Learning to Perform: towards a new understanding of expert musical learning

An extended summary

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‘Learning to Perform: instrumentalists and instrumental teachers’ has been running at the Royal College of Music London since 2004. Working from the premise that musical expertise needs to be understood in more complex terms than ‘practice makes perfect’, the project has tracked two groups of learners over three years of their conservatoire education. Using a mixed-methods approach, governed by a pragmatic perspective, the project has used questionnaires, interviews and observation to gather rich, longitudinal data exploring students’ learning. This paper is divided into two parts; a summary of theoretical developments from Learning to Perform, and a discussion of how I plan to elucidate this work through my PhD studies. Firstly, I present key findings and theoretical developments from Learning to Perform, beginning with a discussion of the three conceptual lenses that have guided the project.

Informed by research with conservatoire professors, our first theoretical lens draws on the thinking of Bransford and Brown (2000), who conceptualise expertise as concerned with the expert’s approach to their learning, which may either reflect an ‘accomplished novice’ or an ‘answer-filled expert’ status. 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 link this with the theorising of Entwistle and Ramsden (1983), who propose that learners may either engage in ‘deep’ or ‘surface’ learning. Deep learners will typically challenge themselves to fully understand each learning experience, and will seek different ways of reaching this understanding. ‘Surface’ learners, on the other hand, are more likely to take an

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immediate approach to their learning, working towards shorter-term aims. To pull the ideas of ‘accomplished novice’ and ‘deep’ learning together, we have made use of the thinking of researchers based in workplace settings. Investigating how people learn at work, Fuller and Unwin (2003) suggest that those who learn ‘expansively’ may be best placed to learn effectively. Their definition of ‘expansive’ includes participation in multiple communities of practice inside and outside the formal educational setting; opportunities to extend identity through boundary crossing’ (Fuller and Unwin, 2003: 411). Expansive learning in music may include working as an instrumental teacher, listening to genres of music outside of a specialism or finding new ways to practice technique.

Findings from the project suggest that musical expertise requires an ‘accomplished novice’ approach that is both deep and expansive. Contrary to the idea that expertise is developed through a focussed and narrow attention to one particular activity, our findings suggest that learning to perform requires a balance between depth and breadth. Furthermore, students recognise the benefits of teaching others their specialism, both in terms of career preparation and enhancing performance outcomes. In terms of preparing for a career in music, well-rounded preparation needs to include grounded and flexible goals; performance practice alone is not enough. Centring on the complex interplay between breadth and depth in musical learning, I will use two case study students in my presentation to illustrate the need for new approaches to pedagogy that embrace musical expertise holistically.

Secondly, I turn to my developing doctoral work. Focusing on the ‘learning culture’ of the Royal College of Music, this work both builds on, and moves beyond, Learning to Perform. While Learning to Perform has done much to address gaps in conservatoire education, there is still very little research – particularly in the UK – which looks at musical learning as it happens within and outside the physical confines of the conservatoire. If we are to truly understand musical learning, I will argue, we need to ‘reassemble the parts into the whole from which they were originally taken’ (Bloomer, 2001: 430), and extend our research into the everyday lives of conservatoire students as they move towards full participation in the musical

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profession (Lave and Wenger, 1991). One way in which we can achieve this is through taking ‘learning culture’ as our lens.

Previously unconceptualised in music or in higher education, ‘learning culture’ has been drawn to my attention by researchers in further education (James and Biesta et al. 2007) who were seeking to capture the complexity of learning. Assuming that learning is situated and takes place within a cultural setting (Hodkinson and James, 2003), the researchers sought to understand this complexity through engaging in the full range of variables that may impact on learning and on learners: ‘relationships between teachers, teaching, learning, learning situations and the wider contexts of learning’ (James, Biesta et al., 2007: 11). At the core of their thinking is their definition of ‘learning culture’ as ‘not the contexts in which people learn, but the social practices through which people learn’ (ibid.: 23). These social practices include those initiated by learners, but also operate within broader social fields (Bourdieu, 1998) that inhibit or promote learning for different people at different times.

Despite yielding rich and innovative results, this complex and interpretative lens has yet to be applied to conservatoire education; here, I seek to rectify this. Taking a constructionist epistemology which also draws on Bourdieu’s structural constructivism (Bourdieu, 1998), I plan to adopt a qualitative methodology which centres on an ethnographic case study of the Royal College of Music. Using unstructured, semi structured and focus group interviews, participant observation, document analysis and photography, I seek to work with both students and teachers in order to gather data that will allow me to understand how ‘learning culture’ is constructed for learners at the RCM, and – crucially – how this can be transformed to enhance learning. My presentation will conclude with a synthesis of how ‘learning culture’ might further inform our understanding of expert musical learning, placing particular focus on the need to explore learning both inside and outside of the conservatoire’s physical boundaries.
References


