
MUSIC IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN EMERGENT SOCIAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN A REGIONAL UNIVERSITY

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Music in higher education faces challenging times. The digital age has brought with it not only new technologies, but new ways of being. The music students at one regional university are increasingly influenced by and engaging with participatory culture and digital environments in both their musical and private lives. This has an impact on how students learn. It is incumbent upon music higher education to prepare students for portfolio careers in ways which engage students' prior learning and identities, and reflect the broader changes in society. This paper is based on a discussion at the 11th APPC and details the response of one regional Australian university to these issues.

Introduction and background

One can hardly believe that there has been a revolution in all history so rapid, so extensive, so complete. Through it the face of the earth is making over, even as to its physical forms; political boundaries are wiped out and moved about, as if they were indeed only lines on a paper map...habits of living are altered with startling abruptness and thoroughness...That this revolution should not affect education in some other than a formal and superficial fashion is inconceivable. (Dewey 1899, p. 9)

When John Dewey penned these words more than a century ago, he was, of course, referring to the challenges posed to education by unprecedented societal change wrought by the Industrial Revolution. In 2013, the revolution is no longer widgets but Wikipedia, and Dewey's plea for education to be affected formally and deeply by social change now contains an urgent relevance, both for education generally, and music higher education specifically. Not only has the Internet transformed the way we work, play, communicate and create, it is even re-wiring our brains (Champeau 2008). University students are 'digital natives', and as Prensky noted as early as 2001, 'today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach' (2001, p. 2). Music educators and education generally 'cannot address today's challenges with yesterday's perspectives. We need new visions of what is possible' (Wenger, cited in Partti 2012).

In addition to the broader backdrop of social change, other specific factors have contributed to recent program and course redesign in music at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Whilst changes to university funding models in Australia may well have provided the initial impetus for change in some institutions, the resultant reflection on how things were done, at least at USQ, revealed that indeed, there were other forces at work which were themselves reason enough to evolve pedagogical practices. These factors included changes to staff profile, the need to ensure the embedding of creative and performing arts threshold learning outcomes in music

courses,¹ the imperative to prepare students for portfolio careers (Bartleet et al. 2012, p. 1; Carey & Lebler 2012, p. 313), and a desire to create a sustainable model of music higher education for the future.

Changes in the music offer at USQ began in 2009, when the Bachelor of Music (B Mus) program was replaced with a Bachelor of Creative Arts (BCA), in which students could study one or more of four discipline areas, including music. There were a number of flow-on effects from the change of program. With the introduction of a contemporary singing lecturer in 2009 (a casual position designed to support teaching and learning in both theatre and music disciplines inside the BCA), the staff profile changed (previously all staff were from classical music backgrounds). Music courses within the BCA necessarily began to embrace a wider range of music (previously, the predominant genre was classical music, with some jazz in the form of a big band). Some students were enrolled in two disciplines within the BCA (for example, theatre *and* music) rather than being solely music majors. The increasing interest in students wishing to study contemporary guitar resulted in that instrument being offered for the first time in 2012. As many of the courses inside the BCA were similar to their B Mus counterparts, a decision was made by USQ music staff in late 2011 to begin auditing and re-designing courses to better address the evolving needs of BCA students. USQ has since introduced an integrated approach to the teaching and learning of music practice, theory, aural, and technology courses across the BCA Program. This holistic approach will become further embedded as the degree moves towards re-accreditation for 2015. The first suite of courses to be re-designed was the music practice courses. The remainder of this paper focuses more closely on the changing profile of BCA music students at USQ, and on how first year music practice courses have been re-designed to respond to wider social forces.

What do the students bring to USQ?

Music students² at USQ come from diverse backgrounds. Whilst some have received formal tuition (including one-to-one lessons), some are self-taught (for example, learning guitar through YouTube videos) and others may have only experienced informal learning environments (such as playing in a band). Self-taught students may have received no feedback on their playing, yet other students from more traditional

¹ These TLOs relate to undergraduate programs and are an integral component of the new regulatory framework governed by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency.

² The following observations are anecdotal however data is being gathered on USQ music students' prior learning and experiences.

backgrounds may have received extensive feedback through formal examinations. Some students have never engaged with classical music, and others have done so exclusively (this also applies to popular music engagement). Students' musical literacy covers the spectrum. It is now not uncommon for some commencing tertiary students to lack the ability to read music notation or to possess basic audiation skills (Crouch 2013). The university-wide student profile at USQ includes many first-in-family university students and students from lower socio-economic and regional/rural backgrounds who have had limited learning opportunities prior to attending university (*What do University funding cuts mean for a smaller university?* 2013). In summary, the average music student profile at USQ is often quite different to the stereotypical conservatorium student who, according to Lebler, Burt-Perkins and Carey (2009, pp. 237-8), has had greater exposure to Western classical music, individual music tuition (both practical and theoretical) and receives more feedback from teachers than peers, friends or family.

