Surgery or Studio: Music Teaching-learning in a Regional Conservatorium, NSW, Australia

Christopher Klopper
Griffith University (Australia)
c.klopper@griffith.edu.au

Bianca Power
Charles Sturt University (Australia)
b.power@griffith.edu.au

Abstract
This study documents and analyzes the environment where music education happens in a regional Conservatorium in New South Wales, Australia. The study aimed to gain insight into the structure, nature and professional practice of a regional conservatorium, and identify innovative pedagogical possibilities. An ethnographic case study was undertaken over one year, with intensity ranging from weeklong immersion schedules to occasional short-term observation of activities. Schwab’s (1969) commonplaces of schooling (Milieu, subject matter, students and teachers) were applied as *apriori* themes, providing a scaffold for preliminary classification and further exploration of the data. Empirical themes were identified as they emerged through data analysis, and subsequently applied. A dominant finding of the study underscores that relationship is at the heart of curriculum transfer in the music studio.

Keywords
Regional conservatorium, professional practice, teaching-learning music, commonplaces of schooling, ethnographic case study

Introduction
Regional Conservatoriums of Music New South Wales (NSW), Australia are unique in that they are not associated with a tertiary institution and are part-funded by The NSW Department of Education and Training. No other Australian state or territory funds or partially funds non-tertiary conservatoriums located in regional areas. Regional Conservatorium teach across wide geographical areas requiring specialist teachers to travel vast distances in order to provide students in outlying communities, villages and cities with access to them. Despite these continued efforts very little systematic inquiry has been directed toward music studios, especially those outside the auspices of a sheltering institution such as a university or metropolitan conservatorium. This study documented and analyzed the environment where music education happens in a regional Conservatorium in New South
Wales, Australia. The study aimed to: gain insight into the structure, nature and professional practice of a regional conservatorium; and identify innovative pedagogical possibilities.

Review of Literature

NSW Regional Conservatoriums are most often the principal provider of music education services for their region by servicing schools, individuals, and the wider community through specialist instrumental and vocal training with emphasis on the music education of school-aged students and curriculum support for schools. Music learning in studio contexts remains largely outside the realm of curricular review or pedagogical scrutiny (Montemayor, 2008). Discussing provision of music education in private studios, Thompson (1983) and Glaros (2006) assert the need for innovative and motivational methods to hold the interests of students, and the role of studio teachers in “keeping with the times.” The teacher-student relationship has been seen as crucial in determining the level of expertise a pupil is able to acquire (Hallam, 1998). Lierse (2007b) identified teacher-student relationship as an important factor in developing the whole student. The necessity of this relationship changing as students mature and move through the stages of learning has also been identified (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Davidson, Moore, Sloboda, & Howe, 1998; Lierse, 2007b; Pitts, Davidson, & McPherson, 2000). Additionally, Creech and Hallam (2009) assert the potential of parent-teacher relationships to enhance the outcomes for students, teachers, and parents alike.

The music studio setting is often not perceived as a community due to the primarily individualized nature of instruction (Lierse, 2007b). Peer influence and interaction is a key factor in the sense of “community” in the music studio, particularly among adolescent students (Barr, 2007; Keeler, 2011; Lierse, 2007b; Montemayor, 2008). The importance of preparing students for musical life beyond the private studio through fundamental guidance on instrumental teaching; and opportunities for ensemble music making was confirmed in the literature (Ford, 2009; Keeler, 2011; Mahamuti, 2009).

Bridges (1988) conceptualized private studio teaching as the “backbone” of Australian music education, acknowledging “many children and older students owe their personal musical development primarily to studio teachers who give individual lessons” (p. 49). Despite its fundamentality to music education in the Australian culture, the private music studio environment is a neglected area of research in music education (Lierse, 2007a).

Method

This ethnographic case study relied heavily on fieldwork, with intensity ranging from weeklong immersion schedules to occasional short-term observation of activities. Observations, semi-structured interviews with the Executive Director and teaching and non-teaching staff (n=5), and informal interviews with students (n=20) and parents/caregivers (n=5) were conducted.

