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THE MASTER-LESS STUDIO: AN AUTONOMOUS EDUCATION COMMUNITY

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Abstract

In recent times, it has become difficult for even the best conservatorium graduates to achieve the traditional goals of concert performance or secure orchestral positions and this has profound effects on the work practices of musicians. There are important implications for teaching in a conservatorium, in terms of providing a learning experience that prepares for the changing circumstances graduates can expect to encounter. The development of abilities to be self-monitoring and self-directing, multi-skilled and adaptable should be included along with the traditional goals of a conservatorium education. This paper focuses on one conservatorium of music that has begun to accommodate alternatives to the prevailing one-to-one studio practice, the central learning experience of most programs. The paper describes an alternative learning design process within that conservatorium. It is a pedagogical design that relies on the recording process to enable separation of performance from critique. Interest is in how critical reflection on the process and product of creative work is enhanced through self- and peer-assessment, and the development of these skills as an explicit goal of the design.

Keywords

Self-assessment, peer assessment, reflection, music learning

Objectives

This paper describes an alternative learning design for music education. In this model, the creative practice of popular music is developed largely through the provision of recording facilities rather than through being taught in the master/apprentice one-to-one studio lesson format that prevails in the study of music in most higher education environments. Students are selected for strengths in a range of skills used in the creation of popular music; they form a community of practice in which the collective abilities of the students and staff form a valuable resource for learning. This is often a continuation of students' prior informal learning experiences. Autonomous, intrinsically motivated and self-directed learning, including peer learning and assessment, is common in popular music in the broader community. The recording process performs one of the functions of the master in the master/apprentice model, that of providing a potential for meaningful and well-founded feedback. The paper does not propose that all expert input should be denied to students, but it does provide examples of practices that could be adopted with positive outcomes in creative practice environments.

Perspective and Theoretical Framework

The Study of Music

Within the modern conservatorium, both the performance and academic study of music are accommodated in a structure that reflects a largely formalistic and positivist approach (Schippers, 2003). Typically, the one-to-one lesson is the primary location for the transmission of performance skill, where the teacher is responsible for designing a developmental program and is the dominant source of feedback. Classroom teaching of music has been studied in some depth (Hamann, Baker, McAllister, & Bauer, 2000) but there is little published on the effectiveness of one-to-one tuition (Gaunt, 2004). The largely verbal transmission of the teacher's knowledge to the student, demonstration, and the separation of learning tasks into component parts characterise this approach (Ward, 2004). However, mastering the basics and component parts before progressing to a fully fledged performance can divert attention from the whole task onto discrete packages of abilities that remain attached to the individual parts (Claxton, 2002; Langer, 1997), and giving too much information can impede learning by osmosis and induce an analytic self-consciousness which hinders fluent performance (Claxton, 2000).

It is thought that popular musicians learn in non-traditional ways, mainly through solitary exploration of recorded material accompanied by self-directed activities aimed at acquiring the skills necessary to replicate what they have heard. Some peer learning is also common, but the master/apprentice and formal tuition models found in the study of classical and jazz music are relatively uncommon. Feedback comes from self-assessment and from peers, rather than from a teacher. Although popular music has been embraced as a content area within the formal education system, the associated informal learning practices are rarely adopted (Green, 2001).

Recording

The value of recording in the development of music has been known by musicians for some time (Bailey, 1992; Hoffman, 1983; Martin, 1979), and recent developments in neuroscience offer an explanation for how this might operate. What a neuron reacts to is conditioned by content, experience and expectation, and the activity of at least some neurons is conditioned by what other nearby neurons are doing or have recently done (Richardson, 1999). Therefore, recent deliberative thinking about the strengths and weaknesses of a performance will "prime" neurons, influencing subsequent intuitive performances without conscious attention. Our preconceptions and expectations interact with subconscious stimuli to create thought, action and reaction (Bornstein & Pittman, 1992; Bradshaw, 1974).

