ABSTRACT

Conservatoires in the UK train undergraduates as performers, and not teachers. Yet many students begin some work as an instrumental teacher before they enter the conservatoire. We ask whether this early experience as an instrumental teacher enhances their own instrumental performance.

This is a mixed-method study that draws upon investigations that took place in a single conservatoire with a musically homogeneous group of students, over a period of two years. The investigation had a tapering structure, focusing on students' experiences of, and attitudes to, being instrumental teachers. First we used specially devised questionnaires to draw written data from students until we reached saturation. Second, we interviewed a smaller group of students at greater depth. Third, we carried out a case study of a handpicked student over two years. We situate this alongside conservatoire assessment data.

Contrary to our expectations, and those of other music educators, we did not find that experience as an instrumental teacher is associated with higher measurable personal standards of performance. However, we found that the students believed otherwise, and suggest that a complex interaction between deep and surface learning, expansive and restrictive learning, and the roles of answer-filled expert and accomplished novice are at play here.

Keywords
Conservatoire; instrumental teaching; expansive learning

INTRODUCTION

While anecdotal views upon the quality (or more usually lack of quality) of teaching and learning in conservatoires is commonplace, research in this area is a relatively new field. Since the turn of the century, however, there has been a growth of research into, and within, teaching and learning in conservatoires. In Scandinavia, for example, researchers have begun to investigate the student-teacher relationship (Nerland and Hanken, 2002) and the ways in which students regulate their learning (Nielsen, 2002). In the UK, researchers have examined the development of musical expertise in conservatoire students (see, for example, Burt and Mills, 2005), as well as the processes by which musicians prepare for performance (Williamon, 2004). Instrumental teachers working in conservatoires
have also engaged in action research, reflecting on and enhancing their own – and others’ – practice (Mills and Moore, 2005). While issues that relate to student progress have been probed, this has rarely been the focus. In this paper we place emphasis on student development, examining the role of instrumental teaching in shaping musical expertise.

Conservatoires in the UK train undergraduates as performers, and not teachers. Yet many students begin some work as an instrumental teacher before they enter the conservatoire (Burt and Mills, 2007). We know that students both expect and hope to teach their instrument when they graduate (Burt and Mills, in press), and that current conservatoire teachers report that their teaching has a positive impact on their playing (Mills, 2004). Here, we ask whether this is replicated for students, investigating whether instrumental teaching impacts positively on conservatoire students’ performance.

In addressing this, we draw on findings and theorising from the Learning to Perform project. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme, Learning to Perform began in 2004. Since that time, the project has tracked two groups of learners over three years of their education at the Royal College of Music London (RCM). Working from the premise that expertise in music performance is far more complex than ‘practice makes perfect’ (see, for example, Ericcson, Krampe & Tesch-Romer, 1993), the project has used three theoretical lenses to expand the way that musical expertise is conceptualised. We go on to examine each of these lenses, explaining as we do so the role that we envisage instrumental teaching may play in developing performance expertise.

Informed by research with conservatoire professors, the first theoretical lens draws on the thinking of Bransford and Brown (2000). In a very different stance to Ericcson et al., Bransford and Brown conceptualise expertise as to do 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). Conservatoire professors at the RCM emerged as ‘accomplished novices’, who see teaching as one way in which they are able to broaden their learning and professional practice. In this paper, we investigate whether conservatoire students may be able to enhance their performance expertise through engaging in instrumental teaching, proposing that in so doing they may move towards an ‘accomplished novice’ approach to their expertise.

But in what ways might ‘accomplished novices’ approach their learning? How do they satisfy their quest for new knowledge and new ways of learning? We are informed here by 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 immediate approach to their
learning, working towards shorter-term aims. Working in a chamber group, for example, has been shown to encourage students to think deeply about their own performance as well as that of their peers (Burt and Mills, 2008), providing a forum in which students can challenge themselves and further their long-term aims. We know also that, for many conservatoire professors, instrumental teaching is one way in which they learn deeply about their own practice. But is the same true for young instrumental teachers? In this paper, we draw on the notion of ‘deep’ learning as we seek to understand the impact of instrumental teaching on the development of performance expertise.

