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The Question of Assessment**

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## **Music Education for the Pre-service Generalist Primary Teacher: The Question of Assessment**

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This paper discusses assessment tasks in music education subjects in two undergraduate teacher education courses, one in Queensland, the other in New South Wales. The aim is to begin discussion amongst tertiary educators about assessment tasks in music courses in teacher education programs. This dialogue is more vital than ever with the impact of so much 'change' affecting university courses, such as revised and changing courses, reduced face-to-face teaching hours, increasing class sizes and constantly changing curriculum documents, which ultimately impact on music education subjects and assessment in these subjects. In this paper a number of assessment tasks are outlined and discussed, indicating the rationale behind the tasks, and how and why these tasks have been modified over time.

This paper will share the experiences of two music education lecturers across two universities in New South Wales and Queensland, as they continue to battle to keep music in the pre-service education degree for future primary school teachers. The focus of the paper will be the assessment tasks in these undergraduate music education courses, and how and why they have been modified over time.

### **New South Wales**

This part of the paper will focus on assessment tasks in a compulsory undergraduate music education subject for pre-service generalist primary teachers, namely three tasks: microteaching, group composition, portfolio. Compulsory undergraduate music education in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) had gone through a number of changes since 2000, where it initially consisted of two music education subjects, with a total of 60 contact hours in music education. In 2001 one of the music education subjects was withdrawn, leaving students undertaking just 30 hours of music education in their four-year degree. In 2005, following further cuts to face-to-face teaching and a review of the undergraduate program, music and dance education became a single subject, albeit with a total of 40 hours face-to-face. Further, in 2006 this multi-arts subject was reduced to 30 hours face-to-face and class sizes increased.

#### *Microteaching*

Amobi (2005) has outlined a number of studies that point to the effectiveness of on-campus microteaching, particularly in its effectiveness for student preparation for field experience and the mastery of discrete teaching skills. Microteaching allows the student to 'try out' teaching skills in a non-threatening environment, where participants (peers and lecturers) can provide immediate feedback. In the microteaching assessment task each student prepared a music lesson plan and taught part of the lesson to their peers. The lecturer assessed the lesson plan and the teaching, with peers participating in the lesson presentations (i.e., singing, playing instruments, playing musical games). In order to ensure a variety of music lessons representing music teaching for different age groups in the primary school, students were asked to sign up for a stage their lesson would be written for (i.e., Early stage 1 – Kindergarten, Stage 1 – grade 1 and 2, Stage 2 – grade 3 and 4, Stage 3 – grade 5 and 6) and nominate a musical concept (duration, pitch, dynamics, tone colour, structure, as outlined in the *Creative Arts K-6 Syllabus*, 2000) that would be the focus of their lesson. Once a student nominated a stage and musical concept, no other student could nominate the same stage-concept combination until all other combinations were taken, thus ensuring a wide spread of presentations. Presentations occurred towards the end of semester when students had experienced a variety of music activities and music teaching experiences in class. Lesson plans were submitted in the final week of workshops, thus allowing students to modify lesson plans based on feedback from the lecturer and peers.

Students were not allowed to present repertoire the lecturer had presented in class. The rationale behind this was that students would then expose their peers to new repertoire. This left some students confused about where they might start to look for a lesson idea, particularly in reference to the *Creative Arts K-6 Syllabus* (2000). Students cited the lack of "real" teaching ideas in this document, which is relatively brief (112 pages), consisting of introduction, rationale, aims and objectives, overview, stage statements for each arts area, outcomes and indicators for each arts area, content overview and scope in the artforms. There is little detail about what might specifically be taught. The most detailed coverage comes in bullet points in the "content overview" section. For example, for Stage 1 music:

Typically teachers of Stage 1 students will:

- provide opportunities for students to sing, play and move to music using their voices, body percussion and percussion instruments
- highlight important musical features of the repertoire used (e.g. repeated patterns, a regular beat, the contour of pitch, sound sources, rhythmic patterns)
- continue to model the use of voice and other sound sources, and extend the range of sound sources that students are exposed to

followed by a further 10 similar bullet point suggestions (p. 63). The more musically experienced students indicated that although they understood what the bullet points meant, they were not the “practical teaching ideas” obviously needed to plan a lesson.

