



## The digital generation: The influence of portable music listening habits of first year pre-service education students on their future practice as primary school teachers

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### Abstract

This article examines the impact of digital music players on the music listening preferences and habits of first year pre-service education students, aged 18-25. A written survey was administered to listeners of digital music players (n=58), followed by a focus group discussion (n=6) to further explore issues raised in the survey. Findings suggest that this age group of listeners are open to listening to a wide variety of music. In particular, the digital music player has had a specific impact in opening listeners to a wider variety of music that they would have accessed prior to owning a player. The study also pointed to the extrinsic value this age group placed on music listening.

### Introduction

Since the beginning of 2004 I have noticed an ever increasing number of undergraduate teacher education students entering my music education classes listening to iPods, earphones or earbuds in place, lost in their own music worlds. Like other digital music players (MP3 players), the Apple iPod can store hours of music on its hard drive. This device is small enough to fit in a shirt pocket, and allows the listener to personalise 'playlists' (i.e., collections of songs/music categorised by the listener) of music, depending on what music has either been copied from CDs or downloaded from Web sites. The Apple iPod uses iTunes, a music software program suitable for PC and Apple Macintosh computers that allows for the management of music into playlists. Apple has also opened its iTunes music store, which allows the user to legally download (and pay for) music.

Digital music players differ from other portable music devices in their size (they are smaller than either a walkman or a discman) and the sheer amount of music they can store. Whereas a walkman or discman only allows the listener to listen to a single CD or tape at the one time (approximately 60-70 minutes of music), the digital music player can hold hundreds of hours of music, and most importantly allows the user to edit what music is being listened to (i.e., a listener may only download two songs from an album, for example, rather than the entire album). Legal downloads of music are cheaper than purchasing CDs, and there are many free downloads (both legal and illegal). This, along with the ease of file sharing (i.e., exchanging playlists between players), allows users to experiment with a variety of music that they may previously not have accessed due to the cost of buying individual CDs.

With this in mind, it was hypothesised that this new listening technology may have an impact on the listening preferences and habits of its users. To address this issue I focused on a group of first year undergraduate teacher education students, the majority of whom were 18-25 years old, an age group where listeners have been shown to be particularly open to listening to a variety of different musical styles (i.e., Behne, 1997; Hargreaves, 1982; Hargreaves & North, 1997). The central research question asked was: *what are the music listening preferences and habits of university students in a generalist primary teacher education degree in relation to portable digital music?* A follow-on question relating specifically to music education was also posed: *how does this new mode of listening to music impact on the way these pre-service teachers view their future teaching of music in primary schools?*



## Music preference and listening habits

Musical preference is a complex area, 'influenced by individual variables such as age, gender, and sociocultural background, as well as by specific characteristics of the music, and the listening situation' (Olsson, 1997, p. 291). Although there is an extensive body of literature about music listening preferences of different age groups (particularly adolescents), Zillmann & Gan (1997) write, 'The fact that adolescents consume their music mostly alone in a private situation has not received much attention' (p. 162). Digital music players, by their very nature (i.e., optimum listening through headphones), foster individual music listening where the listener does not interact with the outside world (Bull, 2001), hence an examination into this new private listening technology is warranted.

The most popular styles of music for American teenagers are current hits (Top 40) and hip hop/rap, followed by Rhythm and Blues, alternative rock, and hard rock/heavy metal. Although some teens listen to 'classic' rock such as Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd, neither classical, jazz or world music are favoured genres (Fetto, 2002/2003). North et al. (2000), in a study of 2465 teenagers found preference for pop music was overwhelming over folk and classical music. Playing or listening to classical music was viewed negatively for presenting a poor impression to peers. Summarising the literature, Russell (1997, p. 145) indicates that 'musical tastes formed in youth tend to persist into and across the adult years, especially in the case of popular music.'

Literature suggests that, from later adolescence (i.e., late teens and onward, the age of the subjects in this study), there is a new openness to styles of music that may previously have been rejected by the listener in later primary school years and early adolescence (Behne, 1997; Hargreaves, 1982; Hargreaves & North, 1997). In one of the most ambitious studies of musical preference across different ages, LeBlanc et al. (1996) measured music preference of 2262 listeners aged 6 to 91 years. Tolerance for a range of musical styles, or what Hargreaves (1982) terms 'open earedness', was found to be at its peak in early elementary school, declined in early adolescence, and rebounded in late adolescence to early adulthood, before declining in older adulthood.