First year music practice courses at USQ have been designed to engage not only with students' prior learning experiences (both informal and formal) but also with students' ways of being in the world. As digital natives and (predominantly) members of the 'yuk/wow generation' (McWilliam 2008, p. 33), today's music students require and respond to very different educational stimuli to those of their Generation X, Y and Baby Boomer predecessors. Students greatly value peer support and feedback, respond mostly to 'doing', enjoy learning in groups (McWilliam 2008) and live within a participatory culture, which not only blurs the boundaries between creation and consumption, but builds a sense in participants that their contributions matter, regardless of levels of expertise (Jenkins, cited in Partti 2012, p. 18). Anecdotally, at USQ, students steeped in participatory culture seek the opportunity to pursue music at tertiary level, although their prior experiences would not traditionally be viewed as worthy pre-requisites for university study. Student presage factors must be taken into account for learning environments to support students' future careers in music (Lebler, Burt-Perkins & Carey 2009, p. 244).

What is different about USQ's first year music practice courses?

Music practice within the first year of the BCA program at USQ is a departure from the conservatoire model. Students are team-taught both as a cohort³ and in small ensembles. In addition to these 'all-in' classes, students receive instrument-specific

³ The current cohort consists of one student each whose principal instrument is tuba, flute and violin, three pianists, five guitarists and eight contemporary vocalists.

group classes in their first year⁴. Collaboration is embedded in the ensemble component of the courses, and students engage in peer and self-assessment of the meta-skills required to conduct themselves in a professional manner (discussed further below). Students are placed into small ensembles, and then asked to choose, arrange and rehearse songs for a public performance outcome. The ensembles range from the conventional (for example, vocals and guitar) to the quirky (tuba, electric guitar, vocals and drums). The repertoire is varied (the current list contains Haydn and Bach alongside Madonna, Mancini and Coldplay) but due to the limited instrumental variety and ensemble size, the arrangements are necessarily 'pared-down'⁵. Students are free to exercise their creativity in arranging, and may also include original music.

These ensembles perform a variety of functions. The ensembles accommodate the diverse range of skills and interests amongst the cohort, and students learn from their exposure to this diversity. The small group format appeals to the students' desire to learn from and with their peers within a supportive environment (McWilliam 2008). Ensemble work in this context launches students into (what is usually) their first experience of critical inquiry into music and music making (for example, is the Haydn piece more 'difficult', or musically 'valid', than the Madonna song? If so, why? If not, why? What assumptions underlie questions of musical validity etc.?). Not only are students asked to develop the fundamentals of collaborative music making (playing in time and in tune, for example) but in addition, they must engage with the broader context of musical materials in order to arrange and perform their work (for example, researching lyrics to folk songs in order to understand their context and meaning, or listening to examples of songs on YouTube by a number of artists to understand performance practices or conventions).

The small ensemble setting has the potential to challenge all students, regardless of musical background or skill level. These often unique ensemble configurations not only encourage versatility, but demand it - the tuba player embraces the playing of a bass line when no upright or electric bass player is present; the singer who is used to singing lead learns to sing vocal harmonies when there are two other singers in the group; the

⁴Melodic instruments are grouped together into a 'single-line' instrument class.

⁵ Many of the catalysts for change were provided by the experiences of the first BCA students during 2009 and 2010. A specific example was the rising popularity of YouTube acoustic cover versions of songs with these students – they seemed to relate more readily to these versions than to the high production values of a Lady Gaga mini opera. Students then and now are also fans of clever musical 'mash-ups'. Due to their popularity and prevalence, mash-ups and acoustic covers have provided a vehicle for students to willingly engage with the creative process rather than feel coerced into it.

guitarist who has only ever played solo, learns the skills of good accompanying – keeping time if they are the only percussive instrument, following the lead of the melody, making dynamic adjustments; the flautist who is an excellent reader of classical music, composes or improvises a counter melody to the main vocal line; the classical pianist learns to read a chord chart, constructing chords and accompaniment without musical notation. In a small ensemble, students used to viewing their role on their instrument in a narrow way must broaden their focus to meet the demands of the musical material. Moreover, many students display a willingness to play on instruments other than their 'principal' instrument, or to sing, where such role changing is necessary to make the performance work musically. The small ensemble setting challenges the notion that one must be expert in their instrument to contribute to music making (in some cases, the best musical contributions are the simplest ones). In this sense, this emergent learning environment is built upon democratic, inclusive ideals which challenge students to think critically on both micro (their role at the ensemble level) and macro levels (the privileging of some musics over others, the role of music in society generally).

