

Building communities of music education practice: Peer collaboration in music teacher education.

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Abstract

Isolation is a theme that is synonymous with Australia's demography and geography, with its population concentrated in clusters and separated by large distances. The distribution of the tertiary music education community in Australia tends to reflect aspects of the country's physical make-up, specifically the separation of individuals or small groups of academics by vast distances. Consequently, music teacher education in Australia suffers from a sense of solitude. Academics in the field typically work alone in institutions and their students, beginning music teachers, also suffer from the experience of being alone in their work environment. In a funded cross-institutional project, aspects of mentoring and peer collaboration have been explored to address this phenomenon.

This paper reports on the initial stages of the project. Problem-based learning through virtual learning sites and discussion groups has been employed in the project design. These strategies have been employed as project participants endeavour to construct a music education community that reaches out across these vast distances, and contributes to academic development and collaboration.

Models aimed at minimising barriers between teacher education course structures and academic experiences across Australia have been implemented. The findings of the pilot stages are revealed through the voices of academics, tertiary students and the public speaking about their involvement with innovative approaches to music teaching and learning.

The project

The project was created to enhance teacher education and to increase academic collaboration.

Central to the project is the involvement of university education students in solving 'authentic' music education problems provided by Australian teachers. The problem-based learning and approach is holistic, integrated and centred in practice. The result has been more widespread than initially anticipated, as the community of people interested in music education has engaged with elements of the project. It is this aspect of the project that is

revealed through the voices of academics, teachers, tertiary students and music industry representatives, as they interact with music learning and teaching environments.

The problem: Music teacher isolation

The problem of isolation is not unusual in teaching. As Lortie (1975) suggests "almost without exception, teachers work in settings where the actual structure of the school building precludes much interaction among adults" (cited in Harris, 1995, p. 19). For beginning teachers within all disciplines there has been a tendency for teachers to be 'thrown in the deep end' to either 'sink or swim' (McCormack & Thomas, 2003). In Australia, with its population concentrated in clusters and separated by large distances, problems of isolation are exacerbated: isolation has been reported by music teachers, generalist teachers and music education academics alike, and has been particularly associated with the praxis shock and 'burnout' of early-career music teachers (Ballantyne, in press). There is a consequent need for teacher education to effectively meet the needs of pre-service music teachers in order to 'smooth' their way into the classroom (Ballantyne, 2007; Temmerman, 2006).

For beginning teachers, Lake (1999) refers to "the devastating consequences of a novice's struggle with the complexities and contradictions of teaching within the isolated, individualistic culture of schools (p. 211)." When concerns of pre-service music teachers are contrasted with those of beginning music teachers, some issues (such as classroom discipline and curriculum planning) remain constant, whilst new issues emerge for novice teachers. These include budgeting, inadequate resources, isolation, mentoring (or lack of it), and physical exhaustion (Roulston et al, 2005). Further issues for the novice teacher include adjusting to the cultural contexts of particular school settings, and the personalities and cultural features that shape these settings. De Vries (a past music teacher) remarks that:

I worked in isolation, being the only class music teacher in the school ... as a primary school classroom music teacher I was, to some extent, alone in the primary schools in which I worked because I was the *only* class music teacher. This resulted in professional isolation, suggesting a need for professional support in the form of communication with experienced music teachers. (2000, p. 176 -7)

Darling-Hammond (1999) suggests that strategies should be put in place to reduce teacher isolation and allow teachers to work in teams, share planning time, and pursue connected agendas based on a set of common curriculum goals. Such approaches provide naturally occurring opportunities for daily learning among colleagues. This paper argues that teacher isolation needs to be addressed firstly in the undergraduate teacher education programs, where collaboration and mentoring strategies can be learnt and practised by future teachers before they become isolated in their teaching contexts.

