‘Learning to Perform’: two years of a longitudinal study

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Abstract

How are musical performers created? Are there better ways of creating them? And can we apply our findings to other learners in different fields? Research considering the development of expertise has not always been directly applicable to musicians, partly because of the partial truth of the idea that ‘practice makes perfect’. Learning to Perform: instrumentalists and instrumental teachers looks much further than the practice room, as we strive to discover exactly how musicians learn. At the heart of the project is a three-year longitudinal study of students and teachers at an internationally renowned UK conservatoire, whose alumni have helped to shape the course of western classical music; this paper reports on the first two years of this study.

Learning to Perform aims to build theory of expertise in musical learning. We are informed in this process by diverse theoretical models, and during our first year have drawn especially on sociological notions of career. We study students and teachers at a conservatoire that is a rich and exciting place to be in, and we work with students to ensure that what we are doing remains ‘student-centred’ at all times. Over one hundred students are already involved in the study through a system of questionnaires and interviews: we begin our paper by presenting our research design and methodology.
The first year of data collection and analysis has yielded fascinating results, some of which have surprised us, and some which have not. We have dispelled the myth that conservatoire students spend all their time practising, and have confirmed that they see their higher education as vocational. We know that different students have very different experiences of the transition period from school to a higher education in music, and that for some there will be a collision of learning culture. We present more findings from the first year of the study and by July 2006 will have built on these further through the findings of our second experimental year, and will present these accordingly. Learning to Perform aims to improve the learner’s lot – this paper will present how we are going about achieving this, and what we have discovered so far.

**Keywords**

Career; conservatoire; expertise; learning; performance

**Introduction**

How are musical performers created? Are there better ways of creating them? And can we apply our findings to other learners in different fields? Research considering the development of expertise has not always been directly applicable to musicians, partly because of the partial truth of the idea that ‘practice makes perfect’. Learning to Perform: instrumentalists and instrumental teachers\(^1\) looks much further than the practice room, as we strive to discover exactly how musicians learn. Over a four-year period, and through gathering large amounts of data, this large-scale longitudinal project considers musical learning from all its different perspectives.
Learning to Perform began in February 2004, and stretches until the beginning of 2008. At its heart lies a three-year longitudinal study of students, teachers and institutional managers at a UK conservatoire (Conservatoire A). Conservatoire A is one of nine conservatoires in the UK and provides musical training for gifted undergraduate and postgraduate students specialising in western classical music. Parallel strands of the project investigate musical learning at other higher education music institutions in the UK and in musical genres such as jazz, popular music and traditional Scottish music. Our developing research is informed and critiqued by experts in mathematics, sports and the visual arts, so that we ensure that we use our findings to the best possible advantage for learners in all subject areas. This paper reports on the development of the research conducted to date at Conservatoire A.

**Background to the theoretical basis of the study**

Learning to Perform builds on research that has already moved away from the premise that expertise in musical learning is to do with the number of hours spent in a practice room. Recent studies, for example, have investigated the *quality* of practice (Williamon and Valentine, 2000) as well as the *quality* of students’ learning (Mills, 2002). We endeavour to collect large volumes of rich and detailed information that will enable us to build innovative models of learning for musicians and other learners, which add to those that already exist, but that also say something new.

In building this theory we draw on existing theoretical models (predominantly) from the fields of education, sociology and psychology. In particular, we consider the sociological notion of career as a blend of subjective and objective (Stebbins, 1970; Cochran, 1991). Career becomes an overarching construct that ‘people use to organise their behaviour over the long term’ and which ‘gives meaning to the
individual’s life’ (Collin and Young, 2000). Of particular importance to this study is the notion that career allows ‘people to construct connections among actions, to account for effort, plans, goals, and consequences, to frame internal cognitions and emotions, and to use feedback and feedforward processes’ (Young and Valach, 1996). We draw on students’ feedback processes as we ask them to report on, for example, their musical histories and their progress since they entered Conservatoire A. We draw on their feedforward processes as we ask them to consider their aims for the months ahead (short-term), and for their professional lives (long-term).

As we have begun to model expertise in musical learning we have drawn on Engeström’s concept of expansive and restrictive learning (Engeström, 2001). Students in music conservatoires may be typically expected to learn in a restrictive way (focused on practising for many hours a day, on one specialism, and in one learning style). Learning to Perform investigates whether this is in fact the case, and if not whether those who engage in more expansive learning may in fact achieve more highly in their specialism and be more prepared for a diverse professional life.

