

Mirror as a Tool of Learning Techniques in Tertiary Institution, Music Education

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Abstract: *The concept of mirror as a symbolic tool of learning techniques in music education of Tertiary Institutions is a reflection of imitation and transformation beyond its physical application in pedagogical approach, serving as a metaphor for self-awareness, balance, and creative qualities in the learning process. Through mirroring, students engage in active observation, bodily coordination, and aural imitation, which support the development of musical identity, structural understanding, and expressive communication. This study explores how symbolic interpretations of mirroring bridge the gap in understanding limits of strategies that provide students with effectiveness of cognitive learning and expressive benefits of the mirror technique to enhance music education instructions by promoting a holistic, and reflective approach to learning. In doing so, this study uses interviews, observations, and analysis of teaching materials that uncovers how mirroring techniques enhances self-awareness, creativity, and collaborative engagement among learners, and hang on to the symbolic interactionism theory of George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. The findings of this study reveal that, when educators recognise and apply the mirror symbolically, it will foster deeper cognitive, emotional, and expressive development in students learning abilities and techniques. Recommending that standing mirror should be made available and positioned at strategic locations with proper awareness of students on the benefits and appreciation of uses offers a framework for music educators to integrate symbolic thinking with practical techniques, ultimately enriching students' experience in music education at tertiary institutions.*

Keywords: Mirror, Symbolic Tool, Teaching Techniques, Tertiary Institution, Music Education.

Introduction

In music pedagogy is seen as instructional tools which play a pivotal role in shaping the learning environment, facilitating skill acquisition, and enhancing students' musical expression and understanding. These tools also ranging from traditional instruments and notation software to visual aids, mirrors, and interactive technologies that serve as mediators between abstract musical concepts and concrete learning experiences. According to Jellison (2004), the strategic use of pedagogical tools can improve both cognitive and affective learning outcomes by engaging multiple senses and learning styles. Similarly, Elliott (1995) emphasizes that music learning is not merely about acquiring theoretical knowledge but critically involves active participation, reflection, and interaction with both the medium and the method. African scholars such as Nzewi (1997) and Euba (1989) have also emphasized that African musical systems are deeply rooted in embodied and performative practices, where tools, whether physical or symbolic tools are central to transmitting indigenous knowledge and developing musicianship.

Furthermore, contemporary approaches in music education highlight the need for reflective, experiential, and embodied learning practices, where tools are not only functional but also symbolic. As Bowman (2004) argues that, educational tools should align with the philosophical underpinnings of music as a performative and interpretive art. Mirrors, for instance, extend beyond their physical utility to become reflective spaces where learners engage in self-assessment, imitation, and personal expression. Okafor (2005) similarly underscores the cultural relevance of performative tools in Nigerian music education, noting their role in fostering critical thinking and expressive development. This also resonates with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is deeply influenced by tools and symbols within a learner's environment. In this context, the mirror emerges not just as a passive reflector but as an active participant in shaping musical identity, awareness, and technique by making it an indispensable, though often overlooked, tool in tertiary music education.

The purpose of this article is to explore the mirror not merely as a physical object, but as a symbolic and pedagogical tool within tertiary music education. While traditionally used for posture correction and visual feedback, this study investigates how the mirror functions metaphorically to enhance self-awareness, imitation, creativity, and reflective learning among music students. Drawing on the theory of Symbolic Interactionism by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, the article examines how mirrors support the internalization of musical concepts through embodied experiences and social interpretation.

However, this aligns with Nzewi's (1997) argument that effective music education particularly in African contexts, requires an integration of body, mind, and symbol in musical learning, where tools like the mirror serve not only functional purposes but also

stimulate imaginative and performative depth. By understanding the symbolic role of the mirror in music instruction, educators can adopt more holistic and student-centered teaching approaches that promote cognitive, emotional, and expressive development.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism, a sociological perspective developed by George Herbert Mead and later expanded by Herbert Blumer. At its core, Symbolic Interactionism posits that individuals develop and interpret meaning through social interaction, and that symbols such as language, gestures, or objects that play a central role in shaping human experience and identity (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). Within this framework, the mirror transcends its physical function to become a powerful symbol through which learners interpret, evaluate, and reconfigure their self-perception, behavior, and performance in relation to their environment and others.