As for the function of music in peoples' lives, teenagers place greater importance on music at home than in the school environment, possibly due to the autonomy (i.e. choosing what music to listen to, who to listen to it with, to what activity it might accompany) children have in listening to music at home (Boal-Palheiros & Hargreaves, 2001; North et al., 2000). Behne (1997) found that adolescents (aged 11 to 17) used music predominantly for mood management. Beyond adolescence music has been found to be used as an accompaniment to other activities (i.e., to accompany active leisure such as going out with friends; accompanying maintenance activities such as housework), with focused listening to music rarely occurring (Sloboda et al. 2001). North and Hargreaves (1996) found that British university students consumed different styles of music depending on the situation (i.e., listening environment). Popular music was seen as desirable in nightclubs, when jogging, and engaging in home tasks such as ironing, whereas classical music and jazz was not. In summary, the literature suggests that the group in the present study (late adolescence to early adulthood, aged 18-25) may be 'open eared' to a variety of different music styles and use recorded music to accompany a variety of different activities.

## Method

A brief written survey (see appendix 1) was administered to first year students undertaking a Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree who owned a digital music player to provide a broad picture of student listening habits. The survey was initially piloted with a separate, smaller group of students to ensure content validity. The pilot allowed for refinement of questions (including providing additional choices for music styles listened to and uses of music). The final survey asked students if they owned an iPod or other digital music player. Those who answered in the positive went on to indicate if the digital music player was their primary



source of listening to music, tick the styles of music they listened to, tick reasons why they listened to music, and finally indicate how they thought their music preferences and reasons for listening to music might influence their use of music as future teachers.

The results from the survey were explored in further detail using a focus group of six students, drawn from students who had answered the survey. Students were asked to nominate for the focus group a week after the survey was administered, with the researcher asking for nominations reflecting the variety of responses that emerged in the survey. All students who had filled in the survey were present (during lectures) when this request was made. Kreuger (1988) indicates that focus groups are ideal as follow-up to surveys, particularly when the survey is exploratory, as was the case in this research. As the digital music player phenomenon was new to me, I felt that individual interviews with respondents may not have been successful as I would not be able to talk to them on the same 'wavelength' about this new technology. Focus groups emphasise interaction between participants (Morgan and Spanish, 1984), encouraging participants to talk to each other, rather than the interviewer (Kitzinger, 1994). This can then result in participants commenting on each others' perceptions, reasoning, and experiences. As mediator of the focus group I prepared a series of open-ended questions based on the results of the survey. These served as 'springboards' for the hour-long focus group discussion.

### Results of the survey

The survey revealed that 58 (71%) out of a total of 82 surveyed students owned a digital music player (39 an iPod, 19 another type of digital music player). No students over the age of 25 owned a player (11 respondents were aged over 25), suggesting this new technology is embraced by young adults (as reinforced by Apple's marketing of its iPod). The survey was then administered to those 58 respondents who owned a digital musical player. Of these, 51 (88%) were female and 7 (12%) were male. 44 respondents (76%) indicated that their digital music player was their main source of music.

Table 1 indicates the number of respondents who listened to each style of music listed. The only unexpected result in the most popular styles was the 'Golden Oldies' category, a genre generally favoured by older listeners (music that was popular when listeners were teenagers). The mid-level acceptance of styles such as classical and jazz was not unexpected considering the literature previously cited about this age group being 'open eared' to a variety of musical styles. The relatively low response to rap, and particularly punk and heavy metal was not surprising, as these styles of music tend to be favoured by males (Schwartz & Fouts, 2003; O'Brien, 1999; Barongan, 1995; Took, 1994; Walser, 1993), who were in the minority of those surveyed.

**Table 1:**

What styles of music do you listen to?