With ten weeks of face-to-face teaching, microteaching presentations occurred in weeks 7, 8 and 9. In 2000 classes averaged 20 students, thus providing students with fifteen minutes to present part of their lesson, followed by some verbal feedback and discussion from the lecturer and peers. However, in future years class sizes increased, thus reducing the amount of time students had to present. By 2005, with class sizes in the mid-thirties, the presentations were adapted whereby students presenting in a particular stage (i.e., Early Stage 1) presented as a group, outlining their lessons, then teaching a snippet of the lesson, usually a maximum of five minutes per student. Due to time restrictions instrumental playing was rare (due to the time it took to give out and collect instruments) and only introductory activities relating to music composition occurred.

Due to these time restrictions I contemplated disbanding the “microteaching” component of the assessment. However, student evaluations revealed that they valued the assessment task. The following two comments, articulated by two individual students, summarised general student consensus:

- You actually get to teach in preparation for prac[ticum] and other future teaching, with feedback
- Seeing peers’ presentations provides a range of ideas for music teaching from Early Stage 1 to Stage 3 that can be used in the classroom.

Due to class size increases and reduced face-to-face workshop time there is an argument for simply dropping the microteaching component, as it compromises workshop time. Students could simply be asked to design a lesson (or lessons) and submit these to the lecturer. However, the microteaching sessions promote a deep, rather than a surface approach, to learning (see Biggs 1999; Prosser & Trigwell 1999). That is, students are encouraged not to simply “pass” the assessment task by doing the minimum that is required. Rather, in presenting to peers students are encouraged to develop their own understanding of teaching music by implementing this in practice they receive immediate feedback. In addition they are encouraged to discuss theirs and others’ teaching presentations, and are encouraged to relate their own music teaching to their peers’ presentations.

### *Group Composition*

The most popular assessment task (based on verbal feedback and formal end of semester student evaluations) with students was the group composition task. Towards the end of semester, in groups of five, students performed an original composition composed by the group to the class, minimum four minutes duration. Students were encouraged to notate the composition (traditional or non-traditional notation), although this was not obligatory. In order to promote reflection on the composition process, each group also provided a written summary outlining how the composition process was negotiated, how the music concepts were used in the composition, and how group composition might be used in the primary classroom. Prior to students commencing the composition, a series of simple group composition tasks were workshopped in class. Although students prepared much of their composition outside of class, in the three weeks prior to performance each group met with the lecturer, played the emergent composition, and discussed ways forward. This is in keeping with the promotion of a deep approach to student learning (Gordon & Debus, 2002). The composition task puts into practice Elliott’s (1995) praxial philosophy of music education whereby the lecturer-teacher acts as musical guide to the students acting as apprentices, and most importantly engaging in an authentic music-making project (the composition and performance of the composition). This reflects what Gordon & Debus (2002) see as the shift from a traditional transmission approach in universities to a constructivist approach that encourages deep learning.

Student evaluations revealed, as Hewitt (2002) similarly found with generalist pre-service teachers engaging in group composition, a high level of enthusiasm for the task and its future use in the primary school classroom. Formal evaluations revealed the terms ‘practical’ and ‘useful for the classroom’ consistently arising in reference to the task. Students also highlighted the value of working and performing with peers, indicating it was non-threatening, fun and creative. A focus group interview with five students indicated that although they had to explicitly think about musical concepts that were being used, it went beyond that to what they believed music should be all about: ‘having fun and

being creative.’ The group also highlighted the importance of peer learning in the group: ‘It was great having a musician in my group, she was able to keep the beat for us and help us stay in time, which was really important. Without that the composition would have bombed.’ Similar issues were revealed by Hewitt (2002) in his study; that is students identified the need to master issues relating to the “physical activity of performing music” such as time-keeping, directing entry and management of dynamics (p. 35). It was through the group composition task that my students revealed they achieved mastery in this area: “You help each other, you just practice and practice until it works, in a way where you don’t judge or put down people in your group.”

Few changes occurred in this assessment item from 2000 to 2005. Earlier on, more time was devoted in class to groups preparing their composition, with lecturer acting as facilitator. However, with reduced hours students simply spent more time rehearsing, usually immediately before or after class. In 2005, with the “merger” of music and dance into the one subject, students were also encouraged to incorporate dance elements into their composition. As dance and movement had been a part of many students’ compositions in previous years, the addition of dance was not viewed as problematic. The difference in 2005 was that students were explicitly incorporating dance into the assessment task. As a result some students allocated themselves dance- only roles in the composition, while others were the musicians. Although this allows students to choose (or negotiate) their strengths, it also discourages all students from being fully engaged in both the music and dance components of the task.

