

From Passive Consumers to Active Producers: Students as Co-Teachers in a Popular Music Program

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Abstract

This paper considers one example of the new roles that are emerging in schools and universities as a result of shifts that are taking place in the nature of pedagogical work. It examines ways in which both learners and educational leaders are working pro-actively as players not pawns in the educational game. Implications of this for thinking about the nature and purposes of formal education are discussed.

Keywords: Student engagement, self-directed learning, reflection, peer assessment.

1 The problem

The paper below responds to the problem of how to set up a learning environment that is more appropriate to the pedagogy of a popular music degree program than a master-apprentice model. It documents a study conducted by one Conservatorium music teacher into his experimental model with students as ‘co-teachers’ in a popular music program currently being offered at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music (QCM). It is program that in many ways exemplifies the shift from students as musical apprentices receiving wisdom from expert teachers to students as co-producers, assessors and users of the cultural products that are learning outcomes of the pedagogical work. For Don Lebler, coordinator of the program and a co-author of this paper, the idea that students should look to him for mastery of what is in essence their own cultural field of play, is patently absurd.

2 Background

Shifting from student-as-passive-consumer to student as-active-co-teacher has not been easily achieved, despite all the reasons why it is so appropriate in this case (Lebler 2006). It is not simply that the QCM, with its long-term investment in time-honoured traditions of master-apprentice pedagogy, militates against such ‘democratisation’ of their programs. It is also that in-coming students themselves anticipate, understandably, that they will be actively taught and assessed by an expert musical educator. One of the most difficult issues for contemporary education is to overcome the deeply embedded notion that teachers ought to know more about their subject matter than their students. It is not just that those outside the profession have this

expectation; teachers themselves expect to know enough to provide considered answers to student questions. Whether or not we view teachers as the sage on the stage or the guide on the side (or a bit of both), teachers are still generally expected – and expect themselves – to earn their keep by being ‘ahead’ of their students in terms of their overall knowledge base.

A corollary of the idea that teachers ought to know more than students is the idea that teachers should provide the starting point for learning activities, and that students should engage in the tasks set by the teacher – ie, that students should follow where teachers lead. In light of shifts in the social nature of knowledge exchange itself, we argue that it is time to re-think this idea (see McWilliam, 2004). Public policy analyst Gregory Hearn’s (2005) points to “an emerging fundamental shift in the way that value creation is thought about in business” (p.1), and the conceptual architecture he provides in his analysis is very helpful for re-thinking the teacher as ‘out in front’ and the student as ‘following’.

Central to Hearn’s thesis are a number of specific shifts that he describes as characteristic of “value ecology thinking” (p1). Among these shifts he includes the shift from consumers to co-creators of value, and the related shift from value chain to network. Hearn makes the point that consumption is no longer essentially passive in character – that after a generation or more of ‘couch potato’ inactivity at the end of a supply chain where the product to be consumed arrives as a final product, we are now seeing patterns of distribution and consumption being developed that allow consumers to add value or finalise and so value-add to the product. In Lawrence Lessig’s (2001) terms, the user becomes the producer.

Research literature claims benefits for more active student engagement, including an enhanced ability in students to monitor their own progress more effectively (see, for example, Blom & Poole, 2004; Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999; Daniel, 2004; Gijbelsa, Wateringb, & Dochy, 2005; Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001; Liu, Lin, & Yuan, 2002; McLaughlin & Simpson, 2004; Sadler, 2005; Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2005). This is easier said than done, however. Whether or not it was achieved it in this popular music program of learning is the object of the study set out below.

