The rise and fall of a wind quintet

Rosie Burt-Perkins and Janet Mills

Proceedings of Behavioural Research in Chamber Music
Royal Northern College of Music, January 2008

*Please note: this is a working conference paper. If you wish to cite this work, please contact the first author.*
Abstract
This paper draws on findings from the longitudinal Learning to Perform project, which is based at a UK conservatoire. While the conservatoire centres its curriculum on one-to-one instrumental lessons, it also offers tuition and assessment for chamber music. In this paper, we propose that chamber music is one way in which students can expand their learning (Fuller & Unwin, 2003), as well as nurturing skills that may promote their careers. But how is chamber music taught at conservatories, and what do students learn from it?

Here we focus on the development of a wind quintet, which formed voluntarily, but that impacted with the college system and eventually dispersed. Using interview, questionnaire and observation data we track the quintet’s successes and disappointments, and the impact that the experience had on the learners involved. We consider how the conservatoire could improve its practice in order to enhance students’ learning. Should chamber music be separated from formal college assessment, for example? How might it be best organized to help students develop the personal and social skills needed to work effectively in a chamber ensemble? We attempt to answer these questions by firstly examining the quintet’s ‘rise’ as they develop, progress and learn expansively from their experiences. Secondly, we investigate the quintet’s ‘fall’, as they begin to aim for different ends, work in different ways, and ultimately disperse. We suggest that conservatoires monitor the impact of assessment on chamber groups, reflecting on whether the inherent advantages of such work may be best left outside of formal curricula.

Keywords: Expansive learning; Conservatoire; Chamber music; Wind quintet
**Introduction**

This paper draws on findings from the Learning to Perform project, a four year longitudinal investigation of musical learning based at a UK conservatoire of music. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme¹, Learning to Perform has tracked two groups of learners through three years of their conservatoire education. While the conservatoire centres its curriculum on one-to-one instrumental lessons, it also offers tuition and assessment for students who seek to engage in chamber music. Here, we consider the role of chamber music in learning to perform, using theoretical and empirical discussions to develop knowledge of how conservatoire students learn.

Since the project’s inception we have argued that ‘practice makes perfect’ is a part-truth when it comes to learning to perform (Mills & Burt, 2004). Rather, we build on the agency of students, teachers and institution as we investigate learning that we conceptualize as situated within its context (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and that constructs, and is constructed within, that context. In particular, we seek to understand how students interact within their environment to shape their developing portfolio of skills as they prepare for a career in music. We know that such a career will be broad and diverse, typically taking the shape of what has become known as a ‘portfolio’ career (Mallon, 1998; Rogers, 2002). But how do conservatoire students learn, and to what extent does this learning prepare them for such a career? In the paragraphs that follow we discuss three theoretical lenses that we have applied as we seek to answer such questions.

¹ RES-139-25-0101
Firstly, we draw on the work of Bransford and Brown (2000), who suggest that learners may be either ‘accomplished novices’ or ‘answer-filled experts’. As Mills (2007) explains: “‘accomplished novices’ are rightly proud of their achievements, but constantly strive to know more, and to push out the boundaries of their expertise. By contrast, ‘answer-filled experts’ know and communicate the information associated with expertise in a more self-contained way’ (Mills, 2007:25). We already know that conservatoire teachers emerge as ‘accomplished novices’ (Mills, 2004). Given that these teachers are recruited as highly successful performers, we can hypothesize with confidence that such an approach to learning is beneficial to musicians. Here, we propose that participating in chamber music may be one way in which students can develop their expertise in a manner that nurtures an ‘accomplished novice’ approach to learning.

