

Teaching Aesthetics – A Case Study of One-To-One Tuition in Popular Electronic Music in Higher Education

Eirik Sørbo

University of Agder

Andreas Waaler Røshol

University of Agder

Abstract: Research regarding informal learning over the last few decades has shown how popular musicians acquire skills and knowledge through informal learning, suggesting new methods for formal music education compared to the structures of western classical music. Today, the realm of popular electronic music education faces some similar challenges that popular music education initially did; new ways of informal learning, and a different and diverse knowledge base for the students entering popular music programs. Related to these challenges is the question of how to teach one-to-one tuition in higher electronic music education, and this article seeks to address this challenge. We present a case-study of the practice of a teacher at the University of Agder in Norway that teaches electronics in one-to-one tuition, where the research data is based on interviewing this teacher and his students. An important aspect of the practice in question is the process of listening to and discussing the student's original recorded music. We discuss some of the challenges of one-to-one teaching in electronic music education, and argue that this particular teaching approach accommodates some of these challenges. Bringing in the educational framework of Biesta, we argue that this form of teaching practice also facilitates subjectification by addressing both uniqueness and expression. Further, we argue that this practice, which focuses on the teaching of aesthetics instead of technicalities, combined with the development of the students' unique artistic expression can open some interesting possibilities related to addressing subjectivity

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in higher music education. One of these is how the students need to articulate both the objectives and aims within their music, and the objectives and aims of their music, which in turn develops a terminology to talk about and beyond aesthetics.

Keywords: electronic music, popular music education, higher education, music technology, subjectification, unique artistic expression

Since popular music entered the educational system some decades ago, it has become increasingly prominent in both research and practice. Research regarding informal learning (Green, 2002; Söderman & Folkestad, 2004) shows how popular musicians acquire skills and knowledge through informal learning, suggesting new methods for formal music education (Green, 2008). These and similar insights have changed how popular musicians are formally educated around the world and, though many institutions are still in the process of developing their popular music courses (e.g. Beauregard, 2019), others have found ways of implementing popular music content and adjusting their teaching methods and structures accordingly (e.g. Lebler & Weston, 2015).

However, electronic music has become a growing part of popular music education over the past decade. When using the term *electronic music* in this article, we refer to music composed on or performed with technology traditionally associated with the recording studio. This builds on Eno's (2004) notion about the recording studio as a compositional tool, and his historical contextualization of how music technology developed the recording studio into a creative tool. Burgess makes a similar point when he recalls that "making records with the Roland MC-8 MicroComposer in the '70s, I realized I was constructing performances not capturing them" (Burgess, 2013, p. 240). We also draw on Knowles and Hewitt's (2012) discussions on *threshold technologies* and *recordivity*. They argue that threshold technology has diminished the difference between composing and performing music live, and show how practices from the recording studio are implemented on stage through recordivity, and how these practices, in turn, are brought back into the recording studio (Knowles & Hewitt, 2012). In other words, we include both the *compositional* and *performing* aspect when we use *electronic music*. We further emphasize electronic music within the popular music scene in

this article, including genres such as electronic dance music (EDM), hip-hop, and disco. However, due to the nature of the particular practice in the study, we also leave the door open to less commercial music.

Although electronic music has been around for a while in musical areas like art music, disco and hip-hop, there are some fundamental differences between the current trends and those of the past. These differences are due to the massive invasion of electronic dance music on the popular music scene fronted by artist-producers or auteur-producers (Burgess, 2013, p. 9) such as Skrillex and DeadMau5 in the 2000s and early 2010s. This, combined with an extensive democratization of audio technology (Pras et al., 2013) and enhanced informal learning platforms, such as YouTube, have lowered the threshold for people to engage in making and performing the kind of music they are surrounded by every day. Further, this has created a large group of young musicians using digital audio workstations (DAWs) as a creative tool and/or instrument (Bell, 2018), needing little or no “traditional”¹ musical knowledge. These aspiring musicians are now entering higher popular music education (HPME), creating similar challenges pinpointed by Green and likeminded researchers 15 years ago: a mismatch between the everyday musical reality and practices of the students compared to the music educational programs they attend. Folkestad (2006) shows how technology is deeply embedded in young people’s musical lives, and Brown further argues that “educators need to accept contemporary musical practices (...), and teach the associated skills. There are many new opportunities available as a result of new technologies – and now education has to adapt to these new parameters” (2015, p. 5).