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). For musicians, participation in multiple communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) could involve playing in chamber groups (Burt and Mills, 2008), working at a summer school (Burt and Mills, 2007) or – as we argue in this paper – teaching an instrument to others. We know that many performing musicians shift from identifying themselves as a ‘performer’ to identifying themselves as a ‘performer-teacher’ over the course of their career, but again we know little of the role that instrumental teaching plays in constructing the identities of younger instrumental teachers. In this paper, we address this gap, asking the question: ‘does early experience as an instrumental teacher enhance students’ own instrumental performance?’

**METHOD**

This is a mixed method study that draws upon investigations that took place at the RCM with a musically homogeneous group of students, over a period of two years. The investigation had a tapering structure, focusing on students’ experiences of, and attitudes to, being instrumental teachers.

First we used specially devised questionnaires to draw written data from students until we reached saturation. In September 2004, 60 BMus Year 1 RCM students and 54 BMus Year 3 RCM students completed a structured questionnaire as part of Learning to Perform. A set of fifteen statements, designed in consultation with focus groups of students, was designed to reflect different attitudes to being an instrumental teacher. Students were asked to illustrate their agreement (1) or disagreement (7) with each statement on a 7-point scale, and to indicate whether they had ever engaged in instrumental teaching. In September 2005 and September 2006, students from the same two cohorts were again invited to complete the question; 74 accepted in 2005 and 87 in 2006.

Second, we interviewed a smaller group of students in greater depth. As part of Learning to Perform, focus students took part in termly interviews. Here, we present results from the third round of interviews, conducted with 17 students in June 2005. All interviews were semi-structured, conducted individually by one of the authors,
recorded, fully transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti software. Third, we carried out a case study of a handpicked student over two years. This female student graduated from the RCM in July 2007, and is selected to provide an example of how instrumental teaching can change learning. She is not chosen as representative of RCM students, or of young instrumental teachers, but rather as a case that we can learn from as we explore the issues raised in this paper. Finally, we make use of conservatoire assessment data to run t-tests to examine the difference in end-of-year performance assessment scores between those students who have taught and those who have not.

RESULTS
We summarise the results in four parts, in accordance with the four sets of data collection.

Of the 114 students that completed the *Learning to Perform* questionnaire in 2004, 55% had taught, or were currently teaching, their instrument to others. A year later, this figure rises to 78%, and a year after that to 84%. As students progress through their higher education, teaching becomes an important part of their portfolio of activities. Students’ attitudes to instrumental teaching are summarised in table 1.

Table 1. RCM students’ attitudes to instrumental teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1=agree strongly</th>
<th>Sept 2004</th>
<th>Sept 2005</th>
<th>Sept 2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7=disagree strongly</td>
<td>median</td>
<td>median</td>
<td>median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I expect to do some instrumental teaching when I graduate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hope to do some instrumental teaching when I graduate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to teach in a conservatoire</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like to teach beginners</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy teaching students who find music difficult</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy teaching students who find music easy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy teaching young children</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is obvious how to teach: I do not need to be trained</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A good performer will always be a good teacher</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When a student gives up, I worry that my teaching was not good enough</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If students do not practice enough, I worry that it is my fault</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving instrumental lessons will improve my playing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would want instrumental lessons to be fun for students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I teach students to improvise and compose</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to start students reading music from the first lesson</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In summary, this cohort of students consistently expects and hopes to engage in instrumental teaching when they graduate. They anticipate that they will have to learn how to teach, and believe that giving instrumental lessons will improve their playing. But in what ways do they believe that this will happen? How can teaching improve students’ own performance practice? Turning to our qualitative data, we see three sets of insight into this question.

Firstly, students report that teaching benefits their practice methods. A third year oboist, for example, reflects that “I have taught a lot more this year and it has made me realise a lot more about the practice methods you use - do I actually do that myself and go back and find out and realise it was in your head all the time - you just didn’t actually apply it yourself.” For this student, being an instrumental teacher allows him to challenge and improve the way that he practices his own instrument. Secondly, instrumental teaching encourages self-sufficient learning and practice, as a first year pianist explains: “It makes me realise that I expect a lot from my teacher and I expect detailed analysis from him when I am perfectly able to do it but I am just not bothering to do it. But being a teacher you have to do it for your students and you realise how much you should do in your own practice”. Again referring to practice, this student highlights how teaching has stimulated independent learning and analysis. Thirdly, teaching allows students to notice ways in which they can improve their technique, as a third year singer illustrates: “You see how much you know yourself. When you are teaching them, you are seeing how you play and you realise you are doing some things wrong”. The act of teaching, it would seem, encourages students to critique their own performance practice, to challenge this, and to improve it. We turn now to examine this in more depth again, moving to our case study student.

