

Exploring Partnerships: A Students as Partners Pedagogical Approach for Fostering Student Engagement Within an Academic Music Course

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Abstract

Student engagement has become an increasing focus for higher music education (HME) in recent times as institutions concentrate on preparing graduates for life beyond their programs. Cultivating effective learning and engagement for first-year Bachelor of Music students is often challenging, as these students predominantly undervalue and deprioritise their academic music courses in favour of practising their craft. ‘Students as Partners’ (SaP) is an emerging field in higher education that may address this challenge due to its potential to foster transferrable skills associated with increased engagement and employability. As an emerging field, there is a paucity of research in this area within HME. This paper responds to the need for further discussions around its potential as a pedagogical approach within this context.

Through a discussion of SaP’s key features and student engagement, it becomes clear that an educator’s role extends beyond assessment and lesson planning to also fostering the attitudes and mind-sets that underpin student learning, such as motivation and conceptions of learning. This approach recognises and respects students as experts in themselves, and values and prioritises authenticity, empowerment and rapport. From this position, it is argued that educators can invite students into partnership, forming effective collaborations to shape engaging learning activities, choose relevant course materials and topics, and design interesting assessment items *with* students, rather than *for* students.

This paper outlines a plan to implement SaP pedagogical approaches within one Australian institution’s compulsory first year academic music course, *Exploring Music*. Exploring Music brings together first year students from different disciplines and involves an exploration of a diverse range of music from different styles, periods

and cultures. Typically, student engagement in this course has been low as they struggle to find immediate relevance of the course to their goals. Incorporating insights into SaP explored herein, this paper conceptualises how SaP has the potential to strengthen four key areas of effective learning: communicating values and purpose; understanding self; developing learning activities and content; and designing effective assessment items. This plan forms the basis of a research project that investigates Exploring Music students' perceptions of, and experiences with the SaP approaches taken, while also exploring their implementation from a practitioner-based perspective.

Keywords

higher music education, pedagogy, student engagement, students as partners, tertiary music

Introduction

Student engagement has become a core focus for higher education in recent times (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014), with more emphasis being placed on pedagogies that actively involve students in their learning (see, for example, Biggs & Tang, 2011). This trend is set to continue as institutions focus on preparing graduates for life beyond their programs. Within higher music education (HME), this involves ensuring graduates are equipped with flexible, innovative and professional skills that will enable them to survive in an ever-changing musical environment (Bennett, 2007; Bennett & Bridgstock, 2014; Shihabi, 2017).

Cultivating effective learning and engagement in first year Bachelor of Music students is especially important, as these students predominantly enter their degree program with aspirations of becoming full-time performers (Tolmie, 2014). This results in students often undervaluing compulsory non-performance courses (Tolmie, 2014), as they struggle to recognise their direct benefits, and often deem academic

skills irrelevant to their performance goals (Gaunt, 2010; Presland, 2005). While some argue that students are disillusioned with traditional teacher-focused pedagogies that are often associated with classroom-based courses (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Garrison & Akyol, 2009), others note that students typically arrive with consumerist conceptions of education (Healey, et al., 2016; Pauli, et al., 2016), leading to passivity in relation to their learning (Entwistle, 2009). In either case, HME institutions are realising that passive modes of delivery do not lead to educational quality (Grant, 2013). How then might educators increase the value of compulsory academic music courses and construct them with student engagement in mind? This paper investigates the potential for a *Students as Partners* pedagogical approach to contribute to answering these questions and to cultivate skills associated with effective and lifelong learning.

Students as Partners

Students as Partners is a process that involves “staff and students learning and working together” (Healey, et al., 2014, p. 7) with the aim “to engage and motivate students to study their subjects at a deep level, and focus on learning outcomes” (Pauli, et al., 2016, p. 6). It is attracting increased international interest within higher education (Healey, et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016) due to its potential to foster transferrable skills associated with increased employability (Crawford, Horsley, Haggard, & Derricot, 2015; Pauli, et al., 2016). As an emerging field, there is a paucity of research within HME investigating the implementation and outcomes of *Students as Partners* projects, and a need for further research within this context (Luce, 2001; Shihabi, 2017). While *Students as Partners* can take many forms (see Healey, et al., 2014; 2016) the focus here is the adoption of a *Students as Partners*

pedagogical approach (hereafter referred to as SaP) to the design of courses (taken here to mean individual subjects within a broader degree program).

