

# Developing teacher identity among music performance students

## **Abstract**

*The mythologised image of the musician as performer often contradicts the reality. This article reports initial results from a study that used learner-generated drawings and journal reflections with music performance majors as a means to examine emerging perceptions of music teaching. Whilst initial drawings illustrated traditional images of the teacher as knowledge giver, these gave way to more fluid and student-centred images in which students appeared to identify with teaching in new ways. The combination of textual and non-textual data provided insights that would not otherwise have been evident, and the broad consideration of 'possible selves' became a useful tool in the explorations of identity and career.*

Key words: music education, identity, career development, teaching

## **Background**

Professional identity is a constant negotiation framed within changing social and historical contexts. This is particularly problematic for musicians and other artists whose work is ever changing and often contradicts the mythologised image of the artist as creator and performer (Bennett, 2008). For performance majors in particular, it is important to challenge existing preconceived notions of career—and of teaching—through opportunities to reconcile romanticised ideals with realistic experiences in which 'possible selves' (Marcus and Nirijs, 1986) and self-identities can be explored.

Despite the commonality of teaching activities within the portfolios of musicians, the lack of comprehensive pedagogical training within tertiary performance studies is by no means unusual. Nonetheless, whatever the extent to which pedagogy is incorporated into students' learning, there are crucial decisions to be made about what to include and how to teach it. Many pedagogy units encounter myriad limitations such as low status, low contact hours, lack of alignment with other elements of the

curriculum, limited staff and student time, low student motivation, and rigid course structure. Simulated practice and experiential learning can be the most feasible ways of providing students with meaningful experiences within these limitations, and it is useful to consider the value of such approaches as a bridge between methods and practice. This article draws on student experience within a unit designed around these considerations. It brings into play students' drawings and journal reflections and examines the effectiveness of these tools in relation to emerging perceptions of music teaching and musician identities.

### **Professional identity**

Professional identity is of special interest to those researching artist careers. Whereas for many people professional identity and job title are one and the same, the reality of life as an artist is the incorporation of multiple employments and complex working arrangements. Consequently, many artists have a career identity that does not correspond with their income sources (Rogers, 2002). Self-definition as a musician, for example, could relate to a career that combines performance, composition, teaching, arts management, technical roles and research, and to waged or unwaged work that is unrelated to music. Ideally, multiple professional identities are switched on and off according to task, but it is acknowledged that this can be difficult: "the concept of a plurality of occupational identities is engaging in theory but a challenge to maintain in practice" (Bain, 2005, p. 42).

For multiple identities to co-contribute to an intrinsically satisfying career, artists need to consider their careers both subjectively and objectively. The role of teaching within music careers is an excellent example of how the same activities can be deemed 'successful' by one person and 'unsuccessful' by another. It is a pertinent example also because teaching in one form or another is a fundamental component of most music careers. A musician who is teaching as a means of financial support whilst aspiring to a performance career, for example, is likely to have a subjective career as a performer rather than as a teacher. Conversely, someone who views teaching as a positive long-term career component is likely to have a subjective career identity that concurs with their objective one (Huhtanen, 2004). It follows that intrinsic career satisfaction, which is a primary measure of success within protean careers, correlates with the level of alignment between subjective and objective career

identities. A key question is the role that pedagogy training might play in the development of career and identity amongst student cohorts who are at least initially performance centred and for whom teaching is often perceived as a ‘fall-back’ position. Miller and Baker (2007) suggest that pedagogy training is vital in this regard and can “serve as a catalyst for changes in career orientation” (p. 5).

### **Teacher development and performance majors**

With a focus on pre-service and first-year teaching, Kagan (1992) outlines three crucial phases of development. Novice teachers, she writes, begin by acquiring knowledge about students. This knowledge is then used in the reconstruction of self-identity as a teacher following which procedural routines are adopted to integrate classroom management and instruction. Kagan concludes that pre-service programs and student practicum placements fail to adequately address these three steps. The difficulty with performance majors in the early stages of their training is that self-identity is likely to be narrowly defined in line with the priority afforded to performance ambitions. Although many students anticipate the inclusion of non-performance activities within their careers (Burt-Perkins, 2008), the adoption of these activities as part of their long-term professional identities is much less certain. As a result, performance majors tend to be a fundamental step behind the continua posited within existing theories. This is significant because a clear self-image inclusive of teacher identity is crucial to a positive engagement with teaching. Kagan goes so far as to suggest that “novices who enter the classroom without clear images of themselves as teachers are doomed to failure” (1992, p. 146).

