
BUILDING A MUSIC SCENE IN A MOUNTAIN HAMLET

eFellow's Research Paper

Hugo Zanker
Dr. Vince Ham eFellow, 2016

December, 2016

My context

I am a classical musician and have come from a family of researchers and professors in the fields of Greek, Latin, and Media Studies. I had a double dose of structure and positivism in my life through my brother and father, and topped this up with a bit of Haydn and Mozart through my studies as a cellist. My mother is a multidisciplinary ethnologist and was a head researcher at the NZ Broadcasting School. For these reasons, I like things to be clearly structured. I like ideas to be honed to a hermetically sealed module.

When I moved to Methven, population 1,400, and the service town to Mount Hutt Ski Field, I missed music on a professional level. It bothered me that students had such limited access to the arts because I had always taken it for granted. So I decided to take the opportunity offered by the [CORE Education Dr Vince Ham eFellowship](#) to build a scene in Methven, based out of the Music Department. My nice and focused initial idea, titled 'Building a Scene in a Mountain Hamlet' asked the question – 'how can the music room become the centre of a vibrant school music "scene," feeding off the expertise and inspiration of other scenes?'

I wanted to connect my students with professionals in the creative industries. Buddying my students up with global experts seemed a good strategy to start that process off. I hoped that this would create more equity to urban schools who had these people at their front door.



Figure 1 - Some of my student participants

My methodology

We had nine meetings where we got together, ate pizza, jammed out on the departmental instruments and made some board work. I recorded every session as audio in OneNote. The images and audio I gathered from those meetings, along with some surveys, emails and Padlets became the data for this research. At the first meeting, we brainstormed some new criteria, and it quickly emerged that the main thrust of what the group wanted to do was inward looking, despite my prompting to connect with other scenes and using technology to export our work.

The criteria were:

1. Some very specific instructions regarding streamlining the spaces in the music department.

2. The concept of networking – starting small and working our way up.
3. Throwing the pecking order out the window – I will talk about that a bit later on.
4. Find new opportunities for recording new material – we looked into why we were not recording ourselves, and what we could do to stimulate this area.

Students owned the research too because they were the participants

These criteria were a great starting point, and we were able to get started immediately in making the space more impressive by exploring these ideas. We installed new instrument storage, got rid of the cruddy 32-bit PCs in the classroom, thus encouraging new buy in for BYOD. We threw out the 70s desks with the bubble gum and graffiti and transitioned to a more minimalist and flexible learning environment. These changes were all suggested by the students but, interestingly, tended to support the current trends in education towards flexible, innovative learning environments.



Figure 2 - Top left and right - Instrument storage, upgraded tech,

Figure 3 - Bottom left and right - before and after the changes in the Music Room

Connecting with other scenes would have worked well if my students did not have other ideas about where they wanted to take the research. According to what the students said in sessions, they saw the role of ‘networking’ in a musical scene in a different way to me. To them, networking was something that happened within the school, and sometimes in the local community with theatre companies, the local magazine and with other nearby high schools. It did not include reaching out to musos across the globe. Local networking was phase one of their plan to becoming more networked on a larger scale. However, the big stuff would need to wait until we sorted a few things out.

Still, sometimes my students mentioned Youtube, SoundCloud and other video and audio sites as key to networking with other scenes. We also discussed a website and blogs as a way to disseminate our music and our culture to other places, as well as to receive feedback from musical peers globally. However, we kept coming back to the question of what it was we wanted to post on these sites. As we talked, we discovered that the big requirement for exporting our culture on the internet was to create a department conducive to great music making. I had to learn that making these changes to the environment on the fly was not going to compromise the research.

The shift in the research

I should have known that things were taking a turn down the ‘punk rock disestablishment’ direction when I decided to use ‘How to Make a Scene’ from ‘How Music Works’ by David Byrne¹ (Former Talking Heads lead singer) to create the initial provocation for my research. This reading used the famed punk rock venue, the CBGB bar in New York in the mid to late seventies, as an example of a thriving musical scene. Byrne describes a musical scene as ‘...that special moment when a creative flowering seems to issue forth from a social nexus – a clump of galleries, a neighbourhood, or a bar that doubles as a music club’². In this case, it was the music department that was going to become the social nexus. Because I am an administrator, it seemed a super-accessible angle, especially when Byrne says ‘...the venue and its policies make a music scene happen as much as the creativity of the musicians’³. In my position, I could undoubtedly help facilitate some thoughtful and relevant changes around the place.