### *Portfolio*

Throughout the various permutations of the music education subject students were asked to build a portfolio relating to their music learning and music education, a working document that could be used on practicum and when they graduate. The portfolio has included, over the five years, various combinations of:

- Lesson plans
- Lesson ideas (i.e., teaching strategies, music games)
- Reflection on the *K-6 Creative Arts Syllabus*
- Personal philosophy of music education statement
- Reflection on personal music learning throughout the semester
- List of resources with rationale for selection
- “Plain English” statement outlining the importance of music in the primary school.

The portfolio began as a loose document where students reflected on their own music learning, music education, and other assessment tasks over the semester. Student feedback was mixed, with a number of students highlighting that 1) the reflective portfolio was used in too many subjects within the degree and 2) a portfolio should include material that can be used on practicum, including material not presented in class. As a result the portfolio moved beyond being a reflective document to a portfolio of both reflection and material (i.e., lesson plans, teaching ideas, resource evaluation) that could be readily accessed for use in the future. The portfolio was not just a collection of artefacts. Rather, students reflected on how each artefact was to be used (i.e., stage suitability, how the piece could be used, how it developed competency in manipulating musical concepts), thus demonstrating their growth and understanding in music education. In particular the personal philosophy of music education statement was added to ensure that ongoing personal reflection on learning was occurring (Francis, 1997).

In 2005, for the first time, the portfolio was not used as an assessment task, due to increasing class sizes (mid 30s) and the time it took to assess a portfolio (from 45 minutes to an hour). Instead students were given an end of semester examination, which was easy to administer and relatively easy (and quick) to mark. At the end of semester debriefing session it became apparent that the students were not engaging in personal reflection of their learning in music as previous cohorts had, indicating that for the future the portfolio might again be used, perhaps using peer and self assessment as strategies to alleviate the amount of time needed to marking these documents.

### *Students on Practicum*

When supervising students on practicum it was refreshing to not only see students teaching a music lesson or integrating music into their teaching, but using repertoire and experiences from the music education subject. Comments revolved around: 1) I’m teaching \*\*\*\* that you demonstrated and workshopped in class, 2) I’m using a musical game and song from my music portfolio, and 3) I’m trying a group composition activity with my class. This suggests that the portfolio and group composition assessment tasks had an impact on these students’ teaching.

### Queensland

In 1999, students in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree undertook one dedicated music education course and one arts education course with a total of 104 hours of music/arts education courses. The music education course was taken in the second year of the course, and the Arts education course in third year.

In 2000 the Arts education course was cut to allow time for a behaviour management course. This left the music education course with a total of 52 hours of contact in the second year of study. In 2004 a new Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree was commenced. After many hours of debate in the previous year, a music course became part of the new degree with 52 hours of contact (4 hours x 13 weeks). The new course is taken in the first year of study. This course is a compulsory course for all students in the new degree and is the foundation course for those students who undertake the path of study to become a music specialist. Education Queensland provides music specialist teachers in state primary schools so the training of these primary music specialist teachers is available through the Bachelor of Education Primary Degree. Currently 85% of state primary schools in Queensland have access to a music specialist teacher (Tyler, 2006). The new music education course is designed with a 2-hour lecture, the first hour looking at issues and current trends in music education as well as the music syllabus document, and the second hour is devoted to music theory. This second hour is optional for those who need to develop their music theory skills. Students are also required to do a 2-hour practical workshop where they are engaged in music making. Students are able to go to a workshop that suits their music skills – advanced skills workshop, some music reading skills workshop, new to music workshop. These levels of workshops came out of feedback given in focus group meetings with students from the 2000 cohort of students. Those with limited or no music skills felt intimidated in front of students with advanced skills especially when it came to playing the recorder.

Positive feedback has been received from students in the 2004 and 2005 workshop groups where they felt that they were able to work at their own pace in a comfortable setting (Hartwig, 2004). In 2006 the maximum number of students in a workshop group has been kept at 25. The capping of the workshops at 25 allows the lecturer to get to know the students individually, provides time for feedback both in class activities, and in the written assessment tasks.

