

The role of chamber music in learning to perform: a case study

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ABSTRACT This paper draws on findings from the *Learning to Perform* project, a three-year longitudinal investigation of musical learning at a UK conservatoire. In particular, focus is placed on the role that chamber music can play in the development of musical expertise. 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 may be one way in which students can “expand” their learning as well as nurturing skills that may promote their careers. We focus on the development of one wind quintet, concentrating on in-depth understanding of the opportunities or constraints that it affords learning. Using interview data, triangulated by questionnaires and observation, we track the quintet’s successes and disappointments, and the impact that the experience had on the learners involved. The quintet emerges as a space in which students can challenge and be challenged, where they can learn deeply and where they can develop skills within and beyond music. Following a decision to be assessed as part of their degree, the group coherence begins to diminish, so that the quintet eventually disperses. We suggest that these findings have emergent implications both in terms of musical expertise and conservatoire curricula.

KEY WORDS: Expansive learning, conservatoire, quintet, peer learning, curriculum development

This paper draws on findings from the *Learning to Perform* project, a three year longitudinal investigation of musical learning at a UK conservatoire. Using a mixed-methods approach, *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 *Learning to Perform'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). 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.

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, p.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 (2000) conceptualisation of expertise is markedly different from some of the theorising that has been previously applied to musical learning. Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer (1993), for example, established clear links between deliberate practice and musical performance expertise. We suggest, however, 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 who seek challenges in their learning, and who 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. We propose that when students are learning as part of a chamber group they have the opportunity to engage in deep learning by questioning their own and their peers’ contribution to the group, thinking deeply about the musical interpretation of the group, and so forth. In this paper, we investigate the extent to which this is the case, and how it shapes the learning of the students involved.

The writing and thinking of Bransford and Brown (2000), and of Entwistle and Ramsden (1983), have informed *Learning to Perform* since its inception. Since that time, we have extended and added to this thinking through the notion of “expansive learning”. Defined by researchers exploring learning at work (i.e. learning “on the job”), 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, p. 411). There are three main points here.

Firstly, 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 exam-

ple. 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 & Mills, 2006). 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:

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

Method

We adopt a mixed-method methodology to answer these questions, drawing on data collected as part of *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 wind 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, our purpose is to learn from the case what we can about both the quintet and about expansive learning.

Within the case study, we draw on multiple sources of data (Yin, 2003) in order to combine different “lines of sight” (Berg, 2007). Table 1 summarises the data collection procedure. Members of the quintet are not identified by instrument to protect their anonymity, and all names are pseudonyms.

Table 1
Data Collection Procedure

Quintet member: →	Simone	Clara	Jackie	Lottie	Fay
Data collection ↓					
Interview 1, Sept 2004	X	X	X	X	X
Questionnaire 1, Sept 2004	X	X	X	X	X
Interview 2, Jan 2005	X	X	X		
Interview 3, April 2005	X	X	X		X
Concert observation, April 2005	X	X	X	X	X
Interview 4, Sept 2005		X	X		
Interview 5, Jan 2006	X	X	X		
Interview 6, April 2006	X	X	X		

As Table 1 indicates, all members of the quintet were involved in three sets of data collection in the academic year 2004-05. The predominant source of data was semi-structured interviews, conducted individually with each student by one or both of the authors. Interviews explored the students' learning experiences, investigating their hopes and fears, short and long-term goals, identity and perceived progress. All interviews were recorded with permission and fully transcribed. These data were triangulated with results from a structured questionnaire that probed musical history, career aims, and attitudes and experiences of instrumental teaching. 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 varied amongst members. Substantial efforts were made to re-interview all members of the quintet, but these were not always successful. While we recognise this limitation in our data, we present the quintet's experiences from the perspectives of those interviewed, and are careful not to generalise to members who may not share these opinions.

