Prior Learning of Conservatoire Students: A Popular Music Perspective



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents data from surveys about the prior learning of commencing conservatoire students in Australia and the UK. This is regarded as presage in the 3P learning model developed by Biggs and used as the framework for understanding the learning systems under investigation. The process and product aspects of one Australian learning system are related to the student presage factors, and it is concluded that the three aspects of the learning system align well and produce positive outcomes for students.

KEYWORDS

prior learning, popular music learning, popular music pedagogy, learning systems

INTRODUCTION

This project aims to determine how musicians have learned music prior to commencing their studies at tertiary level and what the likely impacts of this prior experience on subsequent learning in conservatoires might be. John Biggs (1999, p. 18) provides a model of learning and teaching that is helpful in understanding learning systems, as represented in Figure 1. Named the 3P model, it categorizes the factors influencing learning as

- presage, those factors in place before the learning takes place
- process, those factors in play as the learning takes place, and
- product, those factors present at the completion of a learning cycle.

Presage factors include attributes of the students including their prior knowledge, abilities and approaches to learning along with institutional factors including objectives, assessment practices, teaching processes and the ethos within which all of this is positioned. Process factors relate to the way the learning system functions to achieve its objectives. The product factors are the learning outcomes and include the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the functionality of this knowledge and the influence the entire system has on the learning dispositions of the students.

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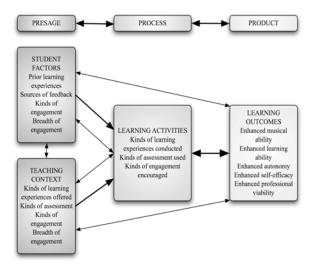


Figure 1: 3P model of learning

If learning is regarded as an ongoing activity, and not an isolated once-only event, then the product of a learning cycle will become part of the presage of the next cycle for both individual students and programmes of study. The pre-existing learning characteristics of students should acknowledged, valued and accommodated in the learning structures provided by programmes of study. The appropriateness of learning activities and their influence on the nature of the learning outcomes can be considered taking all three aspects of the learning system into account. The prior learning experiences of students is one aspect of the presage that is not always explicitly taken into account when considering appropriateness of a learning process, although audition and selection processes are likely to favour students who demonstrate abilities and attributes appropriate to the context.

METHOD

One hundred and ninety-four students enrolled in three Australian conservatorium music programmes participated in the project; 147 Bachelor of Music (BMus) students (of a total enrolment of 164, 90%) training as classical and contemporary instrumentalists, vocalists or composers; 14 Bachelor of Music Technology (BMT) students (of a total enrolment of 19, 74%) whose programme substantially follows the structure of the Bachelor of Music but substitutes a major in music technology for a performance

major; and 33 Bachelor of Popular Music (BPM) students (of a total enrolment of 39, 85%) whose programme employs non-conventional pedagogical approaches which largely replicate popular music learning practices outside of structured environments. A total of 67 Bachelor of Music students at The Royal College of Music as undergraduate or postgraduate training composers and conductors, performers. predominantly in the classical tradition were also involved in the study.

A survey was conducted at the beginning of the academic year for each cohort and was based on an instrument developed by Lebler (2007b) intended to produce data that could be compared with the findings of Daniel (2001). It is intended to identify the prior learning experiences of students including:

- what kinds of music they have studied; their engagement with private lessons and other ways of learning music;
- the kinds of feedback used in this learning and
- the range of music making activities with which they engaged.

The survey questionnaire used in the Australian context is included as Appendix 1. A slightly modified questionnaire used at the RCM sought additional information on the number of lessons and the age at which lessons began.

RESULTS

Results are presented as percentages of the participants in order to provide an illustration of prior learning experiences in each of the contexts. The focus of this paper is to report on the relationships between the popular music cohort and the classical music cohorts. Although reported separately in the companion paper, International and UK resident cohorts at the RCM have been collectivized here to provide some broad comparisons between students of the western classical music (classical hereafter) and students of popular music. The paper will then move on to relate these presage elements to the process and product of the BPM learning systems.

Demographics

In the BMus and RCM cohorts, more females then males are enrolled. This is in stark contrast to the BPM and BMT cohorts in which there are substantially more males than females. There is also considerable difference between the ages of cohorts. A majority of students enrolled in the Australian programmes are aged under 20. On the contrary, the RCM cohort has comparatively low enrolments in this age group with a majority aged between 20 and 25.

