

Experimental Learning: An Experiment in Conservatoire Training

Abstract

This paper outlines how the curriculum of the undergraduate course at Trinity College of Music in London attempts to address some of the imperatives of contemporary professional music training. The first section examines some of the changes that are taking place in the 21st century to the music profession. There is discussion of the broadening roles and expectations of the musician and consideration is given to some of the imperatives that are placed by the government on conservatoires of music in England and Wales. The second section outlines the response of Trinity College of Music to the changing roles of the professional musician manifest in the Professional Skills Projects. It outlines the module's educational philosophy based on experiential learning and its principal goals and outcomes. The conclusion discusses some of the advantages and difficulties encountered within the PSP and looks forward to the next incarnation of the module.

The Changing Profession and Government Prerogatives

It could be said that whilst the world inexorably continues its voyage within the universe, and the years pass by with unhindered regularity, the rate of change within our small sector of human experience has never been greater. This change affects every aspect of human existence and the musical world with which we are all closely associated has no immunity. Changes are manifest in the advances of musical language, techniques, music technologies, mediums and form; they are all aided crucially by technological advances in communications which, at a stroke, make available to the rest of the world the latest composition, performance or collaborative artistic venture, thus instantaneously informing the creativity and work of musicians world wide. This is a process that in the past could only have been achieved within the timescale of at best, months, and more likely years. This phenomenal ease and speed of communications is concomitant with globalisation, the spread of the "free market" principles and economic imperatives that increasingly dominate society, culture and educational policies. It is within this context that on a micro level, conservatoires of music, and in relation to this paper, Trinity College of Music, are continually charged with providing relevant courses so that their students are well prepared to contribute to the artistic culture of society and to earn their livings as professional musicians.

The changes relating to the music profession in the United Kingdom are tracked in the report "Creating a land with music" (Rogers, 2002). The report was commissioned by HEFCE (the Higher Education Funding Council for England) and it considers what is meant by the terms "performance" and "musician"; it investigates the functions of the professional musician in the 21st century and looks at how music training meets the musicians' needs. The evidence offered is drawn from consultation with a wide range of professional musicians and representative bodies. The report is substantial and merits greater consideration than there is time for in this paper. However there are

several overriding conclusions that can be considered crucial for course design within the conservatoire sector.

The report concludes that being a professional musician in the UK involves the opportunity to undertake a series of roles different from and broader than the art of performing and composing. These roles generate the notion of the “portfolio career” that may involve a combination of performance, tutoring, composing, arranging, workshop leadership, singing, producing, conducting, song writing and sound/recording engineering. If at this point one considers the life of J.S.Bach, one could be forgiven for asking –“so what has changed”? The principal point is that the contemporary musician will be unlikely to benefit from patronage or a “full-time” position. The report finds that for every one full-time employee within the music industry, there are nine part-time or self-employed musicians.

“Creating a land with music” investigated the genres of performance and the following outlines the types of performance in which respondents were actively engaged as professional musicians:

64% classical,	44% film/tv,	44% jazz,	44% pop, 41%
opera/music theatre,	31% folk,	31% rock,	24% latin, 23% blues,
	8% electronic,	14% indie,	13% reggae, 24% other

Over half the respondents (52%) performed across four of the genres and 75% of those who listed classical as a category performed in two or more genres in addition to classical and opera/musical theatre. This statistic raises questions as to the breadth of performance training traditionally found within UK conservatoires.

Another important finding of the report is related to the respondents’ perceptions of the most important skills. The majority (82%) listed artistic skills; 62% listed communication skills and 32% listed administrative or business skills. The need for business and entrepreneurial skills to feature within the curriculum is supported by “Metier” (National Training Organisation for the Arts and Entertainments Sector) in its report “The Music Industry” (2001). Here it is suggested that institutions should be aware that employers are disappointed with students’ commercial acumen and entrepreneurial skills.

The changing musical culture and its influence on the music profession is discussed by Peter Renshaw (2004). He identifies the need for conservatoires to respond to contemporary culture and suggests that the conservatoires’ traditional role of reinvigorating the public’s interest and commitment to the classical heritage should be viewed in context with the living vernacular culture and that there should be a creative and educational synergy between the two.

