
What makes the Boy from Oz good? Hugh Jackman and the pedagogy of excellence

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Abstract

With this paper we present the findings of a qualitative study providing baseline information on staff attitudes towards learning in a performing arts setting. The pedagogy for learning in performing arts courses has arisen, in part, from master-apprenticeship relationships between students and expert practitioners. This study is an exploration of how these traditional patterns of learning translate to a university environment and of the pedagogical expectations and processes of actors, singers and dancers. The location of this study is the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts at Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia (WAAPA@ECU). It is an elite training school for students wishing to pursue careers on the screen and stage as actors, dancers, musicians or producers/directors. The study was prompted by a recognition that WAAPA@ECU produces nationally and internationally recognised 'excellent outcomes'. It is, therefore, informed by an interest in the pedagogy of excellence in a performing arts setting.

Introduction

Hugh Jackman, starring on Broadway in the musical 'Boy from Oz' at the time of writing, is known to audiences through his leading roles in the movies *The X Men* (2000), *Kate and Leopold* (2001) and *Van Helsing* (2004). Jackman trained at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA@ECU), part of Edith Cowan University (ECU). One person who taught him remembers:

... when Hugh [Jackman] was training he was just like the perfect, excellent student. Very charming, very able, not at all angst ridden, a hard working skilful student, do you know, and he drew that group up, like he brought out the best of everyone around him ... (*Interview 3*)

But what is meant by excellence? How do teachers of the performing arts recognise excellence, and how do they teach and assess it? The central questions in

this paper arise from the tensions evident in a performing arts academy focused on excellent outcomes and preparation for work in the tough environment of the performing arts. How do the traditional patterns of learning in the performing arts translate to a university environment? To what extent do university values, policies and procedures relating to pedagogy, instruction, assessment and evaluation accord with the values, expectations and processes of actors, singers and dancers? This study is informed by an interest in the pedagogy of excellence. In undertaking it, we sought to delineate the expectations of performing arts lecturers and to explore how excellence is developed in WAAPA graduates.

Methodology

Structured, in-depth interviews were recorded with six performing arts staff. The questions focused on how these staff recognise excellence; their approach to developing and assessing excellence in students; and how they conceptualise and articulate increasing levels of excellence. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was transcribed and subsequently analysed to ascertain any dominant themes in the narrative of creative arts staff. We separately coded each interview to facilitate the emergence of themes arising from a variety of perspectives. For example, one author occupies a managerial position in relation to WAAPA staff and has responsibility for teaching and learning quality assurance processes across the University. The other two authors occupy positions of teaching and learning leadership in other faculties of the University.

Although the number of respondents is small, it constitutes a saturation sample of staff in two, high-profile performing arts areas. Respondent validity was assured by returning transcripts to respondents for additional comments and clarification. The notion of saturation also applies to the interviewing process because, as the interviews progressed, the interviewer established that the data emerging ceased to be new, which suggests that key issues had been captured.

Results

The potential for excellence

WAAPA@ECU has established a reputation for creativity and excellence that has given rise to high entry standards based on audition. This differs from normal university entrance procedures that allow a diverse range of abilities into most courses. The population of university students in general may be described as a skewed normal curve, because all students have demonstrated some academic success. However, some have achieved at higher levels than others. In contrast, entry into WAAPA programs is highly competitive. It is normal to audition 550 applicants across the nation for 18 available places. The audition process for students seeking admission to WAAPA@ECU is rigorous and extremely competitive; ‘we’re auditioning 800 people for 18 places right? We’re getting the cream of the population that want to train in Australia’ (*Interview 3*). Staff spend weeks conducting individual auditions in Australia’s capital cities:

We might see four people an hour for ... seven or eight hours a day for five days ... out of those people we might choose twenty that we want to see again – and that's an arbitrary number. Maybe there will only be six or maybe there will be forty ... from that we cull again. So we have three weeks of auditions. (*Interview 1*)

An initial assumption of this study was that the auditioning process gives rise to a starting point of excellence among WAAPA students. The staff did not agree. The audition process, in the eyes of the performing arts staff, is about identifying potential. They view the applicants as just beginners who must have potential: '... they don't have to be excellent when they arrive, they have got to have a capacity for it. In fact we don't want them to be excellent when they arrive: we want them a bit raw' (*Interview 3*); and '... we get some fantastically good people coming to our auditions. There is no point in us bringing into this course some one who is already, should be working professionally' (*Interview 4*).

