

Curricula and Pedagogy for the 21st Century

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This paper responds to a challenge that is facing all keyboard practitioners today. Given the diverse range of skills needed to prepare keyboard students for the many challenges of the music profession and other jobs related to the music industry, how can we provide the framework for an appropriate learning: one which ensures that music graduates are as well equipped as possible to meet future employment challenges? The discussion of this issue draws on a recent study into the needs of tertiary keyboard students (Carey, 2004b). This doctoral research revealed that many such students were becoming increasingly disillusioned as their degree progressed. There was a profound sense that expectations of the programs in which they were engaged did not align with propositions around their notions of student learning or student needs. The paper uses the findings of the doctoral study to examine how we can better provide keyboard students with a portfolio of skills that can subsequently be built on and used across other areas of the music profession. It discusses how keyboard teachers might make a greater contribution to the thinking that underpins development of curriculum and pedagogy, thus enabling students to develop their own life-related skills.

Introduction

The issue of curriculum relevance has been high on the agenda of educators at all levels. Music educators, like their counterparts in the arts, are increasingly being challenged as music students have more recently felt the urgency to develop skills ‘which will enable them to connect to different contexts and changing cultural values’ (Renshaw, 2001, p.4). As a consequence, tertiary music institutions are being pressured into changing their curriculum offerings. But the question needs to be asked: In the quest to achieve a more appropriate balance in our programs, are keyboard students going to be any better equipped to meet the challenges and uncertainties of contemporary life? This paper suggests that it is not necessarily the curriculum that holds the answers to providing students with skills for the future but that a ‘re-thinking’ of pedagogy will provide at least part of the solution.

Curriculum concerns

Most tertiary music institutions have generally responded to the need to ensure that graduates have some skills required for future employment. Many for example, have recognized that a large percentage of music graduates will at some stage of their careers earn a considerable part of their income in the music studio teaching profession. During the last decade much has been done to address the need to provide students with exposure to some pedagogical training through formalised pedagogy courses (Carey, 2004a). A recent survey (Carey, 2004b) revealed that almost three quarters of music departments within Australia are now offering some form of pedagogy in their curriculum. Nonetheless, while a move in this direction is to be commended, the inclusion of pedagogy courses in tertiary institutions is by no means a panacea for all the problems facing music graduates today.

As a teacher within a tertiary music institution I have become increasingly concerned about two issues: first, the number of graduates of keyboard who cannot

make an economic and satisfying living despite the constant curriculum reviews; second, although music institutions are producing very accomplished performers there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that many students are unable to think or learn independently upon completion of their degree.

As I sit and assess many of the students' final year solo piano recitals, a compulsory major part of the curriculum requirements in most music institutions and thus an area to which students devote the majority of their time, certain anxiety-producing questions keep arising for me such as: Is what I am doing in my daily work actually 'counterproductive' in the lives of my students? Put bluntly, am I complicit in bad practice? Does the current curriculum and the environment in which keyboard students learn produce the kind of musicians who can survive or adapt within a multi-stranded industry?

To examine this agenda more fully, I have drawn upon some of the findings of my recently completed doctorate. The task of my research was to investigate how tertiary educators (such as myself) might better understand the relevance of keyboard curriculum as it is currently delivered in tertiary institutions. As part of the study, all keyboard students who were enrolled in the three year undergraduate program at a tertiary music institution, along with recent keyboard graduates, were invited to respond to the open-ended question: 'What do you think Conservatorium keyboard students need to know'?

It is not possible in this presentation to capture the full complexity of the study. Therefore for the purpose of today's paper only key propositions central to today's topic will be focused upon.

Findings

The research revealed the following:

- there was a profound sense that expectations of the programs in which students were engaged did not align with their notions of student learning or student needs
- student texts were characterised in general by increasing negativity the longer they pursued their studies
- there was a discourse of dependency and provision across all years, particularly in relation to the student's major study.

I would like to take you through typical responses from a representative group of students beginning with first year undergraduates progressing through to graduates.

