studied. Since my experiences are rooted in multiple methods that habitually focused on self-teaching, and the fact that I do not have a degree in music, I had an exceedingly difficult time answering the question. In fact, this very simple question provided the motivation and inspiration to chronicle my lifelong musical experiences from my earliest memories to the present, and reflect upon them. These reflections ultimately substantiate that the process of rejecting formal music education and engaging in self-teaching has been the primary method that allowed me to achieve a high level of musical literacy. The methods I employed during the self-teaching process were very similar to the principles of unschooling as established by Holt, himself a self-taught musician. The purpose of this paper is threefold: (i) it will provide a detailed description of my lifelong musical experiences, (ii) it will offer a critical reflection of these experiences with regards to musical learning, and (iii) it will demonstrate how these experiences are mostly rooted in self-teaching -- a product of the unschooling paradigm. Prior to addressing these three items, however, it is necessary to engage in a discussion that tackles the age old battle between taught and self-taught musicians.

**The Age Old Battle Between Taught and Self-Taught Musicians**

In the musical arena, the war of taught versus self-taught musicians has been waging on for centuries! Since there are many musical styles (classical, jazz, pop, etc.), there are many different perspectives on what constitutes a taught or self-taught musician. Another factor that contributes to this multiplicity is the lack of a unifying and governing body that regulates all

musicians – after all, music is an art, and art simply cannot be regulated. The realm of classical music is perhaps the one entity that comes closest to some sort of regulating body. In Canada and other countries, for example, the Royal Conservatory of Music is such an example. The Conservatory very much functions like a regulating body having formal exams in performance, theory, and history that all must be passed in order to move from one level to another. Hence the expression "classically trained" or "formally trained." My experience as a teacher has revealed that music students who come from this approach are exceptional emulators. That is, they read music notation and perform music with great success. Many of these students, however, are not able to perform once the sheet music is removed. They struggle at improvisation, lack in compositional skills, and quite often do not understand what they are actually playing until the very high grade levels, which most students fail to achieve.

In the realm of pop music, however, (which commercially makes up the vast majority of the music industry) such restrictions do not apply. There is no governing body other than the record buying and consuming public which dictate what sells and what does not, which changes almost weekly. Musicians in this field are often self-taught, almost always engage in unstructured learning typical of garage band practices, and have little or sometimes no formal training. This is the realm that I developed my musical literacy. None of the Beatles, for example, knew how to read music when they started, and Paul McCartney was the only Beatle to eventually learn how to read music. Yet that did not stop them from being perhaps the best songwriters of the twentieth century. Being a self-taught musician, however, does not mean that influence, motivation, stimulation, and prompting from other musicians/mentors fails to exist. In fact, it is quite the contrary. That is, it is other musicians that provide the underpinning for all self-taught musicians to effectively learn a musical instrument. In the technologically savvy

society we currently live in, these "other musicians" come in the form of a variety of formats, including live music, recorded music (radio, television, CDs, DVDs, MP3 Players, and computers), and print-based materials (both traditional and electronic formats). The principal difference, therefore, between taught and self-taught musicians, is that the latter lacks in formal structure and instruction, but allows for richer musical experiences representing a variety of methods and formats, very similar to the unschooling principles as described by Holt (1981) and Farenga (1984). Lebler (2008) has stated:

> Popular music is usually learned in the broader community as a self-directed activity, sometimes including interactions with peers and group activities, but rarely under the direction of an expert mentor/teacher. One Australian conservatorium has adopted the pedagogy of popular music through the creation of a scaffolded self-directed learning environment within its Bachelor of Popular Music programme.

**My Musical Training and Experiences**

My earliest memories as a child are imbued in musical contexts. I can distinctly remember as a four-year-old, for example, that specific melodies would make me laugh or cry. I discovered early on in my life, therefore, that musical ideas and themes greatly influenced how humans think and feel about the world. In terms of a hands-on approach to music, I would spend hours and hours as a child of six experimenting with my brother's electronic keyboard – a small one-and-a-half octave keyboard with only one simple organ sound – a far cry from what children have at their disposal today. I can distinctly remember experimenting with intervals (although I had no idea what I was doing) and evaluating the difference in sounds between them. Despite the fact that I was a very young child, there was nothing formal about these initial musical experiences. They were rooted in curiosity, experimentation, and self-discovery (Bruner, 1961).