3 Method/Findings

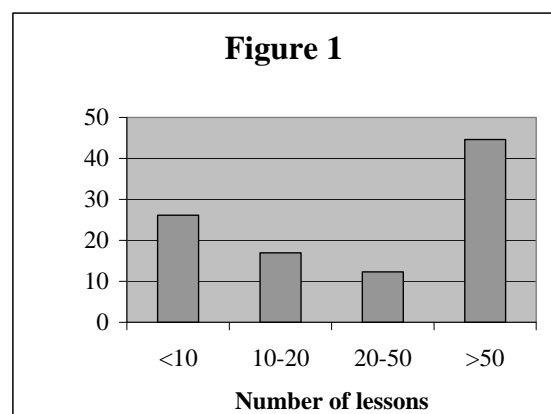
To track the means by which students moved from passive consumer to active co-teacher (ie, “prod-user”) in the program under study, the team collected data at the three stages John Biggs (1999) has identified as crucial to the learning process: the Presage (or antecedents), the Process (or Pedagogical work) and the Product (both creative works and identity formation).

3.1 Presage

Sixty-five students who were enrolled in the program at the start of 2005 were surveyed about the ways they had learned music before coming to university. They were asked about the activities they had engaged with, how much (if any) private tuition had been taken and what sorts of feedback they had relied on to guide their development.

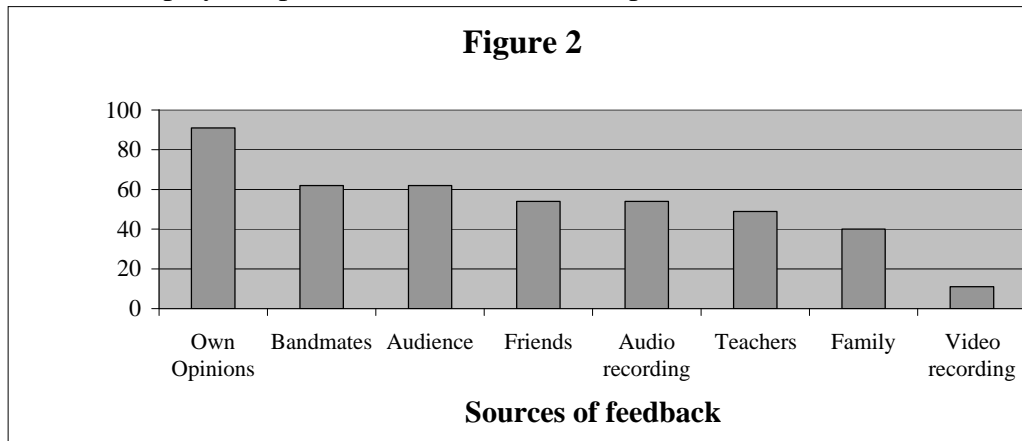
The fact that the program in question focuses on popular rather than classical music does make for a somewhat different cohort of students in terms of their prior learning. As Figure 1 shows, the capacities that are already so well developed in these students have not come, in the main, from ‘master teachers’ – a majority enrolled in 2005 had taken fewer than 50 private lessons and more than a quarter had taken fewer than ten.

Moreover, the cohort was characterised by the breadth of their musical experiences – more than three quarters of students having been singers and almost as many having played guitar, while other common popular music instruments (including



music-making using computers) were also well represented. Indeed, less than one tenth of students reported being active in only one of the categories of music making activities listed in the survey, and almost three quarters were active in three or more areas.