These results shift the focus from excellence to potential, but the question remains: How do staff recognise the potential for excellence? It seems that potential is not restricted to the capacity to become a very good, even excellent, actor or singer. Potential, they argue, is linked to the applicant's prospects of getting work in the industry.

We're looking for someone who we believe is going to be employable in the industry and who has sufficient skills for us to make a judgment that after three years of highly intensive training they will be ready to enter the profession and that's quite a subtle call to make sometimes ... (*Interview 4*)

The skills recognised as potentially employable include preparedness, accuracy, trainability, flexibility and 'imaginative investment'. This can be seen at audition:

The way those people have prepared, how accurate they are and the sort of imaginative investment they make in that text either captures you and grabs your interest or it doesn't, now 80 per cent will fall away at that point. Then you're looking for just how they've really risen to the task of that scene and you, if you're interested you might redirect so ... you would ask them to do something really quite away from the way they've prepared it. For example to turn a confessional speech into a public speaking speech – do you know. And to see how flexible they are and therefore how well they would go with the training. And many fall away at that point because there are many polished auditions out there but you'll only ever get the one [performance]. (*Interview 3*)

... we're looking for trainability, for somebody who, because sometimes we, you might see somebody here who's already like, like cooked already, who could be working ... (*Interview 1*)

Marketability is also seen as an essential component of potential: 'We're looking for people who are, cold term but we use it, we are looking for people who are marketable. We have to, we are talking about to a certain extent, a glamour industry' (*Interview 4*).

Physicality, in terms of skills and appearance, is an element of marketability, although physical attractiveness is not a primary consideration at audition; 'if the

talent is there, then I don't think we rule anyone out on physical looks' (*Interview 2*). While looks may not be a dominant factor in selection, the body and its capabilities are. Acting, singing and dancing engage the body to the ultimate degree. The body is the primary tool of the performer and the audition process is an opportunity for the selectors to assess the physical potential of applicants:

... you're checking for speech impediments, any sort of bias in their movement as they walk in the room. ... I watch them and do a gait analysis on them. ... And so when I then, later on in the discussion with the staff [sic], and they want to bring this person in, I say, "Well please be aware that their spine is scoliotic and I can't, I won't be able to change anything there". If we take them in we've got to agree that's what they work with. (*Interview 3*)

Without exception, the staff viewed the performing arts industry as tough. As a consequence, their definition of potential included temperament: '... I think people's temperament and ability to deal with rejection, to deal with this particularly harsh industry is more, is often more important than their actual ability' (*Interview 2*); and 'I occasionally say, if I'm the toughest thing you've come across, just wait until you get into the industry' (*Interview 3*).

Personality type emerged as a key attribute considered by the teaching staff to be necessary not only for success in the industry but to survive the three years of rigorous and intensive training demanded by the Academy's program.

If we saw somebody what we call blocking when they are working [with another actor], like stopping, then we think "oh this person's got some issues, they're not ready to learn". (*Interview 1*)

I find it easier and easier to identify students who I just say, that person is very unlikely, they are fantastically talented but I can almost guarantee that they will not find success within the industry simply because of their temperament. (*Interview 2*)

The industry loves people who are easy to work with, who are completely autonomous, who can get on with their own thing. (*Interview 3*)

An aspect of appropriate temperament includes an ability to function in a group: 'Sometimes you have people in the year with very strong personalities who have got a real negative energy and you can see it completely debilitate or paralyse the whole group' (*Interview 2*).

The importance of the peer group to success in the performing arts is supported by research. Peers have been found to have a measurable positive influence on academic achievement (Kinderman 1993). Furthermore, when peers are working towards a mutual goal there is evidence that cooperation and collaboration can raise the performance of those individuals beyond that which they may achieve on their own (Jehn & Shah 1997). Thus the selection at audition of individuals deemed to have the 'positive energy' to contribute to the group may well improve the chances of success of all its members, given that the 18 successful applicants will spend all day, at least five days a week for three years with this group.

Despite a reluctance on the part of most of the respondents to describe their audition process in terms of the search for excellence, they were able to identify the qualities that best equip students for their creative journey towards it. The following list of qualities, taken from the interviews, suggests that potential may be defined in terms of:

- malleability;
- trainability (not ‘cooked’);
- emotional and interpersonal intelligence;
 - people who can listen
 - people who are open to criticism
 - people who can work with others
- physicality;
 - physical and vocal potential
 - appearance
- passion;
- sensibility;
- ‘connection, to ideas, to text, to voice’; and
- natural performers.

