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Author

Carey, Gemma, Grant, Catherine

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Enacting Transformative Pedagogy in the Music Studio: A Case Study of Responsive, Relational Teaching

Gemma Carey & Catherine Grant

Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (Brisbane, Australia)

Abstract

Over some decades now, education scholars have clearly delineated the characteristics of transformative pedagogy—student-oriented, flexible, responsive, explorative, context-rich, and have equally clearly and convincingly argued for the potential of this approach to improve learning outcomes in students. With the attention of music education scholars and practitioners now turning to implementing and cultivating the transformative approach in the one-to-one music studio environment, it is becoming increasingly important to better understand specific behaviours, strategies, interventions that together result in a transformative approach to teaching. This article reports on part of a larger project on transformative pedagogy in the studio one-to-one tertiary music environment, which aims to improve the education of the professional musician-in-making by fostering transformative approaches to teaching and learning. The article offers a nested case study of one teacher whose pedagogical approach was identified, in advance of this study, as predominantly transformative. Using video-recorded lessons as prompts, the authors explore transformative behaviours and strategies as manifest in the approach of this teacher, inviting reflections of the teacher herself on what, specifically, transformative teaching looks like in the context of her music studio. Themes range from the importance of pedagogical agility in adapting and responding to the student and situation at hand, to methods of fostering student ownership of lessons and learning, to building a relationship of confidence and trust with the student. In this way, this brief case study offers one example of how transformative teaching and learning may be enacted in the music studio. It argues that particularly in those situations where exemplary teaching practices are shared among colleagues, such pedagogy constitutes a form of leadership-in-action, as the benefits roll out to other teachers and, crucially, teachers-to-be—that is, students. The authors hope its findings will inform and support the aspirations of teachers and institutions to foster transformative pedagogical approaches to one-to-one music teaching and learning.

Keywords

one-to-one, studio teaching, transformative pedagogy, responsiveness, pedagogical agility, student ownership, leadership

Background

For some decades now, scholars and practitioners have underscored the value of a transformative approach to education (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Cranton, 1994; Lysaker & Furness, 2011; King, 2005; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2007). Transformative pedagogy is characterised by a student-oriented approach to learning, where process is emphasised over outcome, and where the teacher remains responsive and adaptable to the distinct needs of each individual learner. The role of the teacher is to help students learn how to learn, through exploration, collaboration, and placing new learning in context; in this way, students take an active part in their own learning. Several studies in the area of education generally (Mezirow et al., 2000; McGonigal, 2005; King, 2005; Lysaker & Furuness, 2011), and music education specifically (Carey & Grant, 2014; 2015a, 2015b), underscore the potential of transformative pedagogical approaches to improve short- and long-term learning outcomes, to increase student engagement and motivation in learning, to support students' personal and professional growth, and to help them develop strong career and life skills.

In the context of increasingly scholarly focus on the characteristics, challenges, and outcomes of one-to-one music teaching and learning (Burwell, 2013, 2015; Carey & Grant, 2014; Gaunt, 2007, 2009; Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013; Gaunt, Creech, Long & Hallum, 2012; Kennell, 1997; McPhail, 2013; Nerland, 2007; Perkins, 2013; Presland, 2005), the attention of music education practitioners (and the institutions in which they work) is now turning to finding optimal ways to implement and cultivate the transformative approach in the one-to-one studio environment. As these efforts gain momentum, it becomes increasingly important to better understand the specific behaviours and beliefs that comprise a transformative pedagogical approach. As a contribution to this end, this brief case study presents some of the specific teaching philosophies, interventions and strategies of one conservatorium-based studio music teacher whose teaching displays predominantly transformative characteristics. In this way, it represents an example of how transformative teaching is enacted in the studio.