Not all educators find this an easy task, as admitted by Ruthmann et al. (2017) and, according to Partti (2017), educators risk falling into either pedagogical fundamentalism² or pedagogical populism.³ Nevertheless,

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- 1 By *traditional musical knowledge*, we refer to the knowledge associated with playing “traditional” instruments like flute, violin, drums or electric guitar. Examples could be notation, harmonic theory, ear training etc.
 - 2 Pedagogical fundamentalism implies a skeptical attitude towards technology, where teachers to a large extent ignore new technologies and how they affect their students’ lives.
 - 3 Pedagogical populism implies a glorification of new technologies, where technologies are put above the teaching, and the role of the teachers is often reduced.

technology forces its way into music education as well as education in general, and teachers need to find their way. Burnard (2007) notes that whether seeing creativity being *in relation to* technology or creativity as *emerging through* technology, it is important to address such questions in education. Bell (2015, 2018) discusses the DAW specifically, addressing how the design of technologies mediates our creative practices. Røshol and Sørbo (2020) expand on this topic in Chapter six in this volume, and discuss the challenges of making and finishing music when using the DAW to create music. Buckingham takes a critical stance on the use of technologies in education at the time of his writing, and argues that “we need to be teaching *about* technologies, not just *with* or *through* them” (2007, p. viii, emphasis in original). A similar argument is made in Chapter eight in this volume by Sørbo (2020), who draws on Heidegger (1977) to argue that making the students reflect on their own relationship and engagement with technology will enhance their creative practices. Such critical examination of current practices relates to critical pedagogy as developed by Freire (2005), who further advocates that students and teachers may benefit from exploring together as equals.

This study is a case study of how electronics are taught in one-to-one tuition by one of the teachers at the Department of Popular Music (DPM) at the University of Agder, to see how this practice could inform other similar practices. Our approach was initially exploratory without a pre-defined thesis or research question. However, it didn’t take long before we recognized the potential of using Biesta’s educational framework as a theoretical foundation, and we developed the following research question: *how are technology and aesthetics balanced in this particular pedagogical practice, and how can this be related to and informed by Biesta’s thinking on balancing educational purposes?* Sørbo (2020) argues that teachers and program developers of electronic music education should strive to keep a meaningful balance of the educational purposes of educational theorist Gert Biesta⁴ and, in our opinion, we provide an example of a practice maintaining this balance in this chapter. It is also a response to Burnard in her discussion on musical creativities, where she notes that “critically,

4 These purposes will be explained in the coming sections of this chapter.

there is a necessity for documentation (in music education) of emerging practices” (2012, p. 324).

After a short outline of the particular context at the University of Agder, we describe the framework of Gert Biesta, and then our research design and method. Then we discuss the empirical findings along with relevant theory, focusing on three main categories detected when analyzing the interviews we conducted. We conclude that careful consideration with regard to both the teaching approach (*how* to teach) and the teaching of aesthetics (how to teach *aesthetics*) might contribute to what Biesta calls a *balanced education*. We further argue that through a mentoring approach and an emphasis on what we term *unique artistic expression* it is possible to facilitate subjectification in these programs, which is central to Biesta’s thinking.