The meaning of excellence

If excellence is not a starting point, perhaps it is a goal. Not so! To some staff, excellence implied unwelcome conclusion: ‘When I achieve excellence ... I would stop. Because ...there wouldn’t be anything more to do. It’s the curiosity, it’s like, what else can there possibly be? There isn’t a point, there isn’t an end’ (*Interview 1*).

Others, however, believed in a concept of excellence and were prepared to share their understanding: ‘... an excellent student is someone who is courageous imaginatively and they’re someone who is kinaesthetically astute so they can really work from a very visceral, organic, physical base ...’ (*Interview 3*).

Excellence is, in part, an intuitive process that is bolstered by comparison to those not so good:

... the excellence of the, I will use that word, for the students here. They really are a cut above, they really are. And that working out in the community with people of not quite as high potential if you like, it affirms for me that we are on the right track. (*Interview 1*)

Some of the academics preferred to speak of excellence in terms of specific skills within their disciplines:

I think I have a notion of what is excellence in terms of the skills behind what we do but it's pretty hard, once again, to specify. You know, one could say, Anthony Hopkins is an excellent actor but I think much of that is because of skills and training and hard work. (*Interview 5*)

One of the most consistent findings of this study was the importance of physicality in the performing arts, which extended to definitions of excellence:

... we do have ... in first year a student that has danced on Broadway ... her dance is quite excellent. She's quite exquisite – line structure of bodily physicality, stage presence, commitment to the space and the art, understanding how to move through the space. (*Interview 6*)

Flexibility was also identified as a feature of excellence:

Range in terms of character, being able to transform oneself. A great understanding of self, an audience, and emotional range, clear communicative skills, the ability to (and this goes into the observation of other people) but the ability to interpret other people's texts. The ability to diagnose, comprehend and interpret texts ... (*Interview 5*)

The definitions of excellence and potential are inextricably intertwined. The list of qualities that define potential also define the achievement of excellence. These include:

- interpretive imagination;
- stage presence;
- physicality 'kinaesthetically astute';
- comparative standards;
- interpersonal and emotional intelligence; and
- ability to work (trainability).

Knowledge

If WAAPA@ECU staff begin with potential and strive towards excellence, then what do they teach? Is there a body of knowledge that students need to know in order to be judged as excellent in a rigorous industry? The experience of knowledge production at the Academy suggests that it functions differently from knowledge production in other parts of the University. Whereas academics in more traditional disciplines argue that the knowledge they teach to the students is informed primarily by research, the academics in the performing arts explained that the knowledge they teach is informed mostly by their own professional experience.

All respondents in this study have extensive industry experience and continue to apply their skills in public performances alongside their teaching commitments. In reply to a question about how Academy teachers decide what students should learn, they uniformly mentioned the industry from which they came:

So it's changeable, it's adaptable but it arises out of the shared knowledge, experience, beliefs of the Department ... Oh and from the outside too because we're all practitioners do you see? And because our field is people, so it, it, it's always going to have influence from, from the world of our industry.

(Interview 1)

We're all, or have been, theatre practitioners and so we have a fairly clear idea of what it is that is required of the professional actor, because this is vocational training and so I suppose we bring a great deal of our specific knowledge from over the years and experience and try to match that with what it is we actually teach ... *(Interview 2)*

I am fairly confident from my work in industry and in the theatrical industry of what they need to know, to be able to work in as wide a field as possible ... *(Interview 3)*

I, for example, was one of Australia's principle theatre music directors for something like 25 years before I came here. So our knowledge is based on very direct practical experience of what happens in the profession. *(Interview 4)*

I am very new to academia and so four years ago I was a director. I was a freelance director and teacher as well but I know pretty well up to the minute what will be required of them professionally so that's what I teach them. *(Interview 5)*

That's really industry driven for me but industry's focus changes so obviously they have to learn, as with anything, the fundamentals and the technical base to work form, to have a steady and sure and reliable technical base. *(Interview 6)*

The importance of experience as the basis for knowledge is summed up by one respondent who said 'the knowledge is carried in the human being ... there is a certain amount that you can learn from a book but it's actually carried in the human being' *(Interview 1)*. The high value placed on knowledge gained from direct industry experience prompted one respondent to express a fear that the University did not sufficiently value an industry background in performing arts teachers:

I think the grave danger for us is that, and I don't know whether this is a University perception at all, that as people leave we will be replaced by people whose background is mainly academic, more theoretical than practitioner. *(Interview 2)*