Bransford and Brown’s conceptualisation of expertise is markedly different from some of the theorising that has been previously applied to musical learning. Ericcson and his colleagues (1993), for example, established clear links between deliberate practice and musical performance expertise. We suggest, though, that theories which take a more holistic approach to understanding learning may elicit a new understanding of what it is to learn to perform. Bransford and Brown provide one such lens; we draw secondly on Entwistle and Ramsden’s (1983) notion of ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ learning. Through working extensively with students in higher education, Entwistle concluded that students who learn deeply are those that seek challenges in their learning, and that advance their skills as learners as they get the opportunity (see also Entwistle, 2005). Those who are ‘surface’ learners, on the other hand, take information ‘as it comes’, are not likely to think around this information, and do not
always seek challenges in their learning. Given the complexity of the task facing conservatoire students (Burt, 2004), we use the concept of deep learning, in conjunction with Bransford and Brown’s notion of ‘accomplished-novice’, to examine the development of musical expertise. When learning as part of a chamber group, we propose that students have an opportunity to engage in deep learning; to question their own contribution to the group, to question their peers’ contribution to the group, to think deeply about the musical interpretation of the group, and so forth. In this paper, we investigate whether this is the case, and how it shapes the learning of the students involved.

The writing and thinking of Bransford and Brown, and of Entwistle and Ramsden, have informed Learning to Perform since its inception in 2003. Since that time, we have extended and added to this thinking through the notion of ‘expansive learning’. Defined by researchers working in work-based learning, we take expansive learning to be ‘participation in multiple communities of practice inside and outside the formal educational setting; opportunities to extend identity through boundary crossing’ (Fuller & Unwin, 2003:411). There are three main points here. Firstly, that expansive learning is about participating in multiple communities of practice (see Lave & Wenger, 1991). These communities of practice involve musicians in a community in which they share aims with other musicians; chamber music provides a clear example. Playing in a chamber group – as part of a portfolio of activities – is one way in which students can become more expansive learners. Secondly, expansive learning is about extending identity; that is, broadening the ways in which one thinks about, and describes, oneself as a musician. For many of the students at the conservatoire, being a chamber musician becomes an important part of identity (Burt
We suggest that this is important both in terms of career preparation and in terms of enhanced learning practices. Finally, we make clear that while we present expansive learning as a potentially useful way to progress as a musician, we do not argue this at the expense of ‘restrictive’ learning. As musicians, a certain degree of restrictive (or surface) learning may well be important to the development of expertise; here, though, we suggest that expansive learning also plays an important role.

We move now to develop this thinking through the examination of the ‘rise and fall’ of one wind quintet at the conservatoire. Starting from the premise that chamber music is one way in which students can expand their learning, we investigate the quintet in terms of the learning of its members, and the extent to which their experiences led to deeper, or more expansive, learning. Specifically, we ask:

- What did the students learn from being part of this chamber group?
- Did their experiences lead to expanded learning?
- What are the implications in terms of the provision of chamber music at the conservatoire?

**Method**

We take a mixed-method approach to answering these questions, mirroring the methodology used throughout Learning to Perform. Informed by a pragmatic approach to conducting research, we agree with Gorard and Taylor (2004) that methodology should be selected in order that the researcher can best answer the particular research question(s). To this end, we take one quintet as our case. We do not seek to generalize from this case, but rather to understand the learning of its
members both intrinsically and instrumentally (Stake, 2000). That is, to learn from the case what we can about both the quintet and about expansive learning. The quintet formed voluntarily, and had opted to be assessed at the end of the year in which we began researching them. Within the case study, we draw on data collected through structured questionnaires, through interviews and through observation of a concert. Table 1 summarizes the data collection procedure. Members of the quintet are not identified by instrument to protect their anonymity.

Table 1: data collection procedure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quintet member:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data collection</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 1, Sept 2004</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire 1, Sept 2004</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 2, Jan 2005</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 3, April 2005</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concert observation, April 2005</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 4, Sept 2005</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 5, Jan 2006</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 6, April 2006</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GRADUATED</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 7, Sept 2006</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 8, Jan 2007</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 9, April 2007</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As table 1 indicates, all members of the quintet were involved in three sets of data collection in the year 2004-05. Firstly, they completed a structured interview designed for Learning to Perform, with questions probing their musical history, career aims, and attitudes and experiences of instrumental teaching. In the same month each
member also attended a semi-structured interview with one or both of the authors.

Interviews ranged across the students’ learning experiences, including their involvement in chamber music. Finally, in April 2005 the first author observed one of the quintet’s concerts. Following this initial data collection, all members were invited to attend termly interviews; table 1 shows the uptake of this invitation, which varies amongst members. Three members were interviewed up until the point of their graduation, and a further two were interviewed in the year following graduation.

