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BODY of KNOWLEDGE

Learning with the body: investigating the link between musical interaction and the acquisition of musical knowledge and skills

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Despite empirical evidence claiming that emotional and bodily processes underlie our cognitive decision making and social functioning (Yang & Damasio 2007), the pervasive body-mind dualism, the Cartesian split (Crossley 1995; Howson & Inglis 2001; Merleau-Ponty 1962), has been deeply rooted in education (Armour 2006; Bowman 2004; Chodakowski & Egan 2008; Powell 2007; Evans & Davies 1996; Reid 1996). This study aims at challenging the body-mind dualism with empirical research, claiming that conscious bodily participation significantly enhances the acquisition of musical knowledge and skills.

This paper examines the acquisition of popular music by young Nepali musicians for whom local traditional music occupies a preeminent place in their music learning process. The way they apply their bodily learning strategies in local traditional music to popular music sheds light on the way musical knowledge and skills might be acquired in general. Therefore, the central question in this study is how bodily learning processes in the form of interaction, gestures and entrainment result in the acquisition of musical knowledge and skills in popular music. The outcomes are based on data collected in Kathmandu, Nepal, from 20 band rehearsals.

Derived from a qualitative video analysis and a binary logistic regression, two patterns of learning emerged, indicating that musical knowledge and skills arise out of bodily interaction between musicians. The first pattern, in which they mainly observe their peers or teachers, comprises of human action observation (Calvo-Merino et al. 2005), imagining the observed movements with motor imagery (Cox 2011) and connecting this to previously acquired musical skills. The second pattern demonstrates the transition from human action observation to conscious participation with the body. Consciously aligning the body with the dominant pulse seems conducive to the learning process. Understanding these patterns contributes to embodied music education and caters to body-mind learning strategies of students.