The problem: Academic isolation

Whilst isolation has been documented in the case of early-career academics (Bazeley, 2003; Akerlind, 2005), isolation also occurs at all levels of academia (Mamtora, 2004). In Australia, pre-service music teacher education is typically delivered by one isolated music education academic at each tertiary institution. The resultant professional isolation may be worse for music education academics that are in the early-career phase of their career, with limited opportunities to engage with more experienced music education academics. As the experiences of music teacher educators could be argued to mirror those of music teachers (particularly in terms of isolation), it seems that discipline-specific peer collaboration is just as important for academics as for music teachers in minimising professional isolation. This paper argues, therefore, that increased communication and collaboration across universities enables academics to develop effectively throughout their career (Kreber, 2000), providing opportunities to address 'barriers of isolation' (Hulig-Austin, 1990) by providing support and cohesion. It also models collaboration for pre-service teachers who can themselves be engaged in collaborative ventures.

Our solution: Building communities through collaboration

Within the practice and research of education, collaborative learning has gained increased attention. Collaboration is defined as a joint process to complete tasks that cannot be fulfilled individually, or cannot be done efficiently otherwise (Brunner, 1991). Within peer-collaboration, “learners share knowledge, ideas and significant thinking and therefore learn from one another and achieve goals that may not be obtained in isolated learning” (Zhang & Carr-Chellman, 2001, p.156). The interpersonal communications associated with peer collaboration encourage learners to reflect and develop meaningful learning (Clements & Natassi, 1988). The outcomes produced by peer collaboration may help reduce the current problems within music education for pre-service teachers, by helping prepare them for the world of teaching. Peer collaboration is equally important for music education academics, as they face similar isolation issues to music teachers.

One of the findings of the recent National Review of School Music Education (NRSME) and the subsequent National Music Education Workshop (August 2006) was the need for a music education ‘portal’ through which such interactions could take place. This project utilises such a portal to enhance the collaboration between music teachers in schools, pre-service teachers and music education academics. This online environment constitutes:

- an interactive public forum where teachers, academics and students can share ideas and personal experiences relating to the teaching of music.
- a place where members of the music education community can upload news on the latest developments in music education Australia-wide.
- context-based problem solving areas, where pre-service teachers connect with the ‘real’ problems posed by in-service teachers. In discussion forums linked to each context, teachers and students together grapple with possible ‘solutions’, thereby

creating an online ‘community’ where philosophical and practical issues to do with music education can be freely aired.

- an area for those interested in music teacher education, where private discussions related to the project can take place.

This paper reports on the community that has emerged in the initial stages of this project. The project was set up to improve teacher education and to increase academic collaboration. In practice, however, it has resonated with a far wider community of people interested in music education. It is this aspect of the project that is revealed through the voices of academics, teachers, tertiary students and music industry representatives, as they engage with the music learning and teaching environment.

Interactions by academics engaged in the project

In the initial stages of the project, academics were primarily focussed on the functioning of the website, and curriculum initiatives planned for the pre-service teachers. This is clearly seen in the interaction below from the first meeting of the project implementers. At this point, discussions describe collaboration in the developmental stages, when communication moved from the phone to the website. ‘Tom’ posted before the meeting, with ‘Toni’ and ‘Max’ posting after the first meeting.

*Tom*¹: Looking forward to our first meeting on Monday! We've been doing a pilot of the project at Griffith and it will be wonderful to be able to share our experiences, but perhaps more importantly, to have a fresh injection of ideas and input into the process. It has worked really well at Griffith and, because they have been in-service teachers, we have been able to see some direct responses to innovative ways of approaching music teacher education.

Toni: The first meeting went well, with the exception of the context videos not working. I believe that has all been sorted out now. I am really looking forward to the opportunity to collaborate with all of you. I left the meeting excited about future possibilities between music educators in Australia - challenging and supporting one another philosophically and pedagogically. The website is just a tool to enable this (not the focus of the project), and so if it begins working efficiently, we should be able to have some wonderful collaboration occurring. When do your lectures start in 1st semester, Max?

Max: Yes it was a great start. First lecture is February 26th. At the moment I am just working through the site with one of our ICT people and solving issues to do with Flash - all solved

¹ Pseudonyms have been used

now. Next task is to work out how and when I will introduce the site to them, how often I will schedule time in the computer lab and what form of assessment I am going to use. (Music teachers Oz, 2007)

Interactions between students across Australia

When the semester commenced, students began to interact on the website. Initial posts were related directly to the contexts. Student gradually became involved in broader discussions, such as this one related to aspects of teacher-student interactions in the school:

Janet: I have a question I have thought about a lot. When I was in high school I had a really good relationship with all my teachers. When I become a teacher I would love to develop this kind of relationship with my students. My question is, how do you find the happy medium between being an authority figure for the students as well as someone who they feel they can talk to and trust? When I have finished my uni degree I will only be a young teacher, so my one fear is that the students won't listen to me because I'm not all that much older than they are. Does anyone have ideas or anything reassuring that can help me get over this fear of mine?

