**Music Generated Narratives: Elaborating the Da Capo Interview Technique**

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**Abstract**

Qualitative researchers draw on multiple, creative ways to elicit participant narratives. Our previous use of playing researcher-selected music to participants to elicit narratives at the end of a traditional interview, in what we call the ‘Da Capo’ technique, suggested it had significant potential to reveal nuanced narratives to complement those generated by existing approaches. This paper relates how we explored the ability of the ‘Da Capo’ technique as a standalone method to generate participant narratives. To do this, we played 10 one-minute long extracts of classical music (5 ‘Western’ and 5 ‘Chinese’) to 20 participants (10 ‘Western’ and 10 ‘Chinese’); after hearing each piece participants were asked if the music recalled for them any experiences of learning. Where it did so, we explored this further in dialogue and narrative recall. As expected, some narratives related to experiences of studying, academic success, and of particular times and places associated with learning. However, in many cases the music elicited narratives of learning which, surprisingly and in multiple dimensions, related to physical learning, culture, the family, and particular emotions such as sympathy, and of aspects of character, such as optimism and honesty. We provide details of using the technique. We show how particular music was effective in eliciting learning experiences with participants, but we also indicate when for some participants it did not elicit such experiences. We provide further evidence of the value of using music either as a stand-alone method in the qualitative researcher’s toolkit, or as an additional and complementary tool. We discuss the merits, limitations, and potential applications of the Da Capo technique.

Keywords: narratives; music; interviewing

**Introduction**

In qualitative research, music has been used to reveal and re-present data (Beer, 2013), to explore aspects such as its relationship with aggression (Roberts & Mattern, 2014), and as a metaphor to facilitate thesis writing (van Shalkwyk, 2002). Our own previous research, somewhat surprisingly, showed how playing extracts of music to participants can elicit memories and experiences which were not elicited by that textually based spoken interview questions (Pilcher, Cortazzi & Jin, 2014). We had interviewed graduating students about their experiences of studying, primarily via more traditional oral questioning and, as a tailpiece, we played these participants selected music extracts. After each piece, we asked if the music reminded participants of anything about their degrees. Among memories triggered, we found that quiet solo piano pieces often reminded students of library study, that celebratory symphonic pieces reminded students of graduating and academic success, although huge large-scale works were considered more indicative of higher degrees, rather than of undergraduate studies. Such results show the potential of music to transport people towards recall and imagination to generate vivid memories, which evoke experiences that appeared to surprise and puzzle participants themselves. We called this technique the *Da Capo technique*, in line with the musical term “Da Capo” which is often written at the end of a musical score, and which means “from the beginning.” The term resonates with Goffman’s (1975) dramaturgical metaphor of narrative as replaying a strip of personal experience which suggests a re-framed remembering of the past in a present narrative performance.

There were, however, additional questions and issues. Previously (Pilcher, Cortazzi & Jin, 2014), music was used alongside oral questions in a more traditional interview approach: music only constituted a small section of the actual interview. Hence, the present intention is to explore whether and how music might have potential as the sole tool to elicit data from participants. We wanted to push the Da Capo technique we had developed to answer questions raised by our initial research. If we used music as the sole focus of gathering data, what would be revealed? Would it be successful to gain useful data? If we focused the Da Capo on gathering narratives of learning, would similar memories to those previously generated emerge through the same or contrasting pieces of music? How would participants respond in an interview in which music as the sole focus? More generally, does music really have the potential to be a significant tool in qualitative research?

We planned this current study to begin to address these questions. In this paper, we present and discuss the results from an exploratory investigation that used 10 pieces of music as the sole focus of an interview intended to gather narratives of learning from participants. We first review literature in the areas of music, narratives and individual experiences. Secondly, we describe the process to using music to attempt to generate narratives of learning in interviews. Thirdly, we report and discuss the results from these interviews before concluding. We hope this report inspires qualitative researchers to take creative initiatives, perhaps combining music in multimodal approaches.

**Music, Narratives, Individual experiences**

Music is strongly associated with memories and experiences (Keightley, 2009), and can evoke highly emotive responses in listeners (Meyer, 1956). The applied use of music is highly varied, including practices in music education, therapy, marketing and advertising, and health and well-being (Juslin & Sloboda, 2010), and its potential to add value to narratives elicited has been demonstrated in research that has focused on students’ experiences of studying for undergraduate degrees (Pilcher et al., 2014). Such use of music to stimulate narratives can be compared to how other non-verbal techniques have been used to elicit narratives. These include established use of wordless film sequences to stimulate oral narratives in different languages (Chafe, 1980), and of videos as cues for narrative (Lyle, 2003). Further, there are visual techniques when participants produce their own drawn time-lines, or *learning journeys* in interviews to stimulate personal accounts of international study (Gu, 2011), or draw self-portraits and use self-taken photos to construct visual and textual narratives of personal language learning (Kalaya, Alanen & Dufya, 2008, 2013; Nikula & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2008), or compose their own multi-media individual learning histories (Menezes, 2008). Unusually, the latter make some indirect reference to music, as when participants use hyperlinks to note songs that influenced their learning of English language. In developing classroom writing skills, teachers’ long-standing practices include employing music as a stimulus for students to write creative narrative or autobiographical texts; however, these tend to be reported as pedagogic practices focussing on writing through evoked emotion rather than as research methods (e.g., Goring, 2004; Jones, Kokotsaki & Cholevar, 2016; West End in Schools, 2013). Other research-based multimodal approaches to the elicitation and expression of narrative have suggested that the mode of analysis of narratives is an open-ended one and includes “language, image, color, typography, music, voice quality, dress, gesture, spatial resources, perfume, and cuisine” (Page, 2010, p. 6).

Still, music is rarely included as a mode for multi-modal narrative analysis; music is absent in the major guides to narrative research which emphasize qualitative methods in social sciences (e.g., Bold, 2012; Clandinin, 2007; Czarniawska, 2004; Elliott, 2005; Goodson, 2017; Riessman, 2008) even in those which distinctively feature multi-modal approaches (Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik, 2014; Mannay, 2016;Squire et al., 2014). Where music is mentioned, it accompanies visual and verbal expression in participants’ *production* of narratives: it is not used to generate or *elicit* narratives (Doloughan, 2010; Menezes, 2008). The present study may contribute to a wider multi-modal view of stimulating narrative expression and suggest further reciprocal relations between qualitative research and multimedia.

