

Listen and watch...and you will learn

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The ability to listen deeply has become an elusive concept in our busy, noisy world. When I began drumming, I discovered that the *only* way to learn African drumming is to listen. There is no text, no book which shows you what you need to know in order to participate fully and authentically. I learned this lesson from Sowah Mensah, master drummer, composer, pianist, flutist, violinist, clarinetist, and college professor in the United States.

In Ghana there is no separate word for *music*. (Mensah, July 22, 2009) It is something everyone does. It so permeates society that there are no separate facilities designated for music performances, like our concert halls. When he studied European instruments, he went to private teachers. However, he never took a drum lesson. He simply watched and listened to the drum groups around him. He entered undergraduate school as a pianist, but was already a better drummer than the professors. He had learned to focus, listen, watch, and then to play what he saw and heard.

What strikes me about Sowah Mensah's teaching is his quiet intensity. He speaks softly and with such insight that it is as if he can see into our souls, where he has compassion for our weaknesses but is unwilling to let us hide behind them. Most of all, he *listens*, and he *watches*, and teaches us to do the same. He tells us not to join until we are ready, not to try something new until we feel we are ready. He keeps reminding us, but always softly. And we always know that he knows how we are doing. He never relaxes the standard. He never stops encouraging. The result is an ever-growing number of very hard-working students.

Another difference in the way in which Sowah Mensah distinguishes between Western and African music is this: in Western music we are all taught to seek the *direction* of the phrase or line in order to play it. As in, "where is the phrase going, where does this chord lead?" In African music, Sowah says, there is no direction, it is not going anywhere. "It is enough for it to be where it is." (Mensah, 2009) For us, busy multi-taskers that we are, this is difficult. We must let go of everything and be *in the moment*. When that happens, there is a rare

experience of being a part of something that is larger than life, as if we are all being lifted to a higher plane and begin to communicate with each other for the first time. When the music ends, strangers have become soul-mates. This is what I strive for in teaching my class in World Drumming.

My students learn how to create and maintain a steady beat, to play existing rhythms in ensemble, to play West African instruments, and to create their own rhythmic patterns, all in real time, not on paper. For the final project, each student composes for an ensemble of five or six instruments, then teaches the composition to a group of students of his or her choosing. Through activities and performance, my students learn the names of the countries of Africa, and the musical connections between West Africa, the Caribbean, and this country. The result is that a group of students, most of whom have never studied music, learn to listen deeply, and with great concentration: the true goal of any music class.

Their faces positively glowed with happy anticipation of the fun they had heard they were going to have with me in Drumming Class, also known as "Music App," short for Music Appreciation. These were my new seventh grade students about to take "Music Appreciation Through World Drumming."

Our first lesson was in teamwork. They were shown how to set up the room in a semi-circle of chairs, the exact number for today, plus one for me.

The second lesson was in keeping a steady beat. We sat, slapping our hands on our thighs. I told them to watch each other to help them stay together. When the beat began to speed up, I stopped to ask what was happening. They knew! They had listened and heard the acceleration of the beat. Then I told them to watch me and lay down their hands exactly as I did. The effect was dramatic. The slaps were absolutely together and in perfect synchrony. They listened, and they watched, and they applied it to their activity, taking note of the difference. (Journal, October 26, 2007, the first day of class, p. 1)

This is probably the most magical moment of the course for me. When they realize they are rushing the beat, they consent to trust me and watch. As they do so, and the beat becomes steady and synchronized, these egocentric, over-stimulated young people are transported from an acute sense of self into a transcendent state of suspended animation. It is as if we are all hovering, watching ourselves, experiencing this unity within our circle, but without effort on anyone's part. When we achieve this, I feel I can begin teaching. They are "hooked!"

As we kept time on our laps I began to chant, "What's your name?" and answered with my own name, with question and answer each in 2 beats. We went around the circle with everyone chanting the question, and each student answering with their name. The first time around, they merely spoke it, with no apparent rhythm, just speech. I took several names and cast them in a 2-beat rhythm, until they caught on, then all used rhythms for their own names. Then I talked about the tonal nature of the African languages that allowed for "speaking" on the drums. We talked about the high and low pitch of our own names. On our laps, close to the knee was called "low," while higher on the leg was called "high." We then went around again, casting our names in 2-beat rhythms, using the highs and lows and accents of the names.

For homework, they were to teach someone in their family what they had learned. (Journal, October 26, 2007, the first day of class, p. 1)

Not only have they learned something about the tonal nature of the Ewe and Ashanti languages, but they have learned to find rhythm in their own names and to use the high and low pitches that we use in them. This is a lesson in rhythm which taps into their natural adolescent narcissism. They also begin to listen to the rhythms, seeking to translate what they hear into words, or names. They are able to translate correctly the names that I drum on my lap.

I think this is an example of what Elliott Eisner has described as the "slowed perception" that is taught in the arts. (Eisner, p. 68) He spoke of this concept in reference to the visual arts. Paraphrasing him, one could say that music can help students learn how to savor qualities by taking time to listen so that they can really hear and feel the beat. It becomes a somatic experience, what Eisner calls "embodied knowledge." (Eisner, p. 19)

Here is the second day of class, when we do our first drum solo:

....We reviewed the set-up and the teamwork needed for it. We reviewed the steady slapping of our thighs, their watching me and listening. We went through

the chanting of names and the question, "What's your name?" This helped two students who had been absent and all of the rest who needed a review. Then we got the drums. What excitement!