### **Method**

Twenty students (14 female, 6 male) participated in the project in two semester-long cohorts. The pedagogy unit was one strand of an undergraduate unit titled Extension Studies, and the twelve one-hour lectures constituted the only pedagogy training for 75% of the students. Eight of the students were in the second and final year of an Advanced Diploma of Performing Arts (ADPA), for which 18 months credit is given towards the Bachelor of Music (BMus) degree; four students were in the second year of a four-year Bachelor of Music Education (BMusEd) degree that would qualify them as classroom music teachers; and the remaining eight students were performance majors in the Bachelor of Performance programme. The unit was compulsory for the

eight ADPA students. Thirteen of the twenty students were majoring in performance in either the ADPA or the BMus degree.

There is insufficient space to provide a detailed picture of all the activities in which the class engaged over the twelve weeks; however, peer teaching was an important element of the class and each student gave and received at least six individual instrumental or vocal lessons. Students also presented to the class two five-minute teaching sessions. Throughout the unit there were numerous activities relating to communication, planning, risk taking, performance stress, group work, teamwork, and approaches to teaching and learning involving movement and creative tools. The common factor was that every activity engaged students in both active teaching and learning, so that they were experiencing the different ways in which they and their peers learned, and were applying this continuously to their teaching.

Surveys were implemented at the commencement of the unit and again at the end. The initial survey asked students about their expected and desired careers and about the anticipated role of teaching. At the end of the unit, students answered a second survey that repeated the career and teaching questions, and in which they reflected on their perception of teaching and the value of tools and activities within the unit. Adopting a modified hermeneutic approach (Van Meter & Garner, 2005) each survey asked students to draw a teaching situation. In addition to questions about students' background and experience, common questions within the two surveys asked about career goals and expectations, choice of electives, and the potential role of teaching in the student's future career.

Citing Britton's (1977) concept of play together with Bruner's (1987) writing on narrative, Creme (2008) argues that journals can enable students to access a potential or transitional space incorporating both play and creative activity. A reflective journal was the central device for recording both teaching and learning activities. Every activity, including each individual teaching or learning session, attracted a peer-assessment and a self-assessment, and reflections were ongoing. Peer reviews did not have to be shared in their written form; however, students developed the skills to integrate generalised critical feedback into group discussions, and to give negative feedback in a constructive manner. Drawings from each of the surveys were analysed

in isolation and also in relation to reflective journals and survey data. The first phase of analysis concerned the performance majors, who are the subject of this paper. The second phase of the study, which incorporates the music education majors ( $n=7$ ), will be completed in early 2009. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to protect the anonymity of participants.

## Results and discussion

### Why will you teach?

Performance majors are likely to embark upon performance-based training in search of careers in performance (Presland, 2005); however, through the course of their undergraduate studies they tend to become increasingly aware that their careers will involve other activities such as teaching (Mills, Burt and Moore, 2005). Six of the eight BMus performance majors cited performance as their primary career goal and for four of these students performance was the only outcome listed. When asked in the initial survey why they had selected the pedagogy elective, three students focused on a desire to improve communication skills, three mentioned teaching skills, and one wrote about gaining confidence. Within the initial survey, students were asked: 1) Do you expect to teach after university; and 2) Why will you teach? All of the performance majors ( $n=13$ ) expected to teach, and the anticipated role of teaching within their careers was revealed in their responses to the second question. All but one of the responses positioned teaching in a supporting role separate to the performer identity:

Jessie	“To support income from performance”
Suzie	“Probably I’ll have to, rather than wanting to pass on skills/knowledge”
Caroline	“Yes at some point, but I don’t want it to be my main priority”
Paula	“It’s a good thing to be able to do <i>on the side</i> ” [student emphasis]
Jordan	“Teaching kids would be fun and a good side job”
Ken	“Source of income”
David	“To earn money and give kids the right advice”
Liz	“For money reasons”

If not addressed, the implications of this include musicians who teach without having accepted teaching as a successful and intrinsically satisfying component of their careers; the perpetuation of existing hierarchies; and graduates whose level of performance focus has left them feeling unprepared to adopt and effectively manage a teaching role. It was hoped that the unit activities would broaden students' perceptions of teaching without 'lecturing' them about the almost inevitability of their future engagement with teaching.