As noted by Pilcher, Cortazzi and Jin (2014), the use of music to elicit narratives involves a number of considerations. First among these is to consider whether the music is heard in the same way by different participants. Gregory (1990) demonstrated that participants were able to distinguish three lines in polyphonic music with equal ability; thus, although participants may interpret music individually, they hear different melodies and lines similarly. Hence, when researchers choose music for melody and lines, it can be assumed that participants will also hear the same lines and melodies. A second consideration is whether musical training has any effect on participants’ emotional responses to music. Waterman’s research (1996) shows negligible differences in this regard. Thirdly, a key consideration is whether cultural background has any influence on individuals’ ability to decode basic emotions in music. Research shows the ability of adults from different cultures to identify lullabies (Unyk, Trehub, & Schellenberg, 1992), and suggests that basic emotions in music are decodable by adults regardless of their cultural background (Thompson & Balkwill, 2010). Fourthly, and critically, it is important to consider whether music interpreted as *happy* by some might be interpreted as *sad* by others; that is, whether the same type of music creates different affective responses. In this context, “fairly similar” responses have been found regarding interpretations of the emotional content of music (De Vries, 1991, p. 41). Fifthly, there may be an ethical consideration in the use of music in eliciting narratives: highly emotional properties of some music might possibly elicit highly emotive responses as some participants recall experiences of a sensitive or negative nature. Therefore, when using music to elicit narratives, it is ethical to inform the participants at the outset that they can withdraw at any point, and that the research will be stopped if any sensitive or harrowing memories arise (cf. Hariss & Atkinson, 2011).

Given these considerations, the use of music to elicit narratives has many apparent benefits. To complement classical narrative elicitation whereby participants are asked to recall and then relate narratives (Czarniawska, 2004; Riessman, 1993), the playing of music serves as a portal to transport participants back to a particular time and place. Narrative recall in response to selected music represents musically-associated or emotionally-prompted events already in memory but then verbalized in language (cf. Chase, 2005; Riessman, 2008) which can provide extra nuances or dimensions compared to those verbally elicited without music. Furthermore, in interview dialogues the music can serve as a sharable common-ground or context to focus discussion and reflection (Bakhtin 1981). Music represents a vast resource from which researchers may select from multiple types of music (varying the genre, tradition, instrumentation, key, style, tempo, or performance) that are available in the Da Capo technique; music is thus able to take account of multitudes (cf. Hertz, 1997) and multiplicities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) of selves within individuals.

As researchers ourselves, we have explored the use of music to elicit narratives within our interest in narrative inquiry (e.g. Cortazzi, 1993; Cortazzi & Jin, 2006, 2012) and in qualitative research methods and approaches (e.g. Cortazzi, Pilcher & Jin, 2011; Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2016). We are interested in intercultural perspectives within international education (Jin & Cortazzi, 2011, 2013). We participate actively in music-making. In using music as the sole tool to elicit narrative we explore further the potential of music to act as a portal for the elicitation of memories and experiences through the Da Capo technique (Pilcher et al., 2014). We wanted to complement our prior efforts by ascertaining the effect of music to generate narratives in a study, which used music alone as a narrative stimulus and might potentially expand the tools for other qualitative researchers to go beyond more traditional methods. Following, we describe the method of how we used the Da Capo technique in this study and how we approached the data analysis.

**Methods: How the Da Capo technique was used in this study**

*Type of qualitative inquiry used*

The type of qualitative inquiry used here is narratively oriented research into student experience of learning, solely using music to elicit personal narratives from participants. As noted above, we had, to the best of our knowledge, invented this Da Capo approach yet it needed further investigation to explore its potential applicability and effectiveness. Thus, instead of more routine lines of questioning we chose music as the exclusive focus of the interview to see how its application in this context might elicit narratives of learning.

*Identification and recruitment of participants and selection of musical pieces*

Participants were undergraduate and postgraduate students who were studying in the UK and were known to the researchers from having previously attended our classes. In total, there were 20 participants, 10 of whom were from countries in Western Europe, and 10 of whom were from China. We selected 10 pieces of music selected for use. Previously (Pilcher et al., 2014), we had used 7 pieces of music with 15 students who were all from China, so here we expanded the number of participants, widened the geographical areas they were from, and extended the amount and type of music we played; selections are detailed in Table 1. Additionally, we wanted to make the research as participatory (Fontana & Frey, 2005) as we could and in return for participation in interviews that on average lasted one hour, we offered to provide suggestions on participants’ current research efforts, based on our experience as faculty and researchers. We would provide similar feedback to any previous or current student in our classes who made a request, therefore we believe the decision to participate provided these students no unfair advantage with their research efforts over any non-participating students.

The research was approved by appropriate university ethics committees before it was undertaken, and all data are presented here anonymously (Christians, 2011), to avoid possible identification of individuals. To recruit participants, all members of our classes were simply asked if they would be interested in participating in the study until we reached our target sample size of 20: most students who were approached expressed interest, perhaps largely through curiosity.

We selected the music using several criteria. First, we wanted to play a range of Chinese and western classical instrumental pieces. The five Western pieces were ones we had used previously (Pilcher et al., 2014); these had effectively generated recall of memories of experiences of learning. The pieces were selected to provide a suitable range of different musical keys (major or minor), tempi (repetitive, slow, fast) and type of composition (large scale orchestral or solo instrumental). Our rationale was that the type of piece would likely be associated with the recall of a type of experience. So, the large scale orchestral major key pieces might be associated with the recall of celebratory events, such as success in an exam; the slower solo instrumental pieces might be associated with recalling more reflective events, like studying in the library; while slow minor pieces might evoke memories of more challenging experiences such as receiving a bad mark.