Educational Context

To better understand the context from which this article emerges, this section provides a short outline of how the Department of Popular Music (DPM) at the University of Agder approaches HPME and electronic music, followed by a short outline of Biesta’s educational framework. DPM was established in 1991 and is one of two courses that the University Board defined as a signature study in 2013, meaning a course that “truly *excelled*, and that was the very *hallmark* of this university” (Tønsberg, 2014, p. 29; emphasis in original). It is a performance-based program, and many students become participants at the highest level in the Norwegian popular music scene after finishing their Bachelor, Master’s or PhD program. Due to technological developments in the music industry, DPM introduced specialization in *electronic music* in 2013, offering students *electronics* (most commonly laptop) *as an instrument*. Though it has some independent courses, the electronic music specialization is an integrated part of the performing popular music program, which further suggests a performative approach to the use of the laptop and other electronics, aligning with our usage of *electronic music* described in the former sections. This, in turn, has tended to open the door towards the realm of art music, and the tension between popular electronic music

and electronic art music often creates an interesting interface for exploring musical ideas. Further, every electronic music student has one-to-one tuition with a teacher, a practice that has been a cornerstone at DPM since its beginning. We will refer to the teacher of this particular one-to-one practice as “TEM” (Teacher of Electronic Music).

Let us now turn to the educational theory of Gert Biesta⁵ which we will apply to the practice that is object of this study. Biesta is a major contributor to the critique of what he calls the *Technological*⁶ approach to education. By Technological, he refers to how educational policy makers tend to “make the connection between inputs and outputs as secure as possible so that education can begin to operate as a deterministic machine” (Biesta, 2015, p. 16). It further illuminates how this relates to the question of *normative validity*, that is, of “whether we are measuring what we value, or whether we are just measuring what we can easily measure, thus ending up valuing what we (can) measure” (Biesta, 2010, p. 13). The Norwegian context is, as in most western countries, heavily influenced by this Technological approach to education, also in music education (Varkøy, 2013). This is manifested in *learning by objectives* that permeates almost every aspect of educational practice. Though the importance of social competences and “life skills” has been acknowledged, both in the past and in the present/future (Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018, 2018; OECD, 2005; Department of Education and Research, 2019), both the framework and the will to properly place value on these aspects of education has failed so far. These are some of the reasons why we turn to Biesta and his educational thinking. We concur with him that the *purpose* of education is crucial, and that education is about more than merely qualifying for a job (Biesta, 2013), which we find particularly relevant in the context of art education.

Biesta’s educational framework consists of three main purposes of education, where the balance between these purposes is crucial. Firstly, there is *qualification*, that has to do with the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Secondly, *socialization* has to do with the ways we

5 This educational framework is developed through four books (Biesta, 2006, 2010, 2013, 2017b).

6 To distinguish between *Technological* as used by Biesta and *technological* when discussing *technology*, we will use a capital T when referring to Biesta’s term.

become part of existing traditions and ways of doing and being. Lastly, *subjectification* has to do with the interest of education in the subjectivity or “subject-ness” of those we educate. It has to do with emancipation and freedom and with the responsibility that comes with such freedom (Biesta, 2013, pp. 4–5). Such subjectification can only occur when the students are given time and space to expose themselves both as musicians, citizens, and human beings, and to achieve this they must engage in activities that by nature have an unpredictable outcome. It is “not about the educational production of the subject – in which the subject would be reduced to an object – but is about bringing the subject-ness of the child or young person ‘into play’” (Biesta, 2020, p. 95). At this point it becomes clear that a purely Technological approach to education, which defines expected outcomes according to a given input and aims for effectiveness, is in conflict with this line of thought. The objective of this article is to investigate how one-to-one tuition in electronic music education can be related to these three educational purposes (with an emphasis on subjectification), and to search for alternative ways to educate than that of the Technological, hence the prominence of Biesta’s framework.

Method

As this study is about the practice of *one* teacher with a limited number of students, a qualitative approach was the obvious choice. The study is designed as an *unusual single-case* study, as we argue that the teachings of TEM contain some elements that are out of the ordinary, recognizing the case as one that is “deviating from theoretical norms or even everyday occurrences” (Yin, 2018, p. 85). In the study, the case is the one-to-one practice of *one* teacher in *one* program at *one* University. Though we had some broad reflections about why we wanted to investigate this particular practice, we did not initially have a clear hypothesis or research question, making this an explorative approach. However, it did not take long before we recognized the potential of using Biesta’s educational framework as a theoretical backdrop, so we have leaned towards his theories more than what is necessarily the norm in exploratory studies. In other words, we started with a clear inductive approach, but ended up with a more

deductive study. Though the case study itself is rather limited in terms of the number of participants, the findings will probably be transferable to similar practices, and some of them will hopefully be pertinent to higher electronic music education (HEME) in general.

