

## **An Assessment Scheme to Promote Autonomy in the Development of Performance Skills in Music Education**

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**Key words:** *self-assessment, peer-assessment, "deep" learning, autonomous learning, musical skills, music education*

### **Introduction**

This paper examines issues involved in designing an assessment process to develop musical performance skills in first-year BA/PGCE Music Education students at London Metropolitan University, so as to prepare them to meet the academic and professional challenges of the course.

The standard of performing skills necessary for a classroom teacher is not prescribed. While the Teacher Training Agency (TTA, 2002) specifies that students must demonstrate a secure knowledge of their subject(s), it is possible to obtain a degree with musicological knowledge and understanding but few musical skills. In general terms, an indication of the level of skill appropriate to this stage of the course is contained in guidelines issued by the Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC, 2002, p. 7) for practical skills at Level 5 (equivalent to HE level 2). The learner should evidence:

- *"Application of skills:* can operate in situations of varying complexity and predictability requiring application of a wide range of techniques;
- *Autonomy in skill use:* able to act with increasing autonomy, with reduced need for supervision and direction, within defined guidelines".

In music education, however, this could be taken to apply to classroom skills as distinct from musical skills. Even so, this points to an expectation of sophisticated technique and developing autonomous performance.

Musical skills, as defined by the National Curriculum for Music, consist of composing, performing and appraising. These skills generate the process of musical activity in which music is formed, performed and listened to. Music derives its meaning through the act of performance; it is at the heart of musical experience and musical experience should be at the core of music education – as Swanwick (1999, p. 2) suggests:

*"I want to argue that music persists in all cultures...because it is a symbolic form. It is a mode of discourse as old as the human race, a medium in which ideas about ourselves and others are articulated in sonorous shapes".*

Similarly, Odam's (1995) central concern is that the pupil learns music primarily *through* musical experiences as opposed to learning *about* music by other means. He also considers that it is important that children experience live music. Recorded music

is an essential component in understanding the breadth of what the world has to offer, but it does not demand attention and engagement in the same way that a live performer does. In some styles this is particularly clear. For example, the exposition section in Indian classical music (*alap*) involves the soloist unfolding the structure of the *rag* for the benefit of the audience. Only when they are all shaking their heads in approval does the soloist allow the performance to continue.

For school music teachers, it is necessary to have *breadth* of vision to be sensitive to new musics and *depth* of skill to maintain a high level of creativity in the classroom. Clearly, teachers will have varying degrees of performing skill, but, whatever their competence, it is essential that they develop and update their skills continuously, so that they have the confidence to use them. It is also important that the teacher is perceived as a learner (as well an expert), showing varying degrees of competence in different areas. This signals that musical ability is not just something you 'have' (or 'don't have') but a series of skills that can be developed by anyone.

In terms of performance, the goal for the first-year students should be to raise their skill level during the year (to a level where accuracy and expressive qualities are secure) and develop the motivation, sense of enquiry and self-discipline to maintain improvement throughout their working lives; to become autonomous, intrinsically motivated learners.

Currently, the course does not make sufficient demands upon the students to develop their individual skills, and existing modules focus upon group approaches to composition and performance, which is a highly relevant model for teaching and learning in schools. Students are asked to improve under their own motivation without any external assessment; there is no monitoring other than an informal periodic check from their course tutor without any learning support being offered.

Perhaps, most importantly, it is because we do not assess their performing skills that the students come to believe that they are considered to have little value. As Brown *et al* (1997, p. 7) argue:

*"Assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves as students and then as graduates... If you want to change student learning then change the methods of assessment".*

## **Assessment and "constructive alignment"**

Assessment should not be considered in isolation but should be linked to the whole learning process through what Biggs (1999, p. 11) describes as "constructive alignment"

*"The fundamental principle of constructive alignment is that a good teaching system aligns teaching method and assessment to the learning activities stated in the objectives so that all aspects of this system are in accord in supporting appropriate student learning".*

Rust (2002, p. 148) summarizes this as a three-stage model in course design:

1. Identify clear learning outcomes.
2. Design appropriate assessment tasks that will directly assess whether each of the learning outcomes has been met.
3. Design appropriate learning opportunities for the students to get them to a point where they can successfully undertake the assessment tasks.

Two central aims for performance skills have already been identified:

- To raise the student's skill level adequately during the academic year.
- To develop autonomous learning in the student.

Autonomous learning depends upon intrinsic motivation and is associated with a "deep" approach to learning. A "surface" approach treats tasks as externally imposed (extrinsic), and while it can be triggered by an exam or a concert, in the absence of such stimuli it is likely that learning will be neglected. A deep approach comes from seeking meaning in musical processes in order to deepen understanding - an ongoing, long-term source of motivation. According to Susan Hallam (1998, p. 61), deep and surface approaches to learning both have their place in developing performance skills:

*"A surface approach has been equated with a focus on technical mastery, while a deep approach reflects concern with the musical interpretation of the work being studied. Both approaches have been identified in professional musicians with many combining these approaches."*

The alignment of technical mastery with a surface approach is somewhat questionable. Rote practice, for example, is a necessary part of developing technique (scales, fast passages etc.). However, since it is not used *instead* of developing understanding it should not be considered a surface approach. In fact, a deep approach can help to reduce unnecessary rote practice by, for example, helping students identify links between new challenges and previous experience.

Of relevance to assessment, Ramsden (1992, p. 81) includes the following as encouragements to deep learning:

- "teaching and assessment methods that foster active and long-term engagement with assessment tasks
- clearly stated academic expectations
- opportunities to exercise responsible choice in the method and content of study".