For the Chinese pieces, we selected pieces that we thought as far as possible paired with the Western ones. So, if we played a Western a solo instrumental piece, we followed this with a Chinese piece that was solo instrumental, or that had a similar rhythm or tempo. We chose the pieces collaboratively, through discussion about the nature of the pieces, with the goal of identifying those most suitable to sustain interest and participation. We additionally identified the mood we associated with each selection. This information is contained in Table 1.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Paired Western and Chinese pieces** | **Key, tempo, and anticipated mood** |
| 1A. Western. Bach, J.S. The Well-Tempered Clavier. Book 1. Prelude No. 2. | Key: Minor. Tempo: steady, continuous  Associated mood: perseverance, solitude, |
| 1B. Chinese. Yang Wei. DaXun Zhang. ‘Galloping Horses’ Melody. 0:30 – 1:40 | Key: Major. Tempo: steady, fast  Associated mood: hard work, perseverance |
| 2A. Western. Beethoven, Ludwig van. Symphony number 5. 4th movement | Key: Major. Tempo: Fast, driven  Associated mood: triumph, celebration |
| 2B. Chinese. Xiao Xinghai. Yellow River Piano Concerto. 4th Movement | Key: Major Tempo: Fast, Driven  Associated mood: triumph, celebration |
| 3A. Western. Vivaldi. Concerto no. 2 for two violins and cello. 4. 1. Adagio e spiccato | Key: Minor. Tempo: Slow, Steady  Associated mood: sadness, hard times |
| 3B. Chinese. Gou Xiao Hu ‘Swallow’ Xinjiang Folksong 2:00 – 3:00 | Key: Minor Tempo: Slow, Steady  Associated mood: sadness, hard times |
| 4A. Western. Bruckner. Symphony No. 8 4th movement | Key: Minor. Tempo: driven, regular  Associated mood: action, hard struggle |
| 4B. Chinese. Wang Xilin ‘Fire Torch’ Symphonic Suite 1:50 – 2:50 | Key: Major. Tempo: driven, regular  Associated mood: action, hard struggle |
| 5A. Western. Medtner. Canzona Serenata in F Minor. | Key: Minor. Tempo: slow, regular  Associated mood: reminiscing, nostalgic |
| 5B. Chinese. He Zhan-Hao and Chen Gang Butterfly Lovers. First section 2:50 – 4:00 | Key: Minor. Tempo: Slow, regular  Associated mood: reminiscing, nostalgic |

**Table 1: Pieces selected, key, mood and our associated moods.**

*Data generation and collection*

Our approach to data collection was exploratory. One of us went with the participant to an empty and quiet room with a portable CD player and headphones, and explained that we would play them a minute of a piece of music, that there would be 10 pieces in total, played in the same order to each participant, and that after hearing each one we would ask them if the music recalled any memories they had of experiences of learning. Participants were asked about whether the music they heard reminded them of anything they had experienced during their undergraduate degree study, and, following, whether the music evoked any experiences of learning they had had. The extract was usually the very first minute of the piece, or occasionally, a minute from later in the piece; exact timings are specified in Table 1. While participants were listening to the music we deliberately moved out of range of eye contact to allow participants to focus more closely on the music; we explained this in advance. If a selected piece did not remind participants of any experiences of learning, we moved on to the next piece. More often, the piece did remind them of an experience of learning. When this was the case, we solicited further information such as the type and details of the learning experience, and what each participant thought it was about the music that related to that particular experience for him or her. While we acknowledge that the questions will have shaped the discussion and played a role in memory; we suggest it was the music itself that triggered these memories initially.

All interviews were recorded using a portable recording device and then later transcribed. We stressed to participants how we ourselves were transcribing the data and no-one else; this was partly for ethical reasons and the possibility that participants might feel more at ease to speak with the assurance that no one else would hear the recording; we also find that the process of researcher-transcribing already starts the analysis of the transcripts through noticing and noting (Bird, 2005, ten Have, 2007).

*Analysis of the data*

We carefully read through the 20 transcribed interviews to identify where a piece had triggered a narrative and where it had not (see Table 2), and noted the nature of each narrative to identify whether it was a narrative of learning or about something else. Then, we repeatedly read through the narratives of learning to identify, and to develop and assign categories for the type of learning it related to. We found it was necessary to work through this manually rather than via use of QDAS software because the themes and categories that emerged continually changed and morphed until we had reached a final version. We believe our manual processes were better suited to the dynamic nature of data analysis because they allowed us to more flexibly modify categories and consider, reflect on, and reconsider interpretations and categorical alignments of selected excerpts from the data.

This approach was similar to that of a constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2010) where codes and themes emerged bottom-up from iteratively analysed data rather than being identified prior to analysis. We note, though, that had we been conducting analysis more with pre-determined codes or (although this may sound counterintuitive) with fewer data, we would undoubtedly have considered using QDAS software.

*Organization of results*

We organise our results by first tabulating where the music did and did not effectively trigger narratives of learning or other narratives. Then we present our results according to overall categories of: Academic learning experienced; Non-academic learning experiences; Memories of places; Narrative of learning about emotion; and Narratives of learning certain aspects of character development. Under these main headings we provide sub-headings to further categorise them. Although our focus is on the narratives generated, where relevant we note the nature of the piece of music played, and sometimes whether the response was from participants from China or the West.

**Results**

**Effectiveness of the music in triggering experiences of learning or other types**

Table 2 shows details from the first stage of analysis. In most of the 200 possible instances (20 participants x 10 pieces of music), the music triggered some experience; most often these were experiences of learning. In only 13 instances were no experiences at all triggered by the music. Experiences not related to learning included memories of movies or of restaurants. Quantitatively therefore, in only 7% of instances here did the music fail to trigger any experiences, but in 25% of cases it did not trigger any experiences of learning.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Piece of Music | Experiences of *Learning* | Any other experiences? |
| Y/N | Y/N |
| 1A | 12/8 | 7/1 |
| 1B | 13/7 | 5/2 |
| 2A | 15/5 | 4/1 |
| 2B | 17/3 | 3/0 |
| 3A | 19/1 | 1/0 |
| 3B | 15/5 | 3/2 |
| 4A | 15/5 | 3/2 |
| 4B | 12/8 | 6/2 |
| 5A | 16/4 | 2/2 |
| 5B | 15/5 | 4/1 |
| Totals | 149/51\* | 38/13\*\* |

**\*n=200 \*\*n=51**

**Table 2: Key narratives triggered.**

**Academic learning experiences.**

Many narratives were related to academic learning experiences; many were narratives we had anticipated as we had chosen the music specifically to trigger such narratives. These were often recalled through references to the nature of the music. For example, that: *“the kind of music is very quick and then give me the feeling that pressure in the examinations… I find first it’s very difficult to start, and then I choose avoiding that and then through the music there’s a kind of a, music slow down and then I realise that I choose the easy one first, then I… overcome all the difficulty in examination… So that kind of experience I can remember from that music”* [1A]. Here the participant’s memory of the process of doing examinations was directly “mapped on” to the experience triggered by the music: the idea of pressure associated with the repetitive nature of the music - this pressure is released and the participant overcame this by choosing a question, associated by the participant with the music slowing in tempo. Academic success was also a memory triggered, for another participant that *“powerful music sounds the feeling is glory* [laughs]*… and the memory was the degree ceremony award… I remember going up the steps to the stage… and getting my certificate from the president of the university… and the gestures… the feeling that now you are one of us… it was a changed moment from student to professional somehow”* [2A]. The participant directly associated triumph and success with a celebratory major key orchestral piece and expressed how this made that individual feel ‘changed’ into becoming a professional and graduating.