This student, who we call Louise, emerged from the questionnaire as an instrumental teacher who is keen to reflect on her practice in order to improve her teaching. She feels sure that instrumental teaching improves her playing, and has heard her own teacher speaking of the positive influence that teaching has had on her performance. Louise ‘stumbled into teaching by accident’, mainly out of financial need, but now speaks of having ‘caught the bug’. After a short period of giving instrumental lessons at a residential festival, she returned voluntarily took part in the RCM Students Associates Scheme, which allows students to work alongside class teachers in secondary schools. The following year, she began giving regular instrumental lessons, and soon began to notice the positive impact on her own playing: “It’s made me very aware of how I do things in my own playing, and I constantly have to find new ways to explain things to my student to engage them”. For Louise, at least, teaching has become integrated into her portfolio as a musician, informing her performance practice as well as her learning more generally.

We have seen that the students report that instrumental teaching improves their performance practice, in a variety of different ways. Turning to conservatoire assessment data, then, we examine whether this is reflected in end-of-year performance assessment scores. There are, though, no significant differences between those who have and have not taught at the end of first year (t(116)=.32, p > 0.05), the end of the second year (t(109)=.31, p > 0.05), the end of the third year (t(62)=.55, p > 0.05) or the fourth year (t(58)=-1.7, p > 0.05). While descriptively the students
who teach do slightly better in performance assessments than those that do not teach, this is reversed in the fourth year assessment; those students who have not taught score 6% higher as a group than those who have.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Contrary to our expectations, and those of other music educators, we did not find that experience as an instrumental teacher is associated with higher measurable personal standards of performance. However, we found that the students believed otherwise, and suggest that a complex interaction between deep and surface learning, expansive and restrictive learning, and the roles of answer-filled expert and accomplished novice are at play here.

The mere fact that students believe that instrumental teaching improves their performance requires comment. From the data that we have presented, we see clear evidence that students feel that their instrumental teaching is of benefit to their performance practice. Simply by engaging in instrumental teaching, students are widening their identity portfolio and stepping outside of their comfort zone. Teaching appears to encourage students to think deeply about their learning and to seek new challenges both for their own learning and for that of their pupils. That the students speak of the links that they have made between the two activities adds weight to the argument that instrumental teaching encourages an expansive approach to learning.

Yet the statistical data does not backup the students’ reports, showing no significant difference between those who have taught and those who have not. While the descriptive statistics show that final year scores are higher for those who have not taught, this difference is not significant. These results do highlight, however, the need for caution in expounding instrumental teaching, and expansive learning, as a uniformly positive approach to developing musical expertise. It may be that a more restrictive approach, with concentration solely on instrumental progress, also has its advantages. Alternatively, it is possible that not all of the students who teach have made the links with their own performance that we have seen in this paper. For them, teaching may be a time-consuming activity that is yet to impact positively on their performance, and perhaps even impacts negatively on their assessment scores. We suggest, then, that emphasis needs to be placed on providing space for students to explore instrumental teaching as a positive and expanding part of their musical portfolio.

Finally, we remind readers that RCM students seek a vocation in music (Burt and Mills, 2006), which is most likely to take the form of a portfolio career (Mallon, 1998) that encompasses many different musical activities, including instrumental teaching. Those students who have already advanced their skills as teachers, and who have become ‘accomplished-novice’ experts in the process, may be best placed to succeed in such a career. The balance between breadth and depth of learning is a delicate one, and needs to be explored further (Burt and Lebler, 2008). This paper concludes, though, that instrumental teaching is a potentially important part of the development of musical expertise, offering opportunity for the exploration of expansive and deep learning which, as well as advancing learning skills more generally, may also improve performance practice.
Notes

1 This case study is also examined in Mills, 2007.

Acknowledgments

Learning to Perform is funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme of the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-139-25-0101)

REFERENCES