Top 40 pop	43
Rock	35
Golden Oldies (i.e., classic rock)	34
R & B	33
Alternative	29
Dance/techno	26
Chill	25
Jazz	21
Classical	17
Contemporary Christian	15
World music	14
Blues	14
Country	14



Rap	9
Roots	9
Folk	9
Reggae	8
Punk	7
Heavy metal	3

None of respondents listened to fewer than four styles of music. 14 respondents (24%) listened to four styles of music, none of which included classical, jazz, contemporary Christian, roots or world music. 35 respondents (60%) listened to between five and eight styles of music, ranging over all styles, including classical, jazz, contemporary Christian, roots and world music, and 9 respondents (16%) more than eight styles of music. These results indicate that the majority of those surveyed were clearly 'open-eared' in the number of different music styles they listened to.

Table 2 indicates the number of respondents' reasons for listening to music. The dominance of the extrinsic reasons for listening to music (the first six categories), as opposed to the more intrinsic reasons for listening to music (the final two categories) is notable. This was also reflected in responses to the open-ended question *how do you think your music preferences and reasons for listening to music might influence your use of music as a teacher?* where a number of themes emerged, namely:

- Respondents focussed on the extrinsic benefits of music (e.g., we should be using music as a motivational tool; music is the best way to share things like culture and who we are and pass on positive messages)
- They stressed the importance of personal choice in selecting music (e.g., I will teach music I enjoy; I want to share my love of music through having kids listen to music I love)
- Listening to music was seen as being about enjoyment – for the prospective teacher and children (e.g., understanding the musical concepts for children is a bonus, but let's do what we do and look at how we use music in everyday life which is about enjoying music and having fun; I listen to music, not play it, so I want my children to be able to listen to and enjoy music like I do)
- Respondents stressed the importance of exposing children to different styles of music (e.g., increase children's appreciation of a range of different music; I want to encourage free thinking in children's choices of music, but also want to make sure they are exposed to all styles of music)
- They believed music should be integrated into/with other Key Learning Areas (use music with other KLAs; use music to help learn how to read).

**Table 2:**

*Why do you listen to music?*

Relaxation	54
Maintain a mood (i.e., you're feeling happy so you play happy music)	52
Escape/distraction	51
To dance to	40
To accompany exercise	37
Motivation	35
To sing along to and/or play along to the music	13
To understand musical concepts (i.e., dynamics, pitch, structure, rhythm)	3



The data from this survey provided material to be explored in the focus group session.

### The focus group session

The focus group session, lasting one hour, had two foci: 1) discussion of findings from the survey regarding music preference and use of music, specifically in relation to digital music players; and 2) implications for teaching music in schools. As previously indicated, a range of students was sought; there were five female and one male, representing (broadly) the male-female ratio of students surveyed; of the six students, two listened to four styles of music, two between five and eight styles, and two more than eight styles of music.

#### *Music preference, use of music and the digital music player*

None of the six participants were surprised that 71% of the first year students owned a digital music player. The following comment encapsulated discussion around this topic: 'It's like what portable CD players were to the generation older than us ... It's new, it's portable, and it's cheaper.' Similarly, there was no surprise expressed that 76% of digital music player owners saw the player as their main source of music. Reasons (all expected) for this were:

- economic (i.e., it is cheaper to download music – both legally and illegally - than purchasing CDs)
- variety (i.e. a digital player store a greater variety of music than a single CD; 'like I've got three thousand songs I think, it's great!')
- privacy (i.e., listening is predominantly done through earbuds/earphones; 'it's just you and the music, no outside noises distracting you like when you listen to the car radio or your CD player at home where you've got people talking in the next room')

Five of the six participants indicated they were now listening to more music, and a wider variety of music, than they did prior to owning a digital music player. The one person who did not limit his listening to four styles of music – alternative, heavy metal, rock and Golden Oldies; he indicated that he simply transferred favourite tracks from his CDs to his iPod for listening to music when on public transport. The other participants pointed to 'just wanting' to try new music, to 'opening up to new musical experiences.' When asked why, the consensus was summarised as follows: 'there's so much music out there now ... so many different styles, and they kind of like merge and blur. It's like you hear a bit of classical in pop and jazz in rap, and on any album a singer isn't going to just use one style of music, or at least most don't.' In response to this comment others indicated that it was like 'exploring', finding new music 'like' a song or piece of music they enjoyed. 'Only now you can do it because with your iPod you can share playlists with friends, download so much free stuff, get into podcasts ... there's so much out there that you can access.'