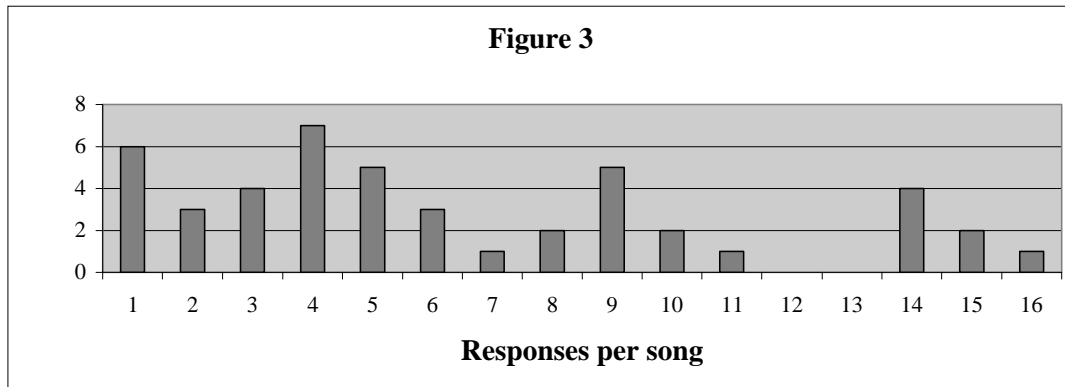
As evidenced in Figure 2, almost all students indicated that their own opinions were the most often used source of feedback prior to entering the program. By comparison, feedback from bandmates, audiences, friends and audio recording all outranked teacher feedback as something students relied on. Over three quarters of the cohort reported that being in bands outside school had played a part in their musical development.



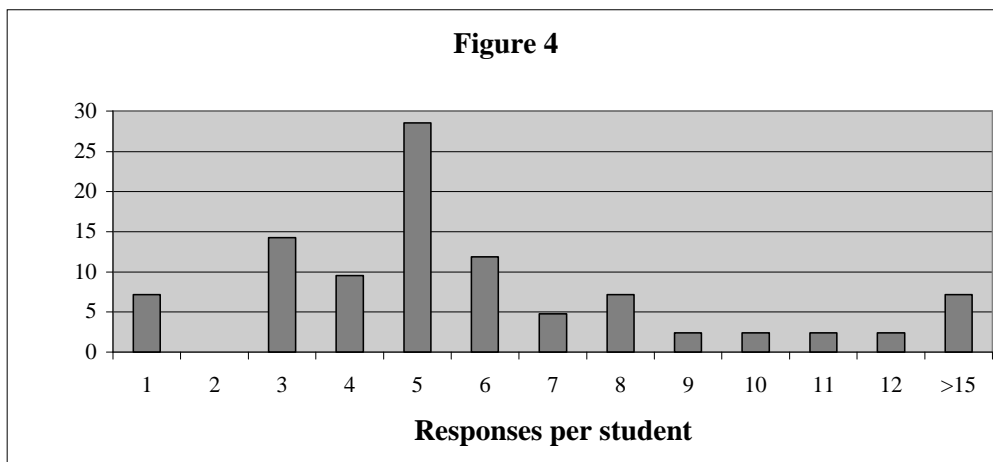
The breadth and informality of their prior learning experiences might well be regarded in more traditional contexts as impediments to excellence – too much diffusion, too little discipline. The approach taken in this case, however, in contrast with perhaps a more predictable ‘reining in’ or formalising of the learning, was to insist on the importance of these same pedagogical processes – those that had framed their learning experiences before entering the QCM – and to seek to duplicate these in the program itself. In simple terms, this meant preparedness to put self- and peer- teaching and evaluation at the centre of the pedagogical culture. The students would be respected for what they knew and at the same time challenged to grow in terms of their musical understanding and productivity. The challenges would come in large measure from the students’ individual and collective ability to critique their music making and to engage closely and constructively with the work of their peers.