Bransford et al (2000) observed that experts ‘notice features and meaningful patterns of information’ that others miss, and organise their extensive subject knowledge in ways that reflect their deep understanding. We draw on this as we consider whether students connect with deep or surface learning (Entwistle, 2005), and the impacts that this may have on their learning.

Where expertise researchers have drawn in the past on the fields of chess, ice-skating, poetry, and so forth (see Ericcson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer, 1993), and proposed general theoretical models that can be applied usefully in many fields, we seek to immerse ourselves in one – complex – field, that of music, and to develop a
basic theoretical framework that may be applied in many fields, to explain expert
performance generally and to enhance students’ learning outcomes.

The context of the study: Conservatoire A

So why have we decided to base a three-year study of musical learning in a music
conservatoire? Firstly, this allows us to work with students and instrumental teachers
who are highly skilled musicians, and who either work or wish to work in the music
profession. In terms of building theory of expertise, then, this is an ideal environment.
But it is also one that is special in many other respects. It is an institution where some
particularly highly achieving students study with scholarships named after the late
Queen Mother, where HRH The Prince of Wales is a regular visitor, and where
everyone learns with an instrumental teacher who is an eminent performer and who
spends at least an hour a week for four years training younger musicians who share
the ambitions that they once had. It is a physically impressive Victorian building,
which has portraits of affiliated famous performers and composers adorning the walls.
As one stands outside the building one hears snippets of music from all directions,
and as one walks through the corridors high-quality music making can be heard from
all sides. In short, it is a remarkable institution that offers an incredibly rich – and
under-researched – environment in which to base our study.

Research design and methodology

Figure 1 illustrates the study’s research design. As the research progresses, the
symbiotic relationship between research at Conservatoire A and that at other
institutions and in other subjects shifts slightly, as collaborators move from informing
the developing research to benefiting from it.
Learning to Perform uses a methodology that is built partly on pre-existing research tools and partly around those devised specifically within the project. This allows us to test existing theories against our own dataset, as well as to develop and refine new tools as the research progresses. A central concern is that what we do remains ‘student centred’ at all times. This ensures that the research feels relevant to the students, that we do not miss out on an aspect of learning that we – as researchers – had not thought to investigate, and that our research is ecologically valid (see, for example, Mills and Burt, 2005). Within these boundaries, Learning to Perform uses quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, as summarised in figure 2.
Learning to Perform tracks two groups of students longitudinally through three years of their learning. By drawing on students from two cohorts, we also track students quasi-longitudinally from before they enter the conservatoire until they complete their first year in the profession. We began our fieldwork in June 2004 with a semi-structured questionnaire that asked students to write freely about their hopes and fears (musically, academically and socially). This questionnaire was sent to students entering the three collaborating music higher education institutions in August 2005. The first of our questionnaires in Year 1 comprised published, pre-piloted and specially written materials, as did the first in Year 2. The second Year 1 questionnaire drew on the transcripts from the first student interviews, in order to devise rating scales that fit our ‘student-centred’ criteria, and that are specific to the environment that we are researching.

Our interview schedules range across students’ careers, drawing on feedback and feedforward processes. We have experimented with different theoretical frameworks for different interview schedules, drawing on research conducted into informal learning in work-based environments (Eraut, 2004), music in everyday life
(DeNora, 2000), and the use of a score as mediating artefact (Engeström, 1995). Our investigation of learning culture is developed through a link with another ESRC TLRP project *Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education* (www.education.ex.ac.uk/tlc/homepage.htm), which led to a preliminary analysis of the learning culture of the conservatoire that is now used as a mediating tool for discussions with institutional managers.

Learning to Perform also aims to build research capacity among students who are the teachers and researchers of tomorrow, among professional musicians who work for part of their time as instrumental teachers, among the researchers working on the project, and more generally in the institutions in which the project is based. The conservatoire’s main objective is to provide practical training for musicians. As researchers, then, it is important that we ensure not only that our sample is reflective of the cross section of students who study at the conservatoire, but also that we help to establish a research ethos which is sustainable after the formal end of the project.

Ways in which we have begun building this capacity include: 1) targeting groups of students who, despite prompting, have not completed the questionnaire. For example, third-year scholarship students were underrepresented in our sample. With the support of institutional managers we targeted this group, and drew students into both the questionnaire and interview surveys; 2) working with instrumental teachers who may have no prior experience of research, and in a parallel project offering them the opportunity of co-writing for a peer-reviewed scholarly journal (Mills and Moore, in press); 3) offering substantial professional opportunity for the contract researchers working on the project (Burt and Moore, 2005).
So what have we found out so far?