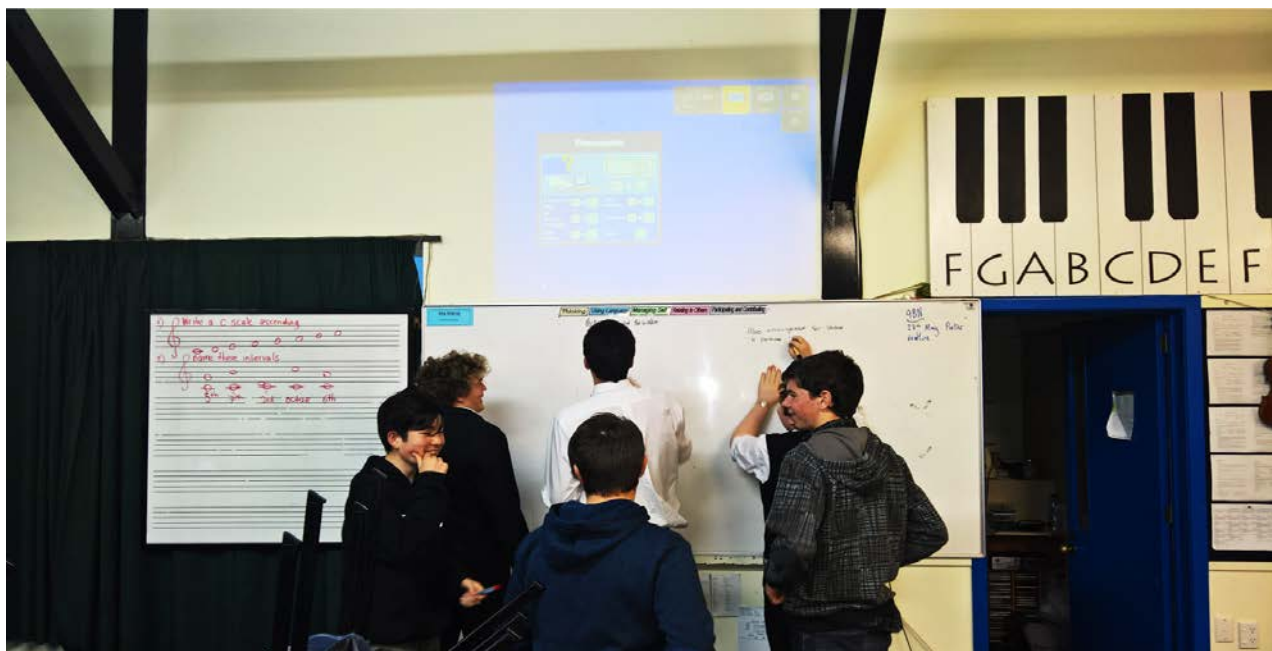


Figure 4 - Making board work

As the meetings progressed, our research became far less about global, or even small scale networking, and much more about making the department a fertile pond with a healthy ecosystem where we could produce music we considered worth exporting. In short, we – the students involved in the research and myself - became more and more interested in culture building.

Putting the brakes on with global networking and the dissemination of content possibly masked the fear that we were not good enough to present our material to strangers yet. The students were afraid that they might be shamed if they put our stuff online without people understanding our context. After all, there are performances which are famous for being terrible. It would be interesting to conduct further research into patterns of digital dissemination of student-generated music and art in high schools. From what my group said, it appears that they wish to maintain their ‘right to be forgotten’ by the internet a while longer. My students are certainly very conservative in what they post online, which appears to buck the trends of ‘Digital Natives’⁴.

¹ Byrne, D. (2012). *How Music Works*. San Francisco Calif.: McSweeney’s.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Prensky, M. ‘Digital Natives. Digital Immigrants’, From *On the Horizon*. NCB University Press, Vol. 9 No. 5, October 2001.



Realising that the participants were interested in taking the project in a different direction forced me to listen to my students finally, and follow them down their preferential spiral of inquiry. A big turning point was recognising that we were not going to do a lot with tech in this project. I had gone into this thinking we would use technology to explore how we could reduce our rural disadvantage in the arts. Instead of exploring this, my students turned our inquiry inwards to the department’s organisational structure and took it from there.

This research has taught me...