Schwab’s (1969) commonplaces of schooling (Milieu, subject matter, students and teachers) were applied as apriori (deductive, pre-determined) themes, providing a scaffold for preliminary classification and further exploration of the data. Empirical (inductive) themes were identified as they emerged through data analysis, and subsequently applied.
Results and discussion

*Milieu*

Milieu refers to the context or setting in which the regional conservatorium exists. The components include:

**Governance, Management, Finance and Partnerships**

The Conservatorium is located in the West Wing of the Court House. The Court House is a grand architectural work built of sandstone and is strategically central and commanding in this regional city of NSW. There appeared to be a great sense of industry about the Conservatorium, which on closer examination revealed the happenings to be that of the Court House and not the West Wing where the Conservatorium is located. Attendance at the Conservatorium is with purpose. That is to receive tuition. People attend to gain a service for which they pay, and it appears that this dominates and overrides the sense of relationship and community. I later learned that there is no central place to congregate, to connect, which contributes to the perceived lack of relationship and community. “*There’s also no room to loiter here. You know, the foyer... you see how big that is! You’re lucky to get two people in there*” (Interviewee). Having spent numerous days and hours immersed in this community it reminded me of a doctors’ surgery. There is an overall practice with individual practitioners utilizing the facilities. Their patients (students) come, present symptoms (rehearse), receive diagnosis (commentary) and are presented with a script (invoice). The General Practitioner, or in this case the Music Teacher, does not take responsibility for the administration of the practice. The administration office collects the fees and administers payments to the teachers.

Due to the large number of teaching staff teaching at various times during the day and week, and in a range of available venues within the West Wing, there is little opportunity for all staff to be together. This was particularly noticeable while sitting in the staff common room. I asked of the teachers: “*So there’s no formal mechanisms at this institution to allow for collaboration and sharing of ideas between staff?*” and the repeated response was “*Not that I’m involved in, not that I know of*. One of the teachers commented: “*Well, I suppose we have to communicate with the administration staff here, even if it’s only, you know, once a fortnight to get paid*” (Teacher), highlighting the surgery transaction mind-set and not one of relation.

**Opportunities for music instruction and related activities**

In the Strategic Plan 2006–2009 (Mitchell Conservatorium Inc., 2009b), the Conservatorium asserted to provide students with: “professional music teachers, early childhood music learning and enjoyment, other school age and adult music learning and enjoyment and lifetime opportunities for music development” (p. 2). On an information pamphlet (Mitchell Conservatorium Inc., 2009a), the following activities were listed: Individual tuition, group tuition (various ensembles have been listed), early childhood music, music therapy, Alexander technique and instrument hire.

The conservatorium offers a service to regional, rural and remote NSW schools that may not otherwise have access to music education through supporting music specialists to travel to the schools. This program is primarily music focused but affords the freedom to tailor the program to what the schools want, whether they want the dance, movement, or a bit of
drama thrown in there as well. This is an illustration of the Conservatorium going to the community as opposed to the community coming in and becoming organically a sense of “community”.

Parents
A few of the teachers encouraged parents being actively involved in their children’s music. Parent involvement reinforces the child’s music learning and concretizes the relationship, and the value of what they’re doing. The relationship automatically changes, when parent and student are side-by-side in a classroom. Suddenly the child is not just practicing in isolation, and getting lost, but a musical interaction has been forged. This musical interaction is between a parent and a child and the teacher “it’s a …a pleasant social event and it helps to facilitate the situation” (Teacher).

Subject matter
Subject matter constitutes the movements and ideas that focus on what is taught and learned in the regional conservatorium.

Standards
Currently there are no set standards, syllabus or curriculum followed. Pre-established curricula such as AMEB, Kodaly, Suzuki and NSW Creative Arts syllabus are currently used. This provides opportunity for these curricula to be adapted to meet the needs of the teacher and student, placing responsibility firmly on the teacher to establish and develop a curriculum based on his/her own knowledge and experiences.

Core knowledge
A significant theme was the perceived need to prepare students for a life beyond the conservatorium. Teachers spoke about “trying to encourage people to play music for life, to keep playing” (Teacher). Not just as a performer but for life: “If you can cooperate during a piece of music you’ve probably got a good chance of being able to cooperate in other situations as well” (Teacher).

Assessment
Formal assessment is only offered if a student elects to participate in grading systems (AMEB, Trinity, RSCM): “I’m running along the lines of that grade system, so I know where they’re up to as far as ability wise goes” (Teacher).

The conservatorium requires all teachers to provide a progress report to parents biannually. There is no template for this report and it is up to the teacher to offer an assessment of the student’s progress. When discussing the effectiveness of this reporting to parents a teacher commented: “I think the reports are somewhat superfluous if you had a lot to do with the parents, but you still have to do the, the formality of it and all this kind of thing”.