“Conservatoires are delicately poised between conserving “classical heritage” and acting as a catalyst within a living culture”.

He argues that whilst conservation of the classical traditions will continue to be an important philosophy of the conservatoire sector, the challenging cultural values will require them to re-shape the curriculum to be more inclusive and outward looking. The notion of an inclusive, outward looking curriculum has been given consideration

by the Association of European Conservatoires in its report entitled “Music in a Multi-Cultural Society”. Here, multi-cultural influences on composition, creative music making such as improvisation and the increasing inclusion of world musics in the curriculum is acknowledged.

Professional orchestras in the UK also reflect inclusiveness, breadth of interest and educational volition. Examination of the Association of British Orchestras’ website shows that this work is usually carried out through their respective education departments, all of which, seek to engage with the wider community such as schools, community centres, youth centres and prisons. Community projects can attract valuable funding for orchestras and is also a means by which they can promote themselves and the classical music tradition. In the context of schools, projects can work to stimulate interest in learning an instrument or composition, thus providing potential future professional musicians. Projects can also help to broaden the concept of performance through the involvement of creative improvisation and audience participation. There is also interest in the inclusion of world musics as exemplified by the London Symphony Orchestra’s Discovery Programme in which the learning of the Balinese Gamelan is featured. Well intentioned programmes such as the above, add to the imperative for conservatoires to respond to the changing role of a professional musician; contemporary curriculum design demands thorough preparation for the skills of presentation, communication and wide musical invention that are required to help such programmes to succeed.

Changing employment patterns are of particular interest to governments, which are responsible for the funding of conservatoires. Higher education in the UK has traditionally been largely funded through the state sector. There has been a significant shift in policy in recent years and students are increasingly required to contribute directly towards their fees. This is partly in response to the funding implications of the government’s policy of widening participation in higher education to at least 50% of the population. Despite this move towards direct individual contributions to higher education, the sector remains very largely publicly funded and as such, is subject to stringent government regulation and accountability. Undoubtedly one of the intensions of government policy is “employability”. It sits as an equal goal along with the aims of developing individuals’ capabilities to the highest potential levels, the achievement of personal fulfilment, and enabling students to participate in and contribute to society (Dearing 1997). The imperative of employability is promulgated by governments as a stimulus for higher education institutions, and in this context conservatoires, to respond to the contemporary music profession.

Funding is of acute importance to a conservatoire given the expensive provision of individual tuition. Indeed, conservatoires are recipients of enhanced funding levels in recognition of the specific nature of the training. Employability is therefore given particular emphasis through the requirement that 75% of conservatoire graduates should be working primarily in professional music employment within five years of graduation (HEFCE, 2000).

Despite the very special nature of artistic study and its benefits to culture and society, there is little doubt that funding and employability within a changing music profession remain, and are likely to continue to be, crucial factors in the modern conservatoire

curriculum. It is within this context that Trinity College of Music developed the Professional Skills Projects. It is however interesting to note that the intervention of government is not always considered to be of benefit and I conclude this section with a provocative quote from Norman Lebrecht in relation to the UK orchestras' moves to embrace multi-culturalism and world musics (2003).

“What the world learned from Stalin and Hitler is that state organs have no business meddling with culture. That lesson is being obliterated in Britain where cultural diversity is brandished as a weapon to intimidate the performing arts and ultimately emasculate them.”

An interesting observation that is arguably perverse in its assertion that inclusion, albeit enforced, is akin to fascism. Regardless of its worth or otherwise, is unlikely to weigh heavily with governments or higher education institutions at this point in time.

