Learning and assessment in popular music: An account of the peer learning and assessment adopted in the bachelor of popular music program, Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia. D.Lebler@Griffith.edu.au

This paper explores the aims, process and outcomes of learning and assessment in the study of popular music. A main focus is on the peer panel assessment process used for the assessment of recorded submissions in the Bachelor of Popular Music (BPM) program. The broader BPM context within which the Popular Music peer panel process occurs is described.

The program aims to accommodate the learning practices generally found in popular musicians in the broader community. However, the program is designed to encourage higher education setting, rather than merely introducing popular music as a new content area taught within conservatorium learning structures. These popular music learning practices include a reliance on informal peer feedback learning along with the use of recording as an aid in the development of performance and composition skills. Although access to expert advice and guidance from staff within the BPM program, the creative practice of popular music is largely through the provision of recording facilities rather than being taught in the master/apprentice one-to-one lesson is normal practice in the study of music in higher education environments. This paper identifies the ways in which the process can enhance learning in the formal study of popular music just as it does in professional practice of popular music.

The recording process allows performers to listen to their work in a repeatable and more objective manner than may be possible at the time of the performance when the focus of the performer is on the creation of the work rather than the critical evaluation of the performance.

Panels consisting mainly of students assess the creative component of this course. Qualitative judgments are based on standards embedded in successful commercially released recorded popular music, and quantitative judgments are an implicit understanding of the published requirements of the course. The process of the assessment of students' recorded submissions by the panel is explained and considered in relation to the learning implications of this strategy. It is argued that the involvement of a formal assessment of the work of their peers is an adaptation of informal assessment processes that occur in the popular music outside a formal setting in which popular musicians assess their work with reference to the recorded performances of their peers as well as soliciting feedback from others. The formal Music Production process is therefore an extension of the prior learning experiences of these students where peer assessment is concerned. The skills that are developed through the assessing of the work of peers can also be applied to the study of recorded music and these skills are central to the continuing development of the popular musician. An ability to accept peer feedback and react to it positively is also valuable in the practice of popular music where such feedback is normal in most settings.

Examination of available literature on the study of popular music supports an argument for the inclusion of assessment processes found in the practice of popular music in the broader community as valid and positive higher education contexts. This evidence supports the validity of the BPM peer assessment process while identifying areas of further research that may contribute to its refinement.

Context

The BPM program was introduced in semester 1, 1999 and operates from a purpose built recording studio facility housed in University’s Multimedia building, Gold Coast. Students are selected for the program through an interview and audition. The program seeks to identify applicants with potential in a range of activities connected with popular music including composition, performance and relevant academic and technical skills. The program aims to develop students’ musical and creative potential and accommodate the learning practices commonly found in popular music.

There are four streams of study:

- Audio in which students are trained in the operation of a variety of recording technologies
- Literature in which students study the history and analysis of popular music
- Supporting studies which include information technologies, music software, rhythm, songwriting, and music business
- Popular Music Production which is the major study in the program

Popular Music Production is a practical popular music-making course taken by all students that concentrates on developing students’ creative and performance skills. In the tradition of popular music performance practice, the development of performance and compositional outcomes is largely self-directed. Students are assessed through the submission of a portfolio of recordings and a reflective journal (30%) detailing the intentions, processes and outcomes of the activities connected with their work. They are also assessed on their performance as members of one of a number of peer panels that are responsible for the assessment of a selection of their peers’ recorded submissions (10%).

Literature survey

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Research into the teaching and learning of popular music is a relatively new field and therefore resources are limited. There is a growing body of work in this area that demonstrates there are significant differences between the way musicians learn and the learning approaches found in students of classical and jazz music. These differences include popular musicians on peer feedback and self-appraisal. An exploration of these aspects of learning in popular music necessary in the development of appropriate assessment processes in this area.

Learning styles

In the classical music tradition, learning is clearly based on a master/apprentice model in which students depend largely on teachers to provide direction for their study and feedback on their progress. In a typical conservatorium setting, individual lessons are a major part of the students' learning and feedback from the teacher is an important part of that process. This continuation of the students' learning experiences in music prior to coming to university. A survey of music students at University reports that, when asked about their learning experiences, 66% of students have taken private lessons and 74% relied on feedback from their teachers either somewhat frequently or very frequently. Only 31% feedback from their fellow students either somewhat frequently or very frequently (Daniel 2001, p.220).

This contrasts with normal practice in popular music. An informal show of hands at a BPM master class indicated the half the students attending had experienced private performance lessons, and all agreed that self-assessment and peer-assessment had been the most significant aspect of their prior learning where popular music is concerned. Among those students who had only one or two private lessons while at school, Lucy Green found that popular musicians generally have either limited or no engagement with popular musicians learn. Lucy Green found that popular musicians generally have either limited or no engagement with the view that popular musicians learn in non-traditional ways, mainly through solitary recorded material accompanied by self-directed activities aimed at acquiring the skills necessary to replicate what they hear. Peer learning is also common, where knowledge acquired alone is shared, but the master/apprentice is not.