Recording enables students to perform intuitively, and then switch to deliberative thinking when critically evaluating the recording. The shift is between conscious thought and unconsciously guided action. Performers can listen to their work in a repeatable and more objective manner than is possible during performance, allowing focus on the outcome rather than the process, thereby enhancing the objectivity of self-assessment (Bailey, 1992; Hoffman, 1983; Lebler, 2003). They are able to make master-like assessments of their own work from a 'not performing music' perspective, though it can be argued that the role of the critic requires a performance of its own. Even so, a second perspective is brought to the work, exposing aspects not visible from the perspective of the performance itself, a perspective otherwise provided by a teacher or other audience. It must be acknowledged that the perspectives of performers will still be framed by their aspirations, whereas the audience listens with their own expectations. However, the student is able to focus sequentially on the role of performer and critic. This puts the student clearly in control of the learning experience, creating a master-less studio. The model described encourages reflections on both the process and product of recorded creative work through assessment activities.

Reflection

It is important in the performance of music that reflection occur at times other than when the performance is in progress, to avoid interfering with the intuitive performance flow. Csikszentmihalyi (1991) describes 'flow' as a state that involves a good match between ability and challenge in which the learner is immersed in an activity that can be completed. It has clear goals and provides immediate feedback. Self-directed recording of original work by students ensures a good match between ability and challenge, and the recording provides the immediate feedback that is required for flow to occur.

Reflection is a process that will produce greater coherence between knowledge (learning that can be put into words) and know-how (the intuitive ability to do something) (Claxton, 1999). Reflection enables assumptions to be tested, enriching self-awareness, but students need to be made aware what the point is and be trained in how to do it. It is essential to the development of the ability to learn (Claxton, 1999). Mindfulness is the process by which we observe our own experience carefully enough to be able to spot any misconceptions that may have become entrenched. It can be cultivated by slowing down our mental activity, and being consciously aware of the world of sensations, rather than accepting the first interpretation that comes to mind and acting on it (Claxton, 2000). Mindfulness recognizes that there is not one optimal explanation or interpretation, and demands that we consider a variety of perspectives. Mindfulness leads us to create options rather than make a choice as to the best solution (Langer, 1997).

Consciously thinking about a musical performance while performing limits, our cognitive engagement with the performance to those aspects can be deliberately thought about, denying access to the complex nonverbal intuitive know-how necessary for fluent musical performance. Experimental work conducted by Jonathan Schooler and others has demonstrated this phenomenon (Claxton, 2000).

Assessment

It is well known that assessment has a major influence on the nature of student learning. Learning is likely to be more thorough if learning tasks are holistic and relate well to prior successful learning experiences (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Assessment needs to be both holistic and well aligned with the educational goals of the course (Biggs, 1999). It needs to be based on criteria and standards that clearly define levels of achievement. Standards based on tacit knowledge are common and can be communicated from person to person through joint participation in evaluative activity (Sadler, 2005). They need not be verbalised but can be shared in action. The development of both the inclination and ability to self-assess is important so that students can monitor progress, identify strengths and weaknesses, recognise good work and develop professional judgement (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999; Claxton, 1999; Sadler, 2005).

While there may be some concerns among students about peer assessment when they are first exposed to the idea, some research indicates high levels of student satisfaction and reliability with this kind of assessment (Gatfield, 1999; Liu, Lin, & Yuan, 2002), and in the case of popular musicians, it is a formalisation of the kinds of processes that are used informally (Green, 2001; Hunter, 1999; Jaffurs, 2004). There are a number of established peer and self-assessment processes in use in the study of music in higher education including the Departments of Music at The University of Ulster (Hunter, 1999), James Cook University (Daniel, 2001) and the University of Kingston (Searby & Ewers, 1997). Preparation of students for active assessing is necessary so that they have the resources, techniques and confidence to participate effectively. Evidence should be provided that demonstrates the appropriateness of this method for their circumstances, and the learning outcomes that are produced should be described so that the students know that the purpose is to enhance learning rather than reallocate what should really be the work and responsibility of teachers in their past experience.

In the area of popular music, students are particularly well prepared for expert judgments on matters of style as the standards applied here are the broadcast quality releases they hear on the broadcast media, part of the culture in which they are immersed. When applying these standards to their judgments, even beginning students will usually have had a sufficiently long engagement with popular music to be confident of their stylistic knowledge; it is not usually something they need to come to university to study, but something that they bring with them.