The selection of participants was given in advance: we contacted all of the students currently having one-to-one tuition with TEM. This resulted in seven participants in the study: six students and the teacher himself.⁷ All of the students were on the Master's program, and most of them had several years of experience with the teaching of TEM. We conducted semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007) of 40 minutes on average. Interviews were the preferred method because we wanted the students' long-term experiences and reflections regarding the teachings of TEM, making, for example, observation too comprehensive. The interviews were transcribed, and the quotes referred to in this article were translated and sometimes slightly altered for a more fluent reading experience. Further, the authors independently read and categorized the material using *content analysis* (Kvale, 2007, pp. 101–119), using the stages suggested by Norton for *thematic analysis* (2009, pp. 115–123). As these stages indicate, we first created multiple categories, then deleted the ones not relevant before merging the remaining categories into three *themes*. Then we reread the transcriptions through the lens of these themes to search for further connections in the material and, finally, we started making links between the themes, as will be presented in the results and discussion sections.

As always in qualitative research, the bias of the researchers is important to address. Both of the authors were familiar with the teachings of TEM in advance⁸ which, on the one hand, is a prerequisite for doing good qualitative interviews but, on the other hand creates challenges regarding our roles as researchers (Kvale, 2007, pp. 33–50). Further, the questions asked in the interviews are grounded in the background and educational thinking outlined in previous sections. Though our intention throughout the design, interviews and analysis was to remain open-minded to the

⁷ We contacted eight students in total, but two didn't reply.

⁸ Røshol was a student of TEM for 3 years until 2018, and Sørbo wrote his Master's thesis based on TEM's instrument setup.

incoming data, it would be naïve to claim a neutral position. Another important aspect to illuminate is that at DPM the students often choose their one-to-one teacher themselves. This case study represents a way of teaching electronics that focuses on expanding and developing the student's musical expression regardless of how this expression relates to mainstream popular music. However, there are different approaches to teaching electronics in one-to-one tuition represented at DPM as well, some more vocational and some more popular music oriented, so this is not the only practice. Hence, the students that attend the teachings of TEM have chosen to do so themselves and do not necessarily represent the average popular music student.

There are some ethical dilemmas to consider as well. The authors are PhD Research Fellows, investigating the practice of a teacher who is both a current colleague and a potential decision maker when we apply for work after the completion of our theses. This will arguably prevent us from being firmly critical to the practice in question. However, we chose this particular practice as an object of study because we, as mentioned, were familiar with the teaching approach, and believed it could provide interesting perspectives to teaching electronic music. Further, as one of the authors was recently a student himself and knew most of the students personally, the interviews were conducted exclusively by the other author to prevent personal attachments from influencing the answers. Lastly, the relatively small number of participants suggests that both the teacher and fellow students might recognize statements made by students in the interviews, so we had to choose quotes that were not clearly distinctive of particular students.

Results and Discussions

As we now turn to our results and discussions we will structure them according to the three themes of our analysis, as mentioned in the method section. The themes detected were: (1) *the teaching approach*, (2) *the teaching of aesthetics*, and (3) *music making as a means to uniqueness*. Starting with the theme “teaching approach”, the first object of discussion is that of one-to-one tuition.