I showed them the low and high strokes and the "open" sound. We played echo-drumming, with my giving two-beat patterns that they had to repeat exactly. Then we did our question and names on the drums. Some needed prompting to create a stroke for every syllable, but all eventually caught on. Once they had it, we went around again, not speaking, the names now being a two-beat drum solo.

Homework: "What's for lunch?" (Journal, October 29, 2007, the second day of class, p. 1)

For the next few days we create two-beat questions based on "What's for Lunch?" "...Dinner?" "...Dessert?" This activity immediately creates an atmosphere of play, not school work. They are encouraged to think of their favorite food, then to create a rhythm out of it, using the high and low sounds of the words. Once this has been established, they do drum solos. Instead of speaking the question and answering in rhythm along with their drumming, the drumming is wordless. The communication occurs through the drumming itself. Each student is given two beats for a solo based on their answer.

....As the students became more comfortable with the Question-and-Answer drumming ("What's your name?" "What's for lunch?" "Hamburger, French fries, etc.," "What's for dinner?" "Roast beef and gravy."), their personalities began to emerge. Danny had a tight slapping routine which was unique to this class. Thomas always finished with a side-swiping slap. Meant for attention. Matthew's patterns were very sophisticated, though he was not a drummer from the band. The girls were usually very careful. When we did Question and Echo Answer, the group echoed exactly what the drummer before answered, including the side-swipes! (Journal, November 1st and 2nd, 2007, p. 2)

The Echo/Answer activity requires intense concentration. We all drum the question, one student answers, we all drum the question again, then we all drum that student's answer. To understand this activity, a diagram might be helpful: Q A Q EA / Q A Q EA. This translates to Question-Answer-Question-Echo-Answer, each of these done in two beats, with everyone drumming the Question and the first Answer done by an individual student. After the class repeats the Question, the Echo-Answer is drummed by the entire class without a break. We keep repeating this until we complete the circle. When it works well the excitement is palpable. When it does not, someone honestly says, "We weren't very good." Their own evaluation arises from their desire

to do it well. This kind of activity demonstrates the problem-solving aspect of work in the arts. Students are invited to be metacognitive about their work – that is, reflective about their own thinking process. (Eisner, p. 37)

After I have given them their maps of Africa and they have done their homework, matching the number on a blank map with the correct name, they choose their country. The question becomes, “What’s your country?” and the answer is whatever you have chosen. Of course, someone always wants to try “Democratic Republic of the Congo,” in *two beats!* Here is where they not only have fun drumming the musical names of African countries, but they also learn how to pronounce them! This activity reinforces the concepts of the two-beat question and answer, and complementary rhythms. And.....they must *listen!* When they have difficulty with any of these, I go back to their names.

....This was an amazingly successful day, with everyone on task and really listening and focusing on the music and the beat. We did echo and echo-answer drumming. In the latter we drummed the question together (“What’s your country?” “What’s your name?”), then after each student drummed the answer, we all drummed the question again and then the whole class drummed the last answer given. They really have to concentrate. It is intense. I began the questions by going back to their names, with which they are most familiar, and had them drum first and last name. This was to reinforce the one-stroke-per-syllable we would be using. It cleared up the group drumming considerably. (Journal, November 1, 2007, p. 2)

At this point in the class, we begin learning the ensembles given in Will Schmid’s book (1998). I memorize these so that I can teach each instrument pattern while looking at the students and requiring that they watch and listen to what I am doing. Each ensemble has its own challenges and each class must be paced according to the students in it. After some weeks of this, I do a unit on group improvisation, without instruments but which leads eventually to the inclusion of the students’ choice of instruments.

....On Friday, I decided to take away the instruments and let them do group improvisation with body percussion. We first divide into groups of 3 to make sure that everyone is forced to participate with peers who need each other. I gave them about 5 minutes and then we had show-and-tell. It was amazing! There was a burst of creativity from this group who had had difficulty getting the beat and the patterns in the ensembles. Craig added a beautiful birdcall to his group. Then we broke into groups of 4, then of 6. Each time there was almost a manic excitement to the effort and the project. They were startled when I told them it was time for the bell. John

Michael went a little goofy at first, but his first group, all boys, did not one, but 2 great ensembles, one with a very creative introduction.

For this project I specify only that the percussion be on the body and may include mouth sounds. They could not use the chairs to beat on, and their feet only sparingly. One group featured a boy swinging his feet together, but not hitting the floor. The energy in the room was palpable. They loved performing their compositions. For the second and third groups, with 4 and 6 students respectively, I told them to create introductions and endings which involved all of them. Again, the creativity was wonderful. They worked extremely well together and learned more from each other than they could have from me. (Journal, Nov. 30, 2007, p. 6)

In the body percussion groups there is an emphasis upon individuality. Each student is encouraged to create a sound and pattern that is unique, then to use it to complement the other patterns. The result is an ensemble that works together. While individuality is key, so is team work, which takes it to another level.

At the end of the course, I let the students do an evaluation of the class and what they have learned. One of the questions is “Has your ability to listen changed as a result of this class?” Almost always the answer is, “yes.” They report a greater ability to listen in other classes as well as in music.

The lessons I learned from Sowah Mensah are myriad. Among them is the concept of music everywhere, in everything, from an early age. Another is that anyone can make music, and *well*. Set a high standard, then show how to reach it. Still another lesson is being *in the moment*. We use words like “focus,” and “concentration,” but they are only words. Actually teaching this way takes the same kind of intense perseverance demonstrated by Sowah Mensah, master teacher...master listener.

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