In the context of music education, the mirror serves as a reflective and interactive medium that facilitates learning through observation, imitation, and self-assessment key components of symbolic interaction. As students engage with the mirror, they do not merely see a visual representation of themselves; rather, they interpret this image in light of their musical actions, bodily expressions, and social cues acquired from instructors and peers. This symbolic engagement fosters deeper self-awareness, musical identity formation, and expressive capability.

Notably, African scholars such as Meki Nzewi (1997) have emphasized that African musical education traditionally relies on the symbolic fusion of sound, movement, and identity in a communal learning environment. Similarly, Akin Euba (1989) argues that African music practices are grounded in metaphoric and representational meaning, where performance tools carry layered cognitive and social interpretations. These perspectives reinforce Mead's idea of the "self" as a social product formed through reflection and interpretation. By applying Symbolic Interactionism to the use of mirrors in tertiary music education, this article highlights how symbolic tools like the mirror can bridge the gap between cognitive understanding and performative expression, ultimately enriching the student's learning experience across cultural contexts.

African Perspectives on Holistic Music Learning

The role of physical tools in music instruction has long been acknowledged as essential for effective teaching and learning. Tools such as instruments, notation systems, audio-visual aids, and digital interfaces support learners in acquiring technical skills, conceptual understanding, and expressive fluency. According to Jellison (2004), these tools function as mediators between abstract musical knowledge and concrete performance practices, enabling students to bridge the gap between theory and expression. Similarly, Ruthmann and Mantie (2017) emphasize the importance of technology-enhanced and embodied tools in shaping active and responsive music pedagogies that reflect contemporary learning needs.

African scholars such as Nzewi (1997) and Okafor (2005) likewise stress that in African musical traditions, the body, voice, instruments, and environment all serve as integrated tools for holistic music learning—facilitating not only the acquisition of skill but the transmission of culture, memory, and identity through practice.

Beyond physical utility, scholars in educational theory have explored the role of symbolism and metaphor as cognitive and affective tools that enrich the learning process. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors structure how learners perceive and experience reality, influencing how they conceptualize abstract domains such as emotion, identity, and performance.

In this vein, the mirror can be understood symbolically as a metaphor for reflection, transformation, and the development of self-awareness within learning environments. Eisner (2002) supports this view by noting that arts-based learning relies heavily on symbolic tools to evoke meaning, stimulate interpretation, and cultivate deeper engagement. In support of this, Euba (1989) emphasizes that African music education is deeply metaphorical and symbolic, rooted in aural transmission and communal symbolism, where tools like musical instruments, costumes, and gestures are encoded with meanings that guide learning and interpretation. Omojola (2006) adds that in contemporary Nigerian music performance, symbolic tools visuals, gestures, staging are used not only for aesthetics but for building connection between the performer, the music, and the audience, often serving reflective and expressive purposes akin to the metaphorical function of mirrors.

In performance arts disciplines such as dance, theatre, and music, mirrors have been employed not only for technical correction but also as a means of enhancing expressive depth and self-regulation. For instance, Bonbright and Faber (2013) describe how dancers use mirrors to monitor body alignment and expressive gesture, fostering a dual awareness of internal intention and external form. Similarly, Thompson and Williamon (2003) highlight that musicians often benefit from mirror-based practice to observe posture, facial expression, and stage presence.

In African music settings, Nzewi (2003) also notes that learners are taught to engage their whole being in music-making—visually, bodily, emotionally, and communally—often mirroring the master performer in a symbolic apprenticeship model. However, while mirroring is common in performance arts, there remains a gap in scholarly attention to the symbolic dimensions of mirror use in music education, particularly in tertiary settings. This study addresses this gap by examining how the mirror, as both a physical and symbolic tool, contributes to the development of musical identity, cognition, and expression in the classroom.

