

Teachers of instruments, or teachers as instruments? From transfer to transformative approaches to one-to-one pedagogy

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Abstract

Research into pedagogy in the context of instrumental and vocal tuition is, by its nature, limitless, as teachers constantly seek improved ways to support and develop their students' learning. Drawing on the literature as well as qualitative and quantitative data from a project underway at one Australian tertiary music institution, this paper challenges some common existing approaches to one-to-one tuition, prompting a rethink of the fundamental role of the instrumental and vocal teacher. The authors contrast the traditional, didactic, teacher-oriented *transfer pedagogy* with a student-oriented, explorative, context-rich approach to learning. This *transformative pedagogy* is characterised by greater student engagement in learning, stronger conceptual understanding, and improved learning outcomes overall. Implications of the study include the imperative for teachers to engage in ongoing critical reflection of their pedagogical approach in the one-to-one context; for students to be made aware of the benefits that eventuate when they take ownership of and responsibility for their learning; and for institutions to explore broadening the scope and nature of instrumental and vocal tuition, and to support collaborative and reflective learning strategies among and between both students and teachers.

Keywords

instrumental teaching, one-to-one pedagogy, tertiary music education, transformative pedagogy, vocal teaching

Conventional approaches to learning one-to-one

One-to-one teaching has been the backbone of music education for around the last two centuries, and is the model that remains the most familiar to many instrumental and vocal musicians, both student and professional. While many learners first engage with music education in school, nearly all professional performers will have had individual lessons as their primary source of music education (Carey, 2008). Research conducted across two tertiary music institutions in 2008 and 2009, for instance, indicated that the significant majority of students entering those institutions had already taken a minimum of fifty one-to-one lessons to date (Lebler et al., 2009). That study also indicated that music lessons may often be the only experience of one-to-one learning across any subject matter that students have throughout their formal education. For this reason alone, individual music teachers have a potentially enormous influence on many aspects of their students' learning and development. Not uncommonly, they become a significant person in their students' lives.

Given this important role music teachers play in their students' growth and development, it would be reasonable to assume that there exists a system of close monitoring and regulation of their training, education qualifications and certification. This is not the case. No system of accreditation exists, despite much recent research indicating the need for better systems of professional training and development for instrumental and vocal teachers (e.g. Carey & Harrison, 2007; Bennett, 2008; Carey, 2008; Creech et al, 2008; Gaunt, 2009). Even in elite music institutions such as conservatoires, vocal and instrumental teachers are typically recruited on the basis of their skills as performers, rather than as teachers, despite the skill-set required for each of these roles being vastly different. In many cases, conservatoire teachers learn how to teach "on the job", raising the chances that they naturally default to those pedagogical methods and approaches by which they themselves were taught. In this circular way, the nature of conservatoire education remains not only "largely unresearched" but also, "crucially, relatively unchallenged" (Perkins, 2013).

This is a risky state of affairs. Recent studies into one-to-one pedagogy in the conservatoire indicate that while the one-to-one model may have initial seduction for students (for example, in terms of the personalised attention and guidance from the teacher), it can also have long-term negative consequences for the student (Persson, 1994; Burwell, 2006; Carey & Grant, under review). The dangers include the creation of a culture of dependency on the teacher; the concomitant risk of students ultimately becoming passive learners, unable to work autonomously, and therefore becoming disillusioned with their own learning ability; an inability of students to adapt their learning to diverse musical contexts outside the absorbing confines of the studio environment; a negative impact on musical development (and other personal attributes such as self-confidence or initiative) in certain kinds of teacher-student

relationships; and for tertiary students in particular, the failure to develop some of the wider skills that are necessary to forge a successful professional career as a musician (Jorgensen, 2000; Mills, 2002; Burwell, 2005; Carey, 2008; Gaunt, 2008, 2010; Gaunt et al., 2012). Any adverse effects are compounded by the fact that typically, students with one-to-one experiences of instrumental and vocal learning go on to become the next generation of educators, and by drawing on their own experiences of one-to-one in constructing their pedagogical approach, the cycle is perpetuated.