SaP recognises that while an educator may be the pedagogical and content knowledge expert, students are experts of themselves, possessing a deep awareness of their histories, interests, expectations, current skill levels and goals (Healey, et al., 2014). The educator thus draws upon these insights to collaboratively create learning activities and assessment items *with* students, rather than *for* them. This, Luce (2001) suggests, can increase student engagement, resulting in stronger learning outcomes. In this way, the course curriculum becomes a dynamic and interactive process, rather than a static product to which learning and teaching are bound (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006).

Before inviting students into partnership, it is important for educators to remain aware that student engagement for learning hinges on students possessing adequate intrinsic motivation (Entwistle, 2009). As Kolb and Kolb (2005) acknowledge, “To learn something that one is not interested in is extremely difficult” (p. 208). Intrinsic motivation has two components, both of which need addressing if student engagement is to be successful (Coutts, 2016). The first is relevance, which includes building on prior knowledge and aligning learning with students’ goals (Jarvis, 2010; Knowles et al., 2011; Biggs & Tang, 2011). The second includes internal factors such as students’ self-efficacy levels (Vancouver et al., 2008; Schunk, 2012), conceptions of learning and teaching (Trigwell & Prosser, 2014) and mind-sets (Dweck, 2007; Dweck & Master, 2012). It is thus arguably part of an educator’s role to foster the attitudes and mind-sets required for effective student learning. This necessitates a pedagogical philosophy underpinned by authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust,

challenge, community and responsibility (Pauli, et al., 2016) and an emphasis on the relationship between educators and students (Matthews, 2016).

Keeping these factors keenly in mind, this paper now turns to a plan for practically embedding SaP into a compulsory first year course within one music degree program. Through the considerations that follow, I aim to contribute to the broader discussion on student engagement and Students as Partners within HME and to prompt consideration of how educators might enhance their own teaching practices.

Context: ‘Exploring Music’

Exploring Music brings together first year music students from different disciplines, including jazz, classical, opera, music technology and composition. The course is designed to introduce students to various ways of understanding issues relating to music while exposing them to the variety of topics they might explore in more depth throughout their degree. It involves an exploration of a diverse range of music from different styles, periods and cultures and the broader issues (for example, social/political/technological) surrounding them, with weekly guest lectures delivered by internal staff with expertise in the topic areas. These are supported by smaller tutorials that explore issues more deeply and provide assistance with assessment tasks.

The course has typically been met with low student engagement in relative terms, with ever-dropping class attendance numbers as the trimester progresses (from approximately 100–120 students early in the trimester to less than 50 towards the end, with a total class enrolment of around 160 students. Tutorials, with 25–30 students enrolled in each, were down to less than five per class in the final week), and last-

minute assessment preparation with little engagement with assistance offered through tutorials and extra drop-in sessions with library staff and the student success officer.

Over the last few years there has been a concerted effort to increase student engagement in *Exploring Music*. Firstly, in acknowledgement of students being unable to concentrate for extended periods of time if not actively involved (Bunce, et al., 2010), the lecture format has evolved from a 2-hour lecture in 2015 to a 90-minute lecture in 2016, and a further shift to a 60-minute class in 2017. The 2017 iteration also embedded more active learning strategies, reducing the formal lecture time to 20 minutes, flanked by time for questions, reflections and discussions to invite students to engage with the week's topic more actively (Ambrose & Lovett, 2014; Biggs & Tang, 2011; Dunlosky et al., 2013; Laurillard, 2013). As convenor, lecturer and tutor for 2018's iteration of the course, I have met with its previous convenors, the senior learning and teaching staff at this HME, and the university's learning and teaching advisory group to evaluate the course and plan for its continued enhancement. Drawing on these discussions and applying insights from student partnership, the following sections explore specific SaP approaches I aim to incorporate into *Exploring Music* over the course of the trimester.

Exploring Music: Approaches to Learning Activities

Communicating values and purpose.

Hattie (2011) and Hussey and Smith (2003) explain that transparency around the purpose of a course, the expectations and criteria around assessment items, and alignment of learning activities is essential for engaging students with their learning. Within a SaP environment, Pauli et al. (2016) also highlight the importance of

effectively “communicating the underlying values of a partnership ethos, how these are embodied within the learning environment, and the freedom for partners to act based on these values” (p. 10).