Year 1

The main response from students in this year was the need for the curriculum to include more piano lessons each week as "one was not sufficient" to allow us "to play brilliantly". Comments such as

- I would like to see the curriculum include more piano lessons

- one piano lesson a week isn't sufficient...two lessons a week would be much better...that's basically why I'm here
- the curriculum should include more courses relating to our instrument such as watching videos of great performers and pianists playing...
- we need to be shown how to perform in front of people

Year 2

In the second year we see a strong discourse of both consumerism and provision.

- we come to a lesson and it is already expected that the music is ready to a certain standard, but we should be shown
- the teachers help us musically but they also need to show us the stepping-stones for learning
- we need to be taught good practice time management skills...we also need to have information *given* to us on what opportunities will be open to us after we complete our BMus
- it isn't made known to us where job opportunities can be found... we are left to our own devices
- we should be shown some life skills...they should show us how to make it in the real world
- I think half the students don't understand what they need to do or are doing and so they are let down
- the curriculum needs to show students how diverse the music industry world can be... a lot of students tend to just go through their course and suddenly get to the end and think what now?

Year 3

While there is evidence in the second year texts of the need to be more informed and 'shown what to do', the third year texts are characterised by negativity. The consumerist discourse is also still strongly evident.

- we're tertiary now and there is no one to watch over you. If I had two lessons a week I would be prodded along...
- students need to be informed of how to make choices...I mean in the first year they tell you exactly what courses to take...and then in the later years you have to go and look for all the subjects... It's really hard...
- students need to know about career counselling so they know we're they're going with this degree and the justification for learning
- many students are learning to perform but there aren't that many opportunities available and well throughout my degree, I've sort of floundered, wondering what I would do afterwards, and a lot of the options are things for which I would have to start from scratch
- there's not really much you can do with your degree other than the obvious teaching or at least that's the biggest outlet

Graduates

The main focus of the graduate texts more strongly relates to destination discourse or employment prospects. The sense of disappointment and disillusionment in relation to these two areas strengthens.

- music institutions are able to produce a very small number of fantastic players that even now five years out ...cannot find jobs. They have studied overseas and they are still unable to be placed in jobs that they expected to have and that their degree was supposed to prepare them for
- I think it is highly unrealistic for any of those who study piano to expect that they would get a job performing...particularly classically anyway...that era kind of ended many, many years ago
- if students are developed more in the academic area then they will be more likely to get a job I suppose
- the only jobs for music graduates are kind of in music education...we can place as much emphasis on performance as we like but the jobs just aren't there

Curriculum versus pedagogy?

From the above it would appear that the major methods of teaching that these students have experienced perpetuate a dependency culture in which students are 'pedagogically needy'. It is also clear that students do not see themselves as having the skills for employment opportunities. Moreover, they blame the academy and the teachers for failing to give them 'what they need' in this regard.

While it is easy to condemn the curriculum, the academy and those who teach within it for the student disillusionment, most educators know that education is never just a series of courses and programs. Most would also argue that it is just not possible to 'cover it all' and teach students all there is to know in any degree program. As Guy Claxton (2004) suggests, knowledge is changing so fast, educators cannot give young people what they will need to know, because they do not know what it will be. It would therefore be dangerous to assume that any single teacher should be held responsible for whether a student ultimately attains cherished career goals.

This however should not be seen as an excuse to let institutions and teachers 'off the hook'. Jane McGrath argues that tertiary education should provide a growth, a thinking, an experience and a deepening of insight whether at undergraduate, Masters or Doctorate level (Magrath, 1996, p.54). It is also reasonable to demand that tertiary education play a strong role in providing an expert workforce. Furthermore, there has to be some acceptance and responsibility for the music making and learning that will take place beyond formal tuition or graduation, an attitude that requires students to accept a level of responsibility for their own learning.

Some educators (Jorgensen, 2000; Lebler, 2004) however, argue that many students are not ready to take control of their own learning, preferring to abdicate the responsibility to their teachers. A survey of music students at one Australian music

institution reports that 74% of those who had experiences of one-to-one teaching relied on feedback from their teachers either somewhat frequently or very frequently (Daniel, 2001). Similarly, this study indicates that the students' preference for 'being prodded' and of needing 'to be taught' certainly belie the ideal of independent thinkers and independent learners. Instead students speak a preference for consumption and nurturance.