Approaches and Methods

This research is situated in the major study course of a degree in popular music. In the tradition of popular music performance practice, the development of practical skills and compositional outcomes is largely self-directed in this course. Students are assessed through the submission of a portfolio of recorded work (60%) and a reflective journal (30%) detailing the intentions, processes and outcomes of the activities connected with the recorded portfolio. 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%). In this course, assessment is regarded as having an important learning role in addition to its normal evaluative and categorising functions.

Assessment as Reflective Practice

There are a number of activities in the course that require students to reflect on their work and bring their unconscious know-how to the surface through putting it into words. The track-by-track report details students' specific involvement with each track and includes a statement on their intentions, observations on the outcome, and includes self-assessed marking. This report requires students to think deliberately about the work they have done largely on the basis of their know-how and apply critical reflection to their creative process. These marks are not included in the calculation of the students' final mark but are intended as a concise representation of the students' perceptions of their work for the information of the peer panel.

Peer panel assessment enables students to experience assessing in company and develop confidence in their ability to make well-founded judgments. Students are assigned to panels that will include members of all year levels of the course and the best possible spread of areas of specialisation. The recorded submissions of students are assigned to panels that do not include students who have collaborated on that track and submitted it for assessment. The submitting student is not present.

Each panel considers submissions from all year levels. The recorded material is made available on campus to enable students to preview submissions for about a week before formal panel meetings are held in on-campus recording control rooms during the examination period at the end of each semester. Panel members have access to the submitting students' track-by-track reports. One staff member is included in each panel, and the staff assessment is included in the process with no additional weighting. These assessment sessions usually run for approximately four to five hours.

Tracks are marked out of ten for how well they meet the submitting student's intentions, how good the track is overall, how good the submitting student's contribution is and how substantial the submitting student's contribution is, a total of 40 marks for each track. The marks for all submitted tracks are averaged and added to two marks out of ten for how helpful the submitting student's track-by-track report was, and how substantial the submission was relative to the duration expectations for each year level. Marks from all panel members are averaged and the comments collated and returned to the submitting students. This process is managed by the course convenor responsible for the awarding of marks. No moderation of marks has been necessary since the introduction of explicit criteria and marking guides.

Students write a paragraph of feedback on each track they assess and mark it applying criteria and standards. They are required to identify strengths and weaknesses and to frame their feedback in non-confronting and positive language, putting abstract and holistic impressions of a musical performance into words. Individual assessment comments of panel members are collated, marks are calculated, and this feedback is returned to the submitting student. Staff assess students on their performance as a panel member, and this accounts for 10% of the course mark. This assessment reflects the quality of the feedback and how well it meets the expectations of the course. Punctuality, quantity of the feedback and the coherence between the commentary and marks awarded are also taken into account.

A reflective journal is the third way in which students are encouraged to reflect on their learning. It requires students to reflect on their learning throughout the semester, increasing awareness of how they learn. The journal includes a description of their recording projects for the semester, a rationale for what they have chosen to do, critical reflection on the outcome and more general reflection on the learning they have experienced during the semester (Lebler, 2004).

These reflective activities address both the process and product of the students' creative submissions. They work to place the responsibility for learning with the student who is self-monitoring and ultimately in charge of a development strategy, and encourage independent learning that is ongoing, meaningful and adaptable to new situations.

Data

Evaluation

Evaluation of these processes has been conducted through informal consultation with students along with observations drawn from written assessment and evaluation items. Student input has been sought at all stages of the development process, and students have been regarded as partners rather than subjects throughout. Changes — including clearer wording of the criteria, modification of the structure of documentation and publication of a specific criteria/standards-related marking guide — have been implemented to overcome shortcomings identified by this evaluation process.

Impact on Self-evaluation

One of the benefits claimed in the literature for peer assessment is its potential to enhance the abilities of students to conduct self-assessment. Peer assessing, particularly in company, will contribute to the development of enhanced self-monitoring skills (Brown, Bull, & Pendelbury, 1997; Daniel, 2004a; McLaughlin & Simpson, 2004; Searby & Ewers, 1997) and the ability to make judgments of progress relative to criteria and standards is improved (Hunter, 1999; Sadler, 2005). The average marks awarded for peer panel performance in 2005 are similar for all three year levels as shown in Figure 1.

