

Using reflection to develop insights into musical practice and performance: A pilot study with Chinese M Mus students.

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Abstract

Reflection has been a part of tertiary education in England and Wales for over twenty years. Reflective practice is employed, for example, in the training of teachers, medical staff, engineers and students of the performing arts. The development of reflective skills, as Boud (2010) points out, may lead to surprising outcomes which challenge students to re-consider their approaches to individual and group learning. Assessed written reflection has been a part of undergraduate performance modules at the University of Liverpool for the last ten years and research is currently being conducted into the role of reflection and musical maturation of undergraduate classical and popular musicians which is described by Esslin-Peard et al., (2015, 2016).

The University of Liverpool offers a M Mus in Performance which, over the last five years, has attracted increasing numbers of students from mainland China. According to Wu (2014), South East Asian students must deal with linguistic, academic, social and cultural challenges. In this pilot research project, we analyse the reflective writing of Chinese M Mus students in an effort to understand whether cultural heritage, a Confucian approach to pedagogy based on effort and rote learning and prior individual musical experiences help or hinder the development of reflective practice. This study offers insights into the challenges facing both Chinese students and faculty staff working with reflective practice which will be of interest to researchers working with Chinese students in other academic disciplines.

Introduction

UK tertiary education institutions have welcomed Chinese students for over 20 years and numbers are predicted to continue growing, reaching perhaps 72,000 in 2020 (Wu, 2014). The University of Liverpool, where this research project is based, has been associated with Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University for over ten years. Whilst the focus of this joint campus has been on business studies, the UK campus has witnessed ever increasing numbers of mainland Chinese students applying for undergraduate and postgraduate courses. For the music department, this has resulted in a major cultural shift in applications over the last ten years. Whereas formerly the M Mus in Performance attracted UK or EU students, it now accepts a majority of Chinese students on to the one year Classical M Mus course. This has not been without some challenges. The M Mus course incorporates written reflection, based upon a practice diary, as an assessed element of the first semester of study. The act of reflection, based on individual critical self-analysis of practice and performance seems to contradict Confucian philosophies of learning and thus represents a challenge for pedagogic practice. In this paper, we examine the self-reported behaviours and experiences of two cohorts of M Mus students and draw comparisons with existing research into the reflective practices of Western undergraduate students on a classical performance module.

Confucian philosophy

The Chinese philosopher Confucius, (551 BC – 479 BC), describes approaches to education which have had a major influence not only on Chinese, but South Asian peoples. At the heart of Confucian principles is the idea, as Starr (2012) explains, that ‘education was the route to social status and material success and promoted harmony based on morality and hierarchy.’

Confucius himself was a musician and, as Huang and Thibodeaux (2016, p.28) relate, he was ‘insatiable in learning’ and worked hard to attain excellence in music. In addition, music was seen by Confucius as a medium through which rulers could establish moral virtue through education, which, in turn, would create virtuous leaders. These leaders would uphold the values of self-respect, kindness, honesty, perseverance and benevolence.

Music education in China

Wang (2010) writes of piano education and Chinese piano music culture from Shenzhen university in mainland China, making the link between culture and politics clear, stating ‘that the flourish of piano music culture was the cultural mapping that Chinese traditional culture “connected with the politics”.’ Whilst the politicisation of music education in general is normal within the context of the Peoples Republic of China and continues to be so, as Ho (2017) discusses in detail in her book, *Popular Music, Cultural Politics and Music Education in China*, there has been, since 1977, a gradual realignment of Confucian principles with primary and secondary education. As Starr (2012) states: ‘The status of education remains high in Confucian heritage cultures, this is reflected in the degree of parental interest in education, in pressure on children to succeed at school and in the priority it receives in family expenditure.’ The explosion of interest in children taking individual lessons in violin, piano and singing in the last 20 years has led, as Huang and Thibodeaux (2016) explain, to the emergence of a group of mainly urban middle-class parents, known as ‘piano parents’, who are willing to invest considerable financial resources in their children taking piano, violin or other instrumental or vocal lessons.