### **Drawings**

The use of drawings with students who were not visual artists was a deliberate attempt to steer away from the more traditional forms of questioning in relation to self-awareness and professional identity. With a focus on student teachers' perceptions of an 'ideal' music teacher and of themselves as teachers, Brand and Dolloff (2002) used drawings with music education majors and found them to be "a valuable entry into the attitudes, beliefs, aspirations and even fears of beginning music education students" (p. 26). As many of the students in this study were performance majors and had not made an active decision to teach, students were asked to draw a teaching situation rather than to focus on their own possibly absent self-image as a teacher. The open nature of the question also enabled students to draw classroom or studio situations, or indeed both.

Paula, one of the four students who had listed only a performance goal, wrote in her final survey that the unit "made me look at myself as a teacher". Her comments reflect a growing enthusiasm for teaching, which she had not previously considered to be a career outcome despite the fact that she was teaching instrumental music lessons whilst a student. For Paula, teaching was initially positioned as a fallback or interim activity rather than as a desirable outcome. Her first drawing separates teacher from student and weights the teacher with a dark cross. In her final drawing the crosses are humanised and both teacher and students are wearing smiles. The teacher figure is the same size and shading as the students, and Paula labels the configuration as a circle, which is a move away from the teacher-centred configuration shown in the first drawing (see Figure 1). Diane, another performance major, drew a very similar configuration at the end of the unit and noted: "I would like my lessons (my teaching) to be very different and fun, and allow the student to really interact and engage with

the material instead of being lectured, all one-way. ... I want us to journey together in the learning process.”

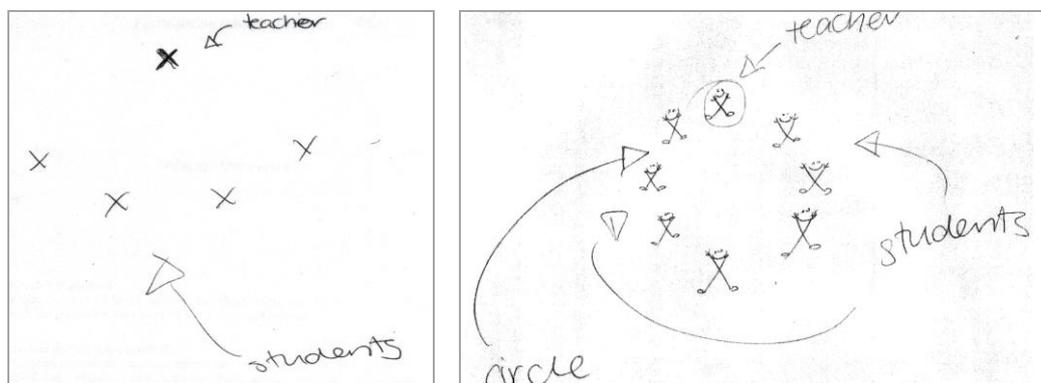


Figure 1: Paula's initial drawing (left) and second drawing (right)

Suzie was clear at the start of the unit that any teaching would be at a tertiary level, which she represented with a tiered lecture hall in her first drawing. At the end of the unit her teaching focus remained at the tertiary level, but she had completely rethought the configuration of the space in which her teaching might take place. Instead, she drew herself teaching a group of students who are sitting on the floor. There is no seating or other equipment in the second drawing.

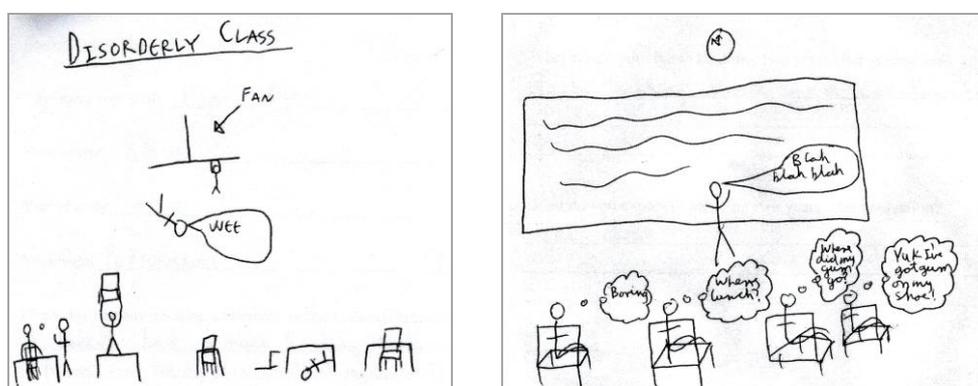
Of particular interest are the drawings of another of the performance majors, Graham, who took the unit for a second time in semester two despite having passed the unit in semester one. Graham, a guitar major, was initially a quiet member of the class who struggled to engage other students in informal communication, and his drawings reveal fears and uncertainties about his teaching that would not have been apparent from his journal writing alone. Similarly, the almost comedic nature of the drawings may well have been dismissed as larrikin had they not been cross-referenced with other evidence. Analysis of his drawings together with his journals and the peer-reviews from his fellow students were very useful in understanding the hurdles he was facing and helping him to overcome them. It was as though he had found, as Creme (2008, p. 62) writes, “a rare space for meaningful play in the academic setting”.