The course aims to provide experiences for all students (irrespective of their music skills and abilities) that will inspire, heighten knowledge, energize, and give insight into the power and vibrancy that music holds for all children and their teachers.

The assessment in the undergraduate music education course comprises 3 tasks. These three tasks are:

1. Written: (A) Early Phase Music Activities and Review of Music Education Resources; (B) Upper School Music Activities and Review of a Music Education Concert;
2. Practical: (A) Team Teaching; (B) Recorder Duet;
3. Examination.

#### *The Written Tasks*

Prior to the introduction of the new degree, students were expected to write three full music lesson plans of 30 minutes, each focusing on different levels of the primary school – lower, middle and upper. The feedback received from written student evaluation forms included:

I am never going to teach all this.  
Only a music specialist teacher teaches like this.  
On prac my teacher did not do any music.  
Why does it have to be 30 minutes?

This feedback led to the introduction of music activities being required rather than full lesson plans. These are activities that classroom teachers will be able to use in their classroom. Alongside the activities, students are expected to review two music education resources – one a website and one a book/CD/kit. The Upper school activities also require the students to hand in a CD with a piece of music that could be used for activities in the upper primary class. The final component here is the reviewing of a live music education concert for primary school students. The concert is held at the university and features an ensemble that is currently touring the primary schools. This allows the students to experience live music performance, and to reflect on the value of this performance for primary school students. The focus is that the pre-service teachers will have a number of music activities and resources for their future use, these being fully prepared now and of use in their future primary classrooms, and they will know where to find additional resources for the teaching of music. Their lecturer gives students individual written feedback for all the written tasks.

In the lecture series, students are shown samples (which they are able to access on the university site for their music education course), and taken through the writing of all these written tasks before they are due. Using the available samples, the lecturer demonstrates the teaching of the music activities to the students. This is continually done throughout the semester in an attempt to draw together the theory of writing music tasks and the practice of implementing these activities in the primary classroom, thereby also engaging the students in music-making (Elliott, 1995).

The most positive feedback came from the live music performance. Many students had not realised that such touring groups were available for primary classrooms. In their review of the concert, they were able to reflect on the value of live performance for young students and overwhelmingly they stated that they would support such groups being invited into their future classrooms. Richard Gill, recipient of the 2006 Don Banks Music Award, regards his work as Adviser for the Musica Viva In Schools program and as Artistic Director of the Education Program for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in bringing live performance to school children of the utmost importance alongside his other commitments. Feedback from the 2005 group showed that many students had used their prepared activities whilst on their next practicum.

### *The Practical Tasks*

Both practical tasks, team teaching and recorder duet, are performed in pairs. This has been done in response to previous feedback that students reported feeling very nervous and concerned about ‘doing music’ by themselves, especially when this may have been their first experience in performing. Students are asked to select a song that is suitable for the middle primary classroom. With a partner they prepare a 15-minute presentation to teach the rest of the class the chosen song. Students must register their song with the lecturer. This is done to firstly check if the song is suitable, and also to ensure that the song is only taught once in a particular class. Students write up the sequence of their 15-minute presentation and hand this to the lecturer. All the class has been very willing to participate fully in these sessions to support their peers. Each year I have always enjoyed these sessions as the students are able to come up with creative ways of ‘teaching their song’ to the remainder of the class. It is good to have students sharing these ideas with the rest of the class, and not only have the direction coming from the lecturer.

The recorder duet has met with much criticism over many years. *Why do we have to learn recorder? I hate the recorder. My cat ran away when I practised.*

However, it has continued to be included for the following reasons:

- It is an easily accessible instrument for all children
- It is a very cheap instrument
- It is the instrument that is predominantly used in Queensland State Schools
- It is a tool to music literacy.
- For some students this will be their only experience of learning a musical instrument.
- Students will engage in the ‘process’ which will be of value for their future teaching careers.
- Playing an instrument is part of the new syllabus.

There have also been very positive comments received:

I can now play a musical instrument.

I play with my children. I can now read music.

It is great to see the students in all corners [of the University] practising their recorders (a comment from a lecturer in education).