Claxton (2004) argues that many students flounder in the face of the uncertainties of contemporary life because we do not prepare them adequately. He asserts that we prepare them for a life of tests not the tests of life. He suggests that students are, however, capable of learning whatever they will need to know if educators help them. This necessitates assisting students to acquire a disposition for learning so that they are innovative and resourceful. It requires that we help them to develop supple and nimble minds so they will be able to learn whatever they will need to. It also requires developing students' awareness of the range of ways they learn thus increasing their confidence to use the best technique for the current context (Claxton, 2002).

Erica McWilliam (2005) writes that this sort of learning requires flexibility. It requires educators to 'unlearn' learning routines where 'habits are too tightly embraced'. Instead of clinging to routines once used for learning, we should be investing in learning processes that assemble and disassemble so that educators 'know what to do when we don't know what to do' (McWilliam, 2005, p.5). Music educators must not only represent this philosophy but must encourage it in the ethos of their students. While this does not necessarily mean that the traditional curriculum in tertiary music institutions should be discarded, it does mean that we should be considering how to prepare students to be effective learners so that they are able to adapt to the future, no matter what it holds (Claxton, 1999). In other words, it is not so much a matter of questioning what we teach, but the manner in which we teach it, i.e. we need to look to our pedagogy.

As practitioners in the field, the challenge is for us to reflect upon not only what it is that we are training today's students of keyboard to do, but how. How can teachers better facilitate the transition from dependent student to independent learner? How can teachers help students to be more innovative and resourceful? How might *all* keyboard teachers make a greater contribution to the thinking that underpins the development of a pedagogy that encourages students to develop life related skills?

'Re-thinking' pedagogy

If we expect to see a change of attitude in our piano students, we as teachers may need to consider changing our way of teaching. Learning routines on which we have relied in the past may no longer be appropriate or valuable. Instead of relying on past practices and saying 'this is the way we have to do it' we may need, as McWilliam (2005) suggests, to 'unlearn' or 'rethink' our habits. We may need to invest in learning processes that help young people become better learners – not just in the sense of getting better qualifications, but in real-life terms' (Claxton, 2004, p.2).

While some teachers (many present today) already engage in effective teaching and learning strategies, in the absence of pedagogical theory, the present methods of

choice for much teaching and learning in piano lessons is still learning-by-doing and apprenticeship. This form of tutorial teaching is described by Uszler (1993, p.584) as, ‘the master is the model who demonstrates, directs, comments and inspires and the apprentice is the disciple who watches, listens, imitates and seeks approval’. This is still a powerful universal motivating force particularly in conservatoires. It is also a firmly established model for the teaching of music in many private music studios.

In this one-to-one setting the teacher takes responsibility for much of the transmission of the performance skill and ‘is the dominant source of feedback’ (Lebler, 2004, p.3). The teacher usually gives the student information (either verbally or through demonstration) and the student then imitates and tries to re-create. The question I would pose is: Is this the most effective method of teaching if we are trying to encourage independent learning in our students?

Paul Pollei (1993, p.53) obviously thought not when in 1993 he described his unflattering (and morally suspect) version of the three categories of piano teachers: Some of you may recognise these from your own early keyboard experiences.

1. The imbecilic teachers – those with no background, no major goals, and little organization, desire or compelling reason to venture out of their own domain
2. The psychological cripples – those who teach for self-serving reasons, ranging from those who amass trophies won by child prodigies to those who rob the public (defined in many ways)
3. The launchers of good health- those who intend to give all, expect little in return, constantly seek for new and better ways, and place themselves in a win-win situation for all concerned.

I believe that most teaching practices have come a long way since this! As some music educators have already demonstrated, it is possible, through innovation and working creatively with knowledge, to break habits and change teaching and learning practices.