Professional Skills Projects (PSP)

“Unravelling Ravel” (string quartet educational project)

“The Philip Lawrence Awards Ceremony (composition of specially composed music)

Schools workshops in Japan (seminar educational workshops)

Production of a rock video (collaborative project of musicians and a television school),

“Samba” (a six week series of seminars with school children)

“The 12th Night” (a concert of music and Shakespearian text)

“Interactive Arts” (a series of interactive arts sessions at the National Maritime Museum)

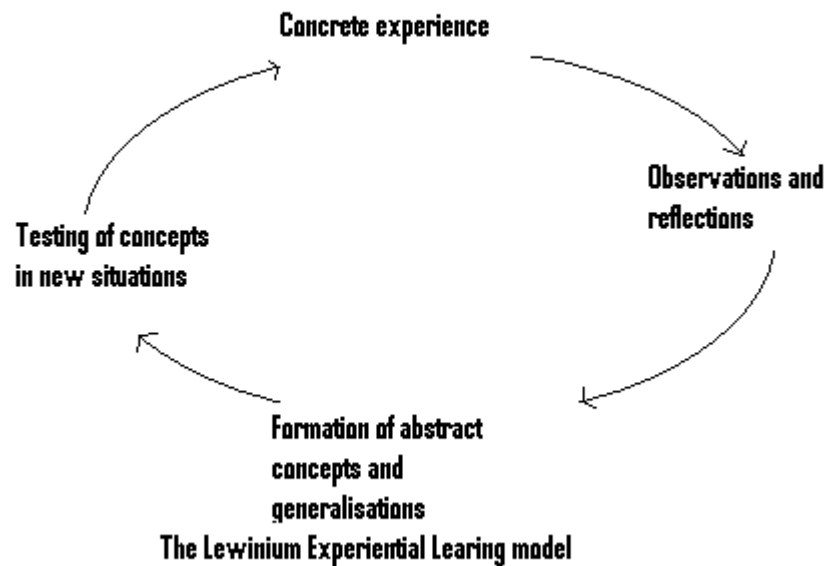
The above titles are student created PSP performance projects, conceived, planned, organised and produced by final year students of the BMus degree. The Professional Skills Projects module (PSP) was introduced to the undergraduate BMus course at Trinity College of Music in September 1999. PSP is a four-year component of the BMus worth 12.5% of the entire programme. It was conceived as a response to the perceived needs of the contemporary music profession. Indeed, the mission statement of the College makes clear the intention to provide contemporary and relevant music training of the highest order. The mission of Trinity College of Music is as follows:

“Trinity College of Music’s mission is to train high-calibre performers and composers to excel in the musical profession, nationally and internationally. In doing so, it aims not only to meet the educational needs of individual students but also to address wider cultural, social and commercial imperatives. It seeks to produce musicians with a commitment to employing their musical talents in the service of their communities; who have an open and adaptable attitude to change; who lead and innovate within the performance industry; and who value collaborative and co-operative working models.”

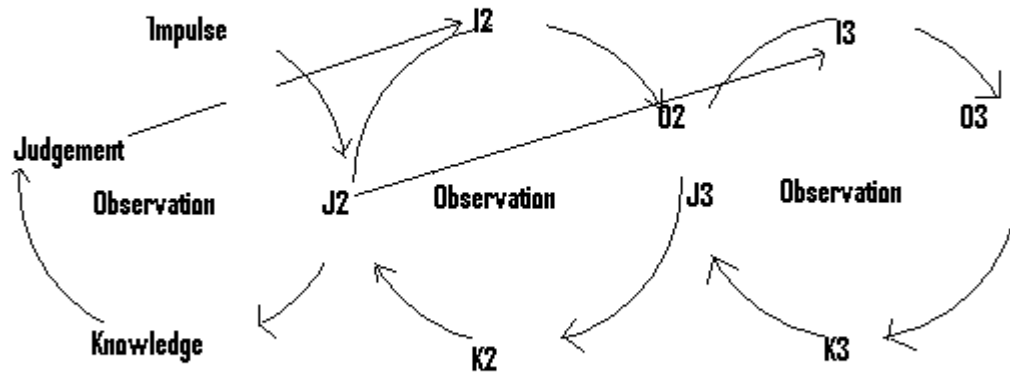
The challenge at the time of planning was to develop a unit of study that would address the mission statement and develop musical diversity, skills of presentation and communication along with business acumen: all identified in the previous section of this paper as specific requirements of the contemporary professional musician.