**Deeply personal triumph and success**. Sometimes the memory triggered was deeply personal. For example, for one participant: *“in my family… my uncle… Just say… to my mother ‘Yeh, your son is stupid’…* [but] *when I got like Master degree… this music remind me… the triumph, you go back home, you open the door and you say ‘See, what you said wasn’t true… so don’t say things that, don’t try to predict the future’”* [4A]. Here, the powerful nature of the music, a very large minor key orchestral piece, triggered the association of vindication for the participant, whose success and newly established self-efficacy countered wrong family assumptions. Another participant was reminded of a deeply personal triumph of finally passing an exam at the 5th attempt by sheer hard study and perseverance; after doing so the tutor finally greeted the participant in the corridor: *“I remember this guy* [the tutor] *who throughout the years I thought he didn’t like me because I was one of his bad students… see me in the corridor of the university and say ‘Hello’ to me and I thought ‘OK, I gain his respect.’”* The participant recalled this through the *“powerful sound it remind that the feeling I get rid of this module… and the ‘Hello’ of my tutor”,* and concluded from this experience that *“I learn that if I find the solution on my own… It worth more than my whole degree than all this”* [4A]. Here the powerful music directly triggered this remembered experience and led the participant to relate a key human lesson through this triumph: the importance of learning a solution by oneself.

Often, the evoked academic experiences related to recalling successful approaches to learning. For example, the importance of teamwork: *“Well… this is a clear one… that memory is that we have the teamwork in the competition… we get the second place… and this music bring me the situation that it’s a very slow movement can you imagine that? … and the number come out from the screen then we will three of members we’re cheering up but this moment is still very slow and some of other teams look some disappointed on their face or something else… Yeh then we jumped out and then we celebrate the success.”* This participant expressed learning how, *“teamwork is… essential… my teammate will always… let me calm down… we always can discuss in the team… the team member is very important… because…, yes there’s a very popular sentence in Chinese … ‘You don’t afraid a very strong enemy but you’re afraid you have team member as stupid as a pig’”* [4A]. Here it was the slow musical movement and memory of being awarded second place which had underlined for the participant the importance and value of teamwork.

**Memories of failure and of struggle.** Minor keys and slow music could recall very detailed and vivid memories of failure and of struggle. Yet, such memories could at the same time be related to successful outcomes. Responding to one piece of music one participant commented: *“it’s like those sleepless agonising nights when you’re in the middle of having two or three things or even a really hard assignment… and you have the strange feeling that you want to go at least I try to go to bed early and… I can never fall asleep… and then the feeling drags on, drags on that you have to do something… and you end up having a horrible sleep… and having to do some work the next day… [I – Does that teach you anything or do you learn anything from that or?] I actually learn to do these bullet points for myself… to get myself organised so that even if I’m stretched out I don’t spend a sleepless week on something I just spend two sleepless days… so I shifted from making no notes whatsoever about my schedule and about my life to doing all these bullet points in my small notebook”* [3A]. Here, a minor piece with slow repetitive rhythms was, for this participant, directly related to the academic difficulty of working through an assignment, yet ultimately a successful learning strategy was developed that helped with this work.

**Non-academic learning experiences**

In addition to the above academic learning type of experiences that we had chosen the music in anticipation of eliciting, there were also a surprisingly wide range of non-academic learning experiences that were triggered by the music. We had not anticipated that the music would prompt these types of experiences but examples show they can be worthwhile to investigate, not least for the expressive tone and narrator involvement or the humane values revealed in the following examples.

Sometimes the music recalled participants’ experiences of learning physical activities. These included learning to dance, to ride a bike, and experiences of the realization of suddenly being able to do these things. For example, one participant said in response to an orchestral piece which we thought might evoke celebratory experiences:, *“it remind me the moment I start cycling and the feeling I get and I start using the… roller skates… because I think… it remind the feeling of freedom… you’re moving fast and also this feeling of ‘Waaah look what I’m doing!’”* [2A]. In telling this, the experience recounted was a response to a piece of music we had chosen in anticipation that a celebratory experience would be recalled; surprisingly, the recounted learning experience was of a non-academic, physical nature.

However, physical learning experiences were also recalled in relation to other types of music. For one participant after listening to a slow and reflective solo piano piece of music the physical learning experience evoked was of how to learn to control objects, but not ones we had expected to hear about: *“Maybe sounds a little bit strange but I think that you know I’m driving on my bike… it is very relaxing and (pause) and I’m, often when I’m driving I try to learn to handle it better… It is motorbike… So, to learn to get it smooth and nice when you’re driving through corners and things… It is yeh, it’s that feeling of, just to get it there…this, you know, to, to feel the bike to get the right balance in the bike it will give you a better chance to handle things you can’t see”* [5A].

**Learning lessons of human achievement and arts of living.** Some minor key slow music triggered for one participant a challenging experience of having to do a very difficult mathematics test which the participant believed resulted in a failing grade. However, surprisingly the participant received a passing grade and was led to conclude a key lesson about the quality of their work: it is relative, compared to that of others. In the participant’s words: *“by the end of it I kind of find out that as long as people around you do less than you it’s OK”* [3A].