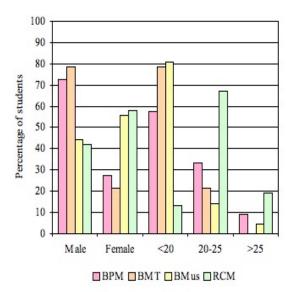


Figure 2: Demographics

Learning History

With regard to engagement with private lessons, group tuition and classroom music, the differences between cohorts are marginal. The differences are most pronounced in band-related and social learning experiences, engagement with orchestras and masterclasses. As might be expected in a genre where creative outputs are frequently presented in a form that utilizes videos, BPM students have substantially greater engagement with video as a learning tool compared with all the other cohorts. Similarly, BPM and BMT students share a not surprising high level of learning from recordings.

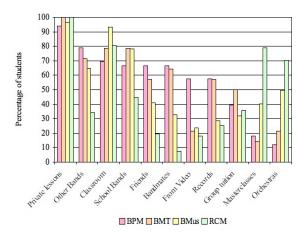


Figure 3: Learning history

Engagement with private lessons

A majority of BPM students have had fewer than 50 lessons, with 20% of students reporting to have had fewer than 10. An overwhelming majority of students from the classical music cohorts reported having had more than 50 lessons.

What was learned

As might be expected, BPM and BMT cohorts had far less exposure to classical music learning and substantially more exposure to popular music and jazz in their lessons. Interestingly, the learning of theory figured strongly for all cohorts with more than half of each cohort having had theory lessons. Almost all RCM students reported to have had exposure to classical training, as did 80% of the BMus cohort.

Feedback

The student's own opinions were the dominant source of feedback for all cohorts. The most notable differences were feedback from bandmates and audience reactions. The BPM cohort reported these and their own opinions as their most often used sources of feedback. Teachers were a dominant feedback source for both classical music cohorts.

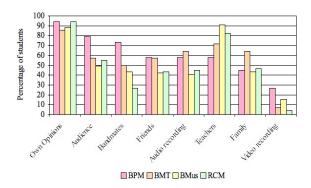


Figure 4: Constantly or frequently used feedback

Activities

Popular music students have a greater diversity of vocal/instrumental experience than the RCM and BMus cohorts.

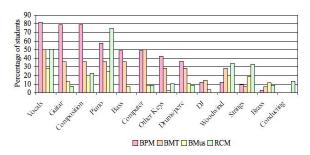


Figure 5: Musical activities

Number of activities

A large majority of the BMus cohort lists only one musical activity. This single focus is three and a half times as common in BMus students as it is in RCM students, almost six times larger compared with BMT students, and almost 12 times the rate reported by BPM students.

The contrast in numbers of activities listed by individual students is also noteworthy. The median number of activities listed by BPM students was 4, with a mean of 4.3 and a standard deviation of 1.88, whereas the RCM cohort reported a median number of activities of 3, a mean of 2.73 and a standard deviation of 1.4. The strongest contrast was between the BPM cohort and the BMus cohort who reported a median of 1, a mean of 1.67 and a standard deviation of 1.41.

DISCUSSION

Presage

Demographics

In almost all the characteristics measured in this survey, there are substantial differences between BPM students and the other cohorts. Apart from the striking difference in gender balance, the differences in the ages of students are also marked. Slightly more than half the BPM cohort is under 20 years of age while almost four fifths of the BMus cohort fall into this age group. This may be partly because students who are not successful in their first audition sometimes spend time developing their abilities in the areas that let them down. They do this either independently or in a non-university popular music programme, then reaudition, frequently successfully. While for places competition in the programmes is also intense, there is a more structured preparatory path for classical students that might likely result in students presenting for auditions appropriately prepared for their future study. The BPM programme is usually the first structured study of popular music practice that students experience, having learned largely autonomously previously.

Learning history

Although almost all BPM students have had some exposure to private lessons, these have been much fewer in number compared to the other cohorts studied. One fifth of BPM students have had fewer than 10 lessons, a far higher percentage than evidenced in the BMus and RCM cohorts. Less than half the BPM cohort has had more than 50 lessons, while this level of engagement with private lessons is very much the norm for BMus and RCM students. The content of these lessons reflects the obvious interests of the cohorts, with a majority of BPM students having studied popular music and only a third having studied classical music. Less than a fifth of the BMus and RCM cohorts have studied popular music but almost all have had lessons in classical music. Learning music from friends, bandmates, videos and recordings has been widely reported as being characteristic of popular musicians' learning (see Green, 2001, 2006; Jaffurs, 2004; Westerlund, 2006) so it is not surprising that these ways of learning are far more common for BPM students than for classical students. Similarly, it is not surprising that reliance on feedback from audiences, bandmates, friends and audio recording is more common for popular musicians than for classical musicians who tend to rely on feedback from teachers to a greater degree. It is interesting to note that a strong reliance on their own opinions is common for students in all cohorts. Learning research stresses the importance of an individual's ability to monitor progress and develop self-evaluation skills and these are characteristics of music learning that are particularly valuable (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004).