By the age of ten, I was actively watching/listening to the crude and unsophisticated sounds of my 16-year-old brother's band that rehearsed in our basement for a few years. The only thing better than attending one of these band practices was the opportunity to try all of the instruments, which could only happen in secrecy with a little coaxing of my mother when my brother and his band mates were not in the house. Since the band rehearsed almost every evening, the musicians often left their instruments in my basement, which was definitely to my liking. On most days after school, I would vigorously bang on the drums, strum the guitar, and tickle the ivories on my brother's full-size keyboard. It was the electric bass, however, that particularly captivated my interest. I loved the potent and powerful deep sound it made which would always rattle the heating ducts in my basement. All of this experimentation and self-discovery was really the first major step towards musical literacy – all without formal instruction. Although I did not know the proper terminology at the time, I was actively teaching myself and becoming intimately familiar with a variety of musical rudiments and fundamentals, such as dynamics, rhythm, texture, melody, and timbre. All I needed was the right environmental conditions that allowed me to engage in this unstructured but highly efficacious approach to learning music, such as my brother's band rehearsing in my basement. It was at this time that I knew music would play a profound role in my life.

By the time I reached the 6$^{th}$ grade, my parents purchased an electric guitar for me. Although I had preferred the electric bass, I was still ecstatic about receiving my very own instrument. Although I did not engage in formal lessons, I practiced that guitar (which still hangs in my basement today) for hours and hours every day. I would try to imitate the hit records of the day (known as "lifting"), all the while honing my musical and compositional ear. Within a few months, I had started a band called "TNT" with another guitar player and a

drummer, and the first song we learned to play by ear was the theme to the television series Hawaii Five-O, which we actually performed on a local cable channel. The thrill of performing on television at age 11 was needless to say, euphoric! Furthermore, this was the first time that I experienced the educational benefits of playing in a band, including developing patience, discipline, teamwork, and communication skills to name a few. I rapidly realized that playing an instrument on your own represented one set of distinct and skills, but playing your instrument as part of a larger whole represented a vastly different set of skills and abilities. Once again, all of this musical training and education was occurring outside the formal context of traditional pedagogy.

With the drummer moving shortly after the band was formed, TNT broke up, and it was not until two years later in the eighth grade that I got the call to play bass in another band. Since I did not have a bass, I eliminated the last two strings of my guitar (the high "E" and "B") and created a makeshift bass. We played a variety of songs, but I was considered to be the weakest member of the band since I did not know how to read music and all of the other members did. This band continued for a total of three years (until the end of my grade ten year) and we actually played several gigs with remuneration. This was the first time that I associated the fact that I could make money from doing something that I absolutely loved, which motivated me to further pursue my musical interests. Once again, there was no traditional pedagogy connected to this musical experience. Although I learned many things from my band mates, they also learned from me, as I had a more developed ear for lifting songs from the record.

At the beginning of my grade ten year, I still could not read music and continued to play bass by ear. I did, however, take a course in instrumental music and played the alto saxophone.

This was my first introduction to the world of formal music education on an instrument[2] where I learned to read notation in the treble clef. Although this did not help me on my bass, I received a taste of what it was like to engage in a very structured form of music learning, which I found very stifling and suppressing. I felt as though my imagination was crippled through learning that was imbued by rote-memorization drills (Gatto, 2008).