Green also refers to the embracing of popular music as a content area within the formal education system but points out the informal learning practices that are normal in the study of this style outside structured learning environments are not used as a teaching strategy within formal music education (2001, p.184). It can be argued that popular music can be learned inside a structured higher education environment in much the same way as it is learned elsewhere in the community, e.g. be assisted through a process of facilitation rather than the more intrusive teaching practices of the master/apprentice model.

Feedback in the broader popular music community comes from self-assessment and from peers rather than from an "outside" view. Feedback is by no means missing from informal music practices. Rather, learners assess themselves through process, in relation to their progression measured against their own personal goals and projected performance, that of their peers and the models they are copying. Not only do they assess themselves in relation to such factors, but they also assess themselves by seeking assessment from their peers (Green 2001, p.209).

These practices enable popular musicians to monitor progress for themselves and take responsibility for their own learning. This reliance on self- and peer-assessment in popular music has particular relevance to assessment in the BSc.

Learning through recording

The performances of popular music production students are assessed through recorded submissions. The implications of this are explored later in this paper, but there are also learning impacts from this increased experience of recording process.

The increasing availability of effective, accessible and affordable recording processes is significant in the learning of popular musicians. The development of the compact cassette recorder enabled musicians to record their experiments in their practice, enabling them to play back their recordings with reasonable fidelity. Steve Howe refers to the significance of this process in his development of composition in the early 1980s for the British band “Yes”. He developed compositions through recording using a cassette recorder and selecting sections of improvisations for inclusion in future performances of that piece (Bailey 1992, p.40).

The opportunity to hear performances played back on the recording studio has contributed to the development of popular music in its early days. Elvis Presley recordings in 1954 through to the present. This process has enhanced this development of the early days and the technology of recording, as has been the case with Bob Dylan, The Beatles and Emerson, Lake and Palmer (Hoffman 1983, p.40). The development of compact cassette recorder enabled musicians to record their experiments in their practice, enabling them to play back their recordings with reasonable fidelity. Steve Howe refers to the significance of this process in his development of composition in the early 1980s for the British band “Yes”. He developed compositions through recording using a cassette recorder and selecting sections of improvisations for inclusion in future performances of that piece (Bailey 1992, p.40).

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When recording facilities are available to students they can record their improvisations and compositions, developing through a cycle of recording, listening, modification and recording again. It also enables musicians to listen to their performances, allowing the performer to focus on the outcome rather than the process, thereby eradicating the distraction of performing it. The advent of computer-based recording software has given individuals access to reasonably high quality recording technologies at low cost, enabling formal and informal learning. Green argues, “The provision of facilities rather than tuition is the major contribution of formal education to the development of popular music” (2001, p.146). Learning experienced in this way involves the learner in self-assessment as a contributor to peer feedback for other aspects of the recording.

Assessment

Recording as assessment

“Performance assessment situations are also often problematic for students. Usually, unless some form of recording is involved, there is no lasting record of the event. As a result, many students have nothing to refer back to, other than memories which are often dominated by anxiety, nerves and tension. Potentially, this causes a problem in terms of the opportunity to reflect on their performances. As a result, they often rely on the opinions of external assessors, be they in panel, their teachers, their peers or an audience” (Daniel 2001, p.216).

The most common form of performance assessment in higher education is conducted by staff in a live performance. However, there is some support for the submission of recorded performances for assessment. In her work on the assessment of music, Helen Stawasser proposes that students of music submit their portfolio as recordings on cassette and video tapes. Recent advances in recording technology and increased access to these technologies have increased the potential for these submissions to be professional quality recordings.

In a recorded performance, the student can benefit from the direct feedback derived through playback of the recordings, where multiple attempts can be recorded, the student is able to engage in the developmental process of refining a performance from one take to the next. With recorded submissions, students are able to listen again to their performance. They can make changes to their submissions and take feedback from the assessment process into account. They can archive their submissions for their musical and technical development. These characteristics of a recorded submission are potentially beneficial in the learning process.

Exposure to the recording process can be of particular significance for students of popular music. The dissemination of popular music as recorded product has become more significant with the local environment as live performance opportunities diminished. A study of live performance of popular music in New South Wales states, “Since the mid 1980s, audiences have experienced a decline in the number of music venues. Various studies have identified the sig opportunities for live performers” (Johnson 2003, p.3).

The opportunities for dissemination of musical product by electronic means through the Internet continue to expand as effective types of encoding are developed and as better Internet connections become more broadly available. With the addition of webcasts of live events, the recording process is the first step in the preparation of product to be distributed in this way.

The assessment of creative work by students of popular music as recorded performance would seem appropriate in this context.

Assessment by peers

“It can be difficult for staff to relinquish their monopoly of assessment; one line of defence is that it requires an expert. But students are required to make judgement; they are constantly evaluating their own progress and passing informed on the performance of their peers. Involving them in the assessment of other students is not a new situation, but rather a kind of situation to which they bring relevant experience” (Hunter 1999, p.62).