In response to the large scale orchestral piece we had chosen anticipating recall of challenging academic experiences, one participant was led to recall that no matter how great you may think you are, a key lesson was to retain a sense of being a fallible human. The music reminded the participant of a *“moment of pure joy is actually… the closest thing I could get on it was when I got my admission for my Master placement… before I nearly burned down my apartment on that day… I went to make pizza… and it wasn’t on the tray with grill… The whole thing burnt down and there was black smoke and smelled for three days… and, it actually was a good experience coz that brought me down back on my feet very very hard, very strong and I said “OK, are you still a fucking stupid human… you can die any moment of any stupid idea… It was really good… even if you feel like you can, you can, you’re the biggest guy in the world you… can just burn your kitchen down”* [4A].

Commonly with participants from China, and in response to the classical Chinese music, the learning experiences recalled were closely related to learning traditional arts and culture. This was another surprise for us. Participants said these traditions related directly to the music and the images it recalled. For example: *“OK, the traditional Chinese music… when listening that it will have some Chinese painting frame appear in my mind* [laughs]*… someone is painting… some mountain, Chinese mountain or Chinese style stuff”* [1B]. Sometimes these memories and narratives could be full of explicit vivid details, almost carrying the participant visually and emotionally back to the place and time itself: *“this kind music give me some kind of warm situation that I was practise my handwriting by maybe pen or something… some brush made by the other, bamboo or something… my father always sit on the sofa and watch the television for the news… and mother always to clean the floor and maybe sweeping or… clean the bowls… after we finish the dinner. That’s a very long time memories and we have moved a lot several times but we still in the very old house and then (pause) there will be an orange table, table lamp on the tables… and the paper will be some kind of light yellow because of the light and we will, according to the handwriting my mother always come here and look at that and a comment on that maybe always he, she always say that change another paper… and do it again… it’s kind of some kind of warm heart… because that kind of experience you can never get back... the other music cannot* [recall this] *but this music can…I have say that’s a good memory from that music… it’s relationship with my parents”* [5B].

**Learning values**. Also with participants from China, and again in response to Chinese music, vivid and detailed memories of family celebrations were recalled. For example, one participant remembered: *“for this song in the beginning I think… reminds something like when I, you know the song in China has the spring festival?... and… all people will get together and enjoy the dinner… [I – Does it remind you of any learning experiences you had?]… maybe maybe this one, how to say is behalf of the experience people who sit in front of TV and er celebrate the spring festival and they feel very happy and warm, warm heart about that… and although they working for 300 days and I don’t know actually they work for but they stop all things and a, a big family they get together… You will saw some little children or your grandfather or something and relatives and they saw the TV and they talking with each other and you forget all the annoying things and… yeh, the importance of family, family maybe”* [4B].

For one participant, in response to the slow minor key music, the experience recalled was of learning that sometimes you only realise the value of something when it is gone and you no longer have it. In the participant’s words: *“It teach me… like when you’ve got something you don’t what it is, how it is important for you… and then when you just take it away from you… You just realise that OK this things is, was important”* [3A].

One value lesson recalled in response to the music, was that of sacrifice - to relinquish something sometimes in order to be successful. Here one Chinese participant spoke of learning loss and sacrifice to gain success: *“if you want to get success you must feel lonely, experience, you must experience lonely… if you want to get something you must leave some [I – Leave something]… Lose something… That make sense?”* [5B]. Another participant spoke of how this sacrifice was often made by the individual but enacted for others. This participant narrated a reluctant choice to go to a military school, against the participant’s personal will but with the knowledge it would benefit the entire family in the long term, concluding that, *“sometimes the thing you want to do and you know is necessary and is important but it’s not good for yourself It’s for someone else”* [3B].

**Memories of Places.**

We had anticipated the music would recall participants’ memories of being in academic places where they had been studying: this did indeed happen. For example, in response to a Chinese piece paired with a Western piece we anticipated might evoke memories of studying in the library: *“it reminds me… the good… moments… the image was me in library studying book and make progress I realised at that moment… that books are helping me a lot to… gain the knowledge that I want, in this case was good version of a book… remind me specifically… about electro-magnetics”* [1B].

However, the music often returned participants thoughts to places not remotely connected with academic study, but nevertheless connected with learning. For example, in response to a Chinese piece of music, one participant had memories of the past: *“I heard this music before but I don’t know where but it reminds me my grandpa… and the holiday I spent with him in the countryside… Yes and… I try to learn swim… but I failed”* [1B]. These recalled places could be associated with sad memories, for example, a melancholic piece of solo instrumental Chinese music recalled for one participant memories of loneliness and fear from their youth: *“it’s being afraid of the dark night… it remind me the, when I was in the primary school… and I didn’t live with my parents as well I live in the primary school… So yeh it’s really depressed”* [3B].

Notably, places recalled could be very vividly described, showing the characteristic of some music to transport participants back to these places. A different participant, again in response to the solo instrumental Chinese music, vividly recalled a park where they walked, close to the university: *“the time that I had a break after, between the modules after studying… In the university… I had walks in the park close to the university just to relax my mind from the stress of studying… It was connected with the university it was directly outside from the university and the park… and I remember some birds around searching to the fallen leaves for food… I, there was a… man-made lake… I remember I spent a lot time there because it had frogs… through my studies through the semester I was exploring the progress of the life… because you can find them from the stage of… tadpole until frogs so day by day… so it was… relaxation from the stress”* [3B].

**Narratives of learning about emotions**

Although music has a known intrinsic connection with emotion (Meyer, 1956), and the music played here would, we thought, be likely to engage emotional responses, we had not anticipated the music would recall experiences of actually learning about emotions. Probably, like most education professionals, we focussed initially largely on academic learning because this cognitive dimension is the default idea of learning in universities. Nevertheless, narrative responses included actual experiences of learning about a surprising range of emotions or learning the value and human significance of particular emotions.

**Learning the experience of stress and about coping with depression.** For one participant, an extract of piano music with a repetitive pattern and rhythm evoked memories of stress: *“so the feeling was it makes me nervous, stress, it makes me feel stress… and I had the flashback through my years of education… some images of the university… elementary and high school as well… my… whole education… was affected… it’s mostly focused on feeling of stress.. through education throughout all those years I have to, I have an aim and I have to pass through all of these stages and achieve this aim”* [1A]. In response to a slow minor key extract of music, one participant related the importance of being able to cope with difficulties, being upset, and feeling depressed, but that such difficult experiences were not always a negative thing: *“this song’s very depress me… make me upset and… when I was hearing this song I was asking me who I am and er maybe I met some difficulties… and I began to suspect myself…. rethinking my life, something like that, yeh… it’s a necessary experience, you see it for the peoples’ grow up… it’s good for teenager… they should experience a lot of difficulty”* [3A].