When asked who listened to classical, jazz or world music, five discussants indicated they listened to all three, and four just to classical and jazz. Of these students, only two indicated they regularly listened to classical, jazz or world music prior to purchasing their digital music player. 'I always kind of liked some classical stuff, stuff you'd hear in movies, but I didn't know what it was so I never went to buy it. But now you surf the Net, google the name of the movie and you can find out. Then it's just downloading the track – a lot of the classical music is free and legal too.'

When asked why the 'Golden Oldies' category was so popular in the survey discussants initially were confused, responding with 'they're just good songs' and 'you just know them.' Upon further discussion discussants revealed that listening to this style of music was something they did with their parents (and even grandparents), as well as being part of the 'karaoke' experience ('I just love getting up on stage after a few drinks and doing early Madonna songs').

In discussing the results of why people listened to music, all six said they had indicated the three highest rated categories as reasons for listening to music. 'I don't know anyone our age who wouldn't' was a typical response, as was 'I've used music to relax to since I was a kid,



especially at high school with all the pressure you're under.' There was consensus that a digital music player was particularly useful for relaxation as it 'blocks out the world and lets you chill', and 'gets rid of traffic and just the usual noise of the city.' One respondent focused on her use of the digital music player for motivation: 'It's so good, play some music to pump me up, then I go out and race [triathalons]. It's great, it's that headspace that it gives you which only you are in.'

The only student who was actively engaged in performing music expressed surprise that so few people used music to sing along to and/or play along to music, and to understand musical concepts. 'I just do that instinctively,' she said. 'I thought a lot more people would.' In response the male discussant indicated that he sung along to music, 'sometimes without thinking.' In response, another respondent said, 'But you do – it's not like you're really trying to 'learn' how to sing a song, it's what you just do, it helps you get into the music.' The discussion then centred on this 'unconscious' singing along to music, which led two of the female discussants to recall playing songs repeatedly at primary school to learn the words and sing songs with the recording, 'and sometimes without it.' Another discussant, who had learnt piano at high school, indicated she had tried picking out chords of some 'easy piano ballads' that she heard on the radio; 'but that wasn't part of my piano lessons, that was something I just did for fun.' Drawing the group back to the low response to the bottom two reasons for listening to music, one discussant summarised, 'You don't listen to music to *learn* about music, it's about relaxing and escaping'; and later, 'the concepts are what you learnt at uni, what you'll do in the classroom – not what I do for fun.' In terms of listening for musical concepts, others agreed that since having undertaken the music education subject at university they did feel more equipped to identify music concepts in the music they listened to, but again stressed that this was something for 'the future ... when we're actually teaching music.' Two of the discussants stressed that they were only in the first year of their studies, which explained why their musical focus was still on 'enjoyment' rather than for understanding of musical concepts, described by one discussant as 'learning about music for something I won't have to do for another three years'; that is, when the pre-service begins her teaching career. These final comments led the discussion towards how these pre-service teachers saw their own musical preferences and experiences impacting on how they see themselves using music in the classroom as future teachers.

#### *Future music teaching*

'So music in the classroom is different to the way you use and respond to music?' I asked. There were nods and shrugs. 'A lot of the music I listen to couldn't be used in school ... you know, the bad language and 'adult' themes.' Others nodded, although shortly afterwards there was a counter response: 'But a lot could, if you think about some of the classics – not classic classics, but older pop songs. And you can use classical that you like, if you like classical, and world [music] is good because it opens children to other cultures.' In response others indicated that they did in fact want to use music with children that they had chosen, that they enjoyed themselves, thus reflecting a similar response that emerged in the written survey in response to the question, *how do you think your music preferences and reasons for listening to music might influence your use of music as a teacher?* This led to another theme that emerged in the written survey, the importance of music in the classroom being 'fun', both for teacher and student. 'It's one of those subjects which has to be fun because music is fun – that's why I listen to it, why I played the piano when I was a kid.' Others agreed, but also pointed to their own classroom music experiences as children as being anything but fun: 'some of the stuff we had to sing, and so much theory, learning note names ... none of that was enjoyable.'