Kate—a pseudonym—is a voice teacher in the jazz department of an Australian university-based music conservatorium. She has been teaching in this department for around 19 years and often teaches in other voice areas of the institution, formally and informally. She has around 33 years' teaching experience at undergraduate and postgraduate levels across the spectrum of contemporary styles, with a focus at undergraduate level on jazz voice, and

musical theatre voice. Kate regularly performs as a freelance singer and band vocalist in a range of contemporary styles, including Legit, belt musical theatre, jazz, pop, rock, and rhythm and blues (R&B). She reports that she learnt to teach by doing, beginning her teaching career at a performance school where she managed up to 250 students a year—aged 4 to adult—in class and individual lesson environments. Upon starting to teach, she immediately began to self-educate in areas of pedagogy and vocal technique, by reading relevant literature and by attending national and international conferences and symposia on voice science and vocal pedagogy. This education, which Kate describes as intense and strategic, was further supported through Kate’s working association with three speech pathologists and two Ear-Nose-Throat surgeons, for whom Kate became an integral team member in remedial programmes for voice-damaged singers.

Since 2011, Kate has been one of six teachers at her institution participating in a project that explores transformative pedagogy in the context of the one-to-one music studio. Research in the early stages of that project reported in Carey et al., (2013), Carey, Grant, McWilliam and Taylor (2013), and Carey, Lebler and Gall 2012), used an in-depth coding scheme and framework to analyse a series of video-recordings of these six teachers’ lessons, to quantify the extent to which they demonstrated characteristics of transformative strategies in their teaching. Kate’s profile signalled that her teaching was the most strongly transformative of all six teachers—an index of 0.85, on a scale between 0 and 1, against an average across the six teachers of 0.58—on this basis, she was chosen as the case study for this research. Detailed description of the process of identifying Kate as a strongly transformative-style teacher is provided in those earlier publications.

For this case study, Kate video-recorded a lesson with each of two of her performance study students: a 19 year-old male and a 26 year-old female student, both enrolled in the second-year jazz strand of a Bachelor of Music, and both receiving the typical one individual lesson per week as part of their studies. The younger student only recently started lessons with Kate, choosing to take advantage of institutional openness to students studying with more than one teacher in the second and third year of their programs, while the 26-year-old had studied voice with Kate for around 18 months at the time of the videos. The videos were recorded in August 2015, early in the second semester of the academic year. The teacher selected these students for this research on the basis of convenience, willingness of the students, gender difference and different experience levels of the students.

Following the video-recordings of these lessons, the first-named author guided Kate's verbal self-reflections on the specific ways her teaching strategies and behaviours embodied characteristics of transformative learning, and how these interrelated with her teaching philosophy and approach. Through semi-structured elicitation and using the lesson videos as prompts, the discussion covered themes from Kate's methods of fostering student ownership of lessons and learning, to building a relationship of confidence and trust with the student, to remaining pedagogically agile and responsive to the student and situation at hand. This discussion was audio-recorded and later transcribed, and it forms the basis of the next section, the case study. In preparing this paper, the authors sought Kate's further reflections on the themes of the study, as well as her comments on a draft of this article; her feedback is integrated into this final version.

Case Study

Fostering ownership and a positive learning environment: Celebrating her students' learning successes and creating a positive learning environment are strong characteristics of Kate's teaching. With all her students, she aims to "get one success per lesson and really focus their attention on that one success, whatever it might be. It might just be 'I feel happier about this now; I can smile at this now'". Kate believes that her positivity is a strength of her teaching; even with those students who "don't do a lot of work", she says, "I'm calm and I'm never negative". Her students "know that I get a lot of joy out of their successes. I don't mean success in the industry, I mean small successes." Kate began the videoed lesson with the 19-year old student—her second lesson with him—by complementing him on changes to his tone since his first lesson, asking whether he was aware of the change, and if so, in what way it felt different: "I wanted him to articulate rather than me tell him ... I wanted to recap on the last lesson, but I wanted to do it in the context of him having had a success." In this way, Kate believes, "he takes ownership of a success that he has ... It then doesn't become: I'm the wizard and I can wave the magic wand, and all of a sudden they can do things better". On reflection, Kate believed that one of the main strengths of her teaching in this lesson was "that I got out of the way a lot ... I asked him to lead the lesson at the beginning. He really wasn't leading the lesson; I was leading the lesson, but I gave him ownership". Encouraging student ownership directly supports Kate's goal of creating a positive learning environment: "In that way, when he has a success it belongs to him and not me". In cases where the students feel unable to carry forward their own learning, however, Kate takes care to ensure

