

Learning to Perform: enhancing understanding of musical expertise

How do conservatoire students learn to perform? How can we enhance this process? Learning to Perform has investigated teaching and learning at the Royal College of Music London, a leading UK and international conservatoire, following students over three years of their higher education. Starting from the belief that learning to perform extends well beyond the practice room or composition studio, the project has produced results which challenge the notion that musical expertise is developed only through narrowing of focus.

- Learning to perform requires a complex balance between breadth and depth of learning. Musical expertise is not achieved solely through narrowing of focus.



Students seeking musical expertise should be encouraged to pursue diverse activities alongside and within their specialism that will help them create their own expansive learning environment.

- The transition from school to conservatoire is challenging. Student experience in the first term is crucial in establishing a positive learning trajectory from day one.



Students should be supported from early in their course in developing a broad identity as a musician and in redefining and widening their expectations.

- Conservatoire students expect and hope for a broad career. Students teach others while in higher education, and report that this enhances their own performance and career preparation.



Conservatoires can best support learning by the use of flexible programmes that allow students to develop the professional skills that they need, at the time that they feel they need them.

The research

The Learning to Perform project was established to open the door to the 'secret garden' of conservatoires of music. An area of higher education where the 1-1 lesson format has traditionally formed the core of teaching and learning, conservatoires have hitherto been under-researched. The project has addressed this gap, working towards a new understanding of how western classical musicians are created and how their learning experiences and outcomes can be enhanced. Its setting in the conservatoire context meant that the project could explore the development of expertise within music, while also using the learning processes of highly specialised musicians to present implications for learning in disciplines beyond music.

Psychological research on the development of expertise paints only a partial picture for musicians, placing as it does a high emphasis on expertise as a result of deliberate practice (see, for example, Ericsson et al., 1993). Furthermore, studies of institutional music have typically emphasised the impact of instruction, which places less stress on other forms of learning such as that stimulated by one's peers, through a learner's new insights, or through induction into the culture of an institution and a profession. Learning to Perform takes a holistic view of musical development, researching students as they engage in the everyday life of the conservatoire and the wider musical profession.

Three years of empirical work lay at the heart of the project, starting in June 2004 (Year 1), June 2005 (Year 2) and June 2006 (Year 3). Data collection and analysis used observation, interview and questionnaire to clarify how students learn to be musicians as a result of instruction, socialisation and through their personal characteristics. In particular, the project closely followed 31 students, monitoring the ebb and flow of their learning as they moved towards full participation in the musical profession. Such rich longitudinal data is unique to conservatoire research in the UK, providing a basis from which to explore the complexity of the learning challenge and to reach emergent implications for the development of musical expertise.

How do students become musicians?

"I don't want to pigeonhole myself as a musician": the need for breadth and depth of learning

The researchers involved in the Learning to Perform project acknowledge the importance of high-quality deliberate practice and instrumental teaching in the development of musical expertise. Learning to Perform, though, has shown the striking importance of both depth and breadth of learning in becoming a musician. While an in-depth approach focuses on one aspect of learning, for example concentrated practice in a student's area of expertise, broad learning looks outwards to find new ways of accomplishing goals. Such outward-looking activity may include listening to new genres of music, teaching others or working in arts administration. Crucially, broader learning may also lead to new approaches to the ways in which students approach their in-depth learning. The majority of students in Learning to Perform, for example, take part in diverse activities outside their specialism, which challenges the stereotypical image of devoting all hours to solitary practice. Many students believe that these other activities help them to become 'better musicians' and that their broad interests will help prepare them for a career that will encompass several different roles. Students at the conservatoire identify themselves most frequently as 'musicians', using this term to reflect the diversity of their learning experiences. They do not only consider themselves performers or composers.

In reviewing learning outcomes, results have shown that students who score highly in their music A level are more likely to score highly in their final degree classification than those who score highly

in their performance-based audition for the conservatoire. This indicates that the broad skills required for A-level study (writing and thinking about music as well as practice and performance) are also relevant to learning to perform at expert levels. But it also challenges the notion that expertise is best developed through an intensive and narrow focus of attention. Breadth and depth in learning are not mutually exclusive, but should be viewed as concurrent strands in developing musical expertise.

"Music isn't one island": the conservatoire as a vocational education, where teaching others is central to becoming a musician

Embracing a broad approach to learning goes hand in hand with preparation for a career in music. Student expectations range from playing in orchestras, to performing as soloists or working as teachers, and most students aim to work in more than one activity in their professional lives. Whilst every student approaches their career preparation in a different way, the professional world mediates learning at every point, providing students with access to the profession and growing knowledge of it. Concurrent research at the conservatoire shows that alumni returning as instrumental teachers notably shift their identity from 'performer' to 'musician', reflecting the broader range of skills they have acquired in their working lives. This means that musicians are under pressure from early in their conservatoire education to identify grounded, achievable targets and to act on them. Learning to Perform has shown that doing so makes them more likely both to develop their expertise as musicians and to be employable when they graduate.

