Practice-centred research training in music: an emerging community of practice in the Conservatoire

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Abstract

Research training could be considered the cradle for developing research culture in the conservatoire. Following the alignment of music schools with universities in Australia there is an increasing expectation that research degrees be available for high-level practitioners best located in tertiary music-making environment. This paper investigates the ways in which the Queensland Conservatorium at Griffith University in Australia has enabled a community of practice in the field of research training. This conservatorium has offered a Master of Music since 2000 and a Doctor of Musical Arts from 2005. Both are classified as research degrees with a major practice-centred component and a text-based component, supported by coursework in the early stages of the programs. The programs have recently undergone an extensive review the paper draws on this and data gathered from research students, graduates, academic supervisors and administrators.

Using the community of practice literature as a basis, the paper reflects on three elements of the review outcomes: i) a domain of knowledge which defines a set of issues; ii) a community of people who care about this domain; and iii) the shared practices that are developing around the issues. These elements are brought together in terms of the community of practice lifecycle: potential, coalescence, maturation, stewardship, and transformation.

Implications for research within the tertiary music setting are argued in terms of institutional imperatives, development of supervisor skills and the enhancement of the student experience. In particular, the paper offers insights about delivery modes (including distance, blending learning and face to face), course content, and the potential for varied practice-centred formats that prepare graduates for professional life beyond their university studies.

Keywords: research, research training, practice-centred, community of practice

Context

This study is located at Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU) in Australia. Established in 1957, the Conservatorium achieved autonomous status as a College of Advanced Education in 1971 and became part of Griffith University in 1991. Prior to the establishment of the Conservatorium Research Centre in 2004, a small number of research candidates enrolled in Master of Music (MMus) and PhD programmes. The Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA) was introduced in 2005. This offering focused on practice-centred research, complementing the research centre’s research supervision capacity in four clusters: artistic practice, music technology, community music; and music education and training.

The MMus and the DMA are structured around practice: 75% of the course work is dedicated
exploring practice in text-based, creative and other formats, with the remaining 25% allocated to coursework. Learning experiences include traditional supervision, practical lessons with experienced practitioners, interaction with visiting scholars and participation in an online, blending learning site locally referred to as “RHDs@theCon.” The site provides a wide range of coherent resources for students including links to administrative resources at the graduate school, suggestions of suitable texts and videos of presentations. There are also student wikis (comprising drafts, diagrams and posts on progress) and the opportunity to collaborate in virtual online colloquia through the site. With a number of distance students and busy practitioners enrolled in the degrees, this site has become critical to the ongoing development of the research community.

More than half of the 80 strong cohort of research students is enrolled in the practice-centred degrees. The first major cohort of 12 students graduated in 2011, and a further group of close to 20 students will complete their programs in 2012. To date the design, progress and saliency of the MMus and DMA have been the subject of a number of peer reviewed publications. Formal review was undertaken in 2011/2012 to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the programs to date, and to ascertain the potential future directions for research and research training in the institution. The review process revealed the emergence of a community of practice in research training.

**Theoretical Framework: Communities of Practice**

This paper draws on the work of Lave and Wenger (2002) and uses their definition of community of practice: “…a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p. 115). Wenger, McDermott and Snyder also note that such communities are comprised of “…group(s) of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al. 2002, p. 4). These have three common elements “…a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in this domain” (Wenger et al. 2002, 27).

A relatively limited amount of literature exists about practice-centred degrees in music, with a handful of studies emerging the last five years (Bresler, 2009; Draper & Harrison, 2011; Hannan, 2008; Harrison & Emmerson, 2009; Polifonia, 2007; Schippers, 2007). This paper seeks to address the paucity of material and comment on perspectives of building a community of practice for supervisors and candidates in practice-centred programs. The aim is to examine the conditions that enabled this community to develop. The central questions explored in the paper are:

1. What are the characteristic features of this community of practice?
2. How did the community of practice evolve?
3. What are the implications for the local and international trends in music research training?
Research design, data generation and analysis
The methodology draws on the author’s experience as a research supervisor and academic manager of research programs at the research site. The formal review process provided an opportunity to interrogate the international landscape in music higher degrees, the national policy and local university setting, and the views of supervisors and candidates in the programs. A mixed method approach (Creswell, 2003) was employed: in addition to reflecting on the developmental insights published in earlier papers, data were gathered from candidate surveys, forums and focus-group interviews across the conservatorium in the period 2008 – 2011. Policy documents, notes and email logs were used to refine the emerging themes, as were informal meetings to discuss student research projects and supervisory issues. Specific conditions for the data generation included:

- Candidate surveys: Two surveys were conducted. The first focused on the one-to-one supervisory aspects of the student project and the second focused on the communal activities such as weekly colloquia and course work.
- Forums: Two supervisor forums per semester were conducted over the period 2009 to 2011. Initially designed as a form of staff development, the forums became an opportunity for dialogue about managing the practice-centred nature of the DMA and MMus.
- Focus group interviews: Students and supervisors attended two focus group sessions in July 2011 at which the findings of the earlier academic papers were presented, along with survey data. The provision of these artifacts provided a means of member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- Policy documents, notes and email logs: Reference to policy, and analysis of email discussion gave further insight into the developing community of practice.