**Learning to express emotions and to cope with despair and fear.** For another participant, this slow minor key music recalled sadness, loneliness and loss, but equally the participant spoke of the importance of speaking about such experiences: *“this is so sad… It remember me like a with loneliness… some parts are like a like a very deep and increasing cry as well, but very deep… like when you feel… so when you have some lost… It’s also how you learned… to know how to manage this process… when you lost something that is really important for you, you feel very deep… and you have to, and you want to scream but you because you need to open yourself… to express… or learning or… it’s your, expression, your pain…but it’s something that you need to do you cannot stay with this pain inside of you, you need to… express”* [3A]. In response to a melancholic solo piece of Chinese music, one participant recalled moments of utter despair and uncertainty, but that letting these pass naturally and accepting them was often the best option: *“despair when everything falls down, you know dead end… That kind of happens a lot… in your life, even if you’re studying… You have these situations when there is just nothing beyond that and you can imagine going to the sea, smoking a cigarette… or standing in the rain it’s just one of those hopeless moments when you have to, when you actually can’t even figure out what you need to do… Just when you have to go with it and be depressed for some time… because I found that sometimes it doesn’t help to try to cheer yourself up you just have to let it follow and eventually if you’re lucky it blows over… And then you can start being a bit more upbeat again [I – And do you learn things from that?] I learned not to fight it to a certain extent… I mean it’s good to feel hopeless and in despair for a few hours… Maybe for a day but I think that eventually you surrendered yourself to it knowing that it will blow over… Then you can recuperate much faster… At least I hope so”* [3B] For one participant, the slow reflective music recalled a distant childhood memory and learning how to face fears, remembering the supportive care and tender comfort from their mother to confront their fear of the dark : *“I remind when I was a child and I was afraid of darkness… and my mum comes to, to say ‘Don’t worry… be calm, nothing’s happened’, and I got my bear… and I would like ‘Uhh, nothing happens, sure?’ and with the tenderness of my mother nurse me, it happen ‘I’m going to put the light this and don’t worry’ maybe it’s learning to confront life you know… your fears”* [5A].

**Learning the importance of empathy.** For one participant, the slow piece of solo instrumental Chinese music was perceived as expressing sadness, and evoked epiphanies of learning about empathy and sympathy: *“because it’s very sad… make me feel sad and I remember the experience when I have travelled… and I saw the very old lady… and she sold something, cucumber or something in the basket. I feel uncomfortable, I want to help them… sympathetic…. it was not good way to do that, I wanted to give the original price to buy all of them, not all of them, some of them… now, maybe in some cities… I also saw some, some situations like this where some poor guy er pick up some, pick up some boxes someone’s thrown it and you know it’s quite like rubbish but he picked up and eat something from it so make me er sympathetic er show sympathetic to him… [I – But do you learn that? Or is that just a feeling?] No I learn now, I want to maybe in the future I got some little rich, although I can, maybe I can be the richest person but I wanted to go in to the mountain and help some children”* [3B].

**Narratives of learning the importance of developing features of character**

Another type of narrative of learning experience recalled through music concerned developing aspects of character. These participants’ narratives stressed the importance of their understanding of certain features of character and their experience of developing them and learning their value. There are dimensions here which might be overlooked in more conventional approaches to researching learning and narrative.

**Optimism.**  One participant responded to the Chinese piece of music paired with a Western piece of repetitive tempo and rhythm, by emphasizing the value of the need to be optimistic: *“when I heard this music… remind me should optimistic with my life… similar as the first music I need to hurry up I need to keep steps everyday…”* [1B].

**Learning resilience and patience.** In response to the reflective solo piano Western piece, one participant envisaged peaceful places with family memories: *“from this music I know that there is one thing that is, people cannot complain all the difficulties… In life in worker, such as, this music let me feel there’s a picture such as sunshine in the grassland… And very peaceful world I like this peaceful world yeh so just er, remind my life when I stay with my grandmother… And stay with her … And her dogs, not, not noisy, very peaceful and very, how to say word… I learn it, people can not complain anything… the mood should be peaceful, not complain everything… if you fail your exam, that’s fine, if you, if some, some people near to you was dead that’s fine just keep your life going and… no arguing with others, no fighting and, such as the assessment don’t need the highest level… Just the medium level is OK”* [5A].

**Learning modesty, tolerance and honesty.** Another lesson related through the piece of music chosen in anticipation of triggering memories of challenges was of the danger of self-pride:*“[I – Does it remind you of any learning experiences?] Learning, er, it seems I too prouded of my study, too prouded… So if people have too prouded hisself or herself maybe… he won’t help the others he think he’s the best one… maybe will lost some friend, some study skills… And he won’t want to study anymore because he think, he thought he’s the best one”* [4A].

The music also triggered memories related to the importance of being tolerant and being honest. For example, in response to the slow reflective piece of solo piano music, some participants’ narrations concluded that on reflection they had learned to be tolerant: *“when I hear this songs I got this feelings though I’ve, I graduated from the universities, and I see back my life during the universities and I cross the classroom, cross the beautiful lake and… yeh, just memorise to save my memory during the university what I learn maybe like the memory the life I should, I don’t know, it’s valuable and don’t waste it, it should be hold in my heart like that… and maybe we have some argument with the roommate… it’s not very big things I feels big and feel we can talk in, play a joke with each other again or something… be… tolerant yeh”* [5A].

**Learning artistic temperament.** One participant recalled through the music a very distant childhood memory of learning to sketch from their mother. As this participant related: *“In my childhood I learned sketching from my mother… She’s a artist… And sometimes she will play some music like this type… so I really I learn enjoy [I – OK, so it reminds you of that] Yeh [I – And what did you learn from that?] Erm I think (pause) er I use dictionary… I’m not sure this word [I – Temperament OK, that means like how to behave] yeh yeh… you know artist is different the normal people… They more love the beauty stuff… And they can feel more beautiful from the product or the world, what you see… so I think that’s the temperament… I think it’s she affect me… [I – How old were you?] about 6… [I - what is the correct temperament?] (pause) I think it’s peace… And… you can focus”* [2A].

