

Musicians as teachers: Fostering a positive view

DAWN BENNETT

ANDREA STANBERG

Curtin University of Technology

The University of Western Australia

Abstract

Previous research with classical instrumental musicians has highlighted the intrinsic benefits of teaching in addition to the perhaps more obvious benefits of securing a regular income, and yet despite the presence of educational activities in the portfolio of most musicians it remains on the periphery of many music performance programs. There is a hierarchical inference in musicians' self-report of success as a soloist, instrumentalist or teacher, and this view is perpetuated in the separation of education and performance students during their university education. This study aimed to investigate the effects of providing a positive engagement with teaching by means of a unit of study delivered to a combined cohort of 2nd year undergraduate music education, composition and performance students. The unit was designed to increase students' understanding of the realities of professional practice, and to form productive and mutually beneficial partnerships. Students' responses were gauged with the use of surveys implemented at the commencement and conclusion of the unit. It was hoped that the study would inform a better appreciation of the development of career and self-identity during the formative years of study. Performance students reported a positive change in their perception of the role of teaching in their careers, and the music education students reflected a growing awareness of the benefits of working in partnership with performers. The study demonstrated that positive teaching experiences within the training of musicians, increases the likelihood of performance students planning a positive engagement with teaching.

Key words

career development, education, musician, success.

Background

Perceptions of success are critical to the career development of musicians. Julliard School principal, Joseph Polisi, called for success to be redefined for Julliard graduates: “to see more of them accept that a full-time performing career is ‘just not very tenable any more’” (in Freed, 2002, p. 1). Aspirations of greatness are frequently instilled before students commence university-level training, and often the intensity of commitment is dictated by parents when training commences (Ellis, 1999). Sand (2000) hypothesised that it is often early teachers and families “who make these performers feel that they have failed if they do not make it as soloists. The unspoken threat of being a disappointment to these adults has loomed over them from the beginning and can remain a source of trouble throughout their lives” (p. 139).

Weller (2004) described the education of musicians as having altered very little, in that performance students tend to view teaching as “a ‘fall-back career’ if they ‘fail’ to make it big in the performing arena” (p. 252). Reflecting on her own transition from the pursuit of a soloist career to that of a piano teacher, Huhtanen (2004) wrote of the disappointment experienced when soloist aspirations are unrealised. She drew upon Freud’s theory of mourning to explain that following a failure, the restoration of self-image and orientation towards reality requires the individual to release the fulfilment obtained previously from that which had been lost. Huhtanen categorised the piano teachers in her research either as realists who accepted teaching as an integral part of their musical identities, or as dreamers who engaged in teaching to meet financial obligations, and who possessed a traumatic relationship with their playing as a result of not having moved on from their performance dreams.

The characteristics of work as a musician appear not to reflect the career ambitions of those entering the field; therefore it is interesting to consider the factors that influence a musician's perception of a successful career. Loebel suggested that most music performance students "are not made aware of the practical aspects involved in making a living as a classical instrumentalist" (in Poklemba, 1995, p. 8). Conversely, Vetter (1990) concluded that students in general were realistic about the lack of performing opportunities and low financial rewards, but that the desire to perform overrode those concerns. Cellist David Pereira concurred: "[m]ost noticeable until very lately has been the assumption that if you do a B.Mus. in cello then the world is going to rush to offer you a playing job. ... Today's freshmen seem to have wised up to this game" (in Dempster, 2003, p. 11).

Music students and graduates give the impression of having a very narrow view of success; most aspire to careers as soloists rather than as orchestral players, teachers or other arts professionals (Arian, 1971; Metier, 2000). Perhaps students would not aspire so quickly to solo careers if they understood what life would be like at the top: according to McDonald (1979), "a career just as a soloist makes demands that few can meet artistically, temperamentally or financially". Top soloists admit that the stress can be overwhelming: Isaac Stern (1999) described the profession of the solo performer as "both simple and cruel" (in Stern & Potok, p. 265).

