

# Learning and Unlearning: New Challenges for Teaching in Conservatoires

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## Abstract

This paper takes up the challenge of Erica McWilliam's recent call for educators in general to focus on the importance of 'unlearning' *as well as* learning and thence applying this challenge to teaching in the Conservatoire. It does so by indicating what the value and limits are of traditional pedagogy in the Conservatoire. For young people who will increasingly experience a 'portfolio career' they will need to 'unlearn' and 'forget' certain practices processes and at the same time learn and embrace others. Getting the mix of learning and unlearning right will be more important for new generations of learners than merely sticking to time-honoured habits that mark a former stable social world. The implication is not that the Conservatoire should throw out long-term teaching techniques, but rather that it will need to be more open to innovative pedagogical possibilities if it is to work against the current trend of a shrinking clientele and audience for its expertise. The presentation provides a rationale for a new conceptual architecture in teaching (mixing learning and unlearning) before moving to consider how the Conservatoire might experiment cautiously with this imperative. Examples are given of such experiments already happening within a Conservatoire in Australia.

Because the appeal of excellent musicianship is universal, and the image of the music teacher is so culturally familiar, it is tempting to assume that the traditional 'master-apprentice' pedagogy of the Conservatoire is unchallenged and inviolate as *the* legitimate method for music teaching. This paper challenges 'master-apprentice' pedagogy by opening up issues around the value and limitations of traditional pedagogy in the Conservatoire for a generation of young people who experience the world very differently from their 'baby boomer' teachers. In doing so, it takes up the challenge of Erica McWilliam's recent call for educators in general to focus on the importance of 'unlearning' as well as learning (McWilliam, 2005a), and applies this challenge to teaching in the Conservatoire. The argument is that unstable social futures will require learners of all persuasions to 'unlearn' certain practices and processes at the same time that they learn and embrace others (Bauman, 2004). Getting the mix of learning and unlearning right will be more important for new generations of learners than merely sticking to time-honoured habits that mark a former stable social world. The implication is not that the Conservatoire should abandon long-term teaching techniques, but rather that it will need to be more open to innovative pedagogical possibilities if it is to work against the current trend of a shrinking youthful clientele and audience for its expertise and an expanded creative workforce from which it is estranged.

## Student Expectations

There is no doubt that during the course of the last decade, a combination of the effects of greatly reduced funding for tertiary institutions, the rapidly changing cultural landscape and the difficulty of finding employment for all musicians, has prompted a more critical re-appraisal of the role of Conservatoires. Yet despite attempts to address the need to seek a balance between a curriculum that produces skilled performers and one that also allows them alternative entries into the workforce, a recent study in Australia (Carey, 2004) suggests that students are just as ill-equipped as they were before the restructuring of the sector.

Carey's (2004) study investigated one Conservatoire's capacity to respond appropriately to 'student needs' by better understanding issues about curriculum relevance. As part of the study, all undergraduate keyboard students, along with recent keyboard graduates were invited to respond to the open-ended question: 'What do you think Conservatoire keyboard students need to know'? The following is an overview of the responses from a representative group of students beginning with first year undergraduates progressing through to graduates.

The research revealed a lack of alignment between the Conservatoire's curriculum and pedagogical approach and the learning outcomes that were relevant to a workforce destination that would have little to do with classical musical performance. It is interesting to note how student expectations and dispositions to learning were shaped at least in part by the very pedagogical culture in the delivery of the program itself. The pattern across three years from entry to exit showed students' expectations moving from being trained for success in elite musical performance to graduate disillusionment about the dubious relevance of much of the program to what they were now seeing as the reality of their future work.

The predominant focus of the first year participants was the acquisition of the skills required for classical performance. The comments were primarily centred on the need for traditional classical performance training even in relation to career prospects.

For the second year students, the emphasis on performance-oriented skills ceased to be a high priority. Indeed the focus of the talk changed from performance-centred skills to that of skills required to be a 'good musician' or to 'get a job'. What was particularly noteworthy about the texts was that they were also informed by strong discourse of both consumerism and provision, discourses which are very familiar in the 'performative' university (McWilliam, 2004). This tendency to passivity, that is, to locating oneself as the passive recipient of the services of expert others appears to have been produced by the nature and purposes of pedagogical engagement.