Janine: One thing that I have learnt is the way you have the appropriate and respectable relationship with students is to not try and be their friend. I actually find, mostly with my younger kids, if I am strict the more they respect and love me. You let them know that if you follow the rules you can have fun but if you break them it won't be as enjoyable. With older students, you treat them with respect and not as kids, the more you treat them as adults, they'll start acting like one ... mutual respect... you respect them, they respect you.

Jenny: I am so glad that you posted your concerns regarding becoming a teacher as I have the exact same fears. I think that the best way to gain student respect is to have clear boundaries. I have been told that the beginning of the school year is the most crucial time for establishing the behavioural expectations of your students. Let your students know what is or is not acceptable in this establishment phase at the beginning of the year and be strong. Once you are comfortable and confident as an adult who is responsible for their educational wellbeing then the other facets of your teacher student relationship can grow. I think that your students will know instinctively if you are the kind of teacher that they can trust and talk to, based on your approach to them and your personality. (Music teachers Oz, 2007)

This is a significant issue for pre-service students and while not all interactions between students take this format, this example gives some indication of the types of discussions students are having on line.

Interactions amongst the broader music education community

The previous examples are evidence of the emerging online collaboration that creates greater communication between academics involved in the project working at various locations throughout Australia and the interactions of students with each other. The more typical type of collaboration takes place across the sector through students, academics, in-service teachers and music industry representatives. One recent example of this type of interaction is:

Student: Hi, just wondering if anyone has used any contemporary music in the classroom to teach a concept or just for an activity. My 6/7s (at this stage) will not do anything unless it is music that they know off the radio. So I have played a music trivia game with them where they have to recognize the song as well as compared songs and their instrumentation. Huge behaviour problems when they're not interested so for a while I want to incorporate songs they know. Any ideas would be greatly appreciated.

Music industry representative: Amber Thomas in Music in Action (Spring 2006), wrote a lesson plan for Year 5 & 6 classroom, with step by step info for the creating and performing curriculum requirements using popular/ contemporary music as the basis of the lesson...might be helpful.

Music education lecturer: For an excellent theoretical paper on the value of music and music education, get yourself a copy of this paper: Regelski, T. (2005). Music and music education: Theory and praxis for 'making a difference' In D. Lines (Ed.), Music education for the new Millennium: Theory and practice futures for music teaching and learning (pp. 7-28). It is very philosophical, but I think very useful.

Teacher: I'm finding film and TV scores really useful as well. "Pirates of the Caribbean" has some simple themes that you can use to derive rhythms/melodies and the instrumentation mimics the instruments of the orchestra. Star Wars is another good score. I asked the kids about their favorite movies/TV shows before I started so they thought they were having some say in the matter. (Music teachers Oz, 2007)

The extent of interactions as the implementation process progresses has exceeded expectations. This has, to some extent, justified the rationale for the project and provides unforeseen insights into possible future developments.

Implications

From beginnings that included some superficial interactions, discussions are becoming more sophisticated and appear to be enhancing teacher education processes and relations. The use of a virtual space impacts on the isolation inherent across the sector: academics working

alone or in small teams have access to the knowledge and experience of other academics, music industry professionals and students. Similarly, students have the capacity to interact on larger scale with cohorts in other locations. Interested parties from all states and many countries around the world are engaged with the project and at the time of writing, more non-students than students were involved.

As the project enters the next phase, students from Griffith University, the University of Southern Queensland and Charles Sturt University will engage in authentic problem-solving activities. They will be able to interact with each other and with academics in music education. From 2008, it is anticipated that several other institutions that have expressed interest will incorporate aspects of the project into their course. Given the recent findings from the National Music Workshop, there is the potential for www.musicteachersoz.org to become the template for the National Music Education Portal.

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