Analysis was carried out via a constant comparative method (Glaser, 1993). Emergent themes were examined against the theoretical frame of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 2002; Wenger et al., 2002) and used to identify the emerging community. What follows is a description of themes that emerged in relation to the three common elements (domain of knowledge; community of people who care about the domain; shared practice), followed by conclusions that pertain to the five stages in the life-cycle of a community of practice: potential; coalescence; maturation; stewardship; and, transformation (Wenger et al., 2002).

A domain of knowledge
Music research is the domain of knowledge for this study. The institution embraced practice-centred music research programs at the turn of last century: in 2000, the MMus program was the first foray by the conservatorium into the research domain. The program submission indicated that

The Conservatorium believes that the advancement and extension of knowledge through collaboration is an important aspect of research achievement in music. This subject aims to progressively develop in the student the highest possible skills in musical practice and research by providing training in advanced musical scholarship, promoting reflective professional activity, and providing opportunities for innovative research and creative accomplishment (Master of Music program catalogue entry).
Similarly, when the DMA was introduced in 2005, it sought to

...provide musicians with extensive experience the opportunity to upgrade their skills and qualifications through research based on their practice. Graduates of the Doctor of Musical Arts program will be able to position themselves within their field of expertise with authority; apply the skills gained to similar contexts; conceive, initiate and conduct substantial artistic research projects independently; provide leadership and authoritative feedback to research of others (Doctor of Musical Arts program catalogue entry).

One of the concerns expressed by students in the early stages of the program was that

There is no trodden path for methodology and format and this is one of the disadvantages as opposed to doing a more traditional PhD where you use the methodologies that fit the problem (Student comment 2009).

As the programs have matured, the type of knowledge being explored has transformed, as evidenced in the quality and diversity of final submissions. There was initial uncertainty as to what the terms “practice-based”, “practice-led”, and “artistic practice as research” implied. This has been replaced by a sense of the centrality of music to the project, and the ways in which other aspects are placed in relation to the creative product. Students reflected in these early stages that the programs were

...trying to adapt practice-based thinking into previously existing, formal academic moulds. I don’t think there is 100% compatibility there yet (Student comment, 2008).

The term “practice-centred” has been borrowed from other disciplines (Woods & Christoffersen, 2001; Rust, Roddis & Chamberlain) but has not yet entered common usage in the music domain. By embracing this term in relation to the DMA and MMus, the potential exists for a fluidity of organization (Antonacopoulou, 2007) while acknowledging the ambiguity, uncertainty and discontinuity of moving from unknown to the known (Clegg et al., 2005). Since taking this approach, new forms of knowledge dissemination have emerged that are not necessarily linear, and serve to ensure that the practice itself, rather than the talk about the practice, is assessed.

Supervisors and students have acknowledged that there are risks involved in such an approach, as reflected in this comment from a supervisor, who found that their stewardship of the students’ projects could be put in jeopardy by pushing the boundaries:

We negotiate our project together and that’s what I find the most challenging part. It’s actually standing up as a supervisor and being accountable for that innovation with the student... That’s what I feel personally is the largest challenge, is taking that risk with the student as a supervisor, it’s a huge step (Supervisor comment, 2009).

As the programs developed, students noted that the institution accepted and understood that diversity was necessary for the submission. This process was assisted by
Agreement on formats and most propitious ways of achieving best practice/ methodologies [that] were apparent early in the degree, including support for performances and technology (Student comment, 2011).

A community of people
The people in this domain are the students and supervisors and, to a lesser extent, the academic managers. The programs were initially attractive to students, with relatively high enrolment numbers. By 2008 a more stable enrolment pattern was established as some candidates withdrew due to matters of workload, lack of basic research training skills and/or suitability for research undertakings (Draper & Harrison, 2011). Since 2008, the DMA candidate profile has continued to increase. This appears to align with the coalescing phase of the community. At the time of writing, around 80 students are enrolled in research degrees, representing 11% of the total university higher degree population and more than 10% of the conservatorium student body. This is in contrast to pre-2003 picture in which the MMus was the small, niche research program supplemented by a handful of PhDs.

The number of staff qualified to supervise projects has remained static at around 15. This represents a logistical challenge for managers of the programs. Each student is required, by university policy, to have two qualified supervisors representing the need for more than 160 supervision allocations. Most supervisors work with between 4 and 8 students, but one has responsibility for 11, and another for more than 20. Reflecting on this level of engagement, supervisors were asked to comment on Leder’s (1995) assertion that in practitioner research “inexperienced personnel [were] being drafted prematurely” (p. 7).

…staffing levels have not matched the growth of research culture and existing supervisory strengths are tested by the nature of the cohort and the range of projects being undertaken (Supervisor comment, 2009).

Students were also aware of the limits of human resources with comments such as “I feel that I was mismatched with my principal supervisor in my first year.” Conversely, others commented that, as they entered the later years of the program:

Supervisory relationships have developed into valued professional and personal relationships despite occasional differences of opinion, perspective and expression. In an environment where DMA students have significant professional background, this seems a healthy thing (Student comment, 2011).