**Learning how to be brave and strong.** In another narrative, the music recalled old Chinese movies, then lanterns and festivals and walking across an iron bridge with their grandmother. Much story-telling experience from their grandmother had taught them the importance of being brave and strong. In their strongly visualized account: *“It’s hard to say… But I’ve, I’ve related like old Chinese movie… And people walking, walking on the street… just watch beautiful lanterns… we have a festival for to see the lanterns… and…when I was a young boy… my grandmother took me… to go the city centre… to see this, it’s very deep memorise… and… if you want go the city centre you have a cross the iron bridge… It’s very long bridge… And my grandmother will told me lots of story about she’s young… [N – What did you learn from those experiences] All those stories, most part about she lives on the very poor… Er social environment… And she wants to leave… I think she is very brave… and… strong… and also… teach me… be a good man like she, brave and strong”* [4B].

**Learning the value of hard work and persistence**. In response to another Chinese piece of music, one participant, from China, narrated their graduation from primary school and how they got a big hug from their parents and teacher because of their hard work. They had thus learned to associate hard work with doing well, and that it was important to work hard in order to do well:: *“This music… remind my when I graduate in my primary school… and my parents and my teacher give me a big hug because I do it very well in my study… So, I think from this music I think if I, if I do work very hard now as I was in primary school er so, maybe… my study result will be better so I won’t be, I won’t have the sad mood [N – Right, so, it’s teaching you the value of hard work] Yes”* [4B]. Also in relation to repetitive rhythmic music, another participant spoke of learning the need to persist, in the face of difficulties, narrating how when they were starting kite surfing they faced hard mental challenges but nevertheless they kept going:: *“it remind me about when I’m learning something new… it could be when I was starting at kite surfing… you have to work a lot in the start and the thing is new and there‘s progress… and it’s going good… but you have to keep on… and it is the difficult part [I – Yeh, so what do you learn from those experiences?] There’s only one way it is, it is to keep on going… but it can be… mental hard to keep on”* [1A].

**Discussion**

Here we’ve extended a previous Da Capo study of using music to elicit narratives (Pilcher et al., 2014) by exploring how music worked when it was used purely by itself in ‘musical interviews’; we broadened the scope to investigate experiences beyond the academic learning found in a degree program. Additionally, we extended the study to include both Western and Chinese music and also to play pieces both to participants from China and from Europe. Given our previous findings in which music generated narrative recall (Pilcher et al., 2014) we had anticipated that the music would generate experiences like those of graduation and of studying hard, and that narratives would recall learning in academic places such as the library. Also, that some participants would likely respond more to the music than others. Both these anticipations transpired to be accurate.

First, a key finding here is that often the music chosen for its potential to trigger anticipated recall of types of learning experiences and memories did so with expected narratives of learning. Next, it is a clear limitation that the technique does not work successfully for everyone. However, when it did, we were surprised by the extent to which the music transported participants back to varied times and places in multi-dimensional learning experiences.

Second, different types of music elicited different kinds of memories and greatly varied narratives of learning. Reflective music often evoked memories of reflection; large scale celebratory pieces often recalled narratives of success; and minor key slow and melancholic extracts often elicited memories of challenging experiences. Yet, when this happened, some emerging narratives were not types we had expected. In qualitative exploration some degree of unpredictability and the unexpected constitutes both a risk and fascinating potential for benefits; here, this is framed by individual responses and the emotive nature of music.

A third major finding relates to dimensions of narratives of learning evoked by music here. They include: cognitive dimensions of academic learning; physical skill learning; learning life-lessons of developing character, morality and values; social, collaborative and teamwork learning; learning arts and aesthetics; and affective dimensions of learning about emotions. Few of these dimensions were predicted. These outcomes demonstrate the potential of music to recall vividly remembered, multifaceted and unexpected ideas of learning. Based on a considerable range of examples which illustrate an unexpectedly broad range of dimensions of narratives of learning, we conclude that pre-selected music in qualitative inquiries can allow access to areas of richness and depth of experience that would not necessarily be recalled in response to other stimuli such as textually based questions. The Da Capo technique opens up other dimensions.

Regarding content, the nature and range of narratives of learning involved here shows wide potential application of music for qualitative researchers investigating other narrative areas. In addition to the cognitive learning experiences such as writing academic essays, taking exams, doing projects, giving presentations and graduating, we found physical learning experiences including: learning to ride a bike, roller skating, climbing and gymnastics. Memories of places, times and events evoked by the music turned out to be vivid and extensive in range, with describing the lifecycle of frogs, the colours of lamps, and details of childhood family activities. The range of arts featured learning experiences related to painting and calligraphy, dance, drama, poetry, film and storytelling, suggesting an aesthetic dimension: ‘*artists …they love the beauty and they feel more beautiful from the product’; ‘experience with companion…being able to see the beauty of the different aspects’.*

In a dimension of morality, values and personal development, participants highlighted aspects of character such as optimism, honesty, keeping faith, avoiding hubris, trusting others and always learning to strive hard. Learning wider life-lessons included the need to retain a positive perspective on life, coming to terms with human nature, and the importance of family. Music is by nature very closely linked to emotion, and to a whole range of emotions (Meyer, 1956). Participants spontaneously affirmed this linkage: ‘*I often tie emotions and music together’, ‘I’m tying emotions and experience a lot to music’.* Experiences of learning emotions and of affective roles in learning permeated a surprising range of responses. The music unlocked memories of learning to manage stress, of coping with depression and despair, dealing with loss and loneliness, but also of experiencing tenderness and peacefulness, love, joy, empathy and hope. The Da Capo technique allows potential exploration of affective dimensions. We conclude that it encourages a multi-dimensional exploration of narrated content and a multi-modal approach to qualitative research development.

Clearly, there are caveats and limitations. Most obviously, these include the limited choice of music extracts and numbers or range of participants. Further, the ability of music to access to such deep areas as character, values and emotions raises ethical issues (negative specifically emotions mentioned by participants quite often included stress, anxiety, struggle, pain, loneliness, failure, sadness, loss and despair). Whilst we initially stressed to participants that they should feel no need to relate anything they did not feel comfortable about, the range and nature of narratives elicited here suggests that this aspect should be highlighted in pre-warnings. The surprise we as researchers sometimes felt when some narratives were recounted was also felt by the participants; this potential for surprise might also be signalled in advance as an ethical precaution. It might also encourage participation: we found many students were curious to be involved in a musical narrative study. At this stage in our research of using music to stimulate narratives, there is ample scope to explore more about how the technique works: this study is still rather preliminary.