As is standard practice, previous iterations of Exploring Music have used the first week as an introduction and overview to the course, including expectations and approaches the course takes. In 2018, I will include activities that prompt students to reflect on their expectations of themselves, of the course and of me as their teacher, and provoke thought around their roles as students. This type of discussion supports effective learning because, as Kember and Kwan (2000) observe, there is “a relationship between students’ conceptions of learning, their approach to study tasks and the eventual learning outcomes” (p. 469). I will facilitate discussions through the use of real-time online surveys (Monk et al., 2013), which will allow students to gain insights into the cohort as a whole, as well as smaller discussion groups, which will enable them to learn about others’ positions more deeply and to think about how they differ to their own (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). This will lead into a discussion on partnerships with the aim of creating mutual understandings of expectations and roles.

In order for these activities to lead to effective partnerships, I will also need to evaluate my own expectations and to continually reflect on how to best adapt to students’ levels of readiness, respecting their positions while also guiding them to engage more critically (Healey, et al., 2014; Mezirow, 2003). I will support the students through this process by becoming an ‘expert learner’ and ‘coach’ (Zinck, 2009), modelling effective learning, demonstrating skills and introducing material as needed. This will entail leading discussions through effective questioning (Elder & Paul, 2010; Cranton & Taylor, 2012), and inviting students to challenge and question

the positions I pose, creating a supportive environment where students feel safe to take risks and explore (Jarvis, 2010). I envisage this will be a steep learning curve as an educator, and similarly to Luce (2001), I expect it will be an uncomfortable and challenging, but also a deeply rewarding experience.

Students' understanding of self.

In previous iterations of Exploring Music, from week 2 the class focus moved to exploring a specific musical style or topic. Given that students' dispositions and motivational styles influence the way they perceive, and thus experience learning (Dweck, 2007) and SaP pedagogies (Pauli, et al., 2016), and being mindful of the prevalent low motivation for this course described earlier, I feel I have a responsibility to first provide students with the opportunity to explore and share their motivations and musical tastes. As with week 1, this will afford me the opportunity to build rapport with students, and will also enable them to understand the relevance of this course to their development as musicians. In week 2, I will therefore introduce the new topic, *musical reference points*. Students will be encouraged to reflect on how their musical preferences have been shaped and how their motivations influence their engagement with musical styles that are not their own. Through discussions on similarities and differences within the class, I will challenge them to discover the relevance of musical styles not their own and to be curious about understanding others.

SaP approaches to learning activities and content.

In 2017, the 20-minute guest lectures were professionally recorded so they could be drawn upon as resource material for future offerings. In 2018, I will thus incorporate a flipped learning model (Grant, 2013; O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015), moving from

'lectures' to 'seminars' that focus on active learning. My previous attempts to implement a flipped approach within tutorials have been unsuccessful, which is perhaps not surprising, given the history of low student engagement in this course. This may be partially due to poor time management on the part of students (Horstmanshof & Kimitat, 2007), partially due to passive learning (Entwistle, 2009), and partially due to their competing priorities and a focus on performance practice (Tolmie, 2014). A flipped approach warrants further experimentation, however, as Healey, et al. (2014) explain that through the independence and self-negotiation involved in a flipped design, students are more likely to engage in partnerships. As responsibility and ownership of learning cannot be taken for granted, I will provide students with the option of viewing each week's recording in the lecture theatre directly prior to the seminar. It is then up to them to choose whether they watch them independently, or attend the scheduled screening.

SaP is by definition a learner-centred approach to pedagogy (Kember & Kwan, 2000), with lessons that are fluid and dynamic, rather than restricted by specific content or fixed structures. I will therefore share the responsibility of finding class materials, such as videos, music and online resources, with students. Within each week's topic are myriad social, cultural, political, economic, technological and artistic contexts that could be explored, and so this approach provides an opportunity for content to be most meaningful to students. When exploring resources and associated ideas, I aim to create a 'culture of inquiry' (Snyder & Snyder, 2008), with a focus on conversational learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) rich with questions, open discussions, problem solving and reciprocal communication. This approach will encourage student to engage cognitively and metacognitively with their learning (Elder & Paul, 2010; Ettlting, 2006; Taylor, 2008). In this way, partnership will involve collaborating with students

to determine the direction of learning in the context of the week's topic, using "interdependent thought, dialogue, deliberation, negotiation, and compromise to develop socially-constructed knowledge, foster interdependent personal relationships, and share the authority of constructed knowledge" (Luce, 2001, p. 22).