Activities

It is in this area that the differences between cohorts are most remarkable. Eighty-two percent of BPM students sing, and 79% play guitar. All BPM students are songwriters at least as contributors to collaborative compositions because this is a requirement of the selection process, and 79% of the surveyed students list composing as an activity. This level of engagement is also found in RCM students' piano playing, but otherwise, classical cohorts' levels of engagement with specific activities rarely exceed 50%. The differences in the numbers of musical activities reported is marked, with most BMus students engaging with only one activity, a majority of RCM students engaging in three or more, and almost three quarters of BPM students claiming involvement in four or more. These differences indicate degrees of expansive learning that may inform current research into the balance between focus and breadth in conservatoire study, a factor that may well influence students' abilities to engage effectively with the dominant portfolio mode of working after graduation.

Process

No one-to-one instruction is included in the BPM process and this represents a major departure from established conservatorium teaching practices in which the teacher is clearly at the centre of the teaching/learning process and has a dominant role in deciding what should be learned, how that learning should occur and how well that learning has been achieved (Lebler, 2005). Although the programme provides a structure that must be adhered to, much of the work is self-directed. This relates well to the prior learning of the cohort for whom the one-to-one lesson is not central to their learning.

Self-assessment and peer assessment are both important aspects of the major study course taken by all students in each of the six semesters of the programme. Sadler (2005) rightly asserts that learning environments should be designed so that students develop the kind of evaluative expertise that will enable them to monitor and evaluate the quality of their own work while it is in progress. The development of both the inclination and ability to self-assess is important so that students can monitor progress, identify strengths and weaknesses, recognize good work and develop professional judgment (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999; Claxton, 1999; Sadler, 2005). For this reason, the BPM programme has employed both peer assessment and self-assessment in addition to assessment by staff.

The informal feedback that is common in all popular music practice is enhanced by structured mechanisms included in the BPM programme. Although this is not a compulsory activity, most students participate in work-in-progress sessions and the peer feedback produced by this process is impressive (Lebler, 2007a).

society becomes more complex information-rich, people will need to constantly re-think, be adaptable, and develop new problemsolving strategies for new challenges. Therefore students need to develop keen reflective thinking capabilities so they will be able to apply new knowledge to complex situations (Koszalka, Song, & Grabowski, 2001). Students reflect on their learning in a journal as well as a track report that details their involvement in each of the recorded tracks they submit. The reflective journal enables students not to just list their activities, but to unpack the learning they experienced in order to increase their awareness of how they learn. All students are involved in the assessment of their peers' recorded folios, and this activity is acknowledged through the awarding of 20% of the course mark for the quality and quantity of a student's participation in this process.

Interdependent learning activities are in play during the preparation of the recorded folios in which students are typically involved in a number of ways with each track they submit. In semester 2 2006, of 292 tracks submitted, students had a single involvement in only 1% of submissions, and in 82% of the submitted tracks, individuals were involved in four or more ways (for example, songwriting, singing, production etc). Students frequently involve others in their creative work. Only 10% of submissions were done without the involvement of others, and half the submissions involved four or more participants (Lebler, 2007a).

Product

All BPM graduates have extensive training in audio engineering and production, the theory and music, popular information analysis of technologies, computer music technologies and music industry studies in addition to the enhancements of musical abilities that result from their access to recording infrastructure and a learning community that includes their fellow students as well as staff. The resultant range of abilities prepares students for autonomous practice of popular music that will frequently involve the interdependent composition, performance, recording dissemination of their musical outputs. In the current context, this is the most common mode for popular music practice. Enhancement of students' abilities to learn, to set their own agenda and monitor their own progress are explicit goals of the process. Importantly, graduates have an impressive rate of employment in the areas for which they have been trained, that is, the autonomous practice of popular music.

CONCLUSION

Like the other programmes included in this study, the BPM programme process provides a good match with the student presage factors. The products of the learning system include a set of abilities and attributes that are a good match for graduates' likely futures in which they will be able to utilize the diverse range of skills that they frequently bring to the programme and that are enhanced by their experiences in the BPM process. If education is intended to prepare students for what awaits them, programmes of study must ensure that student presage factors are taken into account and utilized where appropriate, and critically, that the learning system's processes will produce outcomes that will be useful in students' futures.

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