

Identifying Musical Talent and Potential

By Hugh Nankivell

What are you really learning about your music students?

We need to rethink how we are identifying musical potential. So much of what we traditionally do is just highlighting those who make mistakes. We're putting up barriers and pointing out errors rather than spotting those who are demonstrating potential.

This is a story of a twelve-year, ongoing collaboration, Identifying Musical Potential (IMP) between Awards for Young Musicians, a national music charity, and Hugh Nankivell, a freelance social musician and music educator. The approach we pioneered together is still being shared and explored with music leaders and Music Hubs all over England, and further afield. We learned a great deal from our first action research in 2008, which has since developed into a long-term training programme.

In this document we share the key elements we discovered

1. Get creative

With a Year 3 class, we looked at some of the group activities commonly used by music leaders with primary school children, such as rhythmical clapping and call and response games. These activities all required the children to copy the leader or recreate sounds given to them. What became apparent straight away was that we were far more likely to observe those who made mistakes, rather than those who got it correct. By choosing material that we hope students will all get 'right' the unfortunate side-effect is that what we are actually doing is highlighting the minority who were getting it wrong. We found that by switching to material that was mainly improvised and creative, and therefore could not be 'wrong' it led to a different reading of the musical potential in the class and helped us to clarify the difference between leading creative, as opposed to recreative, musical activities.



2. Be a witness rather than a leader

The session allowed the music teacher to step back and observe her class properly, for the first time. What was immediately obvious was that simply by being a witness rather than a leader, she observed many children exhibiting musical potential that she had never previously spotted. She was surprised at what she saw. We looked at the film footage with her afterwards and she was able to point out these children and articulate what they were doing. We have returned to those initial sessions and conversations many times since, and they have helped us to formulate our whole IMP philosophy and approach. There are always opportunities to step back from an activity – you can ask the children to take turns leading whilst you observe.



3. Enable a diversity of sound

We next looked at some music lessons in a High School in Torquay Torbay, where students had been primarily taught through playing keyboards whilst wearing headphones. We decided to focus on the difference between this kind of lesson and one where there was a diversity of sounds and instruments (e.g. mixed tuned and untuned percussion). The teacher realised that while she was teaching musical information through using keyboards, she was identifying very little musical potential. Her focus was on getting through a curriculum and controlling her sometimes awkward class. But the lack of choice in what was offered was off-putting for students who didn't want to play keyboard or who felt that they could not. This led to a key element of our programme: focusing on giving young people choice and agency in being able to select from a range of options as opposed to being presented with only one.



4. Go with the flow

Finally, we visited a Rock School where the regular sessions would always entail a group of four or five young people playing in a band setting on a stage. During our visit we led some creative, group activities (playing percussion together, focused listening games, trying things out, learning cues...) that were responsive to what was happening an initial stimulus rather than

having a pre-planned, rigid structure. The result was young people being more creative, having more fun and engaging in music in a way that their regular sessions didn't allow room for. This led us to reflect on the need to enter into a music session with a curiosity about what will happen, and not a fixed plan of action. Some structure is clearly important when planning a session, but if you lead a music class with a rigid structure and timetable then you will likely miss some interesting outcomes.



Feedback

We've received some great feedback from teachers who attended sessions and were able to reflect on their own practice:

I mainly took away how to change my approach in inspiring children and including them in musical activities in a way that would show off their true potential. Engaging in activities that gave them the space and freedom to truly express themselves shows innate musical understandings that would have been missed in a typical musical education class. That it is a fantastic course and it is a wonderful opportunity for new ideas and approaches, but also for our young people.

Hub Leaders have also spoken about the impact the training had on their teams:

AYM's Identifying Talent was a perfect start to Lewisham Music's journey on the Furthering Talent Programme. Hugh delivered a thought-provoking, engaging and inspirational session that was extremely well received by our tutors. It

explored exactly what 'talent' is, and what music professionals can do to ensure we are spotting talented young people who could benefit from additional support. The analysis of the videos which were shared were particular fascinating.

The training takes a holistic, inclusive and child-led view of music education- for example the principle that a young person's enjoyment, innate musicality and curiosity are more important than any having any direct music education experience or a clear idea about what kind of instrument they want to learn.

For a service that does lots of whole class and group teaching, the focus on being able to differentiate between different types of learners will prove useful to our tutors across their work, not just in the Future Talent programme.

I would highly recommend the Identifying Talent training session. One of the best training mornings we have had for years.

Charly Richardson, CEO, Lewisham Music

Top tips

Aim for creative not recreative activities

Find a way to 'step back' and observe rather than lead

Offer a range of tuned and untuned instruments

Don't over plan – allow some freedom in where a session might go.