A preliminary analysis of a music college as a learning culture

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Abstract

The research reported here describes work that took place in the early stages of the ESRC TLRP3 project Learning to Perform: Instrumentalists and Instrumental Teachers. A music college is a prime example of an institution that embraces learning within both its student and teaching body. The ongoing Working in Music study has established that the professors at such an institution are highly reputable performers as well as teachers, with many strongly believing that their teaching informs their performing (Mills, 2004a). Indeed, many of the students teach and play professionally for some years before graduating. Such a rich interaction of learning and performing professionally gives rise to a learning culture that is highly complex and worthy of much exploration.

This paper draws on an instrument for analysing learning culture that was devised by the ESRC TLRP2 ‘Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education’ (TLC-FE) project (http://www.ex.ac.uk/sell/tlc/homepage.htm). With no previous experience of a conservatoire education, having studied previously at a university, the author spent her first three weeks at the college observing concerts, finals recitals, masterclasses and teaching, and recording her observations in the form of a diary. She subsequently used this as data on which to apply the TLC-FE instrument, and a preliminary analysis of learning culture was produced. This includes discussion of the possible imbalance between the students’ attitudes towards performing and their outlooks on learning vicariously from immersing themselves in other musical activities, as well as the tensions set up from the complexities of the learning environment. The resulting analysis was later used as a basis for discussion with the head of the institution, and will continue to be extended in this way via further discussion with other members of college staff. As this work progresses, it will lead not only to further understanding of the learning culture itself but also of those who contribute so strongly to it.

A music college is a prime example of an institution that embraces learning within its student, teaching and staff body. It is ‘vocational’ higher education (HE), with the majority of students aspiring to become professional musicians when they complete their studies. Indeed, many teach (Mills 2004b) and play professionally for some years before graduating. The teachers (known commonly as professors) are highly reputable performers as well as teachers, and continue to hold active performing lives alongside their college commitments. The administrative and research staff within the college come from varied backgrounds - many of which include some element of musical tuition or interest - and pursue numerous different training and development activities during their time at college. Such a rich interaction of learning and performing professionally is likely to give rise to a learning culture that is worthy of much exploration.

The research reported here describes work that took place in the early stages of the ESRC TLRP3 project ‘Learning to Perform: Instrumentalists and Instrumental Teachers’. The project considers learning at three levels - that of the student, the
teacher and the institution. To begin the institution aspect of the research, a preliminary analysis of learning culture was written that drew on an instrument for analysing learning culture that was devised by the ESRC TLRP2 ‘Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education’ (TLC-FE) project ([http://www.ex.ac.uk/sell/tlc/homepage.htm](http://www.ex.ac.uk/sell/tlc/homepage.htm)).

On beginning work at the institution as research assistant, with no previous experience of studying or working in a conservatoire environment, the author spent time in her first three weeks at the college observing concerts (2), finals recitals (3) and classes (3) as well as meeting students and staff. Observations were based on both formal and informal aspects of college life, with an emphasis on the subjective role of the researcher. Importance was placed on the students themselves – their attitudes and interactions – as well as the content and structure of lessons and concerts. A more general sense of the ethos of the college and its learning environment was also captured, along with the view that learning is situated in the social context in which it occurs (Lave and Wenger 1991) and in the setting of the learning (or ‘field’) (Bourdieu 1977). The data that this yielded was then used as a basis on which to apply the TLC-FE instrument and a prose account of the learning culture of the college was produced.

In investigating learning as a social and cultural activity, and not merely an individual cognitive process (Colley, James et al. 2002), one must endeavour to capture the multi-voicedness of an activity system – that is the many different perspectives, traditions and interests (Engeström 2001) that feed into it. One of the ways in which this has already been taken forward is through a discussion with the head of the institution, a record of which has been added as an appendix to the original prose analysis. The work will continue to be extended in this way via discussion with other members of the institution, so that a profile of the learning culture can be produced that captures perspectives from different people, and from different places and points in time.

This original analysis was written to represent a ‘snap-shot’ of observations from a particular time, as recorded and applied by one member of the community. There is no attempt to claim that it is a representational analysis of the learning culture, and in
fact it is designed rather as the antithesis of this, aiming to provide a starting point for the ‘Learning to Perform’ project. This paper reflects on the original analysis and frames it within the larger ‘data’ set that the author now has access to having been at the college for over seven months.