At the level of curriculum content what is to be taught is clearly articulated:

... we have absolute content for each year [sic] ... Every dance lesson is actually written out and exists on paper. *(Interview 4)*

... for four weeks we might study the neutral mask. For another four weeks we might do animal transformation. In their third year they will do stage combat, in second year they will do mime. There's a whole range of movement subjects they will study and I will bring in people who have got specialities that I don't have ... *(Interview 3)*

Finally, Academy lecturers accorded with contemporary learning theory that de-emphasises the importance of a fixed knowledge base, focusing instead on teaching students how to learn: 'their training teaches them how to learn. Learning how to learn, how to be aware of your body, how to read your own body, how to be autonomous, problem solving, creating things' *(Interview 3)*.

The learning process

How, then, do Academy students learn the industry-informed knowledge? What processes do lecturers use to help students achieve excellence in performance? The results of this study indicate a number of features of learning in the performing arts: one-to-one teaching; cohort teaching; the importance of the learning environment; mentoring; and performance. While these features identify distinctive Academy teaching and learning processes, the staff share with all lecturers the importance of shifting focus from excellence in teaching to excellence in learning: '[it takes] a long time to understand that teaching is about people learning' (*Interview 1*).

One-to-one and cohort teaching

In the WAAPA@ECU setting, learning and teaching is conducted on a one-to-one and small cohort base that differs in size and intensity from the lecture and tutorial formats that prevail at undergraduate level in universities. In their view, the necessary condition for teaching to a high, even excellent, standard in the performing arts is individualised tuition: '... because each individual is different ... they'll have an overall path, they'll be doing classes with everybody else but within that, we talk about every student at every staff meeting. We go through every single one' (*Interview 1*).

Students learn through constant feedback: 'our students are constantly told how to walk, how to sit, how to move. Don't do that, do this, do that' (*Interview 4*). Nevertheless, offering and taking criticism can be hard on staff and students: 'it's quite an emotional experience for the student and for the staff sometimes. That's why we have boxes of tissues everywhere' (*Interview 4*). However, because the ultimate goal is for graduates to enter the industry, staff feel that it is kinder to disappoint students earlier rather than later:

... sometimes we do ask people to leave simply because we think they're wasting their time and it will be potentially damaging you know, when they could be studying something else, to have the impression that they are going to function within the industry. Appalling industry. (*Interview 4*)

The necessity to give honest and sometimes highly critical feedback to students must be integrated into the safe, nurturing environment that the lecturers believe is critical for the students' development. Research into success in the performing arts consistently suggests that the environment and the relationship with the teacher are important factors in success wherein the teacher responds to the students' needs and steers them towards attainable goals (Freeman 1991).

The learning environment

All the respondents agreed that the learning environment in WAAPA@ECU is radically different from that which characterises other parts of the university. In the first instance, the Academy has its own dedicated spaces – studios, rehearsal rooms and theatres that are not shared with other parts of the university. As a consequence, performing arts staff and students are, by and large, physically separated from the rest of the university and form a community within themselves. Secondly, teaching

in the performing arts is cohort-based. For example, the 18 music theatre students who make it through the auditions will stay together as a group for all their classes for three years. The small cohort and the long hours they put into classes, rehearsal and performances mean that their friendships and relationships will be mainly forged within the Academy.

Thirdly, the staff spend much more time in face-to-face contact with their students than do academics in other parts of the university. While the hours of direct contact with students might average around 12 in the university at large, the average in WAAPA is likely to be in excess of 20 hours and, in some weeks, as high as 40 hours.

The thing that we do that is so different is that we have a very personal relationship with the students. We have 18 per year for three years. We're teaching them from nine until six every day. We're in and out of studios all the time, I'm sitting in on rehearsals watching them, I'm calling them in for tutes over lunchtime, discussing their work all the time. I go to their dress rehearsals, I give notes, I direct them in plays. We all go to their scene work, we all give feedback, voice, movement and acting. Constantly there as a sort of mentor and guide and a collaborator. ... it's got a more intimate relationship and it's a more process-oriented thing so where other university lecturers might deliver a set of lectures, deliver a set of tasks and assess how those students are responding to the essay or experiment or whatever, we're looking much more at how the student is going with the work. (*Interview 3*)

Mentoring

WAAPA staff consistently described 'substantive conversations' through which creative arts students' progress is monitored and enhanced. Staff are 'Constantly there as a sort of a mentor and a guide and a, and a collaborator' (*Interview 3*). As noted by those interviewed, social support is apparent in the individualised learning processes and connectedness with the art, the industry and with staff, whose goal it is to establish 'connection, to ideas, to text, to voice'.