Another aspect of the programs’ maturity is that there has been a more realistic recognition of the workload involved in supervising research students. The institution recognised the need to grow the research programs, and successfully argued for a commensurate increase in workload allocation. In music schools where expensive one-to-one instrumental and vocal tuition is the norm, the opportunity to invest in research training (which brings substantial financial reward to the institution) made sense in terms of stewardship of funds. For new staff recruits, research supervision is built into the job description from commencement and the knowledge of existing staff members passed on through orientation, mentoring and formal supervisor accreditation.
A Shared Practice
The research agenda, including the acknowledgement of the role of research students, has gained currency in the institution. An increasing number of performance teachers have enrolled in doctoral studies, and have also submitted both traditional and creative works in the national research assessment exercise. In addition to the 15 staff members who supervise students, the number of core staff closely involved in the management of research students has expanded to six, each of whom take responsibility for program co-ordination, teaching research methods courses, attendance at colloquium and providing online resources for the RHDs@the Con site. As a consequence, there has been an increase in student engagement: for example, 2011 saw a 33% increase in attendance at weekly research colloquium. In addition, in response to the question “Overall, how effective was the colloquium in supporting you in your HDR program,” 14.3% of students said “excellent”; 14.3% said “very good”; 42.9% said “good”; and 28.6% said “average” (Student survey, 2011).

There has been a mixed reception to the development of online resources in 2010. As one student noted:

I spend so much time doing admin for my job that the second last thing I want to do at home is log on to access materials for my studies, or contribute to a blog: the very last thing is log on to social networking sites (Student comment, 2010).

The online resources feature a podcast of the weekly colloquium session, and this is the medium through which many students are choosing to interact, instead of via text-based lecture notes or attending in person. This web-based community draws together the disparate elements of supervision and demonstrates the advantages of reciprocal peer teaching for both supervisor and student. In this way, distributed supervisory teams work together with higher degree students in coursework and colloquia using different modes of communication. A number of students share documents with their supervisors (and others) through supervision wikis. This is one way to manage the project, check version control, and track contributions students and supervisors have made. Some supervisors also meet through virtual supervision meetings. Distance candidates have particularly benefitted from this approach.

Students in the DMA also take a course in the use of information technologies to shape and disseminate their work. Many students have been initially reluctant to engage in this process, some even transferring to the PhD to avoid enrolling in the course. One of the assessment tasks is to undertake setting up and contributing to a blog. In reflecting on his blog later in his candidature, one candidate stated:

It was originally developed to fulfill a component of my doctoral course work. I had only intended to write a few entries, achieve a good mark and move onto more pressing concerns. This blog has remained with me into my post-doctoral life and I hope that it will continue to educate, inspire and challenge all of us (Student survey, 2011)

The site also houses exemplars of student work. As Hockey & Allen-Collinson (2002) note “With our area, those models are not really around at the moment, so I’m busy nicking proposals
from people in other areas, and then trying to use my imagination, and saying to the student ‘look you can adapt this’” (p. 348). Students have found the “nicking/adapting of proposals” to be one of the most useful aspects of the online environment, one in which practice is genuinely shared.

Regular supervisor forums have provided an opportunity to discuss positive and challenging aspects of supervision. Many supervisors have informally noted that the forums were the first opportunity they had to engage in reflection and co-operative problem solving of supervision-related concerns. As a way of consolidating the community and sharing practice, the institution has established an annual research festival in which local and international students and staff participate in presentations, performances, lectures and social events.

Conclusions
For music institutions formerly known for training high level performers, the expectation of research activity from both staff and students is a pressing concern. Conservatoire teachers are typically ill equipped for the task of research supervision and, as a result, the student experience can be variable. The emerging community of practice documented here is characterised by students and supervisors who have a desire to embrace new approaches, who have set up structures to enhance delivery and engagement, and who constantly reflect for improvement. The community has evolved, in part, through external influences requiring universities to invest more heavily in research and research students. The willingness to explore innovative approaches, often borrowed from other disciplines, has increased the enrolment levels and levels of interaction. This has brought pressure to bear on human and physical resources while providing a critical mass recognised as exemplary by the university and beyond.

The implications of this study for the broader music education environment can be found in the embracing of web based technologies and the investment in people. In addition, national and cross-national collaboration on research training approaches and resources are explored through the sharing of staff expertise and exemplars of student work.

The community of practice described in this paper is still emerging. In terms of community of practice life cycle stages, the potential is still being realised. The academic managers of the program, including this author, have witnessed the coalescence and maturation of the program in many respects. As outcomes from the formal review are implemented, further maturation is anticipated. Stewardship of online and human resources has been evident, though the provision of appropriate physical resources and performance opportunities has yet to be realised. Transformation has been taking place in relation to delivery, provision of exemplars for practice-centred-exegetical models. The first graduates from the programs have begun to take their place in the academic and musical communities, replacing those who have taught them. As such, this community of research training is becoming a vital mechanism for regenerating music education.

References