The planning process began by a consideration of what we felt our students should be able to achieve at the end of the four-year PSP course. It was agreed that the module should culminate in a student generated and managed performance project using the experience of the previous three years as training for this. The range and scope of the performance projects was envisaged to be very broad: this would present potential difficulties relating to reliability and parity in relation to outcome assessment of performance. The module was to be based upon the model of experiential learning, i.e. the process of reflection upon experience. Kolb (1984) outlines two models of

experiential learning, both of which provide a sound theoretical basis for using evaluative methods of assessment. The Lewin's experiential learning model describes a continuing process of concrete experience followed by observation and reflection. These inform the formulation of abstract or new concepts which are tested in new situations. These tests form concrete experience and thus, the process continues in a cycle.



The second theory was created by Dewey and is similar, but perhaps makes the continuum of the cycle more explicit. Dewey refers to a process of impulse followed by observation. Observation is transformed into knowledge forming the basis of judgement. This judgement is the foundation for another impulse thus commencing another cycle but at a higher level.



Dewey's model of experiential learning

The basis of PSP was therefore to be a series of performance projects: the equivalent of concrete experience or impulses. These would initially be generated by professional project leaders but would culminate in a student led project. This experience would provide the basis for reflection and evaluation and the testing of new ideas in further projects, and ultimately, that of the final year. Crucially, failure or problems encountered within a project would not lead to automatic penalisation of marks as the outcome of the performance project would not be assessed. Instead, the assessment would consist of an appropriate evaluative account showing the basis on which learning had taken place.

In order to give a coherent overview of the entire programme, the goals/outcomes for each year are discussed from year four, i.e. the culmination of the learning experience backwards to the introduction at year one.

Year four

The outcomes for year four of the module can be summarised as follows:

- The ability to research and devise a performance project
- The ability to lead a project or aspects of project work
- Skills of communication and teamwork associated with project leadership
- The ability to evaluate and create a rationale for projects
- The ability to apply as appropriate skills acquired in the electives

It is straightforward to map certain of the Mission Statement key phrases such as “lead and innovate” and “collaborative and co-operative working modules” to the above outcomes. Those such as “wider cultural, social and commercial imperatives” are less evident and a little more background information is required. It is a

requirement that student generated projects take place off site. The exact location is left for the student to decide upon thus permitting the student to define the community or culture in which the project is to take place. Projects therefore take place in many locations within UK and sometimes beyond. Moreover, the exact nature of the performance is not defined. Whilst a traditional concert is very acceptable, more adventurous ideas are encouraged and have included concert tours, the production of a CD, the creation of a promotional website, schools educational workshops, collaborative music and dance events, sound engineering and a combined performance and research project. Each project will therefore have its own specific slant, whether it is towards culture, society or commerce and self-promotion. Another important feature is that the student is not required to “perform” in the traditional sense as part of the project. Whilst students generally prefer to use the opportunity to perform, it is very acceptable for students to act solely as animateurs, producers, facilitators or entrepreneurs. Alternatively, their contribution could be to provide an arrangement, to improvise, or even to act as a sound engineer; these skills form part of a wider elective menu (a separate component of the BMus) that is available to all students of years three and four. Appendix 1 gives the project titles of final year students for the academic year 2003-3004.

Year 2 and 3

The performance projects in years two and three are led by professional project leaders and are crucial in providing students with the necessary experience to undertake their own final year project. The outcomes of these years are as follows:

- The ability to evaluate critically a range of contextualised performance projects
- The ability to provide a rationale for a project
- The ability to assess the planning and outcome of the project

In year two, the projects take place on site and the subject matter is very wide-ranging. They take place over a six-week period of two hours per week and culminate in a performance. Projects offered include “Samba”, “African Story Telling” (here students learn to narrate, dance and play in an African folk tale), “Jazz for Classical Players”, “Graphic Notation” “Composition though Improvisation” and ”The music of John Cage”. A full range of projects for year 2 can be found in appendix 2.

In year three, the projects take place usually within the local community and they are always open to the general public. Once again they are likely to take place over a six-week period. Students work alongside the professional project leader(s) and the public to produce an eclectic selection of performances. Projects titles have in the past included “Carnival” (a full Brazilian carnival in Greenwich Park open to the general public and local schools)] and “New Keys” (a project where new keyboard compositions are commissioned, performed and then discussed in an open forum). A full range for the academic year 2003-2004 can be found in appendix 3.