The third year data showed that these themes were continued in students' talk about their needs. There appeared to be little doubt that the students equated the value and success of the Bachelor of Music degree with an ability 'to get a job'. Their talk also reflected a more disillusioned and negative attitude and the consumerist discourse was also still strongly evident. Statements in the text included, 'the kind of impression that I had ...when I came here' (to the Conservatoire) is that you 'do a Bachelor of Music and then you can leave and you will get employment'. However, 'there's not that much performance for classical musicians' and 'I could, not that I would, name many brilliant students who have left here...have had to get jobs as cleaners or secretaries because they cannot get employment in their field'. This trend continued in the data provided by graduates a year after they had left the institution. One graduate commented

Many students come into the Conservatoire feeling as though they will have a job, pretty much performance jobs, and it's not the case...particularly because there certainly aren't the job opportunities, and most people hit their third year and they have a big panic attack. Many of my friends have a complete rethinking...because they come to third year and go, "What's going to happen with the rest of my life? I've spent three years at the Conservatoire, what job can I have?" They're very different to the jobs that we thought we were going to get when we were back at the beginning of first year.

### **Lessons Learned**

In the study there was a profound sense that expectations of the programs in which students are engaged did not align with their notions of student learning or student needs. In view of the above, questions need to be asked: What does this teach us about mainstream pedagogical work in the Conservatoire? Is it possible that the teaching and learning habits traditionally employed within Conservatoires have been 'too tightly embraced', and thus have become impediments to students' social success and even social survival (Bauman, 2004, p. 29). Put bluntly, is our curriculum and *traditional* pedagogy setting students up for failure as 'lifelong' learners?

### **Old Pedagogy, New Learners**

Most Conservatoria are concerned with and commend themselves, on their reputational management around excellent performance, measured by how well students perform in concerts and recitals, or win competitions and awards. Part of this reputational management involves maintaining strong links

with traditional pedagogies that are understood to have produced excellent performative outcomes and this, as indicated at the outset of this paper, is a pedagogical apprenticeship. This form of tutorial teaching is described by Uszler (1993) as, “the master is the model who demonstrates, directs, comments and inspires and the apprentice is the disciple who watches, listens, imitates and seeks approval” (p. 584). There is little room for any creative thinking about learning processes; “matters of content and sequence don’t receive much thought...and generally the thinking has been done for [students] and set like a jelly” (Bridges, 1992, p. 76). Alongside this, Conservatoires tend to pile up procedural documents around progression that are as confusing to students as they are for many staff.

When taken together, pedagogical orthodoxy and systemic complexity are hardly likely to encourage initiative, growth and experimentation in the creative people who participate in Conservatoire programs. Put another way, they are unlikely to inculcate a set of habits that are aligned with the learning needs of what McWilliam (2005b) calls ‘the yuk/wow’ generation, that is people who make virtually instant judgments on the desirability or otherwise of a new idea or experience. When ‘shopping’ for education, ‘yuk-wows’ are buyers of products rather than seekers after ‘masters’. One third of University students are now drifters, churners, parkers, and the percentage is increasing (McWilliam, 2005b). Given the ephemeral nature of their enthusiasms, they are inclined to leave choices to the last minute. Their choices are about lifestyle, self-image, being entertained and this means having a different relationship with the electronic world. They are not word-centric - their social engagement is very much focused away from the traditional ‘book’ learning of universities. For them, Truth is assembled and dissembled in images and sounds. It comes in the form of endless sound bites, half-baked ideas, gossipy tidbits, all in constant flux. The ‘yuk/wow’ generation are wired up and plugged in all the time – to know where the action is, to be where the stimulation is.

Importantly for implications arising from the Carey study (2004), they do not have a traditional life story – they already have a different experience of the notion of ‘career’ that runs in parallel with formal education, and their work futures will be different. By 2020, at least one quarter of the yuk/wow generation will be doing collarless work in portfolio careers. [Note: According to Richard Florida (2002), author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, the creative workforce now includes some 38.3 million Americans, roughly 30 percent of the entire U.S. workforce—up from just 10 percent at the turn of the 20th century and less than 20 percent as recently as 1980.] The ‘yuk-wow’ generation will work in digitally-enhanced environments that are not clearly defined in terms of time and place, and where they will not necessarily be able to transfer what they have learned from one application to another. That is, they will need to unlearn as much as they learn because firmly entrenched attitudes and approaches will act as an impediment to new thought.

While they have ephemeral enthusiasms, according to McWilliam, their speed of decision-making can still be engaged in order to make for more long-term productive work. What they do not display is an innate desire to be passive or to be cynical about what they are doing. The passivity and cynicism documented in the Carey study (2004) is therefore not a characteristic of a new suspect generation of learners but a product of the Conservatoire itself and this has to be acknowledged in the move to optimise Conservatoires as learning environments in which creative people are supposed to thrive.