Engeström (2001) identifies four central questions that need to be addressed when considering learning: 1) who are the subjects of learning?; 2) why do they learn?; 3) what do they learn?; and 4) how do they learn? In order to present and discuss the original analysis in an informative manner, extracts will be taken that represent each of these four categories. Discussion of the original analysis will thus be framed within Engeström’s framework, and also within preliminary ‘Learning to Perform’ research that has been conducted with students - the main focus of the project to date. In this way, it is possible to present the analysis as it is intended; a springboard for consideration, reflection and development within the longitudinal ‘Learning to Perform’ project.

Who are the subjects of learning?

Extracts from the original analysis of learning culture:

“Across the site as a whole there are many convergences in the dispositions, interpretations and actions of the students as a group. In terms of age, the majority of undergraduate students appear to fit into a typical band of approximately 18-25, and the majority of students appear to be from comfortable socio-economic backgrounds. There is a very clear divergence of nationalities at the RCM, however, with many students travelling from Europe and worldwide to study at the college highlighting its status as a renowned institution...Staff at the college are highly divergent in age, ranging from recent graduates to nearing retirement age, although the professorial staff are often older reflecting their experience in the field. There are more male members of professorial teaching staff than women...

The students and staff within the site are all of a very high musical standard, and have achieved highly in exams, auditions and in their professional careers...Formally and informally, the students learn that they are part of an institution where they are amongst many very talented people...”

Although on first impressions it may appear that there are many convergences in the dispositions of the students, more detailed consideration suggests that this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, students begin higher education with “different interests, expectations, motivations and personalities” (Entwistle and Ramsden 1983, p.4), and music college is no exception. Although there is certainly convergence in the view of
college as training for a career in the music profession, the attitudes, experiences and
personalities that the students bring to this differ hugely. Let us take the transition
period – from school to music college – as an example of these divergences.

On entering college, it appears that the students very quickly become aware of their
position as one amongst many very talented musicians. The original analysis refers to
the students and staff within the site sharing a high level of musical achievement, as
well as a desire to excel in their chosen field. Formally and informally the students
learn that they are part of an institution that is characterised by talented individuals.
On the one hand, this should lead to a supportive culture where students are able to
learn alongside similarly talented individuals and gain motivation from those around
them. On the other hand, however, there is the possibility that it could lead to a
struggle to assert oneself and therefore a cycle of diminished learning opportunities.

Previous work has suggested that there are certain ‘pivot points’ that occur in the first
term of study at a music college that shape the students’ development as they progress
(Burt & Mills, submitted). The initial few weeks are integral, though, both in terms of
the students’ induction into the learning culture of the college as well as in their
perceptions of their place within it, and it is here that we begin to see evidence of
diverging dispositions as well as the complexities of the learning environment. Take,
for example, the students’ hopes and fears regarding studying with talented and like-
 minded peers. On the one hand, there is great excitement regarding the opportunity to
study with musicians who are highly skilled and who share the same interests, but
immediately contradicting this is concern as to competition amongst players as well as
possible feelings of inadequacy generated from being amongst peers who might be
perceived as being of a higher standard.

Such is the importance of the transition period in establishing one’s perception of
oneself in relation to others that it can potentially shape a large part, if not all, of the
ensuing experience at college. One student, for example, spoke of suddenly feeling
like “a small fish in a large pond” when she entered college. This experience left her
so devoid of confidence that she avoided performing in public, therefore becoming
more and more isolated from the self-sufficient learning culture advocated at college,
resulting in what she terms a ‘waste’ of her first year. Indeed, it is the environment as
perceived by the student, and not necessarily the objective environment, that relates to the students’ approach to learning (Trigwell and Prosser 1991). There are many factors that may impact on this perception, not least the personality of the individual, previous experiences, perhaps the faculty that the student is involved in and the people who they interact with during their time at college. Clearly there are a whole host of factors that impact on learning to perform that can be captured through detailed consideration of these issues.

Why do they learn?

Extracts from the original analysis of learning culture:

“Tied very closely to the content of learning is the formal and informal notion that the purpose of learning at the RCM is to become a highly trained specialist musician. This is reinforced by the high emphasis placed on performance within the BMus programme, and the highly specialised postgraduate performance and composition programmes. Students also appear very keen to perform at every available chance, and to market themselves as well as possible during their studies. There is a very clear sense of all of the students striving for the best that they can possibly achieve in performing and/or composing.”