WAAPA teachers are facilitators who shed light on theoretical insights arising from performance learning. Bowerman and Peters (1999, p 135) referred to this as a process of de-expertising: 'People need to be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning ... we call this 'expertising''. This is also consistent with the comments made by WAAPA staff about their teaching: 'Yes I'm, I'm older than them and I've got a bit more knowledge ... [but] they're peers' (*Interview 1*). The small numbers and the high level of contact mean that the performing arts staff know their students much better than staff in other parts of the university.

I know what my students think. I talk; we talk to our students all the time. We know what they feel. We have student staff meetings every Monday. We get feedback from students about all ... we cover that stuff so much better than things like UTEI's (Unit and Teaching Evaluation Instruments) that are thrown together in such a hurry and the kids get bored to death doing them. (*Interview 4*)

The fact that the academics have many roles vis-a-vis the students – those of teacher and professional director, choreographer, voice coach, movement coach and mentor – changes the nature of the student-teacher relationship.

... on the last production, *Horizons*, we were not only the teachers but we were also the director, the choreographer and the music director and that relationship is absolute, the way it works in the profession and I think it's a good way of teaching when you're able to get alongside somebody and work with them as a contributing artist and collaborate with them. ... my observation is that their learning is increased exponentially rather than them being lectured or told. (*Interview 5*)

... in my particular field, I see, I consider the students to be my peers ... it could well be when if I ever leave the University, I could well be working alongside them. In fact I would hope to be. (*Interview 1*)

The intensive nature of the relationship between the teaching staff and the students is acknowledged by both groups to be a great strength of WAAPA@ECU and absolutely necessary to effective performance arts training. Every respondent mentioned the long hours but none complained about the work *per se*; rather, their complaints were directed at what they saw as the University's lack of appreciation and recognition of the hours that they put into the job: 'I just hope that, you know, our work is acknowledged' (*Interview 3*).

Performance learning

The centrality of performance is evidenced in the structure of the curriculum at WAAPA@ECU, which is based on a performance cycle for all students:

All the second and third years do back-to-back shows every five weeks and they're all public performances. Yes, we, we will respond to how an audience is reading the work, we will always go to those public performances. I think it's very important. It's really, really important for the actor training for them to work in front of an audience, not just other students. It teaches them a huge amount. (*Interview 3*)

The performance cycle leads to a comparatively fixed curriculum compared to university courses:

... in the University, you can have a lot more flexible entry into courses. You can choose courses, you can have electives, you can do different units. These students all do the same course and they must, there is no choice at all, they must do dance and aikido and poetry and dialect to, to actually be cooked as an actor. (*Interview 3*)

Cooking is a useful metaphor because it implies that the ingredients are mixed. The mixing machine is performance:

Well this is where all the skills that have been taught are, are assembled into the one person. Like, when you're in performance, in music theatre performance, everything you do has to come from the same source within you. It kind of, decisions are all made from the same source. So you, your, when you are as a total performing [sic] and you are singing and dancing and acting and you're doing all those things, bearing weights on them at any given moment in the performance, the whole, the clarity and the effectiveness of the performance is, is measured by the assembling of all those skills and your ability to just draw on those skills on the spot. Now in a public

performance, that's where we see whether they're actually able to do that and also bear in, deal with all the other issues around the profession of stress under pressure ...
(*Interview 4*)

This staff member's comments also make it clear that Academy teaching and learning processes are closely integrated with assessment practice, because performance provides the opportunity for the feedback from which students learn.

Assessment

According to James, McInnis and Devlin (2002, p 7), assessment is a prime mover of student learning in universities: 'For most students, assessment requirements literally define the curriculum'. But how does this play out in a performing arts setting? What is the interplay between teaching and learning strategies and assessment and how do Academy assessment practices shed light on the pursuit of excellence?

Overall, it was evident that staff at WAAPA@ECU had a clear, shared understanding of the purpose and process of assessment. The focus is on formative assessment, with final, ungraded course assessments, complemented by industry, in open auditions for agents and performance employment.