There are two challenges that arise from this for contemporary Conservatoires. The first is how the pedagogy of the Conservatoire might be more responsive to the modes of engagement that are preferred by these learners. The second and even more radical challenge is to consider how Conservatoires might seek to broaden their teaching agenda to include development of generic creative capabilities that apply to a broader agenda that includes, but is not solely focussed on excellent musical performance.

The argument here is not that Conservatoires need to ‘pander’ to this generation or to authorise the ephemeral enthusiasms of the ‘yuk/wow’ generation, but rather to anticipate what it is they are learning for, and to make appropriate adjustments to pedagogical work **with** and **for** (rather than **on**)

these young people. The following two case studies provide illustrations of innovative pedagogical approaches taken in an Australian Conservatoire that seek to be more responsive to the learning challenges posed by the uncertain social and work futures of this generation.

#### *Case Study One: Bachelor of Popular Music*

This case study briefly describes a non-traditional design for the study of music in higher education. The program seeks to emulate the learning practices of popular musicians in the broader community, unlearning the pedagogy of Conservatoire music-teaching and substituting a modified informal pedagogy in which the community of practice is at the centre of largely self-directed learning activity. This learning is enhanced through the provision of recording facilities that students use to develop both the process and product of their music making (Lebler, 2005).

#### **Student Expectations**

The BPM cohort is not usual in a Conservatoire; their primary focus is the creation of original popular music, and they will have strengths as composers as well as in some combination of related areas including performance, programming, sound recording and production. Students are selected for the program through an interview and audition. A key element of the process is to give applicants an opportunity to demonstrate not just musical ability but also to make explicit their readiness to accept an active role in their learning combined with an awareness of the activities included in the program. Many of them will have visited the program web site and will be familiar with the structure of the program. Their previous learning of popular music has usually involved informal settings so they are generally experienced in the self-directed learning they will encounter in their major study. In addition to this existing awareness, orientation sessions include information on the range of courses they will be undertaking and how each contributes to the program learning as a whole. Students come to the program expecting to meet people with complimentary abilities and interests with whom they can make music; they expect to have their skills expanded and developed across a range of technologies and to leave knowing more about popular music. Probably most of all, they want to leave with at least some high quality recorded samples of their work.

#### **Student Experience**

Students study six semesters of courses dealing with the history and analysis of popular music, during which they develop the ability to apply critical analysis to a wide range of popular music. They also study six semesters of sound engineering and production courses that develop the abilities of students to record their own work independently and access the learning that frequent recording enables. Students also undertake a range of other courses in information and music technologies, song writing, rhythm and the music business. All this learning is drawn together in the major study that involves the recording of a CD of original music each semester. This provides 60% of the course mark. Students frequently collaborate on their submissions, and even collaborations with people outside the program are acceptable as major study submissions.

A distinctive feature of this program is that an evaluative self-reflection is required through the written work that explains the students' intentions and involvement with each track. This is submitted along with self-assessed marks, and a structured reflective journal that addresses the semester more generally (30% of the course mark). Students are assigned to panels that assess the recorded submissions of a range of their peers, and this assessment provides not only substantial written feedback but also the marks for recorded submissions. Student performance in this activity is assessed by staff and contributes 10% to the course mark.

#### **Lessons Learned**

Students do leave with recorded product, but they also have developed abilities in composing, sound engineering and production, the understanding of music, and the interpersonal skills that are required of people to work creatively and collaboratively for a sustained period of time. In light of Florida and McWilliam's scholarship elaborated earlier in the paper, such skills might well be argued to serve a

larger purpose in the creative workforce. Certainly, all these outcomes are closely aligned with students' expectations of the program. This development is achieved partly through reflective practice acting to add a layer of formal knowledge to the 'edgy know-how' (Welsman, 2006) that students bring with them to the program (Lebler, 2004). In addition, there are other outcomes that might not be explicitly found in the students' expectations list. For example, the involvement of students in active and meaningful assessment has the effect of improving ability to conduct the self-evaluation that is crucial for autonomous learning (Lebler, 2006), and this outcome is vital if we are to prepare students to adapt to a changing environment.

This program is very successful judging by student evaluations, and its success appears to be linked to the extent to which the program makes room for and values their prior learning of popular music. This is made explicit both in the approach to assessment and also to the pedagogical work more generally (e.g., peer learning is valued over master/apprentice learning). The program is able to respond to the expectations of students while also providing a learning experience that has more impact in terms of portable dispositions to learning. These kinds of outcomes are important when considering what should be reconsidered or even unlearned so new learning can occur.