One-To-One Tuition in Electronic Music - The Teaching Approach

This practice is rooted in individual music instruction that was formalized with the advent of conservatories in the nineteenth century and has traditionally been about the acquisition of practical know-how through “modeling, demonstration, imitation and application” (McPhail, 2010, p. 34). It is about learning the techniques and aesthetic philosophy of the teacher, which can be traced to the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). This approach, which might be termed instructivist, has been problematized for several reasons, some of which we will address in this chapter. The first critique has to do with how the focus on skill development can result in a “lack of emphasis on the development of ownership and independence in students” (McPhail, 2010, p. 34). The second critique concerns the vast and potentially negative influence the tutor has on the student, due to “lecturers’ inflexibility, insensitivity to individual needs, unreasonable demands and dominance” (Persson, 1996, p. 303) and lack of transparency (Burwell et al., 2019). This is especially relevant when the teacher is a renowned performer with no formal educational training, as is the case with TEM. These critiques are all raised in publications regarding the education of *classical* musicians, but the pitfalls are the same in popular music and electronic music as well. It is worth mentioning in this regard that there is no consensus as to whether or not one-to-one tuition is a practice suited to popular musicians and how they learn; there are multiple examples of popular music education programs that have both abandoned and continued this practice (Gavin et al., 2017).

When analyzing the interviews in this research we quickly detected an open-minded approach and a high level of student autonomy that seemed to solve much of the critique addressed previously. The students could shape the sessions themselves, which further enabled them to focus on areas they were interested in and wanted to develop:

Participant 2: My experience is that that I’ve had the freedom to do what I want, and he has always said “have your focus wherever your focus is now, on what’s important to you now,” regardless of what that is.

This freedom will arguably amplify the students' ownership to the sessions, which is central to developing student motivation and autonomy (McPhail, 2010, 2013; Pink, 2011). Though one reason for structuring the teaching this way is that it solves some of the critique of the one-to-one practice mentioned above, it might also be looked at as a *necessary* way of structuring such sessions in electronic music. This is due to the fact that when one-to-one tuition is continued into electronic music education, not all aspects are directly transferable from the classical tradition, or even from popular music. One of these differences is that electronics/laptops are not *one* instrument in the same sense as the violin or the electric guitar. Further, electronics and laptops have a much shorter history as played instruments and, consequently, there are no firm structures or traditions for how to teach these instruments (Thompson, 2012). In addition, the interviews showed a vast variety in the students' musical backgrounds: one participant started off as a classical violin player, one was an experienced music teacher interested in improving his technological skills, one was running a commercial studio, one initially approached music through PlayStation and had never played a "traditional"⁹ instrument, and some had backgrounds from performing popular music studies. The technological skill level was equally varied, stretching from one participant who had recently started using electronics to complement his instrument to a former winner of the Norwegian "Grammy" in the category of *Electronica*.¹⁰ Naturally, this leads to an open-minded teaching practice individually adapted to each student, as such different backgrounds and artistic goals can hardly be captured within one specific method or framework.¹¹ Such aspects might contribute to explaining why many teachers, among them TEM, tend to take the role of a *mentor* in these forms of sessions:

9 By "traditional" instruments we refer to historically established instruments like keyboards, violins, electric guitars, trumpets etc.

10 The Norwegian equivalent of a Grammy is called *Spellemannprisen*.

11 Though similar approaches are common in the tuition of other instruments as well, we find the degree of diversity in electronic music to be unique.

Participant 3: We basically never work on particular stuff in lessons, it's only a conversation. Imagine two producers having a coffee and I show one of my productions and he (TEM) goes "cool, I liked this, and I didn't like that, maybe you should work on this and maybe you should work with that. And listen to this music, maybe you can find some inspiration." (...). I feel very equal, and it's very open (...). It feels very little like a school-thing, more like a mentoring-thing.

A mentor is traditionally described as a person with absolute authority and wisdom, an "all-knowing guru who the mentee looks up to unconditionally" (Keinänen & Gardner, 2004, p. 169). However, in their study on choreography mentoring, Keinänen and Gardner provide an alternative way of mentoring to this authoritarian approach, "emphasizing instead individual exploration of creativity and artistry" (2004, p. 182). Though their work concerns dancers and choreographers, we find many similarities to the teachings of TEM: "to cultivate a sense of individual responsibility, the choreographers allow their mentees a high degree of freedom in their exploration" (Keinänen & Gardner, 2004, p. 184). This instantly resonates with how TEM reflects on his own practice:

TEM: I very much believe in freedom, both in educational and professional settings. That one opens up by giving freedom. Then, based on the result, one might start to shape things; to peel off the things the students, or the professionals, don't necessarily need.

