



Learning about learning: developing conservatoire students' pedagogical knowledge

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Abstract

Conservatoires are specialist and practical schools that provide immersive training for aspiring performing arts professionals. Historically, performance training in music has been valued over and above other aspects of the curriculum in conservatoires. For example, learning how to teach is rarely considered as important as learning how to perform. Yet pedagogical training in music has enormous potential to support students to learn about their own learning development and that of others, and as such can enhance students' employability in or beyond music. Whilst this article focuses on the discipline of music, it poses important questions about the value for students of learning about learning via pedagogical training in many other creative subject areas, such as dance, drama, art, and languages, or even STEM subjects (sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Developing students' metacognitive awareness may benefit society, helping students to nurture the next generation of learners, whilst impacting positively on longer-term recruitment into conservatoires and other Higher Education Institutions.

Keywords: conservatoires; instrumental teacher education; pedagogical training; learning about learning; music education ecology.

Introduction and context

According to the National Plan for Music Education in England, refreshed in 2022, there is an urgent need for music teachers and practitioners to build their skills through connecting with each other and 'the wider music education ecology' (Department for Education and Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport, 2022, p.66). Higher Music Education Institutions have an important role to play here in equipping their graduates to support

musical learning in children and young people. Conservatoires are specialist and practical schools that provide immersive training for aspiring performing arts professionals. Whilst they have sometimes been described as being 'shut off from the world' due to the intensive nature of the training offered, conservatoires 'strive to ensure [their] students engage with the wider world [through] all kinds of education and outreach activity' (Conservatoires UK, n.d.).

Yet, for many years, performance training in UK conservatoires has often been valued over and above all other aspects of conservatoire curricula. In the meantime, students with considerable strengths in other areas may have been overlooked or even dismissed. I have often been baffled by narrow definitions of 'high-quality' in the conservatoire context. For example, it was once suggested that allowing students to study a second instrument 'promotes amateurism', implying that diversifying in such a way would detract from a student's performance development in their principal instrument. On other occasions, I have been astonished to hear comments such as, 'They're never going to be good enough!' to which I have hastily responded (at least in my head), 'Good enough for what?'

According to the Association of European Conservatoires (2010, p.7), instrumental teaching is often seen as a career for those who have 'failed as a performer'. On a personal level, I have been both shocked and intrigued in equal measure by negative attitudes about careers in instrumental music teaching. In a recent study (Shaw, 2023a), a student confided that, prior to learning about learning through their pedagogical training at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire (RBC), they had believed that, 'If you're a teacher you're a failed musician' whereas, 'to be a performer you have to be the best'. Attitudes such as these are potentially damaging in their inference that one does not need to 'be the best' to pursue a teaching career. Furthermore, a recent graduate said, 'I remember talking to my peers about maybe going into something [other than performance, but] it was always met with 'well then, you're not taking it seriously'.

I'm pleased to say though, that over the last decade, I have witnessed a very gradual cultural shift in attitudes whereby students at RBC have become much more open to learning about learning. Students have also come to appreciate the impact that developing pedagogical skills, qualities, awareness, behaviours, and values (Shaw, 2023b) can have on their all-round development and employability. This positive shift has come about

through a carefully-crafted expansion of instrumental music teacher training across the undergraduate music curriculum since 2011.

Contributing to the wider music education ecology

Pedagogical training in a conservatoire could be viewed as an ecological system, thus resonating with Bronfenbrenner (1979). At RBC, students study core pedagogy modules across years 1 and 2, where they develop music workshop facilitation skills and learn about the principles of instrumental, vocal, or composition teaching. This core training acknowledges and aims to build on students' previous experiences of volunteering in music education contexts during their school years (microsystem) and fosters new learning interactions between students and visiting professionals within the conservatoire (mesosystem). Across years 3 and 4, students are then offered opportunities to test these principles in external education and community settings (exosystem). Exploring appropriate technologies and resources in diverse learning environments beyond the conservatoire shapes students' attitudes to learning about learning. In turn, these experiences lead students to challenge and question their own assumptions about their early musical experiences (relating back to the microsystem) which may be very different from the young people they find themselves teaching during their studies and beyond. Indeed, many students also begin to question and challenge traditional notions of conservatoire culture (macrosystem) as they discover and develop teaching-related skills, qualities, awareness, behaviours, and values over time (chronosystem). Beyond their conservatoire training, graduates become part of the exosystem, as they are often invited to return to their former institution to share their early-career experiences, actively inspiring and influencing their younger peers, and even their former tutors (Shaw, 2024; 2025). Indeed, learning about learning in a conservatoire environment can be described as a complex, multi-directional and cyclical network of interacting relationships.