Evident in the outcomes for years two and three is the ability to give detailed consideration to the way in which professional project leaders have conceived, planned and executed projects; students are also required to begin to give thought to how they might apply this experience to formulating a project of their own design. The process of reflection on experience is a critical part of the learning experience. The process is not always comfortable for the student or indeed the project leader who

may find himself/herself to be under continual critical scrutiny throughout the project. The project leader is also open to some criticism within the evaluations submitted for assessment.

The range of projects offered to the students is an important part of the learning process. By design, many of the projects are “non-traditional” in nature and will call upon students to use other musical skills than their Principal Study instrument. These skills may include dance/movement, improvisation, composition, and performance of music of other genres. Through introduction to these new experiences, students are invited to consider the nature of performance itself. It is hoped that the wide range of projects offered to students of years two and three will encourage students to think creatively and boldly as to the nature of their final year project and that the cycle of experiential learning will act as thorough preparation.

Year one

The scope of year one is in comparison limited and serves as an introduction to project work. The principle outcome is defined as:

Knowledge and understanding of a broad repertoire to be used as a foundation for levels 2 and 3 project work.

In practice, students are introduced to a range of workshop leading skills; the main aim of these is to develop skills of communication, presentation and organisation along with self-confidence and the ability to work as part of a team. This is the only point at which students are assessed through outcome rather than evaluation. Students are required to present to the class, a small (five-minute) learning activity, assessed by the tutor, in which they should ensure that all members are actively engaged. This simulates the conditions of a “mini-workshop”. Through this experience, students are encouraged to be open-minded and to gain the confidence required in order to participate in the challenges of later years.

Conclusion

In September 2004 the sixth cohort of students embarked upon the first year of the PSP module. The evidence from student and staff evaluation suggests that the module’s instigation has been largely very successful. Even if a student chooses to produce a “standard” concert as the final project that is limited in creative scope, the four-year programme will have ensured exposure to some of the changes that are taking place within the music profession. The titles of fourth year projects however indicate that a significant number of students attempt to produce a creative project which stretches the definition of performance and the role of the performer. All students will have had to employ appropriate skills of leadership, communication, organisation and collaboration. All students will have had to consider the notion of audience and plan programmes fit for specific projects and they will have been required to manage a limited budget. Other benefits include experience of report writing in the form of a substantial evaluation of the final year project. PSP also gives students the opportunity to integrate the final year project into a performance activity that falls outside college life but is a significant feature of the student’s extra-musical life.

Evaluation of the module has also highlighted some of the problems associated with PSP. Whilst the rationale for assessment through written evaluation is strong, it sometimes appears to be of secondary relevance to students. Having worked very hard at producing a creative project, some students have indicated a preference for assessment by outcome rather than retrospective reflection. As discussed earlier, outcome-based assessment would pose complex problems of parity, reliability and logistics given the range of projects and the non-restrictive approach to their location. The final year project is particularly time consuming for students and this has caused some adverse comment. The dangers of overload and the potential diversion away from the priority of pure performance/composition training are discussed by Tooley (1998). He suggests that this could result in a superficial breadth of training and general overload. The evidence available seems to indicate however that most students are appreciative of PSP and do not feel that the time allocated is over generous. Whilst there is a nominal budget for each student's final year project, it is very limited and as such, it is difficult to describe the student experience of budget management as anything other than superficial. The concept of experiential learning and its associated rationale for evaluative assessment requires considerable and continuous staff development; the workload associated with marking should not be underestimated. It is essential that professional tutors and project leaders as well as staff undertaking assessment understand in full the basis on which PSP is predicated. PSP demands excellent organisation and leadership; without this the risks of failure are great.

There is a requirement in the UK that all higher education courses are subject to periodic review. Trinity College of Music has recently begun this process that will include a thorough re-examination PSP. The literature cited in the first section of this paper, particularly "Creating a land with music" will be influential in the review process. Equally important however will be the process of "putting into practice what we preach". That is to say, applying the philosophy and process of experiential learning to course design and in particular to the development of PSP.

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