The two ways of mentoring described in the study of Keinänen and Gardner represent two opposites that have clear similarities to Biesta's discussion on the role of the teacher: on the one hand, you have progressive education focusing on the freedom of the students where teachers are moved to the back of the classroom and reduced to fellow-learners. On the other hand, if teachers want to stay in front of the classroom because "they believe that that is their proper place and the position from which they can make sense of their unique responsibility" (Biesta, 2017b, p. 97), they are "out of date." Biesta argues for a third approach where the teacher has an essential role to play in an education that still emphasizes

the freedom of the students: where the students are viewed as *subjects*, not objects. The teaching style of TEM seems to contain aspects of what Biesta is searching for, as students describe him both as a peer and as a highly-respected professor and musician. When TEM, from the position of both an authority and a peer, contributes with his opinions and aesthetic judgments to the music presented by the student, he does so from a *unique* position. We will return to some possible implications of this uniqueness shortly, in light of how Biesta approaches the term.

Teaching of Aesthetics - Not Technology

The second issue we find interesting from the analysis is the almost total lack of focus on technicalities:

Participant 1: TEM doesn't care about the technical aspects, it's like fuck that, you'll figure it out, let's not spend time resolving that now, right? Which is great, really, but it requires the people you allow to enter the program to know what the hell they're doing. (...) But there are also many great aspects in the way he puts that technical part aside; if the students are motivated, they'll go home and figure it out.

This clearly differs from educational programs in electronic music offering the students training in specific software and technologies. Further, in literature concerning electronic music education there is a clear emphasis on how the affordances¹² of technologies used in the making of music mediate both creative processes and the music that is being made (e.g. Brown, 2015; Eno, 2004). Musical choices are built into the very design of the DAWs, and if students don't develop a conscious relationship to the technologies they are using, they might miss important aspects of their own agency and practices (Bell, 2015; Sørnbø, 2020). TEM partly addresses these challenges by not addressing them at all; he raises the discussion from being about technicalities to being about aesthetics. The benefit

¹² When using the term *affordances* in this chapter, it will be as done by Hutchby (2001), developed from Gibson: "affordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object".

of this approach is that he, to a lesser extent, allows the affordances of the technology to set the premises for how the music is being discussed, which might be an issue if, for example, the music is discussed with the DAW session open.¹³ It further makes sense when teaching electronic music to leave technical obstacles to be solved by the student, as they are usually familiar with using online resources (like forums or YouTube) for such purposes (Bell, 2014). However, this presupposes that the students already have a certain technical and musical understanding so that they know how to find solutions effectively, and that they are motivated. This might not always be the case, and several students mentioned this lack of technical focus as partly frustrating:

Participant 2: I think it was very frustrating throughout the whole program that we had such few guidelines, it was tough to figure out yourself all the time. (..) My big problem was that I never quite got going (*with playing live electronics*), because I never quite finished setting up and making my instrument do what I wanted (...). With TEM we never got down to the tool-stuff, that's one of the things I missed a bit.

Further, the question concerning the students' conscious relationship to the technologies isn't necessarily addressed. Though it would be possible in such practices to discuss and reflect on how technologies mediate both the music, the creative processes and our thinking about music, this does not seem to be on the agenda of TEM. It could, of course, be discussed whether such reflections are more suitable for courses dealing with groups of students, and some of the students mentioned this to be the case. However, we still argue that at least parts of such reflections might be more properly addressed in a one-to-one setting when discussing original recorded music created by the student. This further addresses another issue recognized at DPM that is due to how students sometimes search for technical solutions to problems that are of a musical and aesthetic nature. For example, a student that struggles with a song could sit for hours searching for the perfect synth sound to "solve" the

¹³ Which was not the case in the sessions of TEM, who preferred .wav or .mp3-files.