Questionnaire data was entered into SPSS and analysed quantitatively. All interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and analysed thematically using Atlas.ti software. Observation was unstructured, and recorded qualitatively.

**Results: the rise and fall of a wind quintet**

We present the results in two phases. Firstly, we examine the quintet’s ‘rise’ as they develop, progress and learn expansively from their experiences. Secondly, we investigate the quintet’s ‘fall’, as they begin to aim for different ends, work in different ways, and ultimately disperse. In a following discussion section, we consider implications for the provision of chamber music at the conservatoire.

At its peak, the quintet provided a forum for much expansive learning. Working from the security of sharing the same aims, the members clearly feel comfortable challenging themselves and others during rehearsal:

‘you need to have the right kind of group dynamic otherwise it is really not going to work. And we do. We all want to do it. We do talk about whether people think it is going well or not. People do tell me honestly what they think - sometimes it is what you want to hear and sometimes it is not’ (member 3, interview 2).
These students are open to be critiqued, find that the quintet offers them this opportunity, and reflect on this as useful and necessary. Similarly, member one reflects on how the group has established a way of working together that emphasizes deep learning:

‘we spend a lot of rehearsal time talking about the music rather than playing and then we do a lot of slow work on technical bits and getting the intonation together and getting passages together - really tight - like in time. So if someone isn't playing in that bit they will clap the beat and then the others will play and we will do it slow and then speed it up and…we are quite happy to wait for the others to do that and I think that is good’ (member 1, interview 2).

The ethos of the quintet, at least from this member’s point of view, is to learn thoroughly, to help others to learn thoroughly and to use different strategies to reach this end.

The learning experiences afforded by the quintet also extend beyond chamber music. As member four reflects, being part of the quintet has helped her to find new ways of addressing performance anxiety:

‘At least with a group you know you’ve got something to back you up and…it’s kind of more pressure cos you know you’ve got to work as a, like if you fail then you fail the group, but that kind of helps in a way cos you know you’ve got to just forget about you being nervous cos otherwise it’s not going to just affect you’ (member 4, interview 1).

For this member, the security of the group is both a comfort and a challenge as she seeks to perform to the highest standard. Her ability to ‘just forget’ about being nervous is a skill that she can extend to other contexts as she continues to develop as a musician. Similarly, the group has deepened the communication skills of its members, as member two expounds:

‘I suppose when you’re practising yourself you are having thoughts and reactions in your head, and at rehearsal you have to try and put it into words and explain what you think to other people and also, sometimes, having patience with other people as well is a big thing because sometimes some
people do not pick up on certain things as quickly as others’ (member 2, interview 2).

The capacity to explain musical ‘thoughts and reactions’ to others is one that clearly expands learning. We know from their questionnaire responses that all members of the quintet expect and hope to teach instrumentally when they graduate; the communication skills that they are harbouring through the chamber group will be highly relevant to this.

At the first sweep of data collection, then, we see chamber music affording opportunity for expansive and deep learning. The members display signs of being ‘accomplished novices’, striving to improve their learning, to find new ways of doing this, and to learn from each other. As member five emphasizes, the quintet share a sense of pride in their achievements at this time: ‘[we have an] established chamber group, think it’s very hard to do’ (member 5, interview 1). Indeed, taking another look at their questionnaire responses, we know that the members also share aspirations for their musical careers. As well as hoping to become instrumental teachers, the members aim first and foremost to be performers. Having decided to take chamber music as an assessed option, however, we begin to see ‘cracks’ emerging in the group’s coherence.