Turning now to piano pedagogy, we discuss two studies describing students’ experiences in mainland China. Huang and Thibodeaux (2016) observed piano teaching at Xiamen university and reported that students focused on skill acquisition without developing their listening skills or learning about composers and struggled with the artistic, aesthetic and emotional aspects of interpretation. At the Beijing conservatoire, as Lin (2002) reports, teaching styles were heavily influenced by the historical involvement of pianists from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe who came to China in the 1950s. She explains that the pedagogical approach combined a focus on technical ability, which she describes as Chinese and developing a fine singing tone, which is ascribed to Russian piano tutors. Undergraduate students on the four year piano course at the conservatoire have weekly two hour lessons. Some studying with a particular professor were expected to spend the first 30 minutes of the lesson on technical studies before moving onto pieces. They were also encouraged to watch their peers during one-to-one tuition.

Vocal tuition in China developed from the 1920s with the introduction of the bel canto style which was adapted to conform with Chinese cultural principals. In her study, Zhang (2016) explores vocal tuition at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Within a Confucian model of education, students hope one day to become singing teachers and thus can lead a life ‘serving as someone’s guardian’. Students hold their vocal tutors in high regard and ‘are not

encouraged to use critical thinking while solving vocal problems with their teachers, (Zhang, 2016, p. 294). Furthermore, to give a good performance, students should think about ‘the tender feeling of mother love’, rather than breathing technique and diction. This leads Zhang (2016) to conclude that vocal music, like other forms of music, is subservient to the state:

In the end, vocal music always seems to be a mirror of the contemporary culture which reflects the people and the civilisation in the contemporary society.

Given the social, cultural and pedagogic context of music education in China, what are the motivating factors which drive Chinese students to study abroad and how do they cope in Western educational institutions?

The experience of Chinese students abroad

As Wu (2014, p.438) reports, the three main reasons why students from mainland China choose to study in the UK are a desire to experience new culture, to be in England with native English speakers and to pursue a programme of study which would enhance their future career aspirations. Given the differences in approaches to education in general and music education in particular presented above, it is to be expected, as Zhou and Todman (2009) discuss, that Chinese students need to be prepared to adapt culturally to the host nation where they choose to study. Difficulties experienced by Chinese students include the challenge of following lectures and reading academic papers in English. However, these challenges were mitigated by group support from Chinese peers. The authors note that academic staff also needed to be sensitive to the needs of Chinese students, both academically, linguistically, socially and culturally. Fang et al., (2016) explore the experiences of Chinese students on a two-year Master in Education programme in Canada. They noted the following barriers to learning, as reported by the Chinese students: the English language, unfamiliar approaches to teaching (including such comments by tutors that ‘there is no standard answer’ which Chinese students found perplexing), expectations of developing critical thinking skills, difficulties in adapting to Western culture and lack of confidence to join with discussions and group activities.

Practice and metacognitive practice strategies

It is well documented that practice is a key part in the development of musical excellence (e.g. Austin & Haefner-Berg, 2006). Classically-trained musicians often report 10,000 hours or ten years of practice to reach professional standards (Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer, 1993). Despite the re-iteration of the 10,000 hour route to mastery by Gladwell (2008), the assumption that expert status is the result solely of time spent practising has been challenged recently, for example, by Hambrick et al., (2014), who highlight other factors such as IQ and personality. Extensive research has been conducted over the last 30 years by academics into the practice habits of classically-trained musicians. Surprisingly, researchers have not agreed on an individual model which best explains practice behaviours, as it appears to be difficult to find a consensus about which behaviours should be included. Hallam (2001) investigated expert practice and conceded that even the definition of an expert is open-ended. However, she concluded from interviews with 22 professional musicians that they do indeed ‘learn to learn’ (p.28).