However, the relationship between the self-assessments of students and the marks awarded by peer panels shows improving correlation as students progress through the program as shown in Figure 2. This supports the contention that engaging in peer assessing will improve the ability of students to be self-evaluating.

2005 Peer panel performance by year level

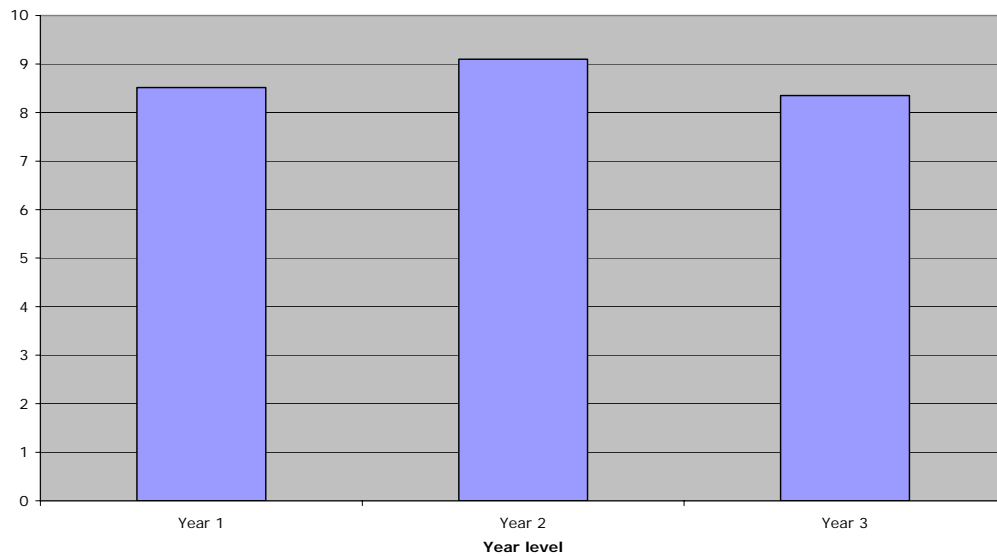


Figure 1. 2005 peer panel performance by year level

2005 Self/peer deviations by year level

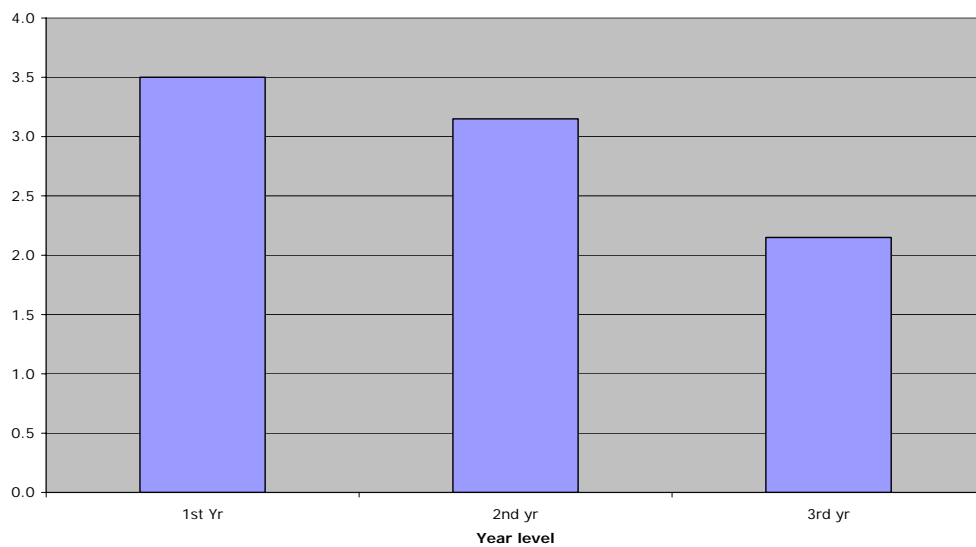


Figure 2. 2005 self/peer deviations by year level

Impact on Student Grades

Assessment by staff is accepted practice in education and comparisons with staff marking are often used as a measure of the rigour of alternative assessment methods. Comparing marks awarded by the course convenor with the marks awarded by the panels of which the convenor was a member in Semester 2, 2004 (involving the submissions of 33 students), 54.6% of folio results were within 1% of the 60% awarded for the folio, 78.8% of results were within 2%, 90.9% of results were within 3%, and 97% of results were within 4%. In Semester 1, 2005 (involving the submissions of 36 students), 44.4% of folio results were within 1%, 80.6% of results were within

