'Music Isn't One Island': The Balance Between Depth and Breadth for Music Students in Higher Education



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ABSTRACT

Educating music students for a 'lifetime of learning' in a diverse musical profession is a complex task. As specialists when they enter higher education, music students spend large proportions of their time honing this specialism to a high degree of expertise. Yet we know from previous research that a career in music is broad, wide ranging and diverse; made up of a portfolio of different activities. How, then, can higher education institutions provide both the depth and breadth required for a successful career in music? Here, we address this question in two ways. Firstly, we draw on data from the Learning to Perform project, which has been running at the Royal College of Music London since 2004. We use interview data to identify key themes that explore the delicate balance between breadth and depth of learning. Secondly, we consider how we can inform practice through cross-institutional and cross-genre collaboration. Along with data from the RCM, we present quantitative data on student identity collected at the Oueensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU) from western classical, popular music and music technology students.

Results show that RCM students demonstrate awareness of the need for breadth as well as depth, that they often seek opportunities to create breadth, and that they adopt broad ways of learning their specialism. Extending the sample to BMus students at QCGU, we see that RCM students place a higher emphasis on performing as part of their career. We unpack this though exploring student identity, and present implications for preparing students for a lifelong and diverse career in music.

KEYWORDS

higher education; cross-genre; depth; breadth; learning

INTRODUCTION

Students entering UK conservatoires of music are highly skilled instrumental, composing or conducting specialists. They will already be

experts on their specialism, and will have one-toone lessons throughout their higher education to hone this expertise. We know, however, that a career in music is wide ranging and diverse; what is known as a 'portfolio career' (Mallon, 1998; Rogers, 2002). Those embarking on such a career require expertise on their specialism as well as the ability to expand this expertise to a broad range of musical and extra-musical activities.

We have argued elsewhere that music students can best prepare themselves for their career through engaging in 'expansive learning'. Defined by researchers analysing learning in the workplace, expansive learning is 'participation in multiple communities of practice inside and outside the formal educational setting; opportunities to extend identity through boundary crossing' (Fuller & Unwin, 2003: 411). For music students this could involve working in a range of musical genres, teaching their instrument to others, working in schools, reflecting on their own learning or engaging in any other activity that takes them outside of their immediate area of expertise, or that encourages them to work creatively to enhance their learning. Crucially, expansive learning introduces students to new skills and ideas, and encourages them to expand not only their portfolio but also their identity.

Identity is an important theoretical and practical tool in music education. We know, for example, that many of the expert performers who teach at the RCM identify themselves as 'performerteachers' (Mills, 2004). We know also that students at the RCM identify themselves primarily as 'musicians', often choosing not to identify themselves through their specialism (Burt and Mills, 2006). In using identity here, we agree with Kaija Huhtanen in conceptualising it as temporal and 'in-process', a way in which individuals describe themselves as they make sense of their changing lives (Huhtanen, 2006). Identity is constructed in the moment, and can tell us about where people position themselves at a certain point in time.

Here, we focus on expansive learning and identity. Accepting that students need to be both experts on a specialism and broad musicians in order to enter the diverse musical profession, we examine the balance between depth and breadth for these students, and consider where and how the most efficient balance can be struck. Since CEPROM 2006, researchers from the RCM have been working collaboratively with researchers from Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU) in order to compare RCM students with those specialising in western classical music at a second institution, those specialising in popular music and those specialising in music technology. Preliminary findings showed that while students entering all contexts share broadly similar patterns of apprehensions and aspirations, there are important differences (Burt, Lancaster, Lebler, Carey & Hitchcock, 2007). In this paper we extend this work to include students' identity, examining what this can tell us about students' preparation for their career.

METHOD

This paper is divided into two parts: a qualitative investigation of depth and breadth at the RCM, and a quantitative investigation of identity for students at the RCM and QCGU. In taking a close look at learning through qualitative data, we are able to ascertain the ways in which individuals address the balance between breadth and depth, and the ways that this changes over time and as career aims shift. To broaden this out to other students, however, we pragmatically chose a quantitative approach in order that we can examine trends that highlight similarities and differences. We envisage that a further, qualitative, investigation will follow. The mixed method approach is informed by the project under which this work has been conducted: Learning to Perform. Learning to Perform is a four-year mixed-method investigation of musical learning at the RCM. Funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme of the Economic and Social Research Council since 2004, the project has worked cyclically to inform its quantitative work through its qualitative enquiry and vice versa. Here, we seek to do likewise.

Part One: The Balance Between Breadth and Depth for RCM Students

We focus here on five RCM students (three women and two men) who are currently in the fourth year of their undergraduate course. Table 1 summarises key characteristics of each student, including their pseudonym.