Framework for independent learning

Many of you would be familiar with the work and contributions of Frances Clark who drew on her own experience of education which was steeped in a rich liberal arts tradition as well as excellent training in the standard music conservatory curriculum. Clark was one of the first great pedagogues to give us a broader view of what we mean when we refer to ‘music education’. In reflecting on what would have been Clark’s 100th year, Louise Goss (2005, pp. 3,4) states that more than any other piano teacher before or since, Frances Clark did extensive research into what makes the most natural and logical sequence for learning music at the piano and had simple and practical maxims in relation to independence of learning. These included:

- Teaching is not telling. Tellers belong in banks, behind bars
- Students really know something when they can use it on their own without any help from you

- The teacher's highest priority is to become *dispensable* to her students
- Meet students where they are, not where you are, and not where you want them to be, but where they really are

Richard Chronister likewise throughout his pedagogical career was intensely interested in how students learn and through his research and experience contributed a great deal to the pedagogical training of teachers.

In addressing a group of teachers in 1998 he posed the following questions (Pearce, 2004, p.3).

- In what specific ways does everything I do promote the student's independence?
- Does everything I do develop fluency and facility in addition to understanding?
- Will the student know exactly how everything I do relates to home practice?
- Is everything I do creative, musical and fun and therefore a motivating influence?

Another experienced pedagogue and proponent of independent learning, Joyce Cameron (1996, p.3), suggests that 'one way to encourage independent learning is to attempt to ensure that students have opportunities 'to act on their own perceptions' rather than expecting the student 'to act in terms of our own'. As teachers we all know that it is relatively easy to share a perception with a student. For example, that note is F sharp not F-natural. The left hand belongs on finger 4 not finger 5. The rhythm is incorrect...the tempo is unsteady...the pedalling is messy....etc. Rather, according to Cameron, 'the trick is to help students to learn to perceive musical sounds and symbols with confidence and accuracy, and then help them learn to act on their perceptions in ways that contribute to the development of musical and pianistic skill' (1996, p.3). However, as Cameron explains, teaching this way is not easy, nor does it necessarily result in fast progress. But, teaching this way does result in lasting progress.

There are ways of helping teachers to encourage such skills in their students. However this requires more than just musical and pianistic expertise. It requires the ability to build a relationship of mutual trust and respect so that students can ask their own questions and respond to a teacher's questions with honesty and a sense of security in such a way that they, and their questions and answers, will not be found 'dumb' (Cameron, 1996. p.6). In reinforcing this philosophy, McWilliam (2005, p.3) states that teaching and learning should be without shame.

More than anything else, it requires an environment where risk taking is encouraged. In other words, it is all right to try something and sometimes get it wrong. It also requires reflective practice on the part of both teacher and student. Thus the process becomes a reciprocal learning where teachers are also learning from their students, encouraging freedom and choice as their students grow and develop. It is as much to do with attitudes, beliefs, emotional tolerances and values (Claxton, 2004, p. 2). In short, it demands an authoritative, but not an authoritarian stance.

Conclusion

This paper does not pretend to solve the many problems I have outlined. What it has attempted is to allow a ‘rethinking’ of student needs by raising relevant questions about what it is that teachers (and I include myself) should be investing in our students.

In summary, I hope I have demonstrated that in reflecting on student needs it is not about constantly changing and ‘wedging’ more into the curriculum. Rather it is more about the understanding of our processes and practices. It’s about the encouraging and the enhancing of our students’ ability to think critically. It is about providing students with a framework for independent lifelong learning and about implementing strategies into our teaching practice that create an environment. One that encourages interaction and discussion –one that views students as participants - an environment that freely lends itself to experimentation with ideas and the finding of solutions through trial and error for both teachers and students.

For this to occur however, we must face up to the challenge of embracing a pedagogy that has at its centre, a laboratory that exemplifies and advocates reflective inquiry and new ways of learning. In doing so, we may be on our way to providing the framework for an appropriate learning: one which ensures that music students are as well equipped as possible to face the challenges of employment, the challenges of the ‘unknown’ whether in the field of music or any other field.

About the author

Dr Gemma Carey is a Senior lecturer in Piano and Keyboard Pedagogy at the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University. Her postgraduate studies and research interests have been in the area of Performance Pedagogy and her recently completed doctoral thesis is in the area of curriculum needs for keyboard students. As well as teaching piano, Gemma is Head of Pedagogy at the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University and Convenor of Keyboard Skills.

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