#### *Case Study Two: Music Technology*

As a further example of alternative approaches being taken in program delivery in a Conservatoire, the following describes two examples of curriculum activity where a music technology community of practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) interacts in ways which challenge systematised approaches to learning and knowing.

The notion of embedding Workplace Integrated Learning (WIL) into Australian undergraduate programs has received considerable attention in recent times (Cooper, Orrel, & Bowden, 2003). In general, the movement seeks to place final year students in workplace internships. However, the Conservatoire in question may also be understood as a site for WIL within the university because of the public nature of student concerts involving marketing, ticket sales, audience attendance and critical review.

One recent development documented in Draper (2005a) seeks to extend this model into a university recording studio via its interface with the external creative industries sector. IMERSD (Intermedia, Music Education & Research Design) is a professional-quality recording studio located within the Conservatoire and its pedagogy is distinct from formal class work. Students may be invited to work with staff and/or alumni on external projects with a range of real world demands. Incentives may include fee-for-service and/or Intellectual Property and/or shared publication rights. The essential features of this model include:

- intensive timelines and outcomes which are fixed to external requirements;
- modelling of professional practice in often ambiguous circumstances;
- provision of an authentic framework to contextualise generic professional skills;
- challenging the dilemmas inherent in risk management vs. innovation; and,
- transparency and promotion of co-learning by staff and students.

Thus far, signs have been encouraging. Barriers have broken down in terms of student-staff relationships and the net effect is closer to that of co-workers, some more experienced than others in varying areas of expertise. This is in keeping with the peer-learning ethos mentioned earlier. On-the-job sharing of techniques and approaches has enriched participant's knowledge and capacity to be proactive in the program. In general, older workers (academic staff) deal better with interpersonal negotiations, politics and the notion of 'fitness for purpose', while younger students bring a wealth of technological-oriented innovation to the partnership. Approaches to workflow are very different – the student background tends to emphasise an 'instant fix' post-problem, whereas the more experienced tend to work toward preparation and understanding of the project, pre-problem. Shared problem-solving has been one of the more notable features of the project.

A longstanding, murky issue that remains to be solved is the fractured and less-than-ideal communication across the music subdisciplines, that is, between performers, composers, technologists and researchers. One implication of this is the need for future research into program design as a transdisciplinary pedagogical process (Draper, 2005b).

### **Student Experience**

Students within this program often team with other younger students as assistants, participants and critical friends. Through the use of eTools, the network extends to cyberspace where the music technology area has a highly effective 'safe house' – a bulletin board and media gallery where students develop personas that are more 'disinhibited' (Lundin, 1997) than they would present in a formal class. This resource has grown to include academic, sessional and technical support staff alongside students from all music technology programs. More recently, the interactions include external industry participants and alumni who continue to maintain virtual links and further enhance the evolving ownership of a music technology community of practice.

These experiences pass back and forth and in general, move towards a highly visible music technology ecology. This is un-moderated in the sense that such knowledge production tends to drive itself: if there are contentious remarks, the population works this through to a common understanding; if there are new solutions, these are just as rapidly disseminated and discussed. The evolution is highly effective and somewhat reminiscent of the dynamics which occur in international cyberspace, for example, the 'open source' approach to the development and collective authoring/peer review of Wikipedia content (2005).

In summary, as some commentators suggest (Barnett & Coate, 2005), perhaps a curriculum may be better conceived of in terms of an overarching learning ecology where disciplinary content may be 'remixed' (McWilliam, 2005a) as required. What is also important here is the visibility and viability of the 'spaces' that allow this to occur amid traditional university compliance mechanisms such as class/year groupings, weekly timetables and semesterisation.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The two examples provided above are exemplars of pedagogical experimentation that are responsive to new agendas both in music performance and also in learning. They are not presented as templates for others but as thoughtful responses to a range of imperatives some of which are emanating from the students who seek out the Conservatoire as a place for developing excellence and for furthering their formal learning. The issue here is that traditional pedagogical practices are increasingly being demonstrated to be supporting a small and precious world of musical producers and consumers. Meanwhile, what counts as learning and how learning is related in turn to new digital technologies and new forms of social interaction are insisting on having a place in all educational settings including Conservatoires. The danger is not that the Conservatoire will lose its dominant modes of teaching and learning but that it will resist instead of accommodating the new practices that are now available to optimise student capacities to learn. Peer learning, the use of eTools and the like allow teachers and students to co-create value rather than to work on or against each other. Such techniques therefore, need to be cautiously investigated for what they offer pedagogical work in Conservatoria rather than as annoying or marginal fads and fashions.

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