Although these risks may potentially manifest in any one-to-one context, some studies suggest they may be most pronounced in situations where the teacher adopts a “transfer” approach to teaching and learning (Carey et al, 2013). *Transfer pedagogy* is didactic in nature, typically involving instruction, modelling, demonstration, teacher mimicry, student passivity, limited flexibility, and decontextualized learning. It is characterised by a predefined pedagogical approach with definite and determined notions of excellence, and where learning outcomes are focused rather than expansive. Assessment orients the learning as an end point, and the development of musical and technical skills is central (Carey et al., 2013; Carey & Grant, under review). While a transfer-style approach to one-to-one teaching has proven learning outcomes, particularly in terms of the development of musical and technical skills, the concomitant risks outlined above raises the critical questions: Is the conventional approach to one-to-one instrumental and vocal tuition in fact an impediment to students’ learning in the twenty-first century? If so, what other pedagogical methods might teachers employ to optimise students’ learning?

‘Rethinking’ one-to-one

At a general (non-music-specific) level, much current research into effective pedagogy underscores the need for a shift in focus away from teacher-centred, authoritarian approaches to learning. Studies in the higher education context have found that students are disillusioned with teacher-focused pedagogies (Barnes & Tynan, 2007), and are increasingly disengaging with models of teaching and learning they perceive as out-dated (Barnett & Coate, 2005). Contemporary educational theories have shifted from regarding students as passive knowledge-recipients, towards an inclusive model in which students become *active* participants with control over their learning, including the opportunity to provide input to content and processes. The recent paradigm shift has its roots in much older pedagogical theories, such as the constructivist thinking of Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1978) whereby learners explore, experiment, question and reflect on real-world problems, functioning as active agents in their learning, learning how to learn, and building transferrable skills along the way. The role of the teacher is essentially to provide students the necessary guidance,

tools and resources to manage their own learning. Most cutting-edge educational research firmly supports these philosophies, indicating that students acquire a stronger conceptual grasp of the content, engage better in their learning, and develop better learning outcomes when they pace and direct their own learning, where process is emphasised over content, and where transformational outcomes are valued over the surface-level assimilation of information (Dirkx et al., 2006; Lysaker, 2011; King, 2005; McGonigal, 2005).

Within the context of the one-to-one music studio, embracing this approach means that the role of the teacher is to create a situation in which students learn to teach themselves. Although the teacher may still provide the student with clear instructions, the time spent explaining, demonstrating and requiring the students to imitate is limited, allowing students more time to experiment and learn from their own successes and mistakes. In this way, the student is placed firmly at the centre of learning. The teacher is no longer just an instrumental teacher but an “instrument” for learning.

This approach to instrumental and vocal teaching may be termed *transformative pedagogy* (Carey et al., 2013, after Boyd & Myers, 1988; see also Mezirow, 1997, 2000; Mezirow & Associates, 2000; McGonigal, 2005; Taylor, 1998, 2007). Transformative-style teachers are more learning-oriented than assessment-oriented; their main objective is “expansive” excellence rather than the “defined” excellence more typical of transfer-style teachers. They scaffold and contextualise the content they teach, helping students make sense of their learning, for example by placing it within the context of their broader life and career. They embrace an open, collaborative and exploratory approach in their studios, encouraging students to take ownership of their learning. In their pedagogical choices they remain agile and flexible, responding to the individual needs of students. Ultimately, music teachers who adopt a transformative pedagogy are able “to promote both performance and learning outcomes in their students, though the primary goals are in terms of learning (increasing ability through new knowledge or skills)” rather than performance (Carey et al., 2013).

For students, this approach to teaching and learning has immediate and tangible benefits. The independent thinking developed through transformative learning helps maintain interest in learning, and stimulates motivation. Students’ expertise and prior knowledge are brought to the forefront of their learning, building confidence and autonomy. Students are able to transfer their learning into other contexts. Most importantly of all, transformative pedagogy helps accomplish what is arguably the primary goal of any educational process: to develop in a student the ability to self-monitor, self-critique, and self-direct so as to be able to continue to learn independently into the future.