Within the small ensemble setting, students are encouraged to develop meta-skills such as organization, communication, time management and leadership. Indeed, it is these attributes (and not matters of musical skill or ability) that they must evaluate for themselves and of each other as part of course assessment. Bridgestock and Hearn (cited in Bartleet et al. 2012, p. 36) cite meta-capabilities such as disciplinary agility, social networking, enterprise and career self-management as central to successful careers for creative professionals in the 21st century. As students progress through the BCA program, these meta-skills become progressively more important to their academic success. At the very core of the BCA (with its four creative disciplines under the one program umbrella) is the notion of inter-disciplinary practice – students are encouraged to engage in inter-disciplinary collaborations wherever possible. Similarly, the social nature of learning and the leveraging of social networks to produce successful creative projects is embedded across music and other BCA courses, with their emphasis on collaboration, and in later years, project-based work which requires self-motivation, and the ability to plan, create and succeed in self-initiated enterprises. First year music students are introduced to these meta-skills gently and gradually through their ensemble work and performances. However, by third year, students are expected to largely work independently and be ready upon graduation to create their own opportunities, rather than relying on securing *prêt-à-porter* music careers (which, unlike their fashion counterparts, are increasingly difficult to find).

Conclusion and future research

Extrapolating from Dewey's ideas in *The School and Society*, the process of designing learning environments is one which requires educators to constantly re-adjust the focus of their lens – the broad focus on the nature of the society in which education takes place must then be narrowed to ensure that learning environments exist dynamically within the bigger picture. The idea is not simply to graduate music students with the skills to simply 'plug in' to today's world in some utilitarian sense – to become 'mere appendages to the machines which they operate' (Dewey 1899, p. 24) - but to engender in students the ability to critically, reflexively and creatively evaluate and enhance their role as musicians within society. In this latter sense then, music education must become 'an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society' (Dewey 1899, p. 29). Dewey concludes that such an educational experience provides the best guarantee of 'a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious' (1899, p. 29).

In a world where connections die and multiply beyond the rate of cell regeneration, rapid flux is the 'new black'. This resultant super-complexity and diversity provides tertiary music educators with both inspiration and challenges when designing effective learning environments. On one hand, to neglect to engage with these broader social issues is, according to Dewey (1899, p. 9), inconceivable. Others have labeled any such refusal of education to engage as 'unsustainable', 'irresponsible' and 'politically repressive' (Partti 2012, pp. 90–91). On the other hand, this engagement is not without its challenges, particularly in music education, where long-standing traditional means and methods have provided safety and security (Alsup & Westerlund 2012, pp. 127, 133), resulting in 'a slow speed of change in training of professional musicians' (Schippers 2004). Making the transition from the security of tradition towards an unknown and uncertain future is challenging for staff, students and other institutional and community stakeholders.

The re-design of the USQ music practice courses is in part a response to the challenge of constructing learning environments informed by and engaged with broader social factors. The work is the subject of the author's PhD thesis, which focuses on examining the learning environment of the USQ first year music practice courses through the lens of social theories of learning. Data is being collected in the form of student and staff short answer questionnaires, staff interviews, and students' reflective journals on ePortfolio. Some of the observations in this discussion paper are from data collected during S1 of 2013, which is yet to be fully analyzed (and is as yet, forms an incomplete data set⁶).

6 The author will study the 2013 first year music practice cohort together with the cohort of 2014.

Questions are derived from the conceptual framework by Wenger, Trayner and de Laat (2011) which is designed to assist qualitative researchers to assess the value of communities and networks for participants, and the contribution these social learning environments make to knowledge creation and new practices. The PhD research aims to illuminate the value and challenges of a social learning environment within the context of music higher education in a regional university.

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About the Author:

Melissa Forbes is a singer, songwriter, educator and researcher. Trained in jazz singing at the Queensland Conservatorium where she graduated with the University Medal, Melissa has performed nationally and internationally, and sung with Michael Bubl , Naturally 7 and David Hobson. She was appointed as a lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland in 2011 and during 2012, studied with eminent voice scientist Professor Johan Sundberg in Sweden. Melissa is currently researching learning environments centred around music practice in higher education towards her PhD. Other research interests include the science of the contemporary singing voice, and teaching and learning creativity. She is a Churchill Fellow and in a former life, an uninspired corporate lawyer of little renown.