Formative assessment is absolutely core to learning in the performing arts. This includes direct feedback from expert performers (the staff and industry), peer feedback, self-reflection, and also opportunities to receive feedback from real audiences in authentic performance. Performance feedback is unusual in its detail, intensity, and in the very public nature of much of the commentary. Feedback is an integral part of learning and assessment processes in the creative arts:

We use it [feedback] very much as a way to teach and learn. We communicate with them in an assessment way on a daily, if not hourly basis. In class there is immediate feedback on the work they've done ... they really are assessed all the time, an incredible amount I think. (*Interview 5*)

Peers are required to contribute by providing open, constructive criticism to other students, in the context of workshops:

... we work a lot through self assessment. So often we would say, okay talk to us but we ask them to prepare a two-minute self-assessment ... you talk about my own understanding of how I went in that particular show, what I learnt, what the gaps are, my inability to deal with Shakespeare ... I have to work on that and then we would chip in and say, "But there's also that or that or I felt this". And you might get differing responses again because it's so much to do with taste. I might enjoy somebody's performance and someone would say, "Oh I thought it was awful". And they have to accommodate that. (*Interview 2*)

I get the students telling me, the performers tell me about how they think they went, get their own assessment of it and then we discuss it with [them] and we try to draw out of the experience material that's useful for everybody in the room to draw on. It's stuff that's for everyone to draw on. (*Interview 4*)

A distinctive characteristic of assessment in the performing arts is the extensive use of team assessment. Staff routinely collaborate in the evaluation of student progress through ongoing discussion about students and their progress.

... because each individual is different ... they'll have an overall path, they'll be doing classes with everybody else, but within that, we talk about every student at every staff meeting. We go through every single one. (*Interview 1*)

Well, we monitor it constantly through tutorials, through staff meetings, every staff meeting we discuss every student. We, we literally sit down and say, "How is so and so doing? How is so and so doing? Is she doing, is she, is she, or what difficulties has she got?" We're constantly monitoring their progress and seeing whether they're really reaching the standards that we ... require. ... it sounds a bit daunting that but I do think that ... the students accept that because we do operate in a very supportive environment and atmosphere. (*Interview 2*)

The emphasis on team assessments in the performing arts provides a degree of reliability and validity to subjective judgements. Whilst clear criteria can be established and agreed for many dimensions of performance, there are subjective elements that might be referred to as 'stage presence', 'raw talent' or 'stage magic': 'It's always been called an 'It' factor in the industry. You know, that person had 'It' (*Interview 6*).

... this is a very, very imprecise science and as I said earlier, about, about the assessment of acting, some people really are drawn to a particular performer and the complexities of why you are watching, you know, why you have a favourite actor or a favourite television star or a favourite movie star or whatever, oh there is a complexity of issues involved in your response to, to someone. And it's all to do with the way that they present themselves and the way they speak and whether they're physically attractive to you and, and, heaven knows what's going on psychologically when you're responding to a performance. (*Interview 4*)

Assessment at the Academy is closely linked with curriculum and learning processes because it is used to plan specific study programs that address individual learning needs. Negotiated assessment processes establish individual profiles of students' performance skills. Such individualised study plans would be very rare in other undergraduate programs. Performance is the key. The process is one of learning and assessment. Students may demonstrate competence through their work in individual units, but unless they can bring together those skills in the context of an actual performance, they will not be judged to have achieved required standards. By comparison, in most university courses a student becomes a graduate by passing a certain number of modules or units at a certain level of competency.

So how do staff know that students have achieved excellence? The end-of-course assessment of Academy students incorporates direct industry assessment. Students are supported to attend auditions for direct entry to employment and, most significantly, to find an agency willing to take them onto their books. Success in these external auditions is the ultimate goal of the course, and provides a **complementary** indicator of the students' achievement.

... in third year we get agents over, you know, we'll take them on a showcase to Melbourne and Sydney to place them with the very best people, to launch them into

this career. ... it's a 50 minute programme normally and they have two scenes in that or a scene and a monologue which we guide them to choose and normally I direct it as a showcase, that means like a show, so hopefully it's interesting and diverse and shows them off, the two aspects of them really ... And to those we invite all the top agents, all the top casting directors, all the top theatre directors. Any one who we think, you know, so there might be a couple of hundred people who come and see our students. We have someone there and then we arrange interviews with those people. They might say, "I'm particularly interested in so and so". (*Interview 2*)

Analysis of results

In summary, this study has revealed that a rigorous audition process gives rise to a student population bursting with potential. Students are nurtured to excellence in an intimate learning environment that provides for individualised and cohort teaching and learning with strong elements of mentoring and peer appraisal. An 'iron fist in a velvet glove' approach engages students in a climate of critical reflection in which they are at once supported and appraised. This study of the pedagogy of excellence has problematised the very concept of excellence, which is neither starting point nor goal. Rather, the process itself should remain incomplete, to create space for the continued growth of creativity.