In the absence of consensus about what an individual does to become an expert, we consider the strategies that are thought to support learning which may variously be grouped under

titles such as metacognition, self-regulated or independent learning. Outside the field of music, Zimmerman (2002) describes how high school students in the United States were helped by their teachers to develop self-regulated learning strategies, which he links to metacognition. The key elements which promote more effective self-regulated learning include setting proximal goals, self-awareness, monitoring progress, self-motivation, effective time management, attributing causation to outcomes and the ability to apply and adapt newly gained knowledge to future behaviour and skill development. Similarly, Hallam, (2006, pp. 122-123) and Jorgensen and Hallam (2009, p. 270) explain that metacognitive practice strategies involve planning, monitoring and evaluation of learning. Asking 'how', we would suggest, acts as a catalyst, helping students to identify their approaches to practice and develop more self-awareness about metacognitive practice strategies.

Reflection and music education

The concept of reflective practice has been embraced by tertiary educational institutions across the English-speaking world over the last three decades, following theories of reflective practice that were developed by Schön (1987) and refined for educational practice by Ghaye (2011) and Pollard (2002), amongst others. In tertiary education the term 'practice' is used to describe the development of skills, knowledge and expertise requisite for a particular profession, such as that of a doctor, nurse or engineer. Trainee primary and secondary teachers, for example, are taught to reflect on their practice, i.e. their experiences in the classroom and suggest ways in which to improve their lesson delivery, as Biggs and Tang (2011) describe. In music education, Leon-Guerrero (2008) reports that music students need to develop skills in (and of) reflection in order to develop their self-regulating capabilities for practice and performance.

Esslin-Peard (2016, 2017) investigates the relationship between reflection and musical learning with classical and popular undergraduate performance students, highlighting the different speeds at which students adopt reflective practice in rehearsal and performance, based upon individual practice diaries and an assessed end of year reflective essay. The Head of Performance does not 'instruct' his students how to reflect, preferring to let them create their own learning journeys. This mirrors the experience of reflective practitioners such as Cowan (2013, p.4), who has worked with engineering students for over 30 years and reminds us:

I want to empower each learner supportively [...] I try to help them to be the best that they can be – but always leave them to decide what to do and how to do it. I certainly do not instruct, or tutor.

However, the process of reflection can be challenging, as Boud (2010, p.33) reminds us:

Reflection is an open, unpredictable process. It is dynamic and changes over time. It necessarily has unintended consequences ... it deals with matters that do not have a ready solution and are not clearly formulated and, as such, it cannot be controlled and managed as a routine process.

In this study, we ask how students from a non-UK cultural background adapt to the challenges of reflective practice in their practice behaviours.

Research Questions

The focus of this pilot study is to ascertain how M Mus students from the Republic of China react to learning about reflective practice. We pose the following questions:

What are the reactions of Chinese students to keeping a practice diary?

To what extent do students develop metacognitive practice strategies as a result of using the practice diary?

To what extent do reflective essays offer evidence of the development of critical self-awareness about the process of practice?

As there is no research about reflection and musical learning in the Republic of China, we pose these questions of the Chinese students on the M Mus performance course.

Background to the pilot study

Two cohorts of M Mus students were invited to sign an Ethics Consent Form, asking for their agreement to participate in this study anonymously, to release their first semester reflective essays to the lead researcher and participate in interviews. This resulted in a sample size of 14 students from the 2015-2016 cohort and 15 students from the 2016-2017 cohort. Table 1 below shows the country of origin of students in the two cohorts:

Table 1: Students and country of origin

Cohort	China	Taiwan	USA	Thailand	UK
2015-2016	12		1	1	
2016-2017	11	1			3

The majority of students were pianists or singers, which reflects the preference of Chinese school-aged childrens' choices of instruments, as reported by Huang and Thibodeaux (2016) quoting US media, who tell us that 36 million students in China study piano and 50 million students learn violin. The principal study choices of the two cohorts are shown below in Table 2:

Table 2: Principal study for pilot study cohorts (n=29)

Instrument	Piano	Voice	Flute	Tuned Percussion
2015-2016	9	5		
2016-2017	9	3	2	1

In addition to the reflective essays, unstructured interviews were conducted with M Mus students and the Head of Performance, who leads the M Mus Module, as shown below in Table 3:

Table 3: Interviews

Year of study	Student	Interview date	Principal study	Country of origin
2015-2016	MM	30.6.2016	Voice	USA