Graham demonstrated his interest in teaching in his initial survey response: “I have a passion for music and the study of music. To be able to share that with students would

be a fantastic career for me”. At first sight, his initial drawing appears to position him in a disorganised classroom without having the capacity for control. However, later in the unit his journal writing reveals that his picture represents an experience he had as a student:

I will not stand for any crap. I’ve seen first hand what it can be like to have a disorderly class. My year 9 maths teacher had no control of his class, and students practically walked all over him. It was not a nice learning environment, and something I would not like to emulate!

The above comments were journalled directly before Graham’s first peer-teaching session. In stark contrast, his end-of-unit drawing portrays him teaching a class and having lost the students’ attention. Graham’s concerns about student engagement were genuine and the theme permeates both his self-reflections and peer reviews of his teaching. Prior to his third peer-teaching lesson he wrote: “last week in comparison to the lesson Suzie gave me, my lesson was boring. I might try and make it more of an enjoyable experience by throwing in a few jokes”. The comedic approach, however, did not work in his class presentations. Another student noted in her diary: “... he tried to make a joke but nobody laughed. I think we had tuned out”. However, prior to the fourth peer-teaching lesson Graham makes a huge step forward: “Ultimately I want Suzie to feel she has some freedom with choice in her learning guitar. ... This will help to make Suzie’s lesson more interesting next week”. Graham’s initial second semester picture illustrates his strategy of giving students some freedom of choice within their learning; nonetheless the risks associated with this are clearly illustrated in the final picture. All four of Graham’s drawings are shown as Figure 2.



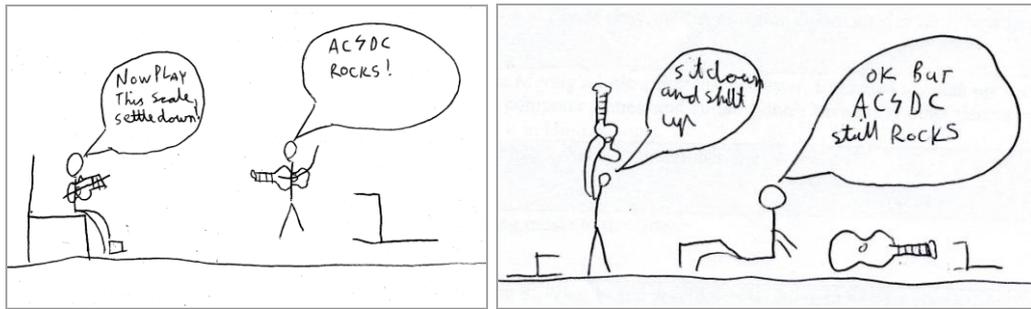


Figure 2: Graham's drawings: Semester 1 drawing 1 (left) and drawing 2 (right); Semester 2 drawing 1 (left) and drawing 2 (right)

Two of the participants were vocal majors completing their ADPA and intending to move on to the BMus degree. Both students were clear about their intended careers: Karen as a performer and Liz in music business, and neither had considered vocal teaching. Karen acknowledged the likelihood of teaching “to support ourselves whilst looking for work as performers”. However, she mused: “I’m not sure how I feel about that, since I have always viewed myself as a performer, rather than a teacher”. Through the unit activities, the two students used the notion of play as transitional space to make meaning of this new potential by ‘trying on’ “different ways of knowing and speaking” (Creme, 2008, p. 61), often bouncing ideas off one another before bringing them to the whole group.