Students at the conservatoire do not only seek to perform or compose. Many expect and hope to teach when they graduate, and hold their own teachers

¹ The Working in Music project, see www.musiceducation.rcm.ac.uk

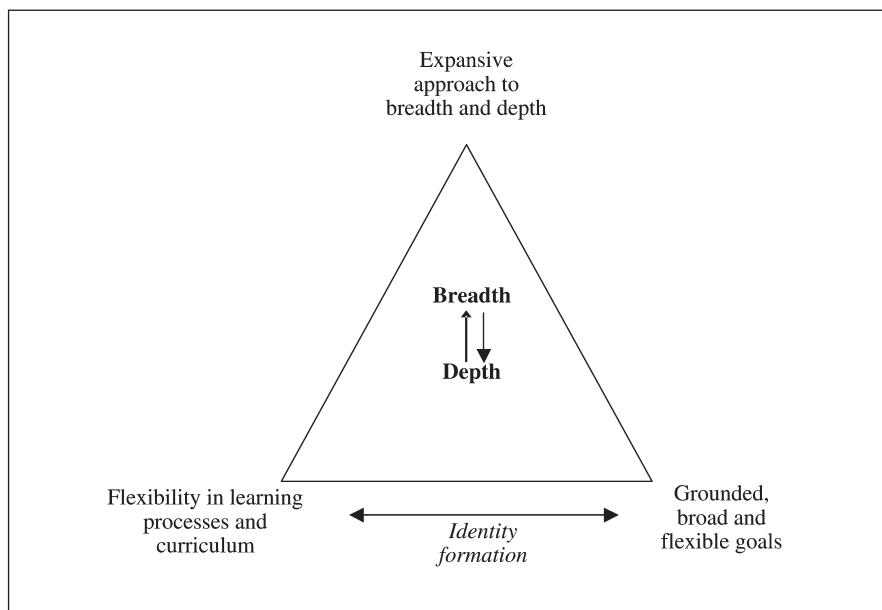


Figure 1: Developing musical expertise

in high regard. Indeed, conservatoire students are unique in their frequent engagement as teachers as well as learners during their higher education. Taking on pupils is frequent for conservatoire students, who have usually engaged in teaching by the age of 18, and continue or expand this activity during their higher education. Participating as an instrumental teacher not only links to effective preparation for a career as a professional musician, but also to the students' own performance skills. Students report that teaching others enhances their own technique and practice skills as developing performers, and encourages a self-sufficient approach to learning. While statistical tests do not demonstrate improved performance scores for those who teach others, it is apparent that teaching adds to the breadth of the student experience.

Aligned with teaching others is peer learning. The majority of conservatoire students are members of chamber groups, and work with their peers to enhance their own learning as well as that of the group. Students report that such group work offers the opportunity to develop expertise in a challenging yet relatively safe environment, where both receiving and offering critique improves learning. Comparative interviews with seven mathematics undergraduates highlighted the role that informal group learning plays in the development of mathematical rather than musical expertise. Learning through others – whether through receiving one-to-one teaching, by teaching others or through group learning – is a key part of developing musical expertise.

"I don't feel like a student. I feel like I am practising and teaching and making money and trying to get better": consolidating and developing a broad identity

The transition from school to conservatoire is a challenging one, forcing many students to reconsider their identity. Students entering the conservatoire frequently report feeling like a 'small fish in a big pond'. While students look forward to working with like-minded and skilful peers and teachers, they express anxiety about the high standards that such an environment will demand. Learning to Perform shows that a student's first term is central to overcoming feelings of inadequacy, particularly through establishing feedback as an important part of learning to be a musician. While students' primary career aims are performer or a composer, this aspiration is framed within an ever-broader anticipated portfolio of professional activity as students move through their higher education. The first term is central to ensuring that this development strengthens a student's confidence and skill as a musician, as opposed to shattering them. An environment where identity is constructively challenged and allowed to develop is one way in which this can be encouraged.

Major implications

How can learning to perform be enhanced?

Through taking an expansive approach to both breadth and depth

The Learning to Perform findings suggest that learning outcomes, in the holistic sense in which the project conceptualises them, can be enhanced by ensuring that students engage in what other researchers have termed expansive learning (see Fuller and Unwin, 2003). Expansive learning involves participation in activities outside the immediate educational setting, and is related to extending identity – in the case of this project, allowing students to build on their concept of what it is to be a musician. Learning to Perform demonstrates that musical expertise can be developed through adopting an expansive approach to both the breadth and depth of learning.

'Restrictive' learning, which concentrates on one particular aspect of study or on one method of learning, sometimes to the exclusion of others, is vital for some aspects of musical training. But even the more restrictive aspects of musical development can be approached expansively. One approach, for example, is to read around a particular piece of music in order to get a new perspective on it and therefore to give a more informed performance. Expansive learning is an approach that can be applied throughout a music student's course, and it may be advantageous for students in other disciplines who need to hone precise skills while at the same time preparing for a diverse professional career. Many music students and teachers already make use of expansive learning, both within and outside music. Learning to Perform suggests that these activities should be encouraged, and introduced flexibly into formal provision. For learners in other disciplines, the project findings imply the need for further exploration of the role of breadth in developing expertise in any specialism.