As the end of year assessment looms, the group begins to come under pressure: ‘the quintet chamber exam...we have got no time to rehearse at all. We are busy and...only [have] two weeks notice...so, yes, I am worried about that’ (member 1, interview 3). As this student alludes, the examination date was announced with relatively short notice, placing the quintet under a pressure that they had not
previously experienced. At the same time, member three reflects on a concert
performance that she felt was disappointing:

‘Our quintet isn’t good at the moment. We haven’t rehearsed it much. It was
kind of thrown together very quickly…Hopefully we will get a better mark in
the exams…I played it OK but everyone had their individual mistakes and
there were just a lot of group things that weren’t together and it wasn’t very
tight and it is just frustrating because some people in the group were satisfied
with the way we played and some people weren’t so it makes it difficult. Some
people were pleased and then I wasn’t with it and that is quite difficult…’
(member 3, interview 3).

We see three ‘cracks’ emerging within the quintet at this time. Firstly, ‘individual
mistakes’ are occurring within performances. Secondly, the group coherence – at least
as it is perceived by member three – is not ‘tight’. Thirdly, and perhaps most
crucially, the group appear to differ in their perception of a satisfactory performance.
At a time when the group is due to be assessed, and when the members are aiming for
performing careers, this difference in opinion is of high significance.

Observation of this concert triangulates the interview data. Member three’s reflection
on the group’s lack of coherence was indicated by their on-stage presentation, most
notably in the lack of a united front during bowing at the end of the performance.
Non-verbal communication highlighted the emerging division within the group, with
certain members sharing looks that indicated disappointment following the
performance. This observed division is accentuated by member five, who reflects on
the quintet’s plans for the future: ‘I think some people in the quintet aren't as keen as
the rest of us and that is kind of annoying really’ (member 5, interview 3). After the
group had dispersed, member two agrees retrospectively that ‘I am not actually a
huge fan of wind quintets. It is great to learn all the repertoire and stuff - but I do
prefer the solo repertoire… so I suppose that has had an impact on my playing’
(member 2, interview 6). By this time, member one feels that she is ‘no longer in a
chamber group, and I don't spend enough time at college to have friends’ (member 1,
The quintet has moved from being a cohesive unit that gave space for expansive and deep learning experiences, to a scattered group of individuals who no longer play together. In the following section, we discuss the implications of this in terms of the individuals involved and for the institution.

**Concluding discussion**

Speaking a year after her graduation, member two reflects on her quintet experience:

‘I got bogged down in the wind quintet at college - I’ve never really been one for chamber music, I was always into solo and orchestral work. There was always so much tension, we were striving to be a serious wind quintet but my heart wasn’t really in it. There was so much tension and arguing. I wasn’t keen on the repertoire or the combination of instruments. I don’t regret it though, I know the repertoire now. It was a positive experience’ (member 2, interview 9).

While the quintet was a source of tension for this member, she considers it a useful part of her development as a musician. Indeed, for all members the experience was – at least for a time – a way to expand learning. We have seen evidence of a space for learning that is comfortable enough for members to challenge each other, and to learn deeply from doing so. But how can conservatoires offer chamber music provision in a way that does not detract from this positive learning experience?

We suggest that the decision of the quintet to be assessed marked the beginning of their eventual separation. The impact of the group with the institutional structures for assessment placed pressure on them, which appeared to accentuate the divisions that were already becoming evident. Once the quintet became implicated in determining individual’s degree classification, the emphasis moved from exploring music together to fulfilling assessment criteria. The quintet ceased to be a safe environment in which to challenge each other and learn expansively, and instead became a source of stress
and tension. We do not yet know whether other groups have experienced trajectories, but suggest that this quintet’s ‘rise and fall’ merits further investigation.

Should chamber music be separated from formal conservatoire assessment, for example? We suggest that conservatoires monitor the impact of assessment on chamber groups, reflecting on whether the inherent advantages of such work may be best left outside of formal curricula. One solution, for example, is to encourage a reflective, peer-based, form of evaluation that replaces formal assessment (see, for example, Lebler, 2006). Such an approach could reduce the pressure of formal assessment, as well as adding to the potentially expanding nature of the learning opportunity. Further solutions could include encouraging chamber group members to reflect on their progress and potential weaknesses as part of any assessment procedure, and/or for conservatoires to implement a monitoring system that helps students to think deeply about the learning experience that chamber music affords. In any case, this quintet shows us how valuable chamber music can be in developing musical expertise; here we argue that students, teachers and institution need to monitor this to ensure that it remains so.

References