These principles could be applied to the Music Education course in several ways. Firstly, it would be helpful to have two assessment points, one at the end of each semester, to reinforce the continuous nature of skill development. The assessment should be summative, providing a measure of achievement, with a high formative content in the form of feedback to encourage and give guidelines for further development. The assessment could also be designed to acknowledge progress as well as achievement.

Study expectations would be stated in learning outcomes that need to be written in clear language that relates to musical activity, and also to the main aims proposed earlier. They should specify what is to be assessed (in this case performance and progress) and the form the assessment will take. Performance could be broken down into categories, most simply accuracy and expressive control. Progress could be assessed by judging whether the performance has demonstrated an increased level of difficulty (in accuracy and/or expressive control) or an extended stylistic range (new challenges in accuracy and/or expressive control) from the level acknowledged at the beginning of the semester. Performing skills could most aptly be demonstrated by a short solo performance, which would be seen as valid, reflecting the real world. Progress could be shown through a written statement, a questionnaire or most musically through a presentation identifying the challenges of the selected pieces and

how they were met. This could be illustrated by playing and could contain a question and answer session.

Student choice could be enabled by allowing the students to select their own pieces for performance. However, this raises the issue of reliability, since students might choose pieces well within their ability and not be challenged by the assessment at all. It is important that students carry out an ipsative assessment of their strengths and weaknesses at the beginning of each semester, set targets for the end of the semester and then select pieces that would demonstrate that progress has been achieved. For the sake of reliability, this process could be reviewed with their tutor to allow for a certain amount of negotiation over targets and pieces for assessment.

A similar process could be set up to develop assessment criteria, whereby students suggest criteria (perhaps based on supplied models) and then submit them to the tutor to ensure that they are appropriate. This would allow students to focus on specific areas for development such as 'bowing', 'wah-wah control', 'phrasing' or 'dynamic structure'. Assessment criteria would need to:

- meet the requirements of the learning outcomes
- be set in advance (within the first 4 weeks of each semester)
- relate specifically to the agreed performance pieces
- be agreed between student and tutor.

As Brown *et al* (1997, p. 178) explain, self-assessment "is central to effective life-long learning and the development of professional competence". To develop this capacity, it is important that the students assess their own performance at the end of each semester. However, this again raises the issue of reliability and tutor monitoring and validation will be needed to support the development of student assessment skills. In order to avoid creating too much anxiety around this assessment process (anxiety promotes surface learning according to Ramsden [1992, p. 81]), and to encourage realistic self-marking it may be better that the mark obtained is for personal reference only and does not count towards the degree awarded. This would also signify and encourage student autonomy. As Rust (2002, p. 150) observes:

*"To be intrinsically motivated, they [the students] need to see the relevance and importance of what they are being required to do...Assessment tasks are far more likely to appear relevant if they are 'real world' tasks ...and if there is a notion of a 'real' audience who might want to receive the resulting product".*

In the context of musical performance a literal interpretation of the above may be useful. The real audience in this case could be the group of students themselves and their role could be usefully extended to that of peer assessors.

Peer assessment, Brown *et al* (1997, p. 173) conclude from considering the research evidence, "can promote critical thinking, the skills of task management, increases in self-confidence and awareness of group dynamics". All these are useful extra benefits, which fit well with the overall goal of becoming music teachers. But, as Brown *et al* point out, these benefits are dependent on the students being experienced at working in small groups and having training in self and peer assessment. The learning task should also be clearly defined and be the subject of a learning contract among the group; the assessment procedure should be clear, and the assessment marks should reflect the time and effort put in by students. Over-marking can largely be dealt with by moderating marking within the peer group, and, in fact, marking is more reliable when all the students are involved with marking (as opposed to individuals marking

each other's work). Effective tutor management is thus critical to the success of peer assessment.

An example of a well-established peer assessment programme, is the one that has been running since 1992 at the University of Ulster as part of the performance modules of their BMus degree course (see website). Groups of final-year students assess mid-year performances by second-year students, but the process of developing the necessary skills is spread throughout the course. There are a number of stages in this preparation including:

- setting the context, providing the reasons for and parameters of assessment;
- working in groups;
- shadowing and collaborating with tutors and students from a later stage;
- devising criteria for assessment;
- discussion around making judgments.

When considering assessment of musical performance there is the special difficulty that such assessment has a subjective and sometimes arbitrary quality, because of its dependence on the assessor's personal experience and taste. Diverse genres spawn diverse values, and it is often difficult to form a consensus on what constitutes a 'good' performance. Using a range of assessors mediates against any one particularly biased viewpoint dominating, and lends validity to the process.

It would be helpful to have two tutors involved in the assessment process in order to gain the moderating input of a second marker. For the sake of reliability, their judgment will need to be strongly reflected in the marking. The tutors will need to moderate the self and peer marks to ensure fairness and equality with expected standards. However, this must be done in such a way that the student body feels supported or advised by the process and not undermined.

## **Conclusion**

Musical performance skills are an important attribute for secondary school music teachers, and they should be autonomous learners in this area, able to continuously improve and update their skills and embody and demonstrate the process of learning. Assessment processes which encourage "deep" learning are those that best serve the aims of autonomy and skill improvement. To support task specificity, aptness of task and development of student autonomy, it is suggested that students select their performance repertoire and design their own assessment criteria. On the grounds of reliability, and to give authority to the process, these activities could be monitored by and negotiated with the tutor. The student group could form the audience for performances and presentations and actively engage in peer assessment, with the tutor playing a crucial management and moderation role in this three-way collaborative assessment process. The focus in this kind of assessment scheme on student responsibility and peer-supported progress favours a constructivist approach to learning, whereby the student actively builds on his or her previous achievements.

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## **Biographical note**

David Cross is a musician (rock and improvisation) featured on more than 30 albums. He has taught across all phases of Education from under-fives to graduate level. He has been a head of performing arts in a London comprehensive school and has worked successfully in community education.

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