Nevertheless, some applications can be envisaged. Some narratives are useful material for workshops related to learning and personal, social and academic development, such as those illustrating experiences of coping with problems arising during academic study. Such workshops might be held for students starting at university, or to learners in secondary schools, for reflective discussion around issues of learning and both successes and challenges. Some examples here have particular relevance for international students, for whom a Da Capo approach through music may open up areas for discussion which may otherwise be difficult to access. The narratives cited here show the integrated and holistic nature of ‘learning’ (cognitive-physical-social-affective-moral-aesthetic dimensions) and how learning takes place often symbiotically in and outside formal educational settings. Arguably, the Da Capo technique has revealed how these are key themes in participants’ perceptions of learning; educational institutions, it is suggested, must attend more to this multi-dimensional view of learning in student-centred approaches. One way to begin to do so is through using narrative examples and Da Capo musical prompts in workshops for both staff and students.

Beyond this, we believe these recounted narratives indicate wider application of the use of the Da Capo technique that may have significant implications for researchers seeking in-depth data that complements or combines with data obtained through established methods. This applies to a wide range of areas such as marketing (Alpert & Alpert, 2006) and therapy (Kemper & Danhauer, 2005). For example, music-inspired narratives could stimulate the verbalization of past or present everyday experiences of patients with dementia (Sixsmith & Gibson, 2007) or those recovering from a long-term illness to recall critical past memories. Narratives inspired by music can extend experiential ways to integrate dimensions of learning as presented to teachers and students; this could combine cognitive, social and cultural aspects of academic learning (Illeris, 2018; Joyce, 2008) or integrate social, cultural, moral and spiritual views of learning (Best, 2008; Eaude, 2008) or physical and aesthetic learning (Abbs, 1994; Bresler, 2004). In comparative or cross-cultural directions, the traditional Chinese music used here could inspire participants from China to gather more details about childhood and life history perspectives of different generations. Similarly, traditional music from other countries could help to explore cross-cultural studies or collect life stories of migrant families. Music could be used to stimulate narratives with senior managers, executives and staff nearing retirement about key career moments in their careers and life work. Most obviously, in narrative research (e.g. Chafe, 1980, Cortazzi, 1993), there could be fuller exploration and analysis of narratives themselves gained through the Da Capo technique. Our aim here was to study the potential of music itself as a standalone research approach to generate narratives. Each narrative or narrative category could have been explored in more depth, say to explore narrative expression of loneliness, anxiety, stress and fear, or of trust, sacrifice and family values, perhaps oriented to social-moral education, guidance and counselling.

Here we have chosen the music we used; this meant that all participants heard the same extracts in the same order. Alternatively, in future research, participants could be invited to bring their own pieces of music which they feel mean a lot to them and the discussion and narrating could then focus on these; a combination of researcher- and participant-chosen pieces could be used to explore how such choice affect narrative expression or content. We hope that developing the Da Capo technique has successfully demonstrated the innovative potential and power of music to evoke and stimulate narratives for qualitative researchers to take such research further and use music in their own qualitative studies. To do so is, in a way, to go back over something already played (as in music) but usually engaging in it in a different way with other nuances and expression in performance (*Da Capo*).

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**Musical recordings used in this study**

Bach, J. S. (1986). No. 2 (C minor) BWV 847 [Recorded by Glenn Gould]. On *Bach*. *The Well-Tempered Clavier* [CD]. New York, NY: CBS Inc.

Bruckner, A. (1998). IV. Finale. Feierlich, nicht schnell [Recorded by Münchner Philharmonic. Sergiu Celibidache]. On *Bruckner: Symphony No. 8*. [CD]. Köln, Germany: EMI Records Ltd.

Medtner, N. (1992). Canzona Serenata in F Minor Op. 38 no. 6 [Recorded by Nikolai Demidenko]. On *Medtner Piano Music* [CD]. London, UK: Hyperion Records Ltd.

van Beethoven, L. (1975). 4. Allegro [Recorded by Wiener Philharmoniker. Carlos Kleiber]. On *Beethoven Symphony No.5* [CD]. Hamburg, West Germany: Polydor International.

Vivaldi, A. (2007). Concerto no. 2 In G Minor for two violins and cello. 4. 1. Adagio e spiccato [Recording artists not specified]. On *Vivaldi Masterworks* CD 5 [CD]. Paris, France: Universal Music Classics.

*Galloping Horses*: traditional Chinese melody arranged by Hai-Hai Huang, played by Yang Wei (pipa, a traditional lute-like instrument) and Daxun Zhang (bass). Recording (2007): ‘New Impossibilities’ Yo-Yo Ma and the silk road ensemble with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya. Chicago, USA: Sony BMG Music Entertainment.

*Yellow River Piano Concerto*, fourth movement (composed 1939, Xiao Xinghai), played by Xiang-Dong Kong (piano). Recording (1992) Recording (1992) with the Philharmonic Orchestra of China, conductor Mak Ka Lok, Beijing, China: Stereophile Production Co.

*Swallow*: a Xinjiang folksong (Western China) arranged by Gou Xiao Hu. Recording with the Chinese National Symphony Orchestra, conductor Tan Li Hua. Guangzhou, China: Pacific Audio & Video cop. ISRC 12-05-0049-O/A

*Fire Torch Festival:* symphonic suite Yunnan tone poem (Southwestern China) (composed 1992 by Wang Xilin). Recording with the Chinese National Symphony Orchestra, conductor Tan Li Hua. Guangzhou, China: Pacific Audio & Video cop. ISRC 12-05-0049-O/A

*Butterfly Lovers* (composed 1959, He Zhan-Hao and Chen Gang), first section, played by Xiang-Dong Kong (Piano) and Xu Ke (Erhu, a traditional Chinese violin-like instrument). Recording (1992) with the Philharmonic Orchestra of China, conductor Mak Ka Lok, Beijing, China: Stereophile Production Co.