

“Let’s Go; We’re Writing a Song”: Co-Creating Auditory and Placial Space in an Afterschool Music Program

Lora Cawelti, Maggie Dahn, Kylie Peppler
lcawelti@uci.edu, dahnm@uci.edu, kpeppler@uci.edu
University of California, Irvine

Olateju Adesida, Noé Cuéllar, Scott Sikkema, Michelle Livas, Nick Meryhew
teju@capechicago.org, noe@capechicago.org, scott@capechicago.org
Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education

Abstract: Auditory space, an underrecognized dimension of placial space, is key to understanding and designing unique learning environments. In this single case study, we analyze an interview with two afterschool music program teachers. We found that as students learn music, co-created auditory space progresses from merely consuming music or making individual sounds, to listening to and playing with one another, and finally collaboratively composing songs. Implications for attending to sound when designing learning environments.

Introduction

Sounds, like birds in nature or traffic on the street outside your home, play a particular role in situating our understanding of physical space and place (Lochhead, 2019). Likewise, music plays an important role in setting cultural space and place (Low, 2014), the rhythms and melodies of a neighborhood market, a holiday festival, the radio on a car ride with your mom. Music researcher Judy Lochhead (2019) describes music as *placial*, emphasizing its role in our lived relationship with the physical space where “aural dimensions are often unarticulated” (p. 696). Like Lochhead, we use the anthropological term *placial space* to indicate the complex combination of physical and relational space in learning environments. In classrooms, physical attributes like desks and other learning tools unite with interpersonal interactions to create new spaces and sites for learning (Massey, 2005). While sharing physical markers with in-school contexts, afterschool spaces often offer more relational flexibility through casual relationships with teachers and less stringent structures and rules for behavior.

From a theoretical standpoint, we consider placial space to be something in the process of becoming, interactionally constituted, and both physically and socioculturally formed (Massey, 2005). The arts, particularly music, set placial space in unique ways through playing, composing, and movement practices. Arts learning is both individual and social, a representational process described as an expression of collective meaning-making or emergent student voice (e.g., Peppler et al., 2022). Like other sites for learning, arts and music-making spaces can be described as co-created (e.g., Dahn et al., 2023) and “made meaningful through peoples’ engagement with them” (Taylor & Phillips, 2017, p. 596). While there are unique sounds that overlay our sense of physical space in a learning environment, little is known about the ways educators describe and interact with sound in a classroom or afterschool setting, or how they use music production as a tool for demonstrating or externalizing learning. In this poster, we consider the ways music overlays a learning setting by asking the following questions: *How do teaching artists describe auditory space in relation to placial space in an afterschool music program? How do auditory space and music learning interact throughout the duration of the music program?*

Methods

Our poster is part of a larger study based on semi-structured interviews conducted with pairs of teaching artists and classroom teacher collaborators. For this single case study (Cresswell & Poth, 2018), we focused on a teaching artist duo, Nick and Michelle, who taught a high school music afterschool program in the 2021-22 school year. Interview questions included thinking about designing for space in their classroom environments, and the role of student agency in co-creating space. We analyzed the interview by coding for mentions of physical space, relational space, music, and other sounds. We then created a qualitative timeline identifying cooccurrences of descriptions of music and sound with placial space. Finally, we analyzed the timeline for the trajectory of change in participation and musical representation from the beginning, middle, and end of the music program.

Findings: Changes in music learning and auditory space

Teaching artists described auditory space in relation to placial space in a few key ways. At the start of the program, students entered the physical space of the music room with one wall lined with keyboards, guitars, and drum sets, and another wall set with rows of chairs with music stands. The center of the room was set for a teacher to act as

conductor and accompanist, with a laptop and pickups for amplified sound output. The teaching artists encouraged students to tinker with the instruments and explore the sounds they make explaining, “the approach to space is really open ended and experimental, experiential, and then students gradually [decide] this is where I want to organize my space.” The placement, physical feel, and sound of the instrument affected a student’s choice of what to play and where to play it in the music classroom. Michelle emphasized the affordances of the afterschool space in responding to student needs, “[we] get input from students of what they want, what is a space for them where they feel comfortable doing what they want to do.” That co-creation of auditory space, driven by listening to student interests, also played out in repertoire selection, where students brought in song requests, learned covers, and eventually wrote and recorded their own song.

As the program progressed, the students went from recognizing and experimenting with sound, to understanding the ways sound interacts in auditory space, Nick described the placial space shifting as the program progressed based on sound production and the students’ need to hear one another as they learned to play together. “It has to do with the bands and being able to hear the drums when you’re playing, or like being able to hear the bass.” Musically, drums and bass set beat, rhythm, and tempo, driving students nearer to one another so they can follow along together. Nick then explained, “It was also about individual students feeling comfortable, scooting closer to each other gradually.” While the students engaged in the physical and auditory creation of space, their relationships to one another within the space led to an added sense of belonging.

Toward the end of the program, the physical space shifted as the group left the music room to record their original song in a second space at the school, an intimate recording studio filled with professional recording equipment like a soundboard and microphones. “This professional setup felt like an escalation for everybody.” One student sat in the lead engineer’s chair and directed the other musicians. Nick explained to the students, “‘you’re pressing record. You’re gonna let them know when to start playing the piece.’ So there was an interplay in that space and ownership too.” Musically, playing and singing their own original song connected the auditory to their roles, directing the collaboration or playing the music, in the physical space.

Nick described working in the recording studio as a powerful turning point in their music learning and song playing, “when we came back to the music room, it was like there was a whole new set of confidence that the students exhibited. We put together twice as many songs in three weeks after the studio than we did in the six months before the studio. I think that shifting space was really powerful.” Michelle explains that relationships also grew, “after the recording was done there was this different camaraderie and they were all closer than they had been before. There was an ease with the way that they spoke and moved around the room that was different.” Student learning was entrenched in the combination of sound and placial space.

Conclusion

Teaching artist descriptions situate co-created auditory space as key to the placial learning environment. In the context of collaborative songwriting, students’ arts learning is evidenced through a shift in participation and investigative process—a progression from music and sound consumption to an external representation of their understanding of how music works as they learn to write melody and lyrics, produce and record, and finally, put the pieces together to create cohesive, collaborative, original songs. Considerations of aural aspects of placial space have implications for other learning spaces, layering sound into designs for future learning environments and considering possibilities for sound in mediating learning processes.

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