The first year of Learning to Perform at Conservatoire A has been full of fascinating findings – some of which have surprised us, and others which have not. We have begun to delve inside the ‘secret garden’ of the conservatoire, and have already bust many myths about the students who study at such an institution. For example, let us pursue the idea that musicians can become experts simply by doing a certain number of hours practice.

Without dismissing the obvious need for practice, we already know from our findings that students at the conservatoire do far more than this. Eighty percent of the students, for example, frequently deliberately undertake activities outside of music in order to ‘become a better musician’ (Mills, Burt and Moore, 2005). This may include reading, writing, doing sports or socialising with friends in and out of music. The students also expect and hope to teach when they graduate from the conservatoire (Burt and Mills, submitted), and as they progress through the conservatoire more and more of them start to teach alongside their studies.

We have also confirmed that the conservatoire is perceived as vocational higher education: from a list of twelve jobs in music, the students rank performer/composer as their first choice of professional occupational (Mills, Burt et al., 2005). At the beginning of the study, students at the conservatoire reported that they do not listen to, or play, music from outside of their specialism on a frequent basis, but that they do believe that playing contemporary western classical music or jazz would improve their performance on their specialism (Mills, Williamon and Burt, 2004). A ‘typical musical history’ of a student at the conservatoire indicates that students begin learning their current specialism at the age of eight (Burt and Mills,
2005), but we know also that some will start learning much later, and some much earlier.

Another focus of the first year of the study has been on the transition from school to a higher education in music. Data from a preliminary study conducted in 2002 (using the same ‘hopes and fears’ questionnaire) were analysed in our planning period in order to inform our preparation, particularly of the interview schedules. Three ‘pivot points’ were identified as potential barriers that a student needs to pass through in order to have a smooth transitory period (Burt and Mills, in press). One of these points is overcoming feelings of inadequacy that may be brought about by the sudden concentration of highly skilled musicians that converge into one institution at one time.

Indeed, students entering the conservatoire in September 2004 (part of the Learning to Perform cohort) look forward most to making friends and meeting like-minded peers, yet are paradoxically most anxious about the high standards that they imagine they will encounter – as well as being able to manage their finances (Mills, Duffy and Burt, 2005). For some students there is a collision of learning culture, while for others the transition is more seamless. One first year student, for example, told us how she had stopped worrying about the standards of others: “now that I’ve got started I just feel as though it’s ok to just concentrate on what I’m doing, I don’t really need to worry at the moment how I compare”.

Perhaps surprisingly, the type of institution is more important than the musical genre to be studied in determining students’ approach to the transition from school to higher education. Students entering different conservatoires share musical hopes and fears, academic hopes, and social fears, while those entering a university music department do not. A student entering Conservatoire A, for example, writes of
looking forward to being “immersed into a great atmosphere, with as many opportunities for performance as possible, particularly new music and chamber music”, and those entering the other two conservatoires share many of these sentiments. Those entering a university music department may be more focused on the holistic experience of studying music (Burt and Mills, in press).

**Conclusions**

Learning to Perform aims to improve the learner’s lot (Desforges, 2000). By choosing to focus our research on a conservatoire of music we are able to investigate the musical learning of those who have achieved highly and who are pursuing music to professional levels. This allow us to identify areas for potentially enhanced learning at the conservatoire and to act on these, to expand this to students in other music institutions, and possibly in other genres of music, and to build theory of expertise that has emerged from learning in music but that is relevant to learners in many subject areas.

The project’s advancement of theory of expertise in music is already developing. Models of students’ approaches to building their careers (Burt and Mills, submitted), and of students’ differing expectations when entering a higher education in music (Burt and Mills, in press) have already been developed. By the time of the ISME conference, our thinking will have moved forward to build on the results from our first year with those from our second, and we will be even further towards our aim of enhancing the learning experiences and outcomes for musicians as well as for learners in general.
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Notes

1A partnership between the Royal College of Music, Leeds College of Music, the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, University of London Institute of Education and University of York Music Department. Co-directors: Janet Mills and Graham Welch.

2 To draw more people into research, to establish a research ethos in institutions where this is not the main objective and to disseminate findings to a wide audience of researchers and practitioners.
References


college? *What a difference a pedagogy makes: researching lifelong learning & teaching*, University of Stirling, 24-26 June 2005.


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