The vast majority of students at the college appear to view their period of study as vocational training in order to become a professional musician – whether this is in performance, composing or conducting. Certainly each individual’s programme of study is built around his or her specialism, so that this forms the focus of their learning. A noticeable point to mention here is the obvious enjoyment that the students gain from music making, which is clearly a very motivating factor.

What do they learn?

Extracts from the original analysis of learning culture:

“There is a clear formal emphasis on the importance of performance skills at the RCM…. This is also reinforced informally as students become aware of the high performance standards of those around them, and the attitude of the institution towards producing successful musicians…”

It is becoming clear through sustained study that the content of the students’ learning is far broader than may first be imagined. On the top level, there is of course that which centres on each individual’s specialism, including aspects of technique,
musicality and repertoire. Secondly, however, there is a whole host of more tacit knowledge that the students are exposed to, such as strategies for dealing with competition and performance anxiety. Thirdly, the students learn how to begin constructing their career, with many performing or teaching alongside their studies. There is far more, then, to the content of learning at a music college than might first be envisaged, and much of this happens alongside that provided formally at the institution.

How do they learn?

**Aspects of restrictive and expansive learning**

Excerpts from the original analysis of learning culture:

“All of the students are extremely keen to perform...as much as possible, and relish the opportunity to do so in front of professors, peers and visiting musicians. The students’ attitudes towards playing and performing a great deal converge highly both as a group and with the views of the teaching staff. Similarly, their attitudes towards attending concerts or events outside their own performing lives converge, with surprisingly little involvement in the huge amount of music happening within the site...The fact that many students do not attend other people’s concerts...suggests, however, that there is a great emphasis on individual progress and learning. This is divergent from the interactive and group method of much of the class teaching, but highly convergent with the large amounts of individual and small group learning that takes place...”

The first point of interest that will be explored is the sense of imbalance created by the students’ attitude to performance and their outlooks on learning implicitly from immersing themselves in other musical activities available to them. The original analysis highlights the convergence in the apparent desire of students to perform at all available opportunities, whether it be in a faculty class\(^d\), a masterclass or a more public concert event. In contrast, however, convergence was also identified in the students’ approaches to attending events that are not directly related to their own performance career, with some of the lunchtime concert events having an audience of only ten to twenty people, and sometimes fewer still.

Perhaps the immediate conclusion to be drawn from this is that the students are channelled – whether formally or informally – into prioritising their individual learning and practice and that this is reinforced by staff at the college, forming a very large influence on the learning culture of the institution. At first glance, then, it
appears that an unduly restrictive learning culture has been established, with students and teachers alike basing their learning on individual practice or small group rehearsal. There are two points to add to this, however. Firstly, the professors at the college speak of a diverse range of musical interests (Mills 2004), including teaching and a broad repertoire that does not necessarily focus only on western classical music. It appears that many of the students do not subscribe to this view, with the men in particular often wishing to focus solely on developing their western classical specialism (Mills, Williamon et al. 2004).

Secondly, on deeper inspection and following discussion with the head of the institution, it became clear that much of the students’ learning - especially that which is more informal - occurs outside of the college. Indeed, “learners…bring to their learning a wide range of social and cultural experiences” (James and Bloomer 2001, p.2), not least the concerts and events that they participate in and listen to outside of college. Although much of the students’ learning does take place during the time that they spend at college, there are many experiences external to this that feed strongly in. One further example of this is the learning that takes place after a performance, when students get together and discuss what they have heard, and how they think it could have been improved. Whilst this may occur in the bar as opposed to the classroom, the learning experience is equally important.

**Aspects of challenge and stability**

Excerpts from the original analysis of learning culture:

"The RCM would appear to be a place of high risk and challenge, where students are continuously being assessed and compared – whether formally or informally – with their peers and being involved in public performances on a regular basis. For the majority of students, though, playing music is a very natural and large part of their lives and something that they relish and enjoy, so that the balance between the risks and challenges and the stability and routine even out well for many students. One particularly noticeable point is the confidence of the students, and how this changes when put in a situation that is more ‘high-risk’, perhaps outside the student’s ‘comfort-zone’…In a similar manner to faculty classes, students in an academic lesson observed appeared reluctant to contribute ideas to the ad-hoc discussion, but when a student presented a seminar in the second half of the lesson she demonstrated confidence and clarity; she had been able to prepare for the event and was therefore in control."