An institutional case study

By interrogating the characteristics and processes of one-to-one instrumental and vocal pedagogy, one research project at the authors' institution in Australia underscores some of the issues involved in evaluating the qualities of one-to-one tuition, and the role of the teacher. Researchers and teachers worked in partnership to design and carry out the project, which involved student focus groups, teacher interviews, and extensive videographic analysis of a series of one-to-one lessons. The methodology and preliminary findings are outlined in depth in separate publications (Carey et al., 2013a, 2013b). All six teachers involved in the videography displayed characteristics of both transformative and transfer pedagogy, but generally tended to adopt a transfer style; only a small number of teachers predominantly adopted characteristics of transformative pedagogy. Further, although the transfer-style teachers were able to realise both performative and learning outcomes in their students, the emphasis on performative outcomes in their teaching was much greater. All teachers expressed an intention to foster independent learning in their students, but for predominantly transfer-style teachers, this did not translate to pedagogical practices in lessons.

Mapping these observed practices against both teachers' and students' experiences of one-to-one confirmed the perceived value of transformative teaching and learning. All teachers felt that the ability to foster independent learning skills in their students was a priority: "I don't want to churn out replicas of myself – far from it. I'd rather [students] retain their own voice . . . I always try and promote musical independence" (T3, female). Another teacher agreed that her role was to encourage students to take ownership of their learning: "My main goal is to make [students] self-sufficient" (T4, female).

Students too spoke of the desire and need to be responsible for their own learning: "It's a two way street, not a one-way street" (FG1, male). Another recognised that "A teacher can only do so much in a one-to-one situation. They can only give you so much direction before you have to take it on yourself" (FG4, female). However, a number of students also raised the concern that independent learning could be threatening. One student reflected on her experience in first year of conservatoire studies:

FG1 (F): I walked in and my teacher asked me what technique I wanted to do, studies I wanted to do, and I just felt in my first year: I need you to give me something that I can just grasp on to . . . So I just felt . . . maybe I was thrown into the deep end.

Some teachers demonstrated awareness that for some students, independence and ownership of learning (transformative pedagogy) needs to be gradually increased as students develop these skills: "In first year I'll demonstrate more, and then in second and third perhaps less and

less . . . By fourth year I would say probably the lessons are . . . way more student-directed than teacher-directed” (T3, female).

In addition to working collaboratively with their students, teachers also saw value in working more collaboratively with each other, drawing on the expertise and skills of their colleagues. In this way, the teacher becomes a participant in the learning process. Three of the six teacher-participants in the study indicated that they had already adopted this approach in some way. One brought other professionals into her studio, believing this “not only brings greater expertise to the studio, which I benefit from as well as the student, but it’s also mirroring professional life where you learn to take instruction from a variety of sources” (T7, female). Another teacher adopted a team teaching approach, with students rotating between different teachers in their first two years of study, and choosing a combination of teachers to work with in their third year (T4, female). Several teachers also recognised the value of conducting one-to-one lessons in combination with various other models or formats, such as peer learning through ensemble work, small-group work, playing for each other, and with older students “looking after” the younger ones, musically speaking (T2, male).

Implications

Although most students attend conservatoires with the hope of later engaging in performance at an elite level, many will go on to build a portfolio career, typically involving some teaching (Bennett, 2008). Those who they teach may be driven less by the pursuit of excellence than by a desire to enjoy their learning, develop their love and appreciation of music, and develop skills to support other recreational musical activities throughout their lives. Yet in probability, those student-teachers with a transfer-style experience of one-to-one will tend to adopt characteristics of transfer pedagogy in their own teaching - a likelihood ironically amplified by the fact that these individuals may mimic the instructional and directive practices they experienced because they did not have the opportunity to “learn how to learn” in their own education. If this is the case - and further research is warranted to establish whether this is so - conservatoire students with transfer learning experiences seem less likely to succeed in later helping their own students reach transformative learning goals. On the other hand, those with transformative experiences of one-to-one know what it is to be fostered, supported, and guided in learning. When transformative approaches to one-to-one pedagogy are commonplace in our conservatoires, the cycle will break.