For the duet, set pieces are identified and students choose from this list. They are however required to create and arrange their performance by composing an introduction, interlude/s and coda for their duet. This assessment task comes in the final week of the semester, and is seen as the culmination of the work when all students perform for their class. This author believes it has been seen as a positive experience for many students, with some ‘dressing up’ for their performance. There are still those students who are terrified of performance and show this in their presentation. Many can see the culmination of their semester’s work and relish their newfound musical skills. The emphasis is on learning an instrument, developing music literacy skills, and then performing. This is a required outcome of the current music strand of the syllabus.

Following the practical tasks of the *team teaching* and the *recorder duet*, each pair of students is given written feedback from the lecturer. Discussion also takes place following each performance, engaging the lecturer, the performers, and their peers in a valuable review of what has occurred. This is an attempt at encouraging critical

reflective dialogue for the future practitioners in schools. Smith & Lovat (2003) believe that this collaborative manner provides the basis for teachers to become critically aware of their own practice.

#### *The Examination*

The 2-hour examination has been conducted as the concluding part of the assessment for the music education course for a number of years. It is an avenue for checking understanding of the syllabus, the advocacy for including music in the primary school curriculum, and written music literacy and music theory knowledge and understanding. There has not been feedback either negative or positive for the examination. This maybe due to the fact that university students accept that their studies may include examinations. I would also like to think that they have been well prepared in the lecture series and theory sessions that they are not overly concerned about this assessment task.

#### *The Assessment Tasks and the Syllabus*

The music strand of the Arts Syllabus in Queensland is very prescriptive in terms of the core content to be covered at each level (p. 50). The core content being sequentially developed during the primary school years. Each level has three core learning outcomes that describe those learnings that are considered essential for students. They describe what students know and can do with what they know as a result of planned learning activities. The skills, concepts, elements, techniques and processes that students need to know in order to demonstrate the core learning outcomes at each level are described in this core content. The core learning outcomes in music include at each level:

1. aurally and visually recognising and responding to core content in music heard and performed;
2. singing and playing a variety of repertoire individually and with others;
3. reading and writing musical patterns, phrases, pieces containing the core content. (p. 33)

The assessment tasks described above commence with the early phase activities where students will need to work with the Level 1 and 2 core learning outcomes and core content. The team teaching task is focused on Level 3, while the upper school activities are written for Level 4. This is an attempt for students during their semester of music to sequentially work through all the primary school levels of the syllabus. The workshops work alongside this theoretical development and engage the students in practical music making activities from level 1 through to level 4.

### **Conclusion**

The debate about inadequate teacher preparation in teacher training degrees is ongoing, particularly as time in these courses devoted to music education across Australia is declining (Pascoe et al., 2005). However, rather than focusing solely on the negative, we are suggesting we should be looking at what is actually working. Although no assessment task is going to please all students, the assessment tasks outlined in this paper have, for the most part, received positive feedback from students both during the semester and at the end of semester. In cases where student reaction has not been positive it is important for the lecturer to explain the rationale behind an assessment task, making explicit its connection to the pre-service teacher's future role in teaching music to primary school students. This was apparent in the case of the recorder duet in Queensland and the portfolio in New South Wales. The latter also demonstrated the importance of also listening to students' needs, resulting in a modified portfolio assessment task that met students' needs.

In both universities a variety of assessment tasks were apparent, including tasks that engaged students in practical music-making experiences, which is vital to inspire confidence in teaching music (Bresler, 1993; Gifford, 1993). It is this aspect of confidence that Pascoe et al. (2005) also highlight in the national review of school music education, recommending that pre-service training should build teacher confidence alongside competence in music (p. 112). At both universities, there is an attempt to provide pre-service teachers with the tools to teach music in their general primary class. This has been developed through experiences in *teaching a music activity, preparation of resources for future reference, and improving music skills of students* through the music education course and its assessment tasks. In providing students with assessment tasks that are practical, that allow the lecturer to act as facilitator and provide constant feedback, and which students view as being relevant to *their* teaching, then surely the path towards inspiring confidence in teaching music has begun.

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Dr Kay Hartwig has taught music from preschool to tertiary level. She now lectures in the Education faculty at the Mr Gravatt Campus of Griffith University to primary and secondary music specialists, as well as primary pre-service generalist teachers. She is also co-convenor of the Master of Teaching program for International Students at Griffith. Dr Hartwig is the current secretary of AARME.

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