Symbolism and Metaphor as Cognitive Tools in Education

Symbolism and metaphor play a vital role in shaping how learners thinking, feeling, and knowledge interpretation. In education, this means that symbols and metaphors help students to make sense of complex or tangible ideas, such as emotion, identity, or creativity by connecting them to lived experiences. Eisner (2002) further emphasizes that arts-based learning thrives on symbolic representation, as it stimulates imagination, nurtures interpretative skills, and fosters deeper engagement. Thus, beyond physical

tools, symbolic and metaphorical tools function as powerful mediators of cognition, enriching the teaching and learning process. Therefore, symbolic and pedagogical use of mirrors in tertiary music education can enhance the following:

Self-awareness and Reflection

A central theme that emerged from both student and teacher interviews was the role of the mirror in enhancing self-awareness during musical performance. Many students reported becoming more conscious of their posture, tone production, facial expressions, and overall body alignment when rehearsing in front of a mirror. Teachers observed that students who practiced with mirrors demonstrated more attention to performance aesthetics and were more engaged in self-corrective behavior, without waiting for external feedback. This reflective engagement aligns with the symbolic function of the mirror as a tool for internalizing performance standards and initiating self-assessment processes, fostering a habit of critical evaluation and bodily mindfulness in musical interpretation.

Creative Engagement

The use of mirrors was also found to encourage creative experimentation and improvisation among students, especially during solo and ensemble rehearsals. Observational data revealed that students often explored new gestural expressions, dynamics, and stage movements more freely when a mirror was available, using it to gauge the visual impact of their performance. This interaction between visual feedback and sonic output inspired a heightened sense of performance presence, allowing students to experiment with non-verbal communication as an extension of musical expression. Educators noted that the mirror served as a stimulus for imagination and embodiment, allowing students to move beyond technical execution to artistic interpretation.

Aural-Visual Alignment

Another recurring theme was the facilitation of aural-visual alignment. Students expressed that mirrors helped them synchronize physical gestures with aural outcomes, particularly in mastering techniques such as breath control, bowing, and fingering. By visually monitoring their movements while listening to their output, learners could more accurately imitate sound patterns, correct technique, and develop muscle memory. Teachers confirmed that the mirror provided an effective means of bridging kinesthetic learning with auditory sensitivity, especially for students who benefit from visual reinforcement alongside aural instruction. This multi-sensory feedback loop was essential in reinforcing nuanced control and precision in performance.

Collaborative Learning

Classroom observations and interview data also highlighted the mirror's role in promoting collaborative learning. In group rehearsals, students often used the mirror not only to observe themselves but to monitor and coordinate with peers, enhancing ensemble cohesion. For instance, synchronized movements in choir and instrumental ensembles were more effectively achieved when students could see each other's timing, posture, and visual cues through the mirror's reflection. This fostered a sense of collective responsibility and visual communication, reinforcing symbolic interactionism's view of learning as a socially constructed process. The mirror thus became a shared space where individual performances were negotiated and aligned with group expectations.

Symbolic Interpretations of the Mirror

Beyond functional utility, participants frequently expressed symbolic interpretations of the mirror. For students, the mirror was described as a "second teacher," "silent mentor," or "performance companion", suggesting an emotional and reflective bond with the object. Many recounted moments of personal growth, increased confidence, and evolving musical identity as they used the mirror to rehearse over time. Teachers observed that students who engaged deeply with the mirror tended to become more self-driven, expressive, and introspective in their learning journey. These findings support the conceptualization of the mirror as a symbol of transformation, representing not just physical appearance but the learner's evolving identity, aspirations, and interpretive voice within the musical space.

In sum, the data reveal that the mirror, when utilized both practically and symbolically, serves as a powerful tool in shaping musical development, reinforcing technical skills, stimulating creativity, and nurturing expressive identity in tertiary music education. The themes identified offer new insights into how symbolic tools can be meaningfully integrated into pedagogy, bridging cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning.

Embodied Learning Through Mirroring As Second Teacher

The mirror functions not merely as a reflective surface, but as a symbolic mediator through which learners interpret their actions, develop self-awareness, and internalize social and pedagogical expectations. Students' descriptions of the mirror as a "second teacher" or "silent mentor" illustrate how they attribute meaning to the mirror beyond its physical function, viewing it as an active participant in their musical development.