Liz was very complacent about the idea of teaching at the start of the unit, but eventually she engaged in the group work and became an active member of the class. Her second five-minute lesson was entirely interactive and very well planned, and she reflected that: “When I started pedagogy I wasn’t sure if I really wanted to do teaching, but now I’m thinking about it as a possibility”. Her drawings illustrate a progression from a simple venture to one in which the planning or business of teaching is at the fore. Karen didn’t produce a drawing at the start of the unit, but at the end she drew a detailed representation of a teaching space in which she focused on the necessary equipment. At the end of the unit she reflected: “My view of teaching has changed dramatically. I was always quite pessimistic about teaching but now that I know how to plan lessons, I feel more confident”.

Jane was the other participant who did not produce a first drawing. When she produced a drawing at the end of the unit I asked her about the absence of a first

drawing and she explained: “Before, I couldn’t see teaching in my head”. Jane came from a strict instrumental teaching system in Korea and her experiences of instrumental teaching were reflected in her journal as she wrote about her own teaching. She wrote about one unit activity: “I was impressed that we were dancing to some music. I’ll never forget it. Making new experiences is a good way to enjoy music”. New ideas and activities were transferred directly to her existing teaching practice and she wrote in her journal of increased enjoyment amongst her students.

### **Concluding comments**

Thinking of oneself in terms of a performer rather than in terms of a holistic career in music is both professionally and personally limiting. Rather, musicians need to develop a conscious and positive self-identity in relation to their work, and to find intrinsic satisfaction in their teaching. Unfortunately, the early labelling of performers often results in the neglect of other strengths and interests, and for many students there is “potential tension ... between the revelation of authentic identity to the self and the social meaning attributed to this in the presence of others” (Gibbs, Angelides and Michaelides, 2004, p. 190). The performer identity has been promoted through performance-centred examination systems, labels of ‘giftedness’ and even the audition process with which students gain their university place. The common placement of pedagogy units as ‘extension’ or ‘supporting’ studies, or as electives rather than core units, signals further to students that teaching is less attractive and successful than performance.

Given the realities of practice as a musician and the considerable presence of teaching within musicians’ portfolios, it is essential that students are encouraged to explore potential career paths and possible selves beyond traditional hierarchical constraints. The process of music making and learning has for most students been a largely private venture, and simulated teaching practice appears to provide a bridge between self-learning and professional practice such that participants can gain feedback and test emerging skills within an environment of guided peer- and mentor evaluation. The combination of open discussion, self-reflection, peer evaluation and simulated teaching practice provided students in the study with a springboard for discussion and the space to consider their possible selves within a supportive group environment.

Reflective journals enabled students to write subjectively and non-academically, and the combination of textual and non-textual data was both useful and revealing. Having engaged in the unit activities, students were more motivated to look at ‘possible selves’ within the interface between motivation and self-concept (Marcus and Nirius, 1986) and to engage in teaching activities as an integral component of their careers and as a positive identity within their composite musician identity.

The addition of a teacher identity would seem a pre-requisite to an intrinsically satisfying engagement with teaching, and yet there is a gap between existing developmental theories and the cohort to which performance majors belong. Teacher development theories tend to commence their developmental continua after the decision has been made to become a teacher. They do not take into account people who engage in teacher training because of a lack of other work, or those who attend introductory teaching units as a component of other studies. This is important because it is acknowledged that the process of becoming a teacher begins early: Weber and Mitchell cite extensive research that has found “becoming a teacher begins long before people ever enter a Faculty of Education” (1995, p. 5). Performers who have yet to consider teaching as a desirable or long-term component of their future careers have not yet reached the starting point of existing developmental continua, and preliminary findings suggest that ‘unintended teachers’ such as performance majors would benefit from two preliminary or complementary steps as a bridge to existing continua. These could be defined as follows:

1. Investigate possible selves by exploring own and others’ personal interpretive horizons;
2. Experience teaching as an integral and successful component of being a musician;

Once these preliminary steps are commenced, students are more likely to embrace existing continua:

3. Acquire knowledge of students;
4. Reconstruct self-identity: incorporate teaching and other roles within musician identity; and
5. Adopt procedural routines for teaching and management.

Purcell suggests that the level of instability and change within the cultural sphere means that “music students cannot predict their career paths, and conservatoires must redefine their identities” (in Miller and Baker, 2007, p. 16). This redefinition does not entail dismantling what they have already, but providing opportunities and the structure within which students can freely explore. Even small pedagogy units have considerable potential to contribute to this vital shift in self-identity. Implications include rethinking pedagogy and introductory methods classes to focus more on the adoption and development of teaching and career identities within a holistic framework: questioning the myth of artist as creator without dispelling students’ dreams and ambitions.

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