The Higher Education Funding Council for England requested English conservatories to justify their funding by ensuring that 75% of graduates were working principally in performance within five years of graduation. Firstly, it would be almost impossible to accurately measure the average proportion of performance roles over time given the tendency towards portfolio careers (Bennett, 2004; Gregory, 2002; Rogers, 2002). More alarming, however, is the narrow definition of success suggested by such a dictate, which raises many questions about education and training. Is performance the only worthy profession for a

conservatorium graduate? Do governments presume that graduates are equipped only for careers in performance? Do conservatories advocate that they train only for careers in performance? Surely such a narrow definition of success is questionable.

Ritterman (in Mark, 1998) suggested that the likelihood of graduates undertaking at least some teaching activity ought to be reflected in conservatorium curricula. A recent study conducted at the Royal College of Music (RCM) (Mills, 2003) found that only 1% of RCM graduates undertook formal teacher training leading to qualified teacher status (QTS) despite the majority of students expecting to include teaching in their careers. One of the strategies engaged for a selection of RCM students was a ten-day teaching associate position in a secondary school, after which students were found to be much more positive about considering teaching as a career option. Participants reported that prior to the teaching placement they had rarely considered secondary school music teaching to be “doing music” (Mills, in press 2005, p. 10), which illustrates the narrow boundaries within which students perceive musicians’ careers, and the hierarchical perception of success.

For many people, as in the case of an accountant, professional identity is the same as job title. For a musician who engages in a portfolio career, the situation is much more complicated; self-definition as a musician could relate to a career as a performer, teacher, sound artist, administrator or researcher. Mills and Smith (in press) found that conservatorium alumni often had a career identity that did not correspond with their income sources. Career identity appears to stem from musicians’ aspirations and goals: for example, if, as in Huhtanen’s research (2004), a musician is teaching as a means of financial support whilst aspiring to a performance career, the individual is likely to have a subjective career as a performer rather than as a teacher. Conversely, someone who takes on a teaching role as part of a portfolio career and who views teaching as a positive professional activity in which the majority of time will continue to be spent, is likely to have a subjective career identity that

concur with their objective one. Mills and Smith (ibid) suggested that musicians become increasingly successful as the gap narrows between their objective work and their aspirations. Success is an individual concept and can vary for the same person at different times throughout their career.

The level of motivation and commitment required to achieve and sustain the standard of a classical performer has long been recognised, and much of the research in the area of motivation and achievement of aspirations relates to failure, rather than to success. Kun and Weiner (in Covington, 1983) found that distress experienced by someone who had failed to achieve something increased in line with the amount of effort invested. Maehr (1983) described two different goal situations that have converse effects upon participants. The 'ego situation' is exemplified in competitive activities such as performance competitions in which one's performance is compared to that of others, and which offers the potential for extrinsic rewards: for instance, prizes and money. In contrast, task-goal situations encourage participants to attempt tasks for their intrinsic value, and to determine success based upon the realisation or development of personal goals.

In light of these factors, this study sought to investigate how a positive interaction with teaching might affect self-image. A combined cohort ($N=38$) of 2nd year undergraduate education and performance students attended an introductory teaching unit, which was run over one 12-week semester. The unit was designed to engage students in teaching and learning activities. It incorporated the development of a personal teaching philosophy, and the preparation and delivery to peers of a teaching artist collaborative program in which education, composition and performance students worked together.

Method

At the commencement of the unit, each student completed a questionnaire which included questions about career goals including the incorporation of a teaching role. At the end of the unit, and following the teaching artist program, students completed a second survey and reflected changes to their perception of teaching. Analysis incorporated the use of a simple database and colour-coding, which led to the use of quasi-quantification to summarise emerging themes.

Results and discussion

Commencement survey

The combined second-year cohort totalled only 38 and was thus a small sample; however, the results of the study reflected previous research in terms of career awareness and perceptions of success. Results indicate that performance students are aware of the likelihood for them to include teaching in their careers: 97% of respondents were expecting to pursue composite careers, which ranged from teaching and performance to librarianship, arts management and music therapy. Huhtanen's (2004) classification of teachers as dreamers or realists emerged clearly from the performance students, who cited a potential teaching role either because of a desire to teach and the acceptance of a teaching role (realist): "getting the sense of pride that you are doing something that is making a difference to people's lives" (R12); or to supplement inadequate work in performance (dreamer): "more reliable income" (R30).