Students
In considering Schwab’s third commonplace of schooling, students, trends and issues are related to those for whom the regional conservatorium exists.
Recruitment of students
Two main modes of recruitment occur through either active recruitment or positive peer pressure. Not only is it challenging to find a medium that connects with all potential students, but also the same difficulty is experienced when advertising concerts that in turn would profile the organization.

A current strong mode of recruitment is the in-school-testing program. The format has changed over time to be more of a demonstration than a testing, followed by instrumental tryouts. The outcome is hoped to be the same, which is that students go home and say, “Mummy, Mummy I want to learn the flute, send the form back in”.

Student expectations and engagement
Students expressed the importance of “keeping it fun” during lessons and the need for teachers to consider students’ other obligations such as sport when offering ensemble performance opportunities. A further consideration is of children who live in rural areas and need to travel to get to town. This adds another dimension to be understood by the teacher and accommodated.

Child protection
For many of the teachers, the current physical environment they teach in does not comply with child protection requirements. One teacher felt strongly about this and described his practice: “I leave my door open whenever I teach, or I have ... if I have a parent in there. When I teach I have my windows widely open or the blinds … I don’t teach behind blinds, that sort of thing”. Challenges of occupational health and safety, duty of care and child protection are underpinned by a Code of Conduct which aims to clarify the conduct expected in the performance of all duties and a guide to solving ethical issues.

Teachers
Teachers are central in the conversation about professional practice of pedagogic activities offered by the regional conservatorium.

Teacher preparation
At present there are a number of tertiary institutions in NSW that offer music related qualifications. It is beneficial to note that the majority of awards offered are performance based and not pedagogically oriented. This confirms the findings of Clinch (1983) that the majority of those said to be “qualified instrumental teachers” were trained by institutions whose main objective is to train them to be musicians, not teachers. The level of qualification however affects the rate of pay: “So if you come in and you’ve been to a Conservatorium and you’ve done your four years, then you’re on the full pay and if you come in and you haven’t got a formal training you’re on what we call an Associate rate” (Executive Director). However, for teachers who are affected by the associate rate of pay, they felt confident that working at the Conservatorium offered them more than in a private studio as the Conservatorium provided administrative support to collect and process fees and insurance coverage.

Professional practice
Paramount to the professional practice is the teacher–student relationship through “knowing their students”. The majority of teachers viewed themselves as performer first and then
teacher or mentor second. While this was a strong response of teachers, one teacher shared: “essentially I view my role as an educator being different for every student. Primarily I’m employed as an instrumentalist teacher. I think that’s very specific and if at the end of the day that’s what the parents are willing to pay for and that’s what they want, that’s what I’ll give them, but my role will change depending on the student”. Discussion followed and consensus found that the role of the teacher is multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and most importantly variable for each student. The different roles performed within each teacher-student relationship supports the belief that no one method of teaching could be adopted, but rather methods should be adapted to suit the needs of the student. The ability to adapt or change, for most, is learned over time. This professional evolution for some has resulted in a shift from performer towards teacher: “I’m no longer a performer; I don’t class myself as a performer, even though I thoroughly enjoyed performing. The opportunities to perform are very few and far between, particularly when I am a very busy teacher … Most of the time I’m just a teacher.”

Pedagogic activities
The pedagogical activities offered by the Conservatorium are essentially student-centered. It was expressed that while the student is central to the activities planned, the appropriate direction followed is negotiated between the student’s needs and the teacher’s experience. This dialogic negotiation is crucial in the maintenance of the student-teacher relationship: “I draw on my own experience as a musician and performer and, no doubt, my own training”.

The Heart of Curriculum Transfer in the Music Studio is Relationship
For a curriculum to be student centered it is crucial that the teacher knows, hears and responds to the needs of the student. Using pre-established curricula might offer a framework and a starting point for a curriculum, but effective adaptation can only be achieved through careful consideration positioned on knowledge and experience. Schwab (1969) advocated that the heart of curriculum transfer was in the classroom, however this investigation underscores that relationship is at the heart of curriculum transfer in the music studio. The triangulation of expertise (teacher, performer and musician) is paramount to the connection and interaction between teacher and student. It provides the opportunity for musical interaction and the necessary engagement for a master apprenticeship relationship to emerge. Parental involvement is crucial for success. It is advocated that their involvement be organic and not imposed. The organic nature of the involvement is relational and is worth trialing to support student success.

References