There is growing acceptance of peer-assessment in higher education, particularly in music performance studies. Hence, the Department of Music at the University of Ulster has been involved with the investigation, development and discussion of peer learning and peer assessment processes since 1991 (1999, pp.51-52). He provides an account of development application of these processes in a variety of classical music study areas since 1995. Their experiences have encouraged peer-assessment from the earliest possible stage. Hunter points out that formal peer assessment process adaptation of students’ existing skills that have developed through the self-assessment of their own performances taking feedback from their peers and audiences into account, and their own experiences in providing informal feedback to the Ulster context, peer assessment is regarded as an important aspect of the learning process that promotes critical thinking a range of other valued learning outcomes.

Daniel states, "It would seem that skills in self-assessment are particularly important in tertiary study when students are encouraged, and able, to develop skills in thinking independently and reflecting on their practice and performance" (2001, p.217). These skills are also developed through the assessment of the work of others, or they are central to the continuing development of the popular musician. An ability to accept peer feedback graciously a
positively is also valuable to popular musicians where such feedback is normal in most settings.

Assessment by peers in the popular music context would seem particularly appropriate given the embedded nature of assessment in the learning practices of popular musicians outside the formal education system.

The BPM methodology

Peer panel assessment of the recorded folio submissions for Popular Music Production replaced staff assessment in 2001 after a period of trials during which the process was developed and refined.

Popular Music Production students submit a CD containing recorded performances for assessment at the end of each course. They may submit work they have composed, performed, programmed, engineered, or produced. Many students submit work which their involvement might be in more than one of these aspects, and some students submit work that they have produced by themselves. Collaborations both within the student community and with artists external to the program are common.

Students also complete a report detailing their specific involvement along with a statement as to their intention with respect to observations on the outcome for each track submitted. They award a mark for four criteria for each track relating to:

- how well the track achieves the stated intention
- how good the track is overall
- how effective the student's contribution is in the recorded outcome
- how significant the student's contribution is in the recorded outcome

The marks for individual tracks are averaged and added to marks for the portfolio as a whole awarded for how well the portfolio as a whole meets the student's intentions (although this will be changed how effective the track-by-track report was in future as an issue for students) and how substantial the portfolio is related to the year level of the student second and third year students submit a minimum of 10, 15, and 20 minutes respectively.

These marks are not included in the calculation of the student's final mark but are intended as a concise representation of the student's perceptions of those aspects.

Students are given a two-hour class on the preparation of their track-by-track report and the peer panel assessment process as documents containing criteria, examples and marking guidelines are posted on the course web site.

Students are assigned a panel of about 9 students drawn equally from all year levels and incorporating as wide a range of experience as possible. Each panel assesses material of about two hours running time, and will not assess material assigned to any other member of that panel. Each panel includes a staff member whose primary function is to ensure that the published criteria are applied. Each member of the panel is provided with the submitting student's track-by-track report and is expected to provide both feedback on each track and marks for each of the criteria as well as marks for the submission as a whole.

The individual assessment comments of the panel members are then collated, marks are calculated and checked for consistency, and the assessment is returned to the submitting student. Staff assesses the performance of the panel member on the basis of the quality of the returned peer panel report and this activity accounts for 10% of the Music Production mark.

Students often comment during peer panel meetings that they have observed strength and weaknesses in their peer assessment of track-by-track reports and these observations will influence their future submissions. They frequently comment on how the experience of being in the role of the assessor rather than the assessed, and they understand the role of the assessor and how the assessment in a broader sense is better, as a result of this experience.

Future research

It would be helpful to gain a deeper understanding of the prior learning of BPM students. The incidence of students having private lessons seems to be higher than that found in the popular musicians interviewed by Green, but much lower than that found in the popular musicians surveyed by Daniel. It may be that students choosing to study popular music in a higher education context do so because they are different in this respect from both students of other forms of music in the higher education system and popular music in the broader community. A better understanding of these differences would provide direction for possible future changes in mechanisms by which performance development is stimulated within the program.

Tracking changes in student perceptions of the value of self- and peer-assessment from before they have experienced the BPM program until their BPM studies are complete would provide a measure of the impact of the peer panel assessment on student perceptions of the value of these mechanisms, and possibly give an insight into possible changes in how students perceive their experience of the program.
to peer feedback as a result of their experiences within the program.

Observing changes in the quality of feedback provided by students in the peer panel process as they progress through the program would give an indication of how effective this process is in developing critical thought and appraisal skills in students. Changes might also be demonstrated by changes in the quality of the students' own track-by-track reports.

Conclusion

The BPM program was designed to accommodate the learning styles of popular musicians within a higher education context. The peer panel assessment process is one of the ways this intention is expressed. A continuing study of how this process contributes to the development of self- and peer-assessment skills in students will contribute to a better understanding of the effects of informal learning practices in a structured educational environment.

Reference list


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