Analysis was conducted in a broadly interpretive framework, using the lens of "expansive" learning to interrogate the data. Questionnaire data were entered into SPSS and analysed quantitatively, mainly for descriptive patterns. Interview and observation data were uploaded into Atlas.ti software and analysed for emergent themes that shed light on the research questions: what the students were *learning* and in what ways, if any, their involvement in the chamber group *expanded* this learning. The research questions were then addressed predominantly through the qualitative data, with the quantitative data used to triangulate and support our developing arguments. The emphasis during analysis was on the "emic" voice, seeking validity through capturing the student voice at different times, and with reference to different sources of data.

Results: The "rise and fall" of a wind quintet

First, we provide some contextual data on the quintet's formation, working practices and goals. Second, we present the results in two phases. We examine the quintet's "rise" as its members develop, progress and learn expansively from their experiences; then we investigate the quintet's "fall", as they begin to aim for different ends, work in different ways, and ultimately disperse.

The quintet formed voluntarily, and membership had been constant for ten months prior to data collection. At this point, the quintet rehearsed two or three times a week, for approximately two hours at a time. All members were female, and the quintet had opted to take "chamber music" as an assessed option in the academic year in which we began researching them. All chamber groups at the conservatoire have access to free coaching from an instrumental teacher (professor) of their choice.

The rise

Analysis of the data revealed three emergent themes that illuminate the learning of the quintet: 1) space for challenge; 2) space for deep learning; and 3) space for developing transferable skills.

Space for challenge

The time spent in rehearsal emerges as both safe and challenging. Working from the security of sharing the same aims, the members feel comfortable challenging themselves and others:

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 (Jackie, Interview 2).

The fact that the quintet discuss their progress, in what appears to be an open way, is evidence of what Davidson and King (2004) refer to as "affiliation" within the group. The members are affiliated both to each other ("*I am in a group with four of my best friends*", Simone, Interview 2) and to a broader sense of commitment to the group ("*we all want to do it*", Jackie, Interview 2). Furthermore, all members of the group aim to be performers in their professional lives (questionnaire data), indicating a shared view of their future careers. This dynamic, it appears, enables the group to have an open and honest dialogue, in which "*if anyone has any ideas, they just put them forward*" (Clara, Interview 2). These students are open to criticism, find that the quintet offers them this opportunity, and reflect on this as useful and necessary.

Space for deep learning

The quintet also provides its members with the opportunity to engage in deep learning (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983), both verbally and through the music:

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 (Simone, Interview 2).

While ensembles vary in the amount of time that they spend talking (Ford & Davidson, 2003), this quintet discuss the music as part of their rehearsing. As one member suggests, the group are responsive to each others' needs, offering all members the opportunity to share their views: "*it is quite good because there isn't just one person who leads the rehearsal. We just all pitch in*" (Clara, Interview 1). In this forum, the students are learning to think creatively and critically about the music that they are playing, and to express these opinions to other musicians. Indeed, Chaffin and Lemieux (2004) identify the ability to be able to envision the "bigger picture" of a piece of music at the same time as practising minute details as one of five characteristics of musical excellence.

In practising the details, however, the quintet also engage in deep learning. Displaying evidence of what Davidson and King (2004) term an "economical rehearsal approach" (p. 110), the quintet focus on mastering particularly challenging parts of the music. Their approach to this reflects a group responsibility, with members finding ways to help others and to think creatively to work through problems. There is little sense in which the students are "restricting" their learning to surface details. The ethos of the quintet, at this time, appears to be to learn thoroughly, to help others to learn thoroughly and to use different strategies to reach this end.

Space for developing transferable skills

An ongoing trend throughout these results is the amount of learning occurring through peer interaction (see also Ritterman, 2000). "*Being able to play with other people*" (Simone, Interview 2) is one part of this, as is the support that a chamber group can offer:

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 (Lottie, 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 may be able to extend to other contexts as she continues to develop as a musician. While this is a predominantly musical skill, the chamber group also expands learning *beyond* performance:

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 (Clara, Interview 2).

We know from their questionnaire responses that all members of the quintet expect and hope to be instrumental teachers when they graduate; the communication skills that they are harbouring through the chamber group will be highly relevant to this. Indeed, communication skills - and what are being termed “transferable” skills more generally - are increasingly being flagged up as central to conservatoire graduates' skill portfolio. Bennett (2008) argues that communication skills are essential to musicians' work as teachers, performers and administrators. Chamber music appears to be one way in which these students are building and strengthening these skills.