3.2 Process

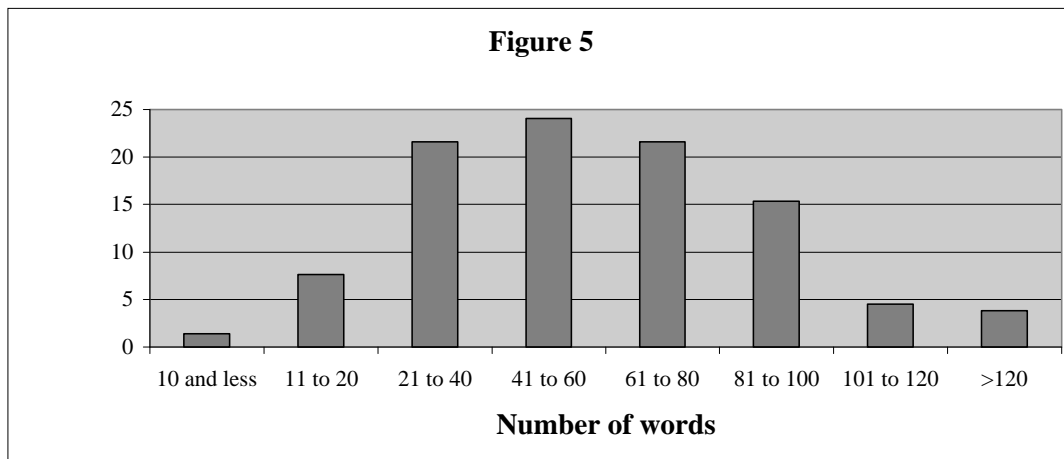
The invitation to self-and peer evaluation should not be understood as welcomed by all students on first meeting for its more ‘democratic’ orientation to the learning process. Disappointment was expressed at times by those who felt that legitimization of their work could only really come from the Master teacher. Nevertheless, the gentle but firm refusal of the teacher to teach as Master, when combined with the rich technological resources of the studio, combined in the short or medium term to counter such resistance. Many students who had been sceptical in the initial stages went on to engage pro-actively in a rigorous process of self- and peer-assessment. Evidence of the level of engagement was captured in a study of the efficacy of the peer feedback program conducted in semester 2 2006 over a three-week period from week 6 to week 8, the normal class time being devoted to the playing of recorded works-in-progress so that students could provide feedback through the on-line course discussion board. As shown in Figure 3, a total of 49 songs were presented, with 58 students engaged in providing collaborative feedback out of a total enrolment of 75.



This process generated informal verbal feedback, and although that is valuable, the more formal process of the discussion board was of more interest to the study. There were nearly three hundred responses posted, an average of six per song. Three or more responses were posted for more than 80% of the songs presented, clear evidence of the preparedness of many in the cohort to 'buy in' to the collaborative evaluation process. Overall, nearly seventeen thousand words of feedback were provided by 42 students, 29 of whom responded with five or more postings, the requested level of participation for all students (see Figure 4).



The overwhelming majority of this feedback was well presented, framed with positive comments at the start, making observations on possible areas for further attention, and finishing on a positive or encouraging note, always with benefits for the receiver being the objective. There were a few instances of very brief comments and occasional use of 'Master' tone, but almost all the feedback was encouraging. The length of responses is represented in Figure 5 below.



Insisting on student-led processes of evaluation was shown to be worthwhile on a number of levels.

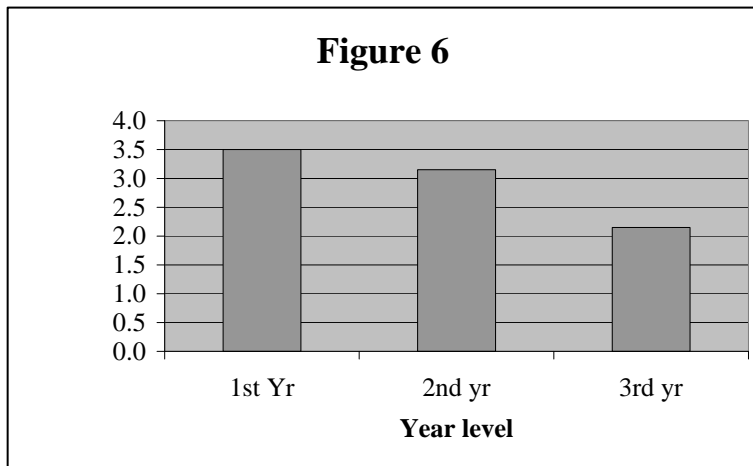
1. It provided useful feedback to a majority of the students who presented work.
2. It increased awareness of the range of music that is currently being developed by students, and who does what.
3. It provided experience of the electronic communication through the course web site that is so necessary at the end of semester for major study submissions.
4. Most importantly, it provided the experience of giving feedback and exemplars of such feedback with the discussion board being used is a resource that students could access to see what kind of feedback others regarded as acceptable.
- 5.