	YY	30.6.2016	Piano	China
2016-2017	NL	14.2.2017	Piano	China
	YD	14.2.2017	Piano	China
	YW	14.2.2017	Piano	China
	ZZ	14.2.2017	Piano	China
Faculty	Head of Performance	25.3.2015 30.6.2016	Viola	UK

Methodology

Following previous research into the experiences of undergraduate musicians who took the Performance Module at the University of Liverpool (Esslin-Peard et al., 2015), a phenomenological approach was taken to interpreting data, reflecting research projects in music education by Reid (2001) and Pulman (2014), for example. This is important, as the focus of the research is to understand the human experiences of the students as they learn about reflection (c.f. Denscombe, 2014) without any pre-conceived hypothesis or model.

Initially, the lead researcher read the students' reflective essays, looking for common themes. Following McKee (2003), repeated close reading of all the available narratives was considered to be the most appropriate method to ascertain how students' behaviour and attitude towards practice was changing, which follows the 'zooming in' approach of Johansson (2012) and the reported methods adopted by Green (2002) and Smith (2013) in exploring interview data from interviews with popular musicians.

Approaches to reflective practice

Music educators like Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) and Daniel (2001) describe the use of video to stimulate reflection after musical performances. Daniel (2001, p. 224) discovers that writing a reflective essay encourages reflection about performance skills. These studies echo the findings of Clark et al., (2014) who found that learning and practice behaviours are linked to levels of expertise, and suggest that conscious, stimulated reflection is useful to analyse past actions and could be a catalyst for conscious change. The Head of Performance at the University of Liverpool introduced reflective practice in 2005 based upon three elements: the individual practice diary, performance workshops in which musicians practised in front of their peers and the annual assessed reflective essay.

The practice diary acts as a record of practice behaviours but, as the Head of Performance explained in an interview conducted in 2015, the practice diary alone does not necessarily lead to reflection:

I don't think a diary, if it's visceral and therefore real, I don't think it can be reflective. It's mixing two things up and it falls into the same trap of 'You'll get better by doing'. If you do a diary, you'll become reflective. I don't think that's true. If you do a diary, it is merely a log. You then have to do the 'stop, think'. You intercept the day-to-day hassle with a moment of deliberate thinking. That's not the same as believing that just because you're sentient, you are being reflective, (TS, 2015).

Perhaps surprisingly, M Mus students were not given guidelines for keeping a practice diary or writing their reflective essay. The Head of Performance justified this approach in interview:

I have this innate reluctance to put things in writing because it reduces flexibility, it reduces spontaneity, it reduces the ability to come up with the appropriate comment at the time. If somebody can say ‘But it says so and so and I’m sticking to that [in the guidelines], to me that is a fossilization, (TS, 2016).

The assumption that Chinese students would be willing to embrace such an apparently unstructured approach to learning might present an enormous challenge as reported by Fang et al., (2016). However as the Head of Performance explained in interview, he regards ‘public practice’ by students in the weekly performance workshop as a key element of his pedagogical input:

I try and get them to practise in public, I encourage them, I practise for them. In a sense, they can all witness it. Then I ask them questions about it: ‘So what’s the difference?’ ‘What has happened?’ (TS, 2016).

This experiential approach which, one might argue, transcends any language barriers helps students to learn by doing, listening and watching their peers with the support of their tutor. Below, we discuss student reactions to the practice diary as described in their reflective essays, accounts which point towards the development of metacognitive practice strategies and present an overview of the differing levels of reflective writing provided by the M Mus cohorts.

The practice diary

The notion of keeping a practice diary in which notes are made about every lesson and practice session was totally unfamiliar to the Chinese students. Practice at home in China involved many hours of repetition, particularly for pianists, as these students explained:

In China, I think aim of practice is that [it] cost a lot of time to play the piano, if you practise many times and long time, you will get good results. When I played the piano in China, teachers and parents always required me to practise a long time, they told me that I need to play the piano at least 4 hours, (MN, 2015).