they feel able to ask her for further guidance: “I expect them to go away and work ... [but] they can always come back [for help], and I don't care how many [times]”.

Approaching learning holistically: To train the voice in the way best suited to each individual student, Kate takes into account their unique personality and demeanour: “I do a lot of ... getting to know them, so that if they come in and they're not well, if they come in and they're stressed, I can be aware of it really quickly ... I don't want to sit and be a counsellor. I want to work with their voice, but I have to work differently according to their mood”. She acknowledges that students’ lives outside the studio affect their learning, and recognises that this demands her constant awareness and adaptation: “You can't rest on your laurels as a one to one teacher. You're on your mettle all the time, because the student ... bring[s] their life in the room with them”.

Relationship-building: Building a relationship of trust and mutual respect with her students is both a characteristic of, and a tool in, Kate’s pedagogical approach. Regardless of her students’ level of skill or knowledge, she says it’s “a given” that she treats them as “intelligent young people who are talented”. She makes sure her students know she respects them: “I show them—and I really mean that. I ask their opinion. I respect their opinion”. Building trust is also an undertaking Kate takes very seriously, particularly with commencing students:

In these early lessons, I want to take the time to listen to them. I want to try and just be quiet and listen ... If I ask them a question ... [and] they take five minutes to answer, I'll just stand there and wait. I want them to smile at me. When I get that sort of smile I go, “Well now I've got a way into this mind”.

She frames the value of trust-building specifically in terms of students’ learning: “I need to let them know that their voice is safe with me ... I want them to feel as comfortable with me as possible, so that we can get as much work done as possible.” Kate considers her ability to listen and observe to be key strengths of her teaching. Observing the way students receive and react to information is a method Kate employs “to break down the barriers as fast as I can, so we can move faster”.

Fostering self-sufficiency: The importance of fostering in all her students a sense of ownership of their learning comes through strongly in Kate’s reflections on her teaching:

“We have a lot of power as teachers ... For me the magic is when the student's capable of going back and realising how that problem's been fixed or how they can do it again.” Her attitude toward her students is: “I'll give you the keys. I'll even open the door for you, but you've got to do the work. You've got to walk through the door”. In her lessons, Kate encourages students to diagnose problems themselves, so that “they can correct issues in their own voices”. Another technique she uses to foster self-sufficiency is to insist students audio- or video-record their lessons, then review and reflect on their lesson using the recording “within a day or two ... so that then they're actually having the lesson again”. Kate hopes this will contribute to fostering students’ ability to learn outside of the studio: “I don't want to have to be there to tell her how to fix something. My ideal student is the one that can be going, ‘You know what? I have the capability of fixing things myself as long as I listen’”.

Goal-setting: For Kate, progress toward overarching learning outcomes are more important than more specific task-oriented progress, such as learning repertoire: “Repertoire for me is not important ... It's not my job to teach them songs.” She believes the learning outcomes of her students is more important than their performance outcomes—that is, for her as a teacher, she prioritises “the joy of seeing them learn something and take ownership of that learning where they can go: ‘You know what, I can do this again, or if that doesn't work I have the skills to work out how to make that better’.” In each lesson, she “wants [students] to feel like they’ve learnt something”, not only intellectually, but so that “they've actually had time in the lesson to process the learning”.

