

A photograph of a butterfly and its pupae on a green stem. The butterfly is on the left, with its wings spread, showing a pattern of black, yellow, and white. To its right are three pupae, also on the stem, showing a similar color pattern. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

TRANSFORMATIVE VULNERABILITY

written by Dr Anita Collins

I have been privileged to walk the road with many schools as they transform their school through music learning.

It often starts with very small steps, a short presentation at a staff meeting, an exploratory conversation with a school leader, a series of emails to confirm what the school leader wants to achieve, and my role in that change.

While I deliver a service to the school in terms of teacher training, parent education and program design, what I have come to understand is that I am supporting the school leader in their quest for change.

In their former professional life, school leaders have rarely been music educators. I have often wondered why this is so and have come to the tentative conclusion that most music teachers are driven by a passion for music-making, not leadership.

They get joy and satisfaction from guiding countless students through the music learning experience, and that is more than enough.

However, this situation means that school leaders who understand the potential of music learning to transform their school learning culture, to support the cognitive development of their students, and enhance the cohesion of the teaching and non-teaching staff, have very little idea of how to implement that change. They know they want it, but they just don't know how to get it.

This is where many music education advisors and consults step in and help. This is work I find incredibly rewarding, quite challenging and above all, highly responsive. I have to meet the school leader and the teaching staff where they are, and then guide them through a process that is not standard or set, but responsive and sometimes bewildering.

MUSINGS FROM ANITA

Embracing the Messy

These school leaders tend to fall into two categories as they progress through the implementation of a music learning program in their school. They either embrace the messy or try to control it. What I mean by the messy is that implementing a music program doesn't follow a Step 1, 2, 3 process but has multiple actions occurring simultaneously. Instruments are ordered while teacher training and parent education commences.

While I love all the steps, teacher training is my happy place. Not because I like sitting on the floor singing a song and helping 30-odd non-musically trained teachers to clap the beat together (sounds easy but in reality, it is surprisingly difficult), but because I support their personal and professional learning through a period of intense vulnerability.

You aren't going to make me sing, are you?

This phrase, or a version of it, is uttered by more than one teacher at the start of the professional learning session. While they care about the singing aspect for sure, they are actually telling me there are frightened.

Singing in a group of people where there are established levels of power and hierarchy at work is scary – it has the very real potential to erode the carefully constructed relationships that exist within a teaching group.

This is exactly the same in the staff from an IT or manufacturing company. Singing is the great equaliser, and no one is more important or influential than anyone else. And what happens if the CEO can't sing in tune?

My response to "don't make me sing" comment is always the same "yes, we will be singing in five minutes, and you will love it". That is exactly what I do, but I never say "now let's sing" because I know the physiological response in most

people will probably be heightened heart rate and blood pressure, uncontrolled sweating and an intense desire to run away. All I say is "now repeat after me" and I sing, and every time without fail, the group sings, invariably has a big laugh, and I see the beginnings of transformative vulnerability.

Staff cohesion through music learning

It was only very recently that I understood the mechanism how music learning transformed a school teaching team. I would commence work with a whole school teaching group, and I would see the cliques, the power plays, and the silent dissenters make themselves known. But we would sing



together, keep beat together, learn to read music together, and slowly, very slowly, those established paradigms would dissolve.

Through the professional learning sessions, the staff became more honest and respectful in their communication with each other, and this resulted in the school becoming a happier and healthy place.

I wish I had this revelation, but it came from a school leader whom I have worked with for several years and deeply respect. As we acknowledged the journey the staff had been on, and the differences between the staff cohesion from three years ago to now, she said “I guess it is that we were all vulnerable together”.

I felt like lightning hit me. Of course! While music learning, and the long-term vision of infusing music learning into

every part of the school, was the tool, the vulnerability that it created was the catalyst to the transformation.

Teachers became learners again, and they connected with their first language, which is song, and re-engaged as a sensory learner. And they did it all in a social learning environment that was safe and infused with humour and connection.

It's Pub Choir without the beer

Recently I was listening to an [interview with Astrid Jorgensen](#) who is the founder of Pub Choir in Australia.

For those who don't know the work of Pub Choir, watch one of their videos when you are having a low day, it is shot in the arm of joy.

Astrid and her team bring sometimes thousands of people together in a pub



MUSINGS FROM ANITA

setting to learning and perform a song, often in three parts. These aren't trained singers, they are people who come together to be connected with people they don't know and will probably never see again, through the transformative vulnerability of song.

Astrid has been a music teacher and developed her Pub Choir skills in the harsh and potentially unforgiving world of high school compulsory singing.

Basically, she could lead an army now with the social cohesion skills she now has. Astrid is one of my educational heroes.

In this interview, Astrid spoke about the vulnerability that people sign up for when they buy a ticket to a Pub Choir event. She also spoke of the very careful and deliberate steps she takes to keep every singer safe within a place of vulnerability. She also said the beer helps, and it struck me that the reason I put so much care into the start of my sessions with teachers is because I don't think I could hand out a pint of beer to every teacher before 3:45pm on school premises (although it would be one hell of an experiment).

It is the same theme in a different setting. Whether we come together in a school library or a pub space, we are ultimately coming together to be vulnerable, and remove all the barriers to being humans together, and not holding onto our roles as an accountant or a bus driver or a teaching assistant.

Music learning is a tool for professional cohesion and any company or school that has high levels of connection and respect delivers better products and services, no matter what area they do it in.

Maybe starting every meeting or conference or strategy session with a [Bobby McFerrin Pentatonic Scale](#) activity is not such a bad idea.



**Astrid Jorgensen and
Waveney Yasso of Pub
Choir on stage at
Riverstage, Brisbane 2021.
To learn more about Pub
Choir [click here](#)**