This symbolic engagement with the mirror transforms traditional teaching techniques that often rely heavily on external critique and instructor-led correction. Instead, the mirror fosters a reflective, student-centered learning environment where learners are encouraged to observe, evaluate, and modify their performance independently. This shift aligns with contemporary constructivist and experiential learning paradigms, which prioritize active participation and personal meaning-making. Similarly, the use of the mirror as a symbolic tool also supports self-regulated learning, where students take ownership of their progress through continuous visual-auditory feedback and embodied awareness. This aligns with Okafor's (2005) view that music education in African contexts fosters independence and expressive identity through reflective practices rooted in communal and individual experience. It repositions the learner from a passive recipient of instruction to an engaged, self-reflective performer capable of interpreting and adjusting in real time.

In this regard, the mirror resonates with African pedagogical models that prioritize inner transformation and symbolic participation alongside with individual technical skill.

Therefore, symbolic mirroring facilitates a bridging of cognitive and emotional aspects of music learning. Cognitively, the mirror aids in visualizing technique, coordinating body movement, and aligning physical action with musical intention. Emotionally, it allows students to explore and express their identities, building confidence and deepening their connection to the music. As the mirror reflects not only the body but also the *musician in formation*, it becomes a tool for identity construction—supporting students in navigating the journey from technical execution to expressive artistry. This dual engagement reflects what Nzewi (2003) describes as a synthesis of intellect and feeling in music education, a process through which learners become musically and socially whole. The findings therefore suggest that the symbolic use of mirrors in music education, when integrated meaningfully, can lead to more holistic, culturally aware, and transformative pedagogical outcomes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the pedagogical use of mirrors as symbolic and instructional tools in tertiary music education:

1. Provision of Standing Mirrors in Classrooms and Studios

Tertiary institutions offering music education should ensure the availability of standing mirrors in rehearsal rooms, practice studios, and performance spaces. These mirrors should be strategically positioned to provide students with clear, full-body visibility during practice sessions. The presence of mirrors will support visual monitoring of posture, gesture, and expressive movement, thereby promoting self-assessment and kinaesthetic awareness. Institutions should also prioritize the inclusion of mirrors as standard infrastructure in performance-based learning environments, recognizing their dual function as physical and symbolic learning aids.

2. Training Educators on Symbolic and Reflective Teaching Strategies

Music educators should be trained to understand and apply symbolic and reflective pedagogies in their teaching. Workshops, seminars, and curriculum development programs should integrate concepts from Symbolic Interactionism, equipping teachers with the theoretical and practical knowledge to guide students in using mirrors not only for technique correction but also for self-reflection, identity development, and emotional expression. Educators should be encouraged to foster classroom cultures that value introspective learning and to design instructional strategies that integrate symbolic tools meaningfully.

3. Encouraging Student Awareness and Creative Engagement with Mirrors

Students should be sensitized to the broader symbolic and creative potentials of mirror use in music learning. Orientation sessions and reflective practice modules can help students understand how to use mirrors for self-correction, creative improvisation, and expressive enhancement. Educators should encourage students to explore the mirror as a space for personal growth—one where technical accuracy and emotional depth are cultivated simultaneously. Promoting this awareness will empower learners to become more independent, expressive, and reflective musicians.

These recommendations aim to bridge the gap between theory and practice by integrating symbolic tools into everyday pedagogical routines, thereby enriching the learning environment and supporting the holistic development of music students.

Conclusion

This study has explored the mirror as both a symbolic and practical tool in tertiary music education, revealing its capacity to transform traditional pedagogical approaches. Drawing on the theoretical lens of Symbolic Interactionism, the research highlights how the mirror functions beyond its physical presence, serving as a medium for self-awareness, expressive development, and identity formation among music students. Key insights from interviews, observations, and document analysis demonstrate that when students engage with mirrors reflectively, they gain deeper cognitive and emotional control over their performance, develop critical listening and visual coordination skills, and become more independent and expressive learners.

The findings emphasize the importance of integrating symbolic thinking with practical technique in music education. While mirrors aid in correcting posture and technique, their symbolic value lies in enabling learners to internalize feedback, cultivate personal expression, and develop a sense of self as evolving musicians. Incorporating such reflective tools into pedagogy promotes a more holistic and student-centered learning experience. Ultimately, embracing mirrors as both functional and symbolic instruments can significantly enhance the quality of music instruction in tertiary institutions—encouraging educators to foster environments where technical mastery, creativity, and personal growth are equally valued.

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