The qualities of excellence that are promoted through audition and curriculum, teaching and learning processes include aspects of temperament, physicality, malleability and creative imagination. The knowledge base of excellence in the performing arts is industry-focused and about process; in particular, learning to learn. It features awareness of habits and work patterns, ideas and traditions, and physicality – body awareness. Assessment is embedded in learning processes and reflects industry standards. At the Academy, traditional master-apprentice models have been sustained and performance is considered the key. This starts with auditions, forms part of a curriculum based on a cycle of performances, and finishes with final assessments in the form of auditions that provide entry to employment.

Our analysis here is focused on the extent to which the identified WAAPA@ECU teaching, learning and assessment processes are distinctive. Is it possible to conclude that Academy staff and students can provide an insight into excellence in teaching and learning? What do they do that is different to staff and students in other fields? The analysis will also address issues arising from attempts to codify teaching, learning and assessment processes in the performing arts.

Similarities between Academy and university teaching and learning

It seems that the Academy differs not so much in kind as in intensity: 'So ... it's got a more intimate relationship and it's a more process-oriented thing' (*Interview 3*). Learning through performance is actually very similar in approach to widely-used, work-based university learning, through which students in many disciplines apply theoretical learning in real-world settings. According to Roelofs and Terwel (1999, p 202), this gives rise to fluid models of curriculum development: 'Instead of being presented as a 'closed' system, subject-matter originates before the students' eyes in

a process of re-invention'. This resonates with how Academy staff described their teaching and learning processes.

Like work-based learning, performance learning integrates modularised skills and aptitudes into an holistic learning experience. This fits action learning (learning by doing) pedagogy and problem-based learning, and resonates with descriptions of master-apprentice relationships in which 'Both tacit and explicit knowledge transfers can take place more effectively' (Talisayon 2001, p 1). Tacit knowledge is the assumed knowledge to which WAAPA staff refer: 'The art is implicit' (*Interview 1*). According to Herrington and Oliver (2000, p 36), much of this is learned from the expert performances of role models:

Interestingly, some of the students commented on the incidental peripheral learning that is possible from an apprenticeship-like learning situation and revealed the 'window on practice' (Brown & Duguid 1993), or the social or cultural insights into ... [professional practice].

Performance learning also accords with other, established tertiary teaching pedagogies because it leans heavily on constructivist learning principles that encourage learners to construct their own meaning for knowledge (Oliver et al 1998). It resonates with the kind of learning through which knowledge is transformed into personal understanding. The parallels with how WAAPA staff describe their own processes are immediately apparent: 'I think it's more efficacious for a student to find their own way into it rather than parroting, copying, mimicking what somebody else is doing' (*Interview 1*).

Performance learning provides authentic contexts and activities as well as opportunities to learn from best practice. These are core elements of what is described as authentic learning (Oliver et al 1998), which includes opportunities to experience multiple roles and perspectives, and to work collaboratively and reflectively in the construction of knowledge. Performance learning recognises the importance of interaction and socialisation among learners. It requires that teachers and students work on problems in partnership: 'They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow ... no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught' (Freire 1970, p 61). In this way, students participate in what Lave and Wenger (1991) call a community of practice, which, according to Herrington and Oliver (2000, p 24), 'enables the learner to progressively piece together the culture of the group and what it means to be a member'.

Codifying Academy processes

One of the original questions of this study was: To what extent do university values, policies and procedures relating to pedagogy, instruction, assessment and evaluation accord with the values, expectations and processes of actors, singers and dancers? With this study we have established that learning and assessing through performance reflects the best of contemporary pedagogy so there should, on the face of it, be no particular discordance between the Academy and the University in which it is embedded. Yet the study revealed some mistrust and suspicion:

... so I think we are different and I think that, that is one of our biggest problems actually with the University is that we, I think we often feel they just don't get it ... Hugh Jackman is a star on Broadway and in films but [they don't actually know] how he was trained to achieve that. (*Interview 2*)

The perceived lack of understanding arises, in part, from the implementation of quality assurance processes across the Australian university sector, but the University gets the blame for an apparent loss of freedom:

... having experienced WAAPA at the beginning and experiencing WAAPA now there was the potential for a more anarchic, it's probably the wrong word, but for a more flexible approach rather than being moderated through the University. I think that there's a kind of vigour in some ways that has been, been lost possibly. (*Interview 2*)