Students were asked to rate how positively they felt about incorporating a teaching role into their careers, using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very positive), through to 7, (very negative) Education students had a mean score of 1.8, and performance students had a

mean of 2.1; indicating that they accepted the potential for teaching roles. The composers, however, appeared to be fairly negative about teaching, with a mean score of 5.

Performance students raised concerns that teaching may result in a loss of technical proficiency and an inability to juggle the irregular hours associated with other creative work: “getting stuck permanently as a teacher” (R32). Given that this was an introductory education unit, it was not surprising that 75% of students were concerned about their lack of pedagogical knowledge and skills. Specifically, participants raised concern about a lack of student enthusiasm, and difficulties with classroom management.

Performance students were more likely than education students to have some studio teaching experience. Overall, 53% of students had some experience and 30% students had already undertaken some group or class tuition work. Surprisingly, only 33% of the education students stated that they intended to take a classroom teaching position; opting instead for composite careers which included an element of primary or high school teaching.

Development of the teaching artist programs involved students working in groups of three to five to develop a program suitable for delivery to primary school children. Students researched their target school(s) and devised programs including delivery strategies and materials, a budget, evaluation, and curricular links. Each group comprised students from at least two of the three different majors - performance, composition and education.

At an introductory level, the unit addressed learning theories, motivation, developmental and remedial teaching, performance anxiety, time management, and advocacy. Using a student-centred approach, students participated in workshops, seminars, discussions, games, a debate (learning through music versus music for its own sake), and peer-teaching exercises. Programs presented by the eleven groups included a marching band, a percussion program, an opera workshop (resulting in a tragic opera entitled ‘the consumption of Rapunzel’, in which

Survey 1: The reality that I probably won't be able to get a job as a performer so I guess I'll have to teach.

Survey 2: It seems more exciting than before. I definitely think I would like to try it. It seems less like a career that would be boring but a fun and inspiring experience ... Definitely I am now seriously considering doing teaching after I have finished my performance degree.

Respondent 5

Survey 1: Money to support myself.

Survey 2: This unit has definitely made me enthusiastic about continuing to do education – I was unsure before this unit.

Respondent 11

Survey 1: I'd rather perform – with teaching on the side.

Survey 2: [The experience] inspired me to be interested in teaching and different teaching methods.

Q: Has the unit altered your view of teaching?

Respondent 8

Survey 1: I am happy to take on a teaching role as long as it is not my primary occupation.

Survey 2: I used to view teaching as a negative necessity; however I have now realised that it can be a valuable tool to have. I have always acknowledged that teaching will be part of my career as a musician. I now see it in a much more positive light.

Respondent 13

Survey 1: [I would teach] to support myself as my main income.

Survey 2: My view has changed in seeing teaching as just as important as performance or any other aspect of classical music. It can be a highly enjoyable experience.

Thirty percent of students reported that their career goals had changed as a result of their first interaction with teaching. Most comments reflected a positive experience: “I have realised the exciting potential of education as a profession. It’s exciting and so [sic] important. I [now] come to inevitable teaching opportunities and positions far more enthusiastically and positively” (R32). One student (R23) indicated in the first survey that he was unsure whether to swap from a performance to an education major, and reflected a negative perception of teaching as a first option: “It [teaching] would be the thing I would do if I was not a performer”. Asked in the survey whether his view of teaching had changed, he responded: “At first, teaching was an uninspired thing with only drop-outs doing it. Now I see that it can be made fun for both teacher and student alike”. The student had moved to an education major by the end of the semester.

Students were asked to comment on the benefits of working as a joint cohort of education, composition and performance students, and 81% of students reported the benefits of encountering different perspectives: “[working together provided] lots of different ideas/views – different talents which open your eyes to things you weren’t previously aware of” (R31). 44% of students mentioned the advantages that a diverse skills base brought to their teaching artist projects; and recognised that “the “teaching artist” is a valued asset and has a lot to offer” (R1).