The most significant aspect of my musical life at this time, however (particularly as a bass player), was discovering the Canadian rock band Rush and specifically the bass playing of Geddy Lee. The influence that Rush had on my musical outlook was so profound that I classified music into only two categories – "Rush" and "everything else." I would spend hours playing my bass alongside my Rush records, which made me feel like I was part of their band. I was Geddy Lee – plain and simple! This imaginary world of playing bass alongside my musical heroes for all intents and purposes was very real in increasing my musical literacy. Once again, my musical experiences (particularly on the electric bass) were curiously void of formal instruction. Perhaps the most important aspect of my teenage years with regards to music was the freedom informal instruction provided. I was free to play and listen to the music that was meaningful and significant for me. The magnitude of freedom in the life of a teenager cannot be underestimated, particularly when it comes to education. Teenagers often view traditional education as the antithesis of freedom – a very formal, rigid, and inflexible approach to learning, much like I found playing alto saxophone in the high school band. Llewellyn (1998, p. 43) has noted:

[2] Previous musical experiences in my school-based education were restricted to vocal music, where we sang from words and learned melodies from rote style teaching.

> Part of my work in writing this book involved contacting all the unschooled teenagers I could find. I asked them, each as part of a questionnaire, what they considered the greatest advantages of unschooling. Almost unanimously, they agreed: freedom!

Furthermore, freedom[3] allows students the essential right of controlling their own thoughts and experiences. This notion is confirmed by the guru of unschooling John Holt (1990, p. 4) who has stated:

> Next to the right of life itself, the most fundamental of all human rights is the right to control our own minds and thoughts. That means, the right to decide for ourselves how we will explore the world around us, think about our own and other persons' experiences, and find and make meaning in our own lives.

All of my spare time during my junior year of high school was spent playing bass in an original rock band (highly influenced by the sounds of Rush of course). We wrote several songs, recorded demos, and played a variety of gigs which were attended by our friends and family. Although I continued to play alto saxophone in the school band, I still did not know how to read bass music. As I entered my last two years[4] of high school, a decision was made by all of us in the band to attend University and study music (which was only a 30-minute drive from our high school). This of course made me very nervous, as I was not formally trained on the bass. With roughly a year and a half to prepare for my audition, I purchased every book I could find and taught myself how to read bass clef and execute the notes on the electric bass. Looking back, it was at this time that I started to embrace the skills of a schooled and formally trained musician, but I discovered, learned, and cultivated these skills on my own.

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[3]Our current system of education was put in place to provide students the basic skills needed to be successful in the industrial age. This system of education is old, antiquated, and not in touch with individual needs and requirements. Harrison (2002, p. 6) has argued: "The education system that we have in place now came out of the transition from the agrarian society to the industrial society. Our education system was a way of preparing agricultural workers for jobs in industry. The great narrative, the story that we tell ourselves about public education, is that if our child is educated, he or she will be able to be successful."

[4] The province of Ontario at this time required an extra year (grade 13) of high school in order to graduate with a secondary school diploma.

Although several aspects of my University audition did not go well, particularly those that addressed music theory and sight reading, I was admitted to the program based on what the audition committee members referred to as my "freestyle performance ability." I guess this was an acceptable way of saying I did not do that well on the formal things but they liked the way that I played. So, there I was – a first-year undergraduate music major and I absolutely hated it! I detested the history of Western Music; I despised sight singing; I loathed music theory and counterpoint; I hated the fact that the jazz program only allowed traditional bebop jazz and not the modern jazz fusion that was popular at the time; and I could not stomach the fact that my favourite band Rush was considered on the fringes of the musical arena! I felt as though I was expected to learn music the way that it was heard and processed by someone else. This was not my world, and learning music that was boring and uninspiring on the promise that it would help me in the long run was a pill I was not prepared to swallow. Llewellyn and Silver (2001) echo my position:

> For real learning to take place, the information must occur in a world . . . The relationship of the information to reality – its context – must be apparent. People can be asked to absorb a certain amount of meaningless data in good faith, on the promise that eventually it will be related to a larger world and transformed into information.

Although I was reasonably successful in my courses, it was the focus of my original band that kept me going. By the end of my second year, however, a band member became seriously ill for a while and the band broke up. With a lack of musical focus, I dropped out of the music program at the end of my second year and transferred over to the Geography Department in the Faculty of Arts, where I would eventually earn an honours Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Arts. The structured approach of the university music department boxed me in and did not cater to what I wanted and needed to learn. It was my original band that allowed me the freedom to discover and learn music the way I wanted to, and when that band dissolved, so did my musical

aspirations. This is why I made the drastic move to leave the music department and enroll in a completely different subject matter. There was, however, a huge silver lining in this decision.