My biggest learning was definitely about how I listen to students, in the classroom, and in focus groups. At the start of the research, I was a knowledgeable and confident teacher who was addicted to being needed by my students. I got anxious when students were just doing their own thing without prompting. I needed to direct, otherwise, why was I there? I was greedy with my agency. My fear of becoming irrelevant played out in the early days of the research by stifling my students’ ability to function autonomously in our sessions. Later, after much reflection, after conspiring with students in how we can break these hierarchies down, I asked the group to reflect on what has changed in the department. Participants referred to the desks being pulled out and other physical changes, but many also talked about how their lessons have become more flexible, and they felt freer to get on with it, rather than being interrupted all the time. One particular student is now quite vocal in saying that I am irritating her because she is getting on with it and doesn’t need my help.

When reviewing all my data and notes for my research, I realise how far my participants and I have come in our journey during my 2016 [Dr Vince Ham eFellowship](#). My initial idea was to ‘use tech to create connections with practitioners in creative industries agglomerations, thereby building access to the best professionals.’ I also wanted to ‘use tech to create a dialogue between global arts organisations and students.’ I realise now that it was mostly my personal context as a Pākehā classical musician of an urban background that had shaped the goals for my research. Largely, it was focused on my journey, to develop my skillset as an educator and my understanding of different scenes, and to facilitate growth in areas that I found interesting.

This project quickly became less about me, and more about the project’s core participants and the role of the department in their lives. The knowledge gained was far more embedded in the community and my participants, harder to summarise, and impossible to directly transplant to other schools. Among other

things, I take away from this experience that, somewhere during this research, I worked out that it is quite fun to leave things unresolved, to identify next steps and pathways through chaos.



Figure 5 - Student participants record the Ōpuke Ensemble for digital dissemination

The research project 'Building a Scene in a Mountain Hamlet' has profoundly changed my objectives as an educator and as a researcher. 'Mountain Music' has informed the strategic direction of the Mount Hutt College Music Department this year in many critical ways and it will leave a lasting impact on my school's culture.

As of yet, I do not have satisfactory answers about how my department can become the 'centre of a musical scene, feeding off the expertise and inspiration of other scenes.' To have a definitive answer, to fulfil my need to seal off my research and present recommendations, I need to do more cycles of this research.

Conclusion and next steps

Currently, I am in a grey area between what I wanted to create and what my students are trying to tell me. While I am in this process, there is great potential for me to improve things. I am learning so much about the department by not having any answers; it almost makes me want to draw the process out.

Still, I have concluded a few things; that not all the rules we believe as musicians, classical in particular, are going to work for Mount Hutt College's Music Department and its students. This place is isolated, culturally and geographically, and historically this reduces their chances to find their niche in the community as musos. I have spent my life learning the rules of music as a cellist and performer in a profoundly differently section of society. I need to pass the fundamental rules of music on so that my students can carry the flame, but at the same time, I need to recognise that these standards are not always going to work in my students' favour as rural context musos.



Figure 6 - Student participants in the Ōpuke Ensemble perform at Mount Hutt Ski Field

It has become apparent that the next step for my students is to learn how to put their best foot forward, to present themselves to outsiders so that they look professional and excellent. They need to downplay their weaknesses and up play what they can do, which is a lot. That is excellent advice for any musician, and something I find myself implementing in my personal musical practice more and more as a result of this research.

Following my research this year, I now speculate that many people in the middle of a scene take it for granted and don't notice. That has certainly been true for me in scenes that I have been a part of, and by the sound of it, David Byrne when he says about the CBGB that 'that was just what we did. It was not in any way special'⁵. Maybe it is only outsiders who notice a scene and value it.

The dialogue between those inside and those outside a scene brings me back to my original question and how there are two aspects to it; 'how can the music room become the centre of a vibrant school music "scene," and how can it 'feed off the expertise and inspiration of other scenes?' Following the two cycles of inquiry which make up this research so far, I have come to believe that you can only have a scene when other people can look in and observe. In the context of Mount Hutt College, we need to get to the stage where we are proud of the department by employing organisational change. Once their 'house is in order,' my students will embrace the prospect of showing their beautiful sounds to the world and the Music Room will become the centre of a musical renaissance.

References

Byrne, D. (2012). *How Music Works*. San Francisco Calif.: McSweeney's.

Prensky, M. (2001). Digital Natives. Digital Immigrants. From *On the Horizon*. NCB University Press, Vol. 9 No. 5, October 2001.

⁵ Byrne, D. (2012). *How Music Works*. San Francisco Calif.: McSweeney's, pp.269