2%, 88.9% of results were within 3%, and 100% of results were within 4%. In Semester 2, 2005 (involving the submissions of 34 students), 47% of folio results were within 1%, 70.6% of results were within 2%, 82.4% of results were within 3%, and 94.1% of results were within 4%. This illustrates the close relationship between the marks students are awarded for their creative folio under the peer panel system compared with the marks they would have been awarded had the previous staff-alone marking been continued. Figures 3 to 6 provide a graphic representation of these results.

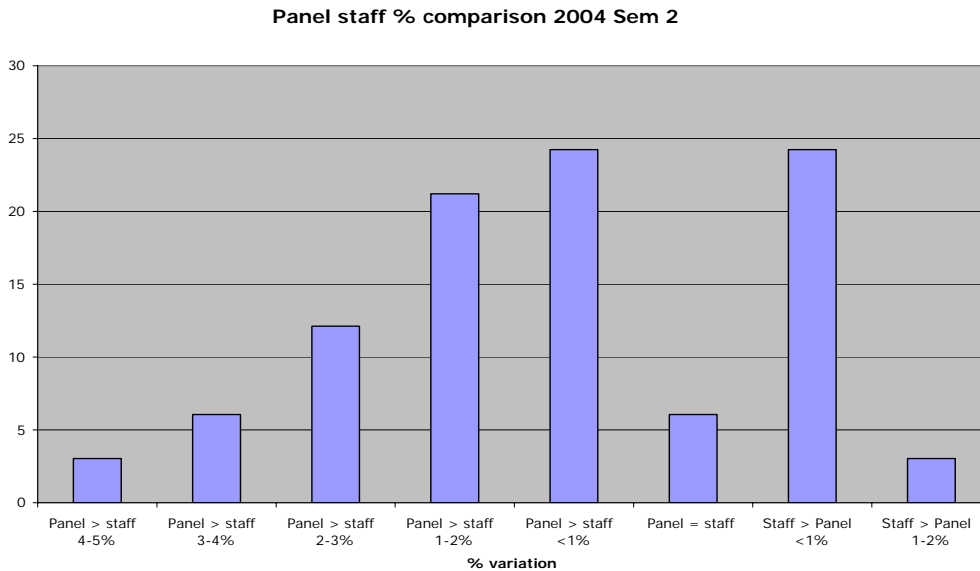


Figure 3. Panel/staff % marks comparison Semester 2 2004

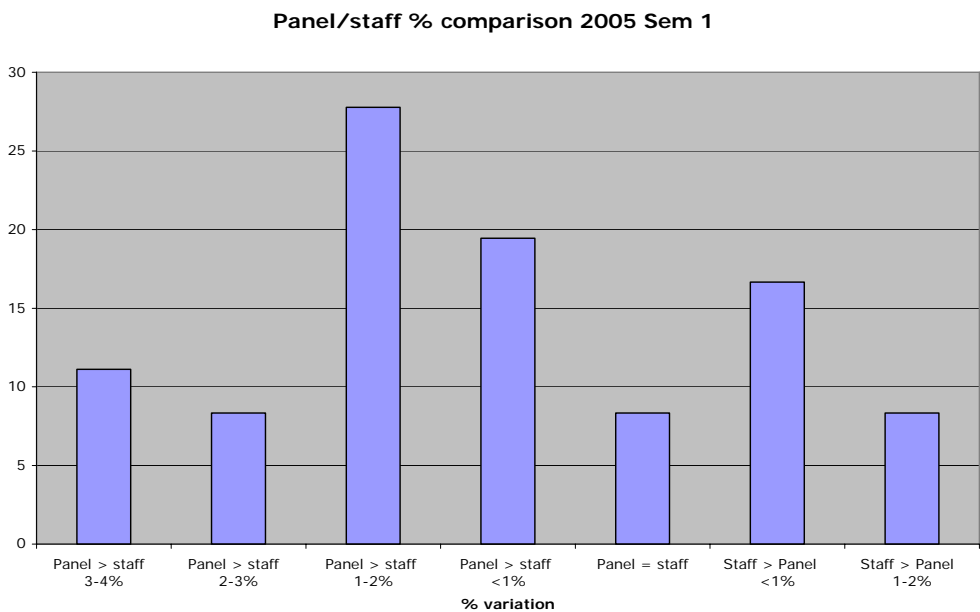


Figure 4. Panel/staff % marks comparison Semester 1 2005

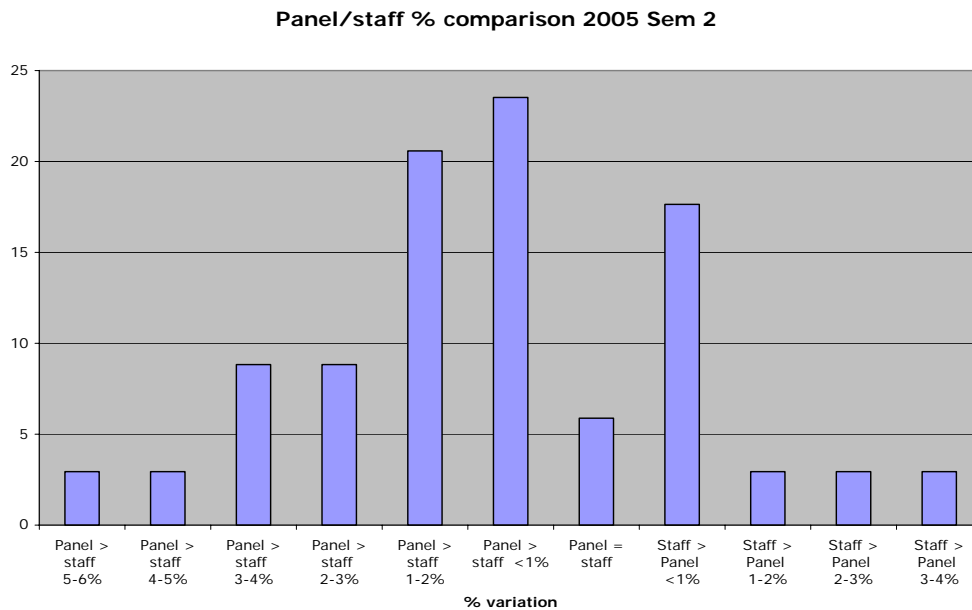


Figure 5. Panel/staff % marks comparison Semester 2 2005

	2004 Sem. 2	2005 Sem. 1	2005 Sem. 2
Within + or – 1%	54.5%	44.4%	47%
Within + or – 2%	78.8%	80.6%	70.6%
Within + or – 3%	90.9%	88.9%	82.5%
Within + or – 4%	97.0%	100.0%	94.1%

Figure 6. Panel/staff marks comparison table

Results and Conclusions: Educational Importance and Implications of the Study

One of the concerns expressed about peer feedback is that students are not qualified to conduct reliable and equitable assessment, that at least some students could be significantly disadvantaged by this kind of process (Daniel, 2004b). In this course, the marks awarded by the peer panel assessment process and those awarded by the staff member of that panel are within a 2% marks range about 80% of the time; any perception of substantial impact on marks is not supported by the descriptive statistics.

It is clear that education has to include a focus on learning to learn if it is going to prepare students for an increasingly uncertain future where whatever content is taught may be made redundant by new discoveries or circumstances. It is not enough to simply know more; people need to be able to learn better, in flexible ways that will enable them to respond to inevitable change. The characteristics of good learning ability described by Claxton (2002) are encouraged by the kinds of activities normally engaged in by popular musicians and are developed by the learning activities described here. These characteristics include resilience, absorption, perseverance, resourcefulness, using a range of approaches, making links, imagining, reasoning, thinking rigorously, making good use of resources, planning, distilling, meta-learning, being able to learn alone and with others, interdependence, collaboration, empathy and imitation.

This course provides an example of the incorporation within a structured higher education context of activities that enhance students' abilities to learn, including self- and peer-assessment, self-directed learning, reflective practice, and both independent and collaborative work that incorporates program-wide learning in integrated creative practice.

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