Switching my academic focus away from music ironically allowed me to cultivate and nurture my musical literacy more than any other time in my life! I was no longer bound to the rigid and formal framework of the music department, but rather open and free to discover and experiment with musical stimulation in other forums – an opportunity made possible through the principles of unschooling -- learning based on my interests, needs, and goals. What I discovered was a university that was brimming and overflowing with musical talent that was not formally associated with the music department. Rather, these were students (just like myself) whowere majoring in various non-musical disciplines but had a keen interest in playing and composing music in their own way, shape, and form. It was the musical world that I thought never existed on such a large scale. Simply put, I was in musical paradise, and the next five years were spent studying geography but learning music! It was at this time in my life that I made the largest gains in my performance and compositional abilities, and used such abilities as a means of earning desperately needed money. I was actively working in the Toronto music scene as a freelance musician, performing at bars, weddings, private parties, and corporate functions. Life was good!

After completing my Masters Degree, I enrolled in a Bachelor of Education Program and would spend the next 14 years teaching in Ontario School Boards (mostly at the intermediate/senior levels) where I took a few years off in between to tour professionally as a musician as well as commence my doctoral studies on a part-time basis. Teaching allowed me a

comfortable lifestyle where I earned a good living and could still play professionally on weekends and even take semesters off in order to professionally tour.

Despite my geographical training, I have spent the vast majority of my teaching career in Ontario School Boards engaged in music pedagogy. Although I eventually learned the nomenclature of traditional music theory, much of my pedagogical approach was rooted in the unschooled approaches that imbued my musical experiences, particularly in the latter[5] years of my high school teaching career. I was respected and valued by some colleagues, and I was also considered revolutionary, radical, and dissenting by others. I even felt ostracized by some of my music teacher colleagues once they found out I did not have a degree in music. Somehow the lack of my formal training in music demeaned and belittled their formal accomplishments in the arena of music education. In the high school music classroom, I often worked with students on the fringes of traditional music education (the so-called Rock/Goth students of the school) and gave these students a voice by allowing them to play the music that they wanted. Even in traditional orchestral settings, the selection of music I would perform at concerts was very atypical for secondary school.

**Conclusion**

As I write this paper, music continues to play an integral part in virtually all aspects of my personal and professional life. As I reflect upon my musical training over the years, the overwhelming vast majority of my learning was rooted in unconventional and informal pedagogy that mirrors the paradigm of unschooling. This learning was not attainable through traditional and conventional music education, but rather through an alternative and unconventional

[5] It is very easy as a new teacher to fall into the trap of traditional pedagogy for many years.

approach imbued in the principles of unschooling where I had the ability to choose what and when I wanted to learn with regards to my musical education. This is very different from traditional schooling which boxes students into a pre-existing framework rooted in the experience of others. Fitzenreiter (2003, p.8) has stated:

> The true aim of school seems to be conformity rather than learning. Schooled children have no say in what they do with their time; therefore they do not learn how to make choices for themselves.

As educators, it is our responsibility to foster an environment that is conducive to learners of all types, especially those that flourish in environments free of restrictions and boundaries. Creating such a free and unrestricted learning environment requires educators to gamble and take on risks, as the majority of educational forums do not embrace unschooling principles. Griffith (1998, p. 6) has so adeptly stated:

> The first requirement [of unschooling] is that children spend bulk of their time in places where learning and exploration are possible and welcome . . . children need to feel comfortable exploring those surroundings and using what they find around them.

At the end of the day, however, all of us (both students and teachers) need to take risks and metaphorically create a sculpture of who we are. No formal education can help us with that. In sum, I urge all people reading this paper who have had a similar experience in either music or another field of study to share their story and help expose the limitations and restrictions of conventional education.

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