All six respondents agreed that music should be integrated with other Key Learning Areas. 'You have to, because there aren't specialist music teachers in most schools.' Others suggested that there was simply no choice, pointing to the 'crowded curriculum' as reason for doing this ('if you don't integrate then you don't do music, because you'll run out of time – particularly with the big push on literacy and numeracy'). Lots of suggestions as to how this could be done were given, particularly in relation to Studies of Society and the Environment, where 'you can expose children to different styles of music ... and how different cultures and



people use the music.'

The term 'use' music was frequently heard, particularly in reference to how the discussants saw themselves as 'using' (rather than 'teaching') music in the classroom. In asking the group about this, one respondent said, 'Sure you can teach music, as in how to sing, the musical concepts, how to compose and all that, but you can use it too, like we do now, for relaxation and motivation.' Others nodded: 'that is so important. Young kids get so stressed today and music is a great way to de-stress. I think we should be using music more for that than just *learning* music.' There was unanimous agreement on this point, which in turn led to discussion about a point raised earlier in the discussion, that of not 'consciously' learning a song when listening to a digital music player. 'Little kids like to learn that way too. So it's kind of not like learning, you just do it for fun because you want to. You don't even need a teacher for that ... Yeah, I think there should be more of that.' When asked if that was possible in the classroom, the respondent said, 'I know, there's the time thing we talked about. But yes, I'm sure you can. Let children work on that at lunch time, then bring it into the classroom ... I think it's a great idea. Kids have iPods now, so why not?'

To conclude the session I asked the respondents to reflect on the music education subject they had completed in first semester at university: 'In light of what we've talked about today, how could that subject be improved?' Two issues were clearly articulated:

- 1) Early on in the semester ask students about the music they listen to, then connect this to music education and music curriculum documents
- 2) Include 'other' uses of music in the subject (i.e., extrinsic uses of music such as music for relaxation, motivation etc.).

### Discussion and conclusion

The first part of the research question *What are the music listening preferences and habits of university students in a generalist primary teacher education degree in relation to portable digital music?* confirmed that this cohort of students (n=58) aged 18-25 are 'open eared', as previous studies of this age group has suggested (Behne, 1997; Hargreaves, 1982; Hargreaves & North, 1997; LeBlanc et al., 1996). The focus group discussion on this topic revealed just how important the digital music player has been in fostering this open earedness, namely through the sheer volume (and as a result, variety) of music these players can store, and most importantly the economic ease (i.e., cheapness) in accessing a variety of different music styles. With this knowledge there is a clear message for educators in pre-service music education programs: expose students to a wide variety of music to whet their musical appetites, to music they may not have yet encountered; make suggestions about composers, singers, styles of music students might like to download which may not only be useful to them as future teachers, but for their own listening pleasure.

The second part of the first research question, focusing on the music listening habits of these students, confirmed what previous research had suggested about teenagers and college age adults; that is, music was predominantly used in a functional way, for its extrinsic worth (Boal-Palheiros & Hargreaves, 2001; North et al., 2000; Behne, 1997; North & Hargreaves, 1996). The survey clearly indicated the extreme between the heavily favoured extrinsic uses of music and the nominally favoured intrinsic uses. Focus group discussion revealed just how entrenched the listed extrinsic uses of music were and how valued this use of music was, thus suggesting (as discussants in fact indicated) that this use of music should be addressed more explicitly in pre-service music education programs. In terms of the extrinsic use of music, it was very much the *functional* aspect of music that the focus group discussants emphasised. That is, how music could be used in everyday lives to enhance living. The fact that focus group discussants emphasised this not only in terms of their own lives, but in terms of the lives of young children that they will teach, suggests that the use of music in this way needs to be explicitly addressed in pre-service music teacher education. Although digital music players were viewed as enhancing listening to music for relaxation and motivation, this technology was not explicitly viewed as a pivotal aspect in highlighting the value placed on



extrinsic uses of music.