Through redefining and widening student expectations

The project results suggest that reassessing what defines a successful musician is important from day one of a conservatoire education. Incorporating a wide range of skills with a thorough knowledge of repertoire, taking the initiative, and gathering know-how in respect of the profession are some of the positive steps that can be taken by well-rounded musicians. Conservatoires can assist in developing this area of expertise through giving due consideration to students' expectations and providing appropriate guidance to enable students to shape their careers; the gap between expectations and likely employment needs

to be fully acknowledged by both students and institution. Teachers also have a significant role to play in sharing their professional expertise, by easing the transition from student to professional musician, and in some cases helping to realign expectations. This research supports the view that by discussing the hopes and fears of each student at the audition stage, institutions could mediate early on to avoid student priority clashing with institutional priority.

Through flexibility in the learning process

Concurrent breadth and depth of learning are central to developing musical expertise, and build vital skills for a future career. Learning to Perform suggests that this process can be enhanced through flexibility within the learning process and the learning programme. The research suggests that teachers, at conservatoires and potentially elsewhere, could aim to include an even greater diversity in their teaching programmes, both in terms of the way in which learning is approached and in the skills being taught. For example, conservatoire teachers can offer space for new ways of learning to be explored within individual lessons, encouraging their students to expand their skills through initiating innovative experiences.

Furthermore, tailored professional skills can be carefully integrated more fully into the curriculum. Learning to Perform case studies reveal crucial differences in student perceptions of different aspects of a career in music. While some students view instrumental teaching as a pinnacle of career success, for example, others view it as one inessential part of their career portfolio. Such differences highlight the need for flexible approaches and for provision on a case-by-case basis. If introduced at the right stage, professional skills training would enable students to step outside their comfort zones, widen their knowledge of repertoire and engage in deeper, more expansive learning. Finding the balance between principal-study practice and work that contributes to a broad portfolio of skills is the key challenge. Learning to Perform suggests that this challenge can be met by providing space for students to explore professional skills as one facet of their developing musical expertise, at times when they recognise that they need this. A tailored approach that is appropriate to the individual's progress and stage of development would appear to be the most effective way forward. Allowing students to access resources as and when they need them will help them develop their expertise while preparing effectively for their chosen future career.

Further information

For further information about this project please visit <http://www.tlrp.org/learningtoperform>

Project publications are at <http://www.tlrp.org/dspace/index.jsp>, search by 'Mills' or 'Burt'.

Two related recent books are:

Mills, J. (2005). *Music in the School*. Oxford University Press.

Mills, J. (2007). *Instrumental Teaching*. Oxford University Press.

A short video summarising the key findings of the project, along with performances by student participants and discussion of what learning to perform means for musicians, can be found on the ESRC website from July 2008: www.esrc.ac.uk

References

Ericsson, K. A., Krampe, R. T. and Tesch-Römer, C. (1993) The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance, *Psychological Review* **100**: 363-406.

Fuller, A. and Unwin, L. (2003) Learning as apprentices in the contemporary UK workplace: creating and managing expansive and restrictive participation, *Journal of Education and Work* **16**(4): 407-426.

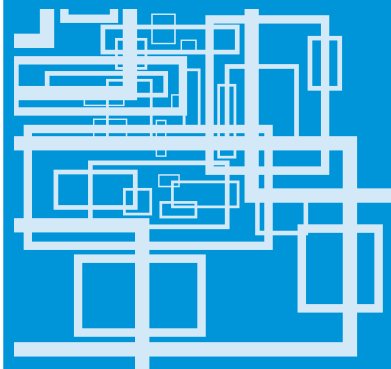


The warrant

The conclusions of this project are based on a longitudinal study of students at a leading UK and international conservatoire. Specifically, the findings are based on 118 in-depth interviews with 31 students over three years, which are situated within data collected through six biannual questionnaires completed by a total of 266 students. Interviews were recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Research instruments were based on what students told researchers, in order to promote commonality of understanding. When existing instruments were used these were drawn from research using the same approach. The project employed a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, and cross-checked data and findings that arose from these approaches. There was also triangulation with other research projects being carried out in western classical music based at the conservatoire, and involving comparison with other music colleges overseas.

The project advisory group, which met for eleven full days over the course of the project, included an independent evaluator to ensure rigour and to provide comment on the developing research. In addition, the project was critiqued at least termly by specialists from outside music, in mathematics and in sport. Learning to Perform built on many recent and continuing smaller research studies carried out at the conservatoire with each of the contexts the project investigated, so that none of the settings we investigated was entirely unknown. Analysis was both inductive and deductive, and took place throughout the duration of the project in order that saturation could be reached.

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