Envisaging this level of student engagement in class, and relying on their involvement to source materials necessarily requires a willingness for me to accept discomfort, challenge and uncertainty within the lesson environment. Whitworth et al. (2007) aptly describe this as "dancing in the moment", which is characterised by "listening at a deep level, with intuition tuned high...[to] be flexible and unattached, to stay curious about the unfolding conversation and adjust instinctively." While students may initially resist actively participating, Luce (2001) provides encouragement, arguing that "the teacher's commitment and dedication to collaborative learning principles as a means of improving student education is essential and worthwhile" (p. 21).

Exploring Music: Approaches to Assessment Design

HME has been gradually moving away from traditional assessment items that test students' knowledge recall to authentic assessment items that are learning experiences in themselves. Assessments that fall into this category provide students with choice and require deep engagement with tasks (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and critical reflection of their changing understanding (Brown & Race, 2013).

In 2017, a reflective writing assessment item was introduced into Exploring Music. Students were expected to surpass content recall, making connections to their prior

knowledge and/or experiences, and linking to future actions as a result of their newfound understanding of topics explored. They were required to submit three times over the trimester, with a choice of which styles of music explored in the course they would write about. In 2018, I will keep this assessment item, but will require the first submission to focus on week 2's topic (i.e., understanding how their conceptions of learning and mind-sets influence their engagement with the course and with genres of music not their own). While this takes away some freedom of choice, it encourages students to critically reflect on their perceptions early in the course and how they might impact their engagement with musical styles other than their own. This will potentially prepare them to engage with the rest of the course, and at a minimum will expose them to ideas associated with self-identity and reflection. The other two submissions, as with 2017, will provide students with choice over which musical styles they reflect on.

As Exploring Music is a music literature course, academic writing skills are a required learning outcome, assessed through a written essay. Students have often appeared disinterested in the essay questions presented, failing to see the relevance to their musical education or future, or have lacked understanding about how to approach the task successfully as well as the motivation to seek assistance. With this in mind, and using SaP as an extension of authentic assessment, I will invite students to work collaboratively with fellow students and myself to devise a range of three to four essay questions to choose from (Healey, et al., 2014). In relation to this style of partnership, Pauli et al (2016) explain the importance of respecting each student's current degree of readiness to participate in such partnerships. Balancing inclusion

with readiness likely involves providing students with different levels of involvement and appropriate levels of guidance.

I will allocate two or three tutorials, depending on student needs, to the task of devising essay questions. This will include a discussion on backward design and constructive alignment (Angelo, 2012; Biggs & Tang, 2011), connecting the task to course learning outcomes and objectives, and the marking criteria. This allows students to understand the task, the criteria and associated learning outcomes more intimately, potentially cultivating increased motivation around the assessment item (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). I will guide students in their understanding of features of an appropriate essay question (for example, ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, versus ‘what’ questions) and provide opportunities for them to share their interests and ideas with others. Students will then choose one of the resultant topics for their assessment, ensuring that students who did not participate in the creation of essay questions are not disadvantaged. The remaining tutorials will stay dedicated to assessment preparation, exploring essay topics in depth and providing support in the development of academic skills.

Final Thoughts

I believe our role as educators is to plant seeds for change. We cannot *make* students hold conceptions of learning that align with effective learning, nor can we force them to engage with active learning or participate in partnerships. We can, however, provide a space for exploring ideas, model and scaffold the thought processes and skills required for critical engagement with these ideas, and invite students to collaborate in the development of learning experiences.

Within the Australian HME institution that I belong to, pedagogies that foster student engagement, autonomy of learning and critical self-reflection are being implemented across the program, including within industry-based courses (Tolmie, 2013) and one-to-one instrumental and vocal performance lessons (Carey, Coutts, Grant, Harrison, & Dwyer, 2018). Including a focus on academic courses, such as *Exploring Music*, has great potential to enable stronger alignment in students' educational experiences across their program, further strengthening learning outcomes and better preparing students for the rest of their degree program and beyond.

The approaches explored in this article are just some ways SaP may be realised within a Bachelor of Music academic course. The more educators disseminate ideas and experiences with SaP, critically inquiring into their impact on student learning, the challenges faced and the lessons learned, the more potential this has for the professional development of other educators. This paper thus forms a foundation for possible future research that investigates *Exploring Music* students' perceptions of, and experiences with the course learning activities, assessment items and learning outcomes described above, while also exploring their implementation from a practitioner-based perspective. I am excited to discover what unfolds through *Exploring Music* in 2018 and to share these experiences with the broader HME community in due course.

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