The second research question, *how does this new mode of listening to music impact on the way these pre-service teachers view their future teaching of music in primary schools?* was not clearly answered. Rather, broader themes emerged concerning pre-service teacher beliefs about teaching music that went beyond the impact of digital music players, but did sometimes touch on their usage. For example, music was viewed as having to be 'fun' in the classroom, for both teacher and students. This included allowing children to learn music in informal contexts, such as those that occurred when listening repeatedly to a song on a digital music player. Such a learning environment focuses more on enjoyment than the 'learning' that occurs in school music programs (Boal-Palheiros & Hargreaves, 2001, p. 115). Implications for pre-service music programs is to allow students to discuss and utilise informal music learning processes, and also have a greater awareness of how children learn music in informal situations (see Marsh, 1999; Campbell, 1995), thus moving away from the more 'traditional' teaching strategies employed in the music classroom (Green, 2002).

The two other main issues to emerge in student beliefs about teaching music were 1) the importance of teaching/utilising the extrinsic benefits of music, and 2) the need to integrate music with other Key Learning Areas. The former was consistently highlighted in the survey and focus group discussion, to the point where this 'use' of music was favoured over intrinsic music learning. This suggests that tertiary music educators need to address this issue, which is clearly part of these pre-service teachers' experiences. In line with a constructivist approach to learning (Bruner, 1996), these experiences need to be acknowledged, discussed and drawn upon, at which point the tertiary music educator then can make explicit the links between extrinsic and intrinsic music learning, not only in pre-service teachers' own musical lives, but in the musical lives of the children they will teach. That is, using music for extrinsic purposes does not necessarily preclude music from being used for intrinsic purposes. The belief that music should be integrated with other Key Learning Areas is interesting, particularly considering these students were in their first year of their undergraduate teaching program and therefore had only completed a limited number of education subjects. Integration was only presented as one of a number of ways to approach music education in the music education subject completed by the students (co-ordinated and taught by myself). Students in the focus group indicated that integration had not been specifically promoted in other subjects they had completed to date. Rather, it was something 'that's just there – we know there's so much that we'll be expected to teach.' Awareness of this issue so early in an undergraduate teaching degree is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does (again) raise the issue of whether music should be integrated with other subject areas, particularly if there are no specialist music teachers in the primary school. Perhaps pre-service non-musician teachers see their own engagement with music as being integrated into other parts of their lives, as opposed to focusing solely on music at any given time in the day. This aspect of future teachers' lives is ripe for future exploration. This, along with curriculum documents (i.e., Victorian Essential Learning Standards, VCAA, 2006) and curriculum research (i.e., The Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study, Queensland Government, 2001) may account for a pro-integration attitude.

It should be noted that the research reported on in this article is only the beginning of a larger project that will aim to chart the musical preferences of pre-service teachers and the impact of these preferences on their music teaching, over their four year pre-service teacher training. Future work on the project will endeavour to explore students' musical backgrounds in relation to their musical preferences and future music teaching attitudes, and examine instances during pre-service fieldwork where students endeavour to bring their personal beliefs about music, as outlined in this article, into their own music teaching.

In conclusion, the digital music player has had an effect on the listening habits, and in particular the range of listening preferences, on its users in this study. There is no clear link between this and how first year pre-service teachers view their future teaching of music. However, this is something that tertiary music educators might like to consider engaging with; that is, encouraging music exploration through iPods and other digital music players, and



have students reflecting on their own use of music using this technology and how this might impact on their own future music teaching.

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### Appendix 1: Listening Habits Survey

Do you own an iPod? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you own another type of MP3 player? \_\_\_\_\_

What styles of music do you listen to? (please tick )

- Alternative .....
- Top 40 pop .....
- Country .....
- Dance .....
- Blues .....
- Jazz .....
- Roots .....
- Folk .....
- Christian .....
- Golden Oldies (i.e., classic rock/pop) .....
- Punk .....
- Heavy metal .....
- R & B .....
- Reggae .....
- World music .....
- Classical .....
- Chill .....
- Other (please list) \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you listen to music? (please tick )

- To accompany exercise .....
- To dance to .....
- Maintain a mood (i.e., you're feeling happy so you play  
happy music) .....
- Relaxation .....
- Motivation .....
- Escape/distraction .....
- To learn how to sing and/or play music .....
- To understand musical concepts (i.e., dynamics, pitch,  
structure, rhythm) .....
- Other (please list) \_\_\_\_\_

How do you think your taste in music and your reasons for listening to music will influence your use of music when you are a teacher?

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