Using space and movement: Kate uses movement and the physical space of her studio to support her students’ learning. By changing her position in the room frequently, she aims to shift students’ focus: “They start to switch off otherwise. So I tend to move them around the room and try to get them to do different things.” In this way, she reflected of her younger student: “He doesn't feel like he's a specimen being studied ... I don't want him to be focusing on me; I want him focusing on him, on his self”. Kate often uses physical techniques in her lessons, believing many students are “physical learners” (her common tools include a balance board, a gym ball, and a mirror). In the recorded lesson with her male student, she suggested that he put his fingers in his mouth “to get him into a resting jaw position”, because she “want[ed] him to see what it feels like”. At another point in the lesson she asked him to sit, so he could change and explore centres of tension in his body. In using these physical techniques, Kate recognises that until students build confidence and trust in

her, such activities may feel “vulnerable”: “I don't put people straight on the floor, because that's very vulnerable”.

Remaining pedagogically agile: Adaptability, flexibility, and responsiveness are key characteristics of Kate's teaching. At the start of each lesson with each student (including the videoed lessons), she “gets them to sing”, because she “want[s] to hear what their voice is doing in that moment, in that day. I don't want to teach to what it was last week, because I only see them weekly. So I want to see where the voice is.” Rather than setting her own pre-determined goals and agenda for each lesson, she will typically ask her students what they wish to cover, both as a way to better understand their needs, and to encourage their own goal-setting. She adapts lesson structure according to the student and situation at hand: “I have a plan, but it's a very flexible plan. It's really oriented to the student ... That's why I think one to one teaching is terribly invigorating but it's also very tiring, because I have no set way that I approach a student.” Whilst recognising that the knowledge base of each student might vary, Kate believes there is no fundamental difference in her approach to teaching beginning students and those more advanced. She simply gauges the situation of each student anew each lesson. She asks frequent questions of students throughout their lessons—“I constantly, purposefully ask rather than tell”—which serves to elicit from the students their opinions and needs in relation to their learning.

Conclusion

Kate's strategies in the studio, coupled with her reflections on how these strategies relate to her philosophy of teaching, suggest a pedagogy strongly underpinned by transformative tenets. She prioritises holistic learning, and generally places more emphasis on longer-term learning outcomes than achieving specific performance-based or task-oriented goals. She is sensitive to the potential of physical space and movement as a tool in learning. She actively fosters an affirmative learning environment, and a personal, collaborative, and respectful student-teacher relationship built on trust. She encourages students to be actively involved in their learning, from setting the agenda in lessons to discovering their own solutions to challenges they face, thereby developing in them self-sufficiency. Finally, Kate remains alert to both the necessity and the pedagogical value of remaining agile and responsive in her teaching, adapting to the unique and changing needs of each student at each stage of their learning journey.

A better understanding of these kinds of specific behaviours and strategies that constitute transformative pedagogy is important, as teachers and institutions increasingly challenge old education paradigms and look to new ways of fostering successful, sustainable, professional music careers. When the transformative practices of teachers like Kate are shared among other teachers and institutions—either through research, as in this article, or in collaborative disciplinary contexts, as in the wider project of which this study forms a part—that pedagogy implicitly represents a form of leadership-in-action, as its benefits roll out well beyond a single studio. Sharing such practices not only enables other teachers to better understand the characteristics and advantages of transformative teaching; it also has intergenerational gain, as students are exposed to exemplary pedagogical approaches which they in turn later adopt in their own teaching practices.

Transformative teaching may be realised in many different ways. In this paper, we have presented a brief sketch of one studio music teacher whose teaching displays characteristics typical of a transformative approach. In so doing, we make no claim that this case study is indicative of transformative teaching practices in general, that it presents a perfect manifestation of the transformative approach, or even that it displays a comprehensive set of qualities inherent in that approach. Rather, we offer this sketch as just one illustration of the specific ways in which a transformative teaching philosophy and approach may be realised in the studio music environment. In this way, we hope to inspire reflection by teachers (and by extension, their institutions) on the nature and value of transformative learning, and how it may be fostered—and ultimately achieved—in the music studio.

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