problem, while the problem might be a poor melody or chord structure. In other words, when technologies become such an integrated part of the creative practice, it is hard to distinguish technological decisions from aesthetic decisions. It might even be impossible at times to make this distinction, as articulated by Frith and Zagorski-Thomas: “In the studio technical decisions are aesthetic, aesthetic decisions are technical, and all such decisions are musical” (2012, p. 3). Hence, we argue that a conscious relationship to the technologies and the way its affordances mediate our creative processes can contribute to making accurate and meaningful distinctions, and that such distinctions will be valuable:

Participant 2: To many of us (*electronic music students*), me being one of them, it’s very easy to dig into the technical stuff and get a little lost, and that’s when it’s smart of TEM to get our focus back to what’s more important.

This quote sums up much of the above while also taking us back to the aesthetic focus and how these conversations about the music itself are at heart of TEM’s teaching. One objective in these conversations seems to be the development of the students’ ability to express themselves verbally, and be clear and accurate when explaining their aesthetic choices. Due to the lack of formal training many of these students have, in combination with the fact that “a comprehensive formal theory of electronic music seems far away,” (Roads, 2015, p. 6), this was quite a challenge to many:

TEM: The minute we talk about tools they have a clear language for it, as in how long the predelay is on the reverb, what kind of processing you’re using, or what synth is being used (...). But regarding the musical language, it’s often quite poor. It starts with good or bad, this was nice, or this was not.

However, it is clear through the interviews that the aim of these conversations was not only to discuss the aesthetics of *any* music, but that it mattered *which* and *whose* aesthetics were discussed. This brings us to the last theme.

Music Making as a Means for Uniqueness

The third discussion we want to raise is that of using *music making*, that is, making *original* music, as a means to develop *unique artistic expression*. The usage *music making* as an educational tool in popular music education is fairly common (e.g. Lebler & Weston, 2015; Moir & Medbøe, 2015; Tobias, 2013), though it is usually referred to as composing or recording.¹⁴ We recognize this approach in the teachings of TEM, who is clearly conscious about making the students present original material. This, in turn, enables reflections on patterns and connections within their music, helping the students to become aware of similarities in their own aesthetics and eventually start to articulate their unique artistic expression:

TEM: They present material they don't perceive as connected in any way, they just make music, right? And then maybe I can point out that there *is* a connection between these things, that they are not that far apart. And when they realize this themselves, it happens. Then things *really* start to happen.

By making students present recorded versions of their original material he puts them in a position where they must expose their aesthetic values and judgments, which enables discussion regarding the presented material. The interviews suggest that this makes the students reflect upon their own practices in new ways which, in turn, opens up for new approaches and new practices. It also helps the students develop and articulate their unique artistic expression as these reflections concern their own creative works:

Participant 2: He [TEM] was very good at making me think outside my box, to view things differently. The most important was maybe the attitude, the attitude that it's not that big of a deal, don't be afraid. (...). Many of our conversations have been what has shaped me; the philosophy around making music and what we're doing.

¹⁴ We prefer music making, since electronic musicians often don't associate themselves with the term composer.

To further explore the implications of this, we once more turn to Biesta to show how his notion of “*unique*” and “*expression*” opens up possibilities to approach the students as *subjects*. He distinguishes two ways to understand the term unique: uniqueness as *difference* and uniqueness as *irreplaceability* (Biesta, 2013, pp. 19–22). Uniqueness as difference is the way uniqueness is usually understood, that is, what makes one student different to another student, or one artist different to another artist. When we claim that TEM uses music making as a means to develop the *unique artistic expression* of the student, this is the kind of uniqueness we refer to:

Participant 4: In TEM’s teaching, *that* was the main focus; the distinctiveness, what are your practices (...), and what do these practices look like in their purest, most extreme form? (...) Another clear difference from other teaching I’ve had, is that this distinctiveness or your personality, and your musical expression, are two sides of the same coin to a much larger degree, and that this distinctiveness and personality gets more space in the teaching.