Table 1. 'Focus' student characteristics

	Age	Specialism	Number of interviews
Sophie	22	keyboard	9
Jane	21	strings	7
Emma	22	vocal	6
Nick	21	strings	3
James	21	keyboard	7

The five students were part of a group of 22 students who became 'focus' students, and who were interviewed regularly throughout Learning to Perform. The number of interviews varies for each student because participation was voluntary, and students occasionally 'missed' interviews or joined the project midway. These five students represent a mix of gender and specialism, but we do not seek to generalise from them, or to claim that they are representative of RCM learners; rather, they have something important to tell us as we begin this investigation. Interviews were semistructured, ranging across students' learning and career aims. All interviews were conducted individually with the first author, and recordings were transcribed fully. Transcripts were analysed for emergent themes using Atlas.ti.

Part Two: Expanding to Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU)

In April 2005, 88 RCM students completed a questionnaire that included a specifically designed question probing identity. Students were offered up to 30 'crosses' (X) to put next to one or more of 19 pre-determined identities¹. The questionnaire grew from qualitative data on student identity, and allowed students to identify themselves in multiple ways. In March 2007, the identity questionnaire was completed by 147 western classical students, 33 popular music students and 14 music technology students at QCGU.

Data were ranked according to the number of crosses aligned with each identity. For each respondent, the highest ranked identity was given a rank of 1, the next highest a rank of 2 and so on. An equal number of crosses were assigned the same ranking, and subsequent ranks adjusted accordingly (e.g. three identities ranked as 1, the

¹ 'learner'; 'music student'; 'student'; 'popular music musician'; 'western classical musician'; 'jazz musician'; 'traditional Scottish musician'; 'teacher'; 'conductor'; 'composer'; 'orchestral player/choral singer'; 'performer'; 'singer'; 'chamber (i.e. small group) musician'; 'musician'; 'instrumentalist e.g. clarinettist, pianist'; 'instrumental player e.g. brass player, woodwind player'; soloist'; 'other'.

next as 4 and so on). Each 1 ranking was then allocated a 'score' of 10, each 2 ranking a 'score' of 9 and so on, until a rank 10 received a score of 1. Individual scores were summed and divided by the number of people per cohort, allowing us to compare across the four cohorts.

RESULTS

Results are organised according to emerging themes. Depth here is characterised as specific focus on one aspect of learning, requiring significant time and expertise in order to accomplish a goal, as Sophie illustrates: "your teacher will tell you and correct only some details cos it's very hard work... how you use your hand, and sometimes for one hour or two hours...I corrected only three or four bars". Breadth, on the other hand, is characterised as learning which looks outwards to accomplish goals, some of which may include new ways of approaching depth. Sophie again provides an example:

I took part in many masterclasses, and it is very necessary, because you can solve many problems...and compare that different professors have different tips for you, and you can compare it and use for you what it the best, and the most appropriate way to solve the problem, improve your play(ing).

Depth and breadth are not mutually exclusive; rather they overlap and inform each other. But how do different students manage this relationship, and what is a useful balance for a diverse career as a musician?

Depth of Learning

Four themes emerged under the 'family' theme of depth: depth of technique, depth of interpretation, depth of teaching and depth of musical knowledge. We summarise each, providing examples from the five RCM students.

Unsurprisingly, the RCM students and their teachers take a detailed and in-depth approach to mastering the technique of their instrument. Jane, for example, explains how she worked on her bowing arm:

"I think I can now sustain the same tone throughout the whole bow because before to do that you - it is all to do with the way I change bow at the tip and the heel but sort of to do with the position that my arm gets to once I have turned around because before there was a point in the middle of the bow where it lost a bit of control and it was quite hard to sustain the sound evenly throughout the bow and I think I have analysed exactly what my arm is doing now"

We see evidence here of careful, analytical learning that improves an aspect of technique. The same kind of care is also evident in the students' approaches to interpreting the music:

I would go and find the exact, precise translations for the pieces so that I knew word for word what it meant and I would practice just speaking the poem that it was set to, to work out where the stresses fell. (Emma)

There is little doubt that these students engage in in-depth learning in their quest for expertise.

This approach also extends also to the students' work outside of their specialism:

so I learned all about different kinds of textures and how all the rules that he [Bach] used..., the different ways of analysing the counterpoint... I went and found an invention that Bach had written in the same key and I looked at the structure of it and where he modulated it and stuff like that.

For Jane, at least, her in-depth approach is not limited to her specialism. But how do these students approach their learning more generally? Are they only interested in the depth of their specialism, or do they in fact match this with breadth of interest elsewhere?