For teachers, a decision to shift from a predominantly transfer to predominantly transformative approach to one-to-one pedagogy has deep implications. With their role fundamentally shifting from authoritative instructor-deliverer to collaborator and facilitator,

teachers will need to be willing to renounce their position as *expert*, and also to accept a greater diversity of learning styles, structures, and outcomes than they may be used to through the more assessment-oriented transfer approach. Teachers may need to develop new skills to monitor, facilitate, and guide students. For transformative one-to-one music teaching to be successful, teachers need to be constantly questioning what their students are learning - that is, whether what they believe they are teaching is in fact what is being taught (and learnt). In this regard, well-established systems of critical reflective practice will be essential for teachers who embrace the challenge to shift their approach (Mezirow, 1991; Brookfield, 1995; Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; Kreber 2004; Lysaker & Furuness, 2011).

Students will also need to be open to new experiences in the one-to-one context. If a transformative approach to teaching is to be successful, students need to assume greater responsibility for their learning, for example by being more proactive in their questioning and their own learning goals. Students themselves may be reticent to embrace unfamiliar pedagogical approaches, especially those who prefer the security of more passive, prescriptive, or task-oriented learning styles (cf. Murphy, 2009; Minhas et al., 2012). For this reason, student evaluations of transformative teaching - particularly in contexts where a shift to transformative approaches is made - will need to be considered in the context of the possibility that, like many of us, students are resistant to change.

For institutions, the main implications of these findings are twofold. First, one-to-one music teaching appears to be most valuable when it adopts transformative characteristics. On the basis of the available evidence, this claim can only be made in relation to generic, transferable, non-discipline-specific learning outcomes (often known in the higher education sector as ‘graduate attributes’), not to technical and musical development. This area is therefore recommended for further research. The second implication is inferential: that despite the many benefits of one-to-one, providing access to a combination of different pedagogies may maximise students’ learning by supporting a transformative learning environment. Collaborative learning activities (van der Linden et al., 2000; Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013) locate students within a community of practice that may counteract the oftentimes inward-looking intensity of the one-to-one situation. Gaunt et al. (2012) found that conservatoire students with more than one teacher became more responsible for their own progress than those in an exclusive learning partnership; Renshaw (2009) describes characteristics of effective mentors and mentoring environments in the music context; and several studies that conceptualise one-to-one as a “creative collaboration” underscore the benefits of putting this conceptualisation into practice (Presland, 2005; Barrett & Gromko, 2007; Gaunt et al., 2012; Burwell, 2013). It is important to point out that collaborative approaches to learning may be beneficial not only for instrumental and vocal students, but

also among and between teachers, who themselves may benefit from the opportunity to collaboratively reflect on, engage with, and enhance their own and others' teaching practices (Conway, 2006; Haack, 2006; Blair, 2009; Haack & Smith, 2009).

For instrumental and vocal teachers in the twenty-first century, the challenge continues to improve pedagogical approaches and learning outcomes for students. Only recently has research begun to expose in depth the common characteristics of one-to-one music pedagogy and the assumptions that underpin it, a fact at least partially due to the difficulties involved with accessing the private and intimate space of the studio (Carey, 2008). With growing academic understanding of the nature, benefits and challenges of this pedagogical approach, the possibilities expand for teachers not only to draw upon the teaching traditions of the past - sometimes excellent, sometimes not - but to learn about, critique, explore, and potentially ultimately embrace innovative educational approaches that hold promise of improving student skills and capabilities. In this way, teaching and learning will remain relevant to the here and now. Thus, the argument presented in this paper is not that more conventional transfer-style approaches to one-to-one teaching be abandoned altogether, but rather that teachers and institutions should remain deeply engaged in reflective practice and open to adopting transformative pedagogical practices that improve our students' capacity to learn and grow - as musicians, as future teachers, even as people.

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