This quote takes us from the understanding of uniqueness as difference to an alternative notion of uniqueness. Biesta invites us to see uniqueness as *irreplaceability*, which has to do with the unique relationship we have with every other person, and the inherent *responsibility*¹⁵ within this unique relationship. The way this responsibility inevitably is a part of every relationship is key to Biesta’s notion of *subjectivity*. Further, this might be a useful way to illuminate what was mentioned earlier about the *unique* position from which TEM could make suggestions and statements about the music presented by the student. Our argument is that the search for and development of unique artistic expression that we recognize in his teaching approach contains a double potential. Not only does it search for and develop uniqueness as difference, that is, unique artistic expression, but it can also facilitate uniqueness as irreplaceability, which has to do with subjectification. When discussing the uniqueness of the student,

15 Responsibility here refers to an *ethical* responsibility, not one consciously chosen. In other words, we can’t choose our responsibilities, we can only choose how we respond to them. For further elaboration on Biesta’s usage of this term, see Biesta (2006, pp. 50–52).

though it is initially and intentionally about music and aesthetics, such discussions might contribute in addressing the student *as a subject*.

One last angle from which we want to look at unique artistic expression is that concerning *expression*. Biesta criticizes what he refers to as *educational expressivism*, which has to do with the emphasis in arts education to make students *express* themselves (Biesta, 2017a, pp. 55–59). Although this is obviously an important aspect of art in education, and most certainly in the teachings of TEM and in the argument of this chapter, Biesta argues that *expression in itself* is never enough; teachers need to engage in the *quality* of the expression put forward. Quality in this regard does not refer to *aesthetic* quality, but to whether what is being expressed has the quality of making students “exist *well*, individually and collectively, *in the world and with the world*” (Biesta, 2018, p. 15; emphasis in original). This might suggest that teachers should engage the students in the purpose and value of their art and music and illuminate its possible moral and political implications. Again, such discussions would reach beyond music and aesthetics, and represent yet another opportunity to facilitate subjectification. In other words, we find the same potential for encountering subjectivity when engaging with expression as when dealing with uniqueness.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have examined the practice of a teacher in HEME teaching one-to-one. We have illuminated some common challenges in electronic music education, and also addressed some common critiques to the use of one-to-one teaching in this field of education. We find that the teaching approach of TEM negates many of the critiques of one-to-one teaching. By putting the student at the center of the practice and building the course around the student’s uniqueness, the students are empowered and encouraged to shape their own learning environment in the classes. Further, by focusing on the teaching of aesthetics instead of technology (where lectures, flipped-classroom approaches or informal learning platforms often are sufficient), the time can be spent focusing on developing the student’s unique artistic expression. TEM’s focus on the

student's music making is one strategy that facilitates aesthetic discussions concerning this unique artistic expression. When focusing on the student's music making in the one-to-one setting, it gives the student and teacher artistic objects for discussion which, in relation to Biesta's educational framework, can be related particularly to subjectification. This is especially true since TEM's teaching focuses on original material.

When further relating this practice to the educational framework of Biesta we have argued that teaching of aesthetics combined with the development of unique artistic expression can open up for some interesting possibilities. The way students have to articulate both the objectives and aims *within* their music and the objectives and aims *of* their music contributes to developing a terminology to talk about aesthetics, but also opens up for discussions reaching beyond aesthetics. Following this, we have applied the thinking of Biesta to develop a dual understanding of both uniqueness and expression, and we argue that these understandings can be helpful in addressing subjectification in HEME. By doing so we hope to contribute to a meaningful balance between Biesta's three educational purposes in HEME: qualification, socialization and subjectification.

Balance is central to our argument, and we do not argue that this necessarily should be the only way to teach electronics. Obviously there are prerequisites, assumptions and pitfalls in this way of teaching that makes it unsuitable to be the only approach in every setting, and the students of TEM also gave examples of other methods that were used in his teaching. However, we argue that this approach might work in virtually every setting as an important and valuable *variation* on ways of teaching, and that most students of electronic music will benefit from having at least one semester with similar approaches.

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