Concluding comments

The benefits of working with a combined cohort of performance, composition and education students were strongly felt by the students in this study, who reported an increased understanding of the roles of teaching and performance in educational and community

settings. Education students reflected a growing awareness of the benefits of working in partnership with performers. Career satisfaction is directly impacted by perceptions of success. Crucially, performance students indicated a positive change in their perception of the role of teaching in their careers.

The study demonstrated that positive teaching experiences within musicians' training increase the likelihood of performance students planning a positive engagement with teaching. It is imperative that the education and training of performance students fosters such engagement and assists students to develop the skills required to meet realistic career goals. As a result of this study, the students will further refine their teaching artist proposals with a view to the implementation of a schools partnership program in 2006.

Acknowledgement

The researchers would like to acknowledge the second year students who contributed to this study, and particularly the group which gave us permission to show an extract from their tragic opera, 'The Consumption of Rapunzel'

References

- Arian, E. (1971). *Bach, Beethoven and democracy*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- Bennett, D. (2004). Peas in a cultural pod? A comparison of the skills and personal attributes of artists and musicians. *Australian Journal of Music Education*, 2004(1), 22-25.
- Covington, M. V. (1983, February). *Musical chairs: Who drops out of music instruction and why?* Paper presented at the Ann Arbor Symposium in the application of psychology to the teaching of and learning of music: Session III. Motivation and creativity, Reston, VA: MENC.

- Dempster, J. (2003). Feature interview with David Pereira. *Stringendo*, 25, 10-12.
- Ellis, H. M. (1999). *The escalation of commitment: How conservatory students form the notion of a career and sustain the pursuit of their professional ambition in the face of career uncertainty*. Unpublished PhD, Northwestern University, Chicago.
- Freed, G. (2002, October 23). President of Juilliard sings job-market blues. *Star Tribune*. Retrieved October 30th, 2002 from <<http://www.startribune.com/stories/462/3382950.html>>.
- Gregory, S. (2002, April). *Collaborative approaches: Putting colour in a grey area*. Paper presented at the CONNECTing With conference, Brisbane, Queensland Conservatorium.
- Huhtanen, K. (2004). Once I had a promising future (facing reality as an ex-promising pianist). *Australian Music Forum*, 10(3), 21-27.
- Maehr, M. L. (1983, February). *The development of continuing interests in music*. Paper presented at the Ann Arbor Symposium in the application of psychology to the teaching of and learning of music: Session III. Motivation and creativity, Reston, VA: MENC.
- Mark, D. (1998). The music teacher's dilemma - musician or teacher? *International Journal of Music Education*, 32, 3-23.
- McDonald, G. (1979). *Training and careers for professional musicians*. Surrey: Unwin Brothers.
- Metier. (2000). *The music industry: Skills and training needs in the 21st century*. London: Department of Culture, Media and Sport.
- Mills, J. (2003, October). *Working in music: the careers of RCM alumni from 1949-2003*. Paper presented at Music education: Research, policy, practice, London.
- Mills, J. (2005, in press). Addressing the concerns of conservatoire students about school music teaching. *British Journal of Music Education*, 22(1).

- Mills, J., & Smith, J. (2002). *Working in music: Becoming successful*. Paper presented at the Musikalische bebabung in der lebenszeitperspektive, University of Paderborn.
- Poklemba, J. L. (1995). *Career education: An integral part of the education of the undergraduate music performance student?* Unpublished Master's thesis, The American University, Washington.
- Rogers, R. (2002). *Creating a land with music*. London: Youth Music.
- Sand, B. L. (2000). *Teaching genius: Dorothy DeLay and the making of a musician*. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press.
- Stern, I., & Potok, C. (1999). *Isaac Stern: My first 79 years*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press.
- The University of Western Australia. (2005). Music Education 190.260: Introduction to music teaching and learning. Unit outline. The University of Western Australia, Perth.
- Vetter, T. (1990). *The university music performance program: Performance or liberal arts degree? The case of voice performance*. Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Toronto, Ontario.
- Weller, J. (2004). The whole musician: Journey to authentic vocation. In O. Musumeci (Ed.), *The ISME Commission for Education of the Musician. Preparing musicians: Making sound worlds* (pp. 245-256). Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya Department d'Ensenyament.