Breadth of Learning

We again see four themes emerging under the 'family' theme of breadth: breadth in specialism; breadth out of specialism; breadth out of music and breadth of career. We see evidence of the students using a breadth of approach in order to achieve the depth of technique which they seek. James speaks, for example, of how he plays his concert programmes to friends before he performs them: "They are really willing to help and they are not necessarily pianists but they come out with clever musical things - things that I wouldn't think of because I am too engrossed in the pianistic pattern of the music". James is choosing to perform to peers who are not necessarily keyboard specialists, and recognises the benefits that this brings to his own work. Similarly, Sophie demonstrates a breadth of learning that goes beyond her specialism: "I think it is CD production which I enjoy the most, however, the professional skills - kind of career development different aspects of music as a business". In terms of the music that they listen to, Nick illustrates that this also is broader than western classical:

I bought the [rock] album because my Dad and brother went out and bought me a tee shirt and I had never heard any of their music before and I found out that I really enjoyed it so I thought I would research into it a bit more.

While we have seen the depth that these students apply to their learning, then, we are also seeing the breadth which runs in parallel and which they use as they strategise and plan their detailed learning.

This group of students also demonstrate a breath of interest that goes beyond music. Describing his identity, James says:

I would go for the broad umbrella term of musician because it is not only solo but it is also chamber music and also bringing academia into performing... I don't want to pigeonhole myself as a musician and also, you know I am still doing this other degree in English literature and I like arts and I like bringing everything together because music isn't one island.

For James, then, the music that he studies in depth is only one part of his life, a sentiment that is shared by the other four students. Jane expands on this as she talks about her plans for her career:

I don't want to be someone who just plays the instrument really, because I don't think that is very interesting...and also I think that the more versatile you are, the more kinds of music you do; whether it was sort of educational whatever, the more interesting you are as a player, as far as I can tell.

This is particularly interesting in that it not only shows Jane seeking a diverse career, but also that she conceives this diversity as improving her performance on her specialism. We return to this point later, after moving to consider the identities of the larger sample.

Comparing Identities

We can see from figure 1 that the conservatoire students in all four contexts identify themselves across a wide range of musical activities. 'Musician' is the identity most frequently used, while 'performer' and 'music student' are also prevalent. RCM students identify themselves more often as instrumentalists (i.e. clarinetist, violinist) than those at QCGU, suggesting a stronger alignment with instrumental specialism. They also chose 'soloist' more frequently, and are less likely to identify themselves as 'composers'. When we compare the RCM cohort to the western classical BMus cohort at QCGU, we see that RCM students are more likely to identify themselves as 'performers', but also more likely to identify themselves as 'musicians'; they see performing as only one integral part of their musical lives.

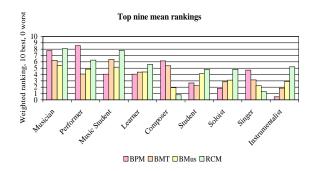


Figure 1. The top nine ranked identities

Comparing outside of the western classical cohorts, we see that the popular music students (BPM) identify themselves most often as 'performers', 'composers' or 'singers', but less often as 'music students' or 'soloists'. Similarly, the music technology students (BMT) identify themselves strongly as 'composers', and also as 'music students'. The range of identities for these two cohorts moves more clearly beyond solo instrumental performance to broader musical activities. As we unpack this quantitative work with interviews, we seek to understand the breadth of these identities, and the ways in which western classical musicians can add to their breadth through expansively broadening their identity profile.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The need for both depth and breadth in learning to be a professional musician is anecdotally accepted; this paper explores the reality for five RCM students and looks outward to learn lessons from other contexts. The depth with which the students approach their instrumental learning is not surprising, but the breadth of learning that surrounds this depth requires comment. The notion that conservatoire students do nothing but practice is proven wrong; the students in this paper learn languages, read books, listen to all kinds of music, visit art galleries, travel and so forth. In these ways alone they are expanding their identities. But the breadth in which they plan their learning – through performing to other students, reading around their pieces, finding ways to address problems – may be key to determining success in a portfolio career.

What we have seen here are students applying a breadth of learning strategies to highly focused tasks. We see students engaging in diverse activities for a broader learning experience and a belief that this will also enhance specialism performance. Ongoing analysis is seeking to establish the extent to which this is true in relation to assessment scores (Mills and Burt-Perkins, in preparation). We see through the identity data that breadth is also important for the sample as a

whole; across all four contexts the students identify themselves broadly. Those studying popular music, in particular, identify themselves strongly as performers, singers and composers.

The balance between depth and breadth is of course different for all individuals, but we suggest here that higher education institutions can help students to find their right balance in three ways. Firstly, through encouraging small group work where students can explore the breadth of learning strategies that their peers employ. Secondly, though encouraging students to articulate their identities and to reflect on how this may impact on their careers (see Huhtanen, 2006). Finally, we suggest that there is much to be learnt from those learning in different contexts. As we progress the preliminary collaborative work presented here, we unpack the ways in which different learners construct their identities. As we do so, we consider what being a 'musician' is for these students, and the ways in which they can guide each other in finding the right balance between breadth and depth. We know from this paper, though, that the students are only too aware that 'music isn't one island', and are already advanced in finding some kind of working balance between depth and breadth.

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