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 Fay 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” (Fay, Interview 1). Having decided to take chamber music as an assessed option, however, we begin to see “cracks” emerging in the group's coherence.

The fall

As the end of year assessment approaches, the group inevitably 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” (Simone, Interview 3).

As this student suggests, the examination date was announced with relatively short notice, placing the quintet under pressure both in terms of being assessed and in terms of preparing thoroughly for that assessment. The ways in which the group responds to this pressure, and the effects that it has on them, can be seen in the diminishing group coherence.

Diminishing group coherence

The sense of “affiliation” that was previously evidenced within the group begins to dissolve as the quintet moves towards its assessment:

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...(Jackie, Interview 3).

The “deep” learning that the quintet was affording its members is not replicated here. Rather, the student paints a picture of hasty rehearsals, a lack of preparation for performances and disagreements as to what constitutes high quality. Some light is shed on

this by Fay: *"I think some people in the quintet aren't as keen as the rest of us and that is kind of annoying really"* (Fay, Interview 3).

The shared goals that we saw before seem to have been replaced by divergence within the group. This divergence is also evident in the students' identity, which differs across the members, ranging from "overall musician" (Simone) to "performer" (Clara) to "music student" (Fay).

Observation of one of the quintet's concerts at this time triangulates the interview data. Jackie's reflection on the group's lack of coherence was indicated by their on-stage presentation, most notably in disjointed bowing and exit at the end of the performance. Non-verbal communication highlighted the emerging division within the group, with some members sharing looks that indicated disappointment following the performance. Although the quintet remained together during the following academic year, none of the members interviewed reported it as a key component of their learning; they did not mention their chamber group peers when they were asked who influenced them musically.

The group dispersed at the end of their final undergraduate year. By this time, Simone feels that she is *'no longer in a chamber group, and I don't spend enough time at college to have friends'* (Simone, Interview 6). Retrospectively, Clara comments 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 (Clara, Interview 6).

The quintet has thus 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

At a more "macro-" level, *Learning to Perform* has concluded that musical expertise requires a complex balance between depth and breadth of learning (Burt-Perkins, 2008). Depth of learning refers to in-depth practical mastery of the students' specialism and musicianship, while breadth of learning includes looking outwards to find new ways of approaching in-depth learning, as well as looking beyond the specialism to become a more holistic musician (Burt-Perkins & Lebler, 2008). The quintet appears - at its peak - to have offered its members both, making it an invaluable learning space.

Speaking a year after her graduation, Clara told us that although there was *"so much tension and arguing"* she does not *"regret it... I know the repertoire now. It was a positive experience"*. Indeed, for all members the experience was, at least for a time, a way to expand learning. In considering the reasons behind the quintet's dispersal, the work of Alexander (2003) provides a useful stimulus for discussion. Alexander identifies two types of what she terms "individual interest" that feed into the development of expertise: general and professional (p. 11). For musicians, general interest may revolve around listening to music or reading about music, while professional interest may revolve around "goal-orientated interest" in particular performance opportunities. It would appear that the professional interest of the quintet members diverged, so that they were essentially working towards different end-points, both in terms of the quality of their music-making and their individual interests in music. For a chamber group to play a sustained role in the development of musical expertise, the general and professional interests of its members may need to remain aligned.

How, though, can chamber music be integrated into conservatoire life in a way that nurtures and sustains this alignment? We suggest that the decision of the quintet to be

assessed marked a turning-point in their development. 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. The group cohesion, so important to a flourishing ensemble (Davidson & King, 2004), was diminished as the goals of the endeavour were subtly changed by the looming assessment. 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? Such a move is, of course, radical if not drastic. We suggest, however, that conservatoires monitor the impact of assessment on chamber groups, reflecting on whether the inherent advantages of such work may be best left outside (at least in part) of formal curricula. One solution, for example, is to encourage a reflective, peer-based, form of evaluation that works alongside 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 institutions need to monitor this to ensure that it remains so.

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