It is worth noting that, in purely quantitative terms, the volume of feedback available to each student in the formal assessment process conducted at the end of the semester was impressive – indeed, individual teachers would find it difficult to match this quantity of assessment output. Seventy-three students presented 292 recorded tracks that were assessed by 11 panels consisting of six or seven students and one teacher, as described in Lebler (2006). Feedback generated by this process amounted to 182,025 words averaging 623 words per track. In addition, teachers provided an average of 197 words of feedback to each student on their performance as assessors.

3.3 Product

The essential difference between this approach and that employed in most conservatorium practices is that both the prior learning of students and their expertise are explicitly factored into the structures of a learning environment, relieving the teacher of the sole responsibility for the provision of feedback and expertise. Instead, the teacher becomes a co-producer of learning, assuming responsibility for the design and maintenance of the structures that support the learning community, providing training in the learning functions rather than instructing in the learned product. If the structures are not well maintained, then such activities could well descend into chaos or an ‘anything goes’ free-for all. The pedagogical work is therefore intense and on-going, though not as instructional pedagogy. Modelling careful, rigorous and deep engagement with the cultural products of others is a crucial part of this work – this is the antithesis of patronising or preaching.

Certainly students become enculturated in the assessment practices employed in the course, and the gap between self-assessed marks and those awarded by the assessment panels narrows with experience as illustrated in Figure 6. But perhaps most importantly, student experience an authentication of their prior learning as well as a shift from ‘couch potato’



consumption of the expertise of knowledgeable others to an active engagement in the pleasures and challenges of 'prod-using' music. If Lessig (2001), McWilliam (2004) and others are right, then it is just this sort of capacity to add value through collaborative and productive engagement, not just in the creation of music in digitally enhanced environments but in work and leisure more generally, that will be the

hallmark of the post-millennial global citizen.

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Erica McWilliam's career has involved 36 years as an educator, 17 of which have been as an academic working in the Faculty of Education at QUT, the largest faculty of education in Australia. She is an internationally recognised scholar in the field of pedagogy, with a particular focus on the sociology of youth, post-compulsory schooling and higher education. Erica is well known for her contribution to educational reform and its relationship to "Over the Horizon" work futures in the context of the new knowledge economy across the entire spectrum of formal learning environments from early years to doctoral education within university contexts. Her trans-disciplinary location across Education, Creative Industries and the Social Sciences is demonstrated through her current Carrick Institute Associate Fellowship (*Developing pedagogical models for building creative workforce capacities in undergraduate students*), her leadership of the Creative Workforce research program

within the QUT-led ARC Centre of Excellence for Creativity and Innovation, and her editorial leadership (she is she sole editor of *Eruptions*, an interdisciplinary academic series with Peter Lang Publish

She has utilised cutting edge ideas from all these disciplinary fields to investigate how best to prepare young people for creative work futures at a time of social flux. Her recent scholarship on what she terms the Yuk/Wow Generation, presented at the recent *Creativity or Conformity?* Conference in Wales, builds on her long-term research into pedagogical processes and the impact of social change. Because of Erica's international reputation as an educational scholar and her outstanding ability as a public speaker, she was chosen by the Australian Council of Educators to deliver the prestigious biennial Bassett Oration, *Schooling the Yuk/Wow Generation*, in August, 2005.

As Assistant Dean (Research) in the Faculty of Education at QUT, Erica chairs the most successful Faculty Centre for producing educational research in Australia, QUT's Centre for Learning Innovation. Erica is also Chair of the Research Committee of Eidos, a research consortium of Queensland 'Smart State' universities and government agencies.