The second point of interest is the clear tension set up between the nature of the students’ preparation for performances and the high challenge environment within
which these performances take place. On the one hand, students are able to prepare to a high level for their public events, but on the other they are aware of the constant scrutiny that they are under when delivering these performances. The college is generally a high-risk environment, and there could be a danger of students relying too heavily on pre-prepared material. If students do rely too much on this balance, there is little scope for any surprises or unexpected events, both of which are clearly prevalent in music, and potential learning may be restricted.

**Teaching and teachers**

> “Learning at the RCM takes place through a variety of processes owing to the fact that each student has a different specialism within the framework of a set programme of study. One-to-one instrumental lessons with one or two professors as well as individual practice and ensemble rehearsal form a large part of this learning and students also attend larger lectures and seminars as part of the BMus (or postgraduate) programme that they are studying for. The fact that the teaching staff are all of a very high professional level leads to a large emphasis being placed on their expertise, and much of the students’ learning will be based on work conducted with, or in collaboration with, their professor(s). Informally this is reinforced, as students learn that studying with a particular professor may not only help them practically but will also help to build their career through association…

The teaching staff within the culture are distinguished, and many students will come to the college with the express view of studying with a particular professor. The majority of the staff will have professional careers outside of teaching, and so will come into college on a part-time basis to teach their students. There appears to be an informal and close relationship between the students and their professors.”

One of the most significant people that the students will form a relationship with is their professor(s). In the conservatoire environment there is a large emphasis placed on one-to-one lessons that form the pinnacle and focal point of the week for the majority of the students. Beckwith (1991) highlights that “numerous elements interact in the teaching-learning process, including…pre-existing knowledge of relevant material…” (Beckwith 1991, p.17). The fact that the teacher is almost definitely an active, and highly successful, performer adds another dimension to this, as students often chose to study at the institution on the basis of their teacher’s reputation and ‘pre-existing knowledge’ and skill.

It is likely that the teachers are perceived as being a ‘definitive’ source of knowledge on their particular specialism, so that the dynamic created is often characterised by a high level of respect, and often a personal relationship that may not be found in a different HE institution. Within a health care setting it is suggested that a “patient’s
strategy can and often does have a decisive influence on the physician’s strategy and on the outcome of the consultation” (Engeström 1995, p.410). Indeed, many professors strongly believe that their teaching informs their performing (Mills 2004), and it is this kind of mutual learning that characterises the strength of the learning culture.

**Conclusion**

Perhaps the most pervading aspect of the learning culture of this music college is the constant prominence of music as a professional aspiration. Whether one looks at it from the students’ or professors’ perspective, professional performance is not only the aim of the majority of individuals involved but also a large part of their studying and/or working lives. As such, this aspect is represented in all four of Engeström’s aspects of learning for this setting.

![Figure 1: A diagrammatic representation of the interplay between student, teacher, institution and the music profession.](image)

It is important not to lose sight of this influence as one begins to probe the complexities and contradictions within this culture, some of which are beneficial to learning and some of which are not. There are constant tensions between wanting to become a successful musician, being in an environment where others have the same goal, finding the right balance between restrictive and expansive learning and dealing with the practical issues of the location and setting of the building.
Through continued research with students and teachers, as well as institutional managers, it will be possible to extend this analysis as Learning to Perform develops over the next three years. It is hoped that through the discussions in this paper, the original analysis – as it stands as a representation of a particular point in time from one individual’s application of the TLC-FE instrument – has not only been captured, but also set in the context of a broader set of ‘data’ that has arisen from initial research in Learning to Perform as well as the changing perceptions and applications of the author as she becomes more integrated into the learning culture.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Janet Mills for her help and advice at all stages of this research, and also Graham Welch and David Hargreaves. The involvement and insights of Dame Janet Ritterman in the developing work are highly appreciated.

Notes

1 Economic and Social Research Council Teaching and Learning Research Programme, Phase 3

ii Faculty class is an event where members of a particular faculty (i.e. strings, woodwind) perform in front of each other and a professor. Constructive discussion is encouraged following each performance.
References


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