A specific requirement of the quality assurance process that pertains to teaching and learning is the need to codify teaching objectives and learning outcomes. This does not accord with the intuitive and fluid processes of performance-based learning and assessment:

... it's hard to say there's a quite clear set of outcomes the way that the University would generally want them. It's very difficult to write down within an acting course exactly what a student, what the outcome for the student is going to be because it is somewhat subjective. (*Interview 5*)

The perceived problems arise, in part, from the accreditation of WAAPA@ECU courses. The Academy was established as, and remains, a vocational training institution. The acting program, for example, is an Advanced Diploma – a Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualification – not an undergraduate degree course. As such, it is subject to the requirements of the Australian National Training Authority that include specification of learning outcomes, competency-based assessment and regular compliance audits. The translation of intuitive, performing arts programs into competency-based curricula has been met with scepticism by Academy staff:

... every two or three years it seems as if we have to redefine what we do in another way ... consultants are being paid an awful lot of money to produce glossy pamphlets saying the same thing ostensibly in a slightly different way and in a slightly different format that we then have to jump through ... it's for the administrators and not for us. Because ... within our teaching [it] has made no difference whatsoever. It only makes a difference to the way that we're measured from the outside. (*Interview 1*)

Others, however, suggest that the Vocational Education and Training regime has 'forced me to articulate things' which, while it is difficult to find the words, is no bad thing. 'I found it actually useful to write down some things which have been in my head for a long time but I actually put them in a formal kind of structure ...' (*Interview 2*).

The music theatre program is a Bachelor's degree and therefore not party to the VET requirements. Nevertheless, acting and music theatre are required to comply with university requirements with respect to the evaluation of courses and teaching and other quality assurance measures. Not surprisingly, the evaluation

instruments have been developed to suit a traditional learning and teaching environment and speak a language of assignments, tutorials and lectures; all of which are meaningless concepts in an environment where students learn through the practice of their craft.

The academics interviewed for this study believed that the University neither understood nor valued the concept of training. One stated that she felt that the University was 'not honouring the fact that that's what we do' (*Interview 1*). Similarly, another performing arts teacher expressed the fear that by virtue of their location within a University and the associated accountabilities 'we are being diverted somehow from our main mission, which is to train actors' (*Interview 2*).

Edith Cowan University is subject to five-yearly governmental audits in which it must demonstrate that its own audit processes, for each area of scholarship, are in place. As WAAPA@ECU staff see it, these matters may satisfy the auditors more than they enhance the curriculum. They experience this as a clash of cultures between the Academy and the University. From the University's perspective, it is a management issue if staff are unable to comply with the audit requirements on which the University's income depends.

However, to suggest a clash of cultures and processes between the Academy and normal University teaching and learning processes, which also aspire to excellence, risks polarising analysis – because many university academics also question the de-professionalisation of the master-apprentice relationship that once existed between Dons and their students. The process of change has been likened to the deskilling of artisans replaced by assembly-line production. In fact, it has been called the Taylorisation of academia (Dominelli & Hoogvelt 1996). In short, our analysis here of the production of excellence in students gives rise to a critique of contemporary quality assurance processes that risk constraining rather than liberating the teaching of excellence. In the flight to assure quality in teaching and learning processes, we may have forgotten how important collegial and professional peer relationships are in developing students' excellence through their chosen discipline.

Conclusion

There can be nothing more real than real, and this is the strength of performance learning – it offers authentic or situated learning environments that reflect the way knowledge will be used in real life. Performance learning encourages students to reflect on their learning needs and to link these to current studies and future employment. It engages students with professional associations and enhances opportunities for networking that may facilitate employment prospects. Finally, performance learning may be described in the terms that Stanley and Plaza (2002, p 97) applied to action learning: '... what students learned was not so much a product as a process – a creative, cognitive process of offering ideas, critiquing and expanding upon them ...'

This is also true of excellence, which the staff define as ongoing potential. Achievement spells closure. At the same time, staff know excellence when they see it, and the knowledge base they draw upon to make judgements of excellence is their own industry practice. Performance learning promotes excellence. It complements – rather than undermines – traditional, discipline-specific, university education because it equips students with work-relevant, key skills and subject-specific, theoretical outcomes that facilitate the long-term innovation and flexibility required of performing arts students. These are the features of a pedagogy of excellence that may be difficult to harmonise with the processes designed to guarantee them.

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