Through all levels of this ecological system, students are encouraged to reflect, not only on their own learning experiences as musicians, but also on how children and young people learn, and how they as emerging professionals can support that learning in a range of contexts and scenarios. According to Kuhn and Dean (2004), individuals who develop metacognition (defined as an awareness of their own thought processes) are able to retrieve and apply strategies learned in one context to other related situations. Arguably,

increasing 'metacognitive awareness' (Shulman, 1986, p.13) through facilitating opportunities for students to develop deeper understandings of their own and others' learning is important if conservatoire students are to contribute to the future development of young(er) musicians. Indeed, employers of graduate instrumental teachers across England have expressed concern, perceiving that conservatoire graduates simply teach as they have been taught themselves and are not sufficiently prepared to teach learners with wide-ranging interests and from varied socio-economic backgrounds (Shaw, 2023c). In the absence of authentic opportunities to observe, experience, experiment with, and reflect on up-to-date teaching practices in real-world music education settings, conservatoire graduates would inevitably be predisposed to relying solely on replicating the teaching they had experienced themselves in the past. However, I argue that learning about learning both within and outside the conservatoire supports students to diversify their developing pedagogical knowledge in ways that will benefit future generations of musical learners, especially in a post-Covid world.

In tracking students' development across RBC's BMus course, through a combination of surveys, textual narratives, and semi-structured interviews between 2019–2021 (Shaw, 2023b) I have found that a substantial proportion of undergraduates (81% in 2019) arrive at conservatoire having already gained some experience of supporting children and young people to learn in music education contexts. Through engaging in Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in schools and community settings over time, students have been able to build on their pre-higher education teaching experiences. In doing so, many students have gradually moved away from self-interest and perfectionism in relation to their own artistic development, and towards caring about the positive impact their practice as musicians could have on others. Halfway through 2019, 59% of first-year students claimed that a Community Engagement module had led them to become a 'more open-minded musician', and of those who had never previously considered that teaching could form part of their future career, 87% began to consider it. Furthermore, after completing a range of teaching placements during their course, a final-year student revealed a completely changed career outlook, having realised that becoming a successful professional musician is not only about 'the things you can gain' as a performer, but much more importantly, 'the things you can give'. Indeed, this student was excited to be in a position to be able to use their highly-developed performance skills away from the formal concert platform, to inspire and motivate young people who may not otherwise have had the opportunity to learn a musical instrument.

Conclusion

In his book, *Music, Talent and Performance* (1988, p.56), Kingsbury wrote: 'Although it is only occasionally spoken aloud, there is a general understanding that only a small minority of graduates of the conservatory will be able to make professional careers as performing musicians'. This citation led me to question the huge pressure experienced in a conservatoire learning environment where a year's worth of development in performance, assessed by a single end-of-year recital, leaves many students little time to explore other avenues. I wonder if the emphasis placed on promoting performance training in conservatoires poses a challenge and impediment to the development of students' pedagogical skills, qualities, awareness, behaviours, and values. After all, as Lawson (2025, p.11) acknowledges, 'today's conservatoires are much more than sites of advanced musical performance training and serve not just their students but wider society'. Greater investment in and expansion of instrumental teacher education in conservatoires (and indeed university music departments) could help to ensure that music graduates are well prepared to engage and support learners from wide-ranging backgrounds. Building on students' existing teaching experiences through a wider network of external placements, mentoring, and alumni contributions to curricula could sustain and diversify future recruitment streams and above all, feed into and inform the 'wider music education ecology' (Department for Education and Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport, 2022, p.66).

This piece has focused on the discipline of music, but there may be implications for many more subjects taught in higher education, including other creative subjects (dance, drama, art, languages) and STEM subjects (sciences, technology, engineering, mathematics). Is learning about learning and how to facilitate learning in others the preserve of postgraduate initial teacher training courses? Should more undergraduate courses include subject-specific pedagogical training? Could inspiring more emerging graduates to teach and nurture future learners be of benefit to society whilst contributing to longer-term recruitment into higher education? Certainly, learning about learning in a conservatoire environment can influence how students view themselves as musicians, highlighting their significant potential to impact learning development for future generations.

Acknowledgements

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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