When I was a child after I finished my homework, I could not do anything what I want to do, I had to sit down in front of the piano and practise. Even in the most important festival in China, Spring Festival, I also need to practise, (QZ, 2015).

To be honest, in the past I have a lot of bad habits such as repeat practice and prefer to play the whole piece when I made mistake. However, when I begin use of practice diary, I recognised that before method was extremely waste of time, (YZ, 2015).

Not all the M Mus students understood that the practice diary would help them to become more self-aware. One singer in the 2015-2016 cohort made no mention of practice or the practice diary in the reflective essay, writing only about the repertoire for the end of semester recital. Four students from the 2015-2016 cohort and two from the 2016-2017 cohort described technical exercises without relating these exercises, whether for pianists (n=2) or vocalists (n=4), to how they might improve their personal technique or adapt their practice behaviours. It is hard to ascertain whether this lack of reflection is due to factors which were highlighted by Fang et al., (2016), particularly the challenge posed by having to become self-

critically aware and realising that there may not be a 'right answer' to a particular question, or whether there was an underlying resistance to any kind of change in practice habits. A critical difference may be the teacher-pupil relationship, as one student explained in interview, 'in China, the teacher do the reflection work for you', (YY, Interview, 2016), which echoes the descriptions of relationships between piano teachers and their students reported by Huang and Thibodeaux (2016, p.26).

The singer from the USA also commented on the difficulties of starting to keep a practice diary, suggesting that the problems were not just linguistic or cultural:

The biggest thing I have had to adjust to is the not-so-simple task of writing things down. It seems like an easy job, but when you have to actually stop and think about what you are doing, why you're doing it and how you're doing it, things can get a little difficult. It's almost an entirely new way of thinking, (MM, 2015).

One Chinese pianist admitted that she was resistant to changing her practice behaviours:

I determined to write practice diary. However, after one week, I still feel [it's] too hard to carry on. During this period, I have found an important thing that I am resistant to change my habit. Practice diary has recorded all of my mistakes. At the same time, I found that I usually ignore some mistakes when I do not use practice diary, (YW, 2016).

For the remaining students in the two cohorts (n=22, including three English students, one student from the USA, one student from Thailand and 17 from mainland China) efforts to get to grips with the practice diary gradually led to descriptions of deliberate practice behaviours. The most frequent themes cited in the reflective essays included recognition of play-through behaviours, becoming aware of mistakes, slowing down difficult passages and repeating a phrase ten times perfectly, for pianists, practising left and right hand parts separately and learning to use a metronome.

These descriptions of new practice behaviours, cited in 13 out of the 29 M Mus reflective essays, did not necessarily lead to insights about how these changes might affect the individual.

Developing metacognitive practice strategies

Metacognitive practice strategies involve higher-level thinking, which is associated with self-regulation in practice as described by Gaunt (2008, 2010) and critical awareness of what needs to be addressed, (Hallam, 2006). Six of the M Mus students, five pianists from China and one singer from the USA, provided evidence of using metacognitive practice strategies, which we present below.

All but one of the Chinese students recognised that their previous practice behaviours which were centred on repetition did not produce effective results. They learnt through their use of the practice diary to analyse the problems that they faced and then solve them, step by step. One pianist related in detail how she used a metronome to practise semiquavers in a Haydn sonata. She had also learnt that changing rhythms as a specific practice strategy could help to overcome inaccuracies in passage work.

Another pianist wrote about her lack of discipline when playing arpeggios, ‘When I play arpeggio, I always change the fingering. The result is I never smoothly play it. I decide to separately play it with fixed fingering.’ She then went on to describe how she started to listen critically to her practice:

The key words must be listening and thinking to play slowly. I need to hear the melody, and think what is a problem in this bar? Should I highlight the melody of the right hand? Did I play even notes? All of these questions need to be solved together. I need to think carefully, find out the solutions and slowly play to ensure I am right, (TJ, 2015).

This approach was echoed by another pianist who marked up her score to identify difficult passages. She started by annotating her score to indicate difficult (one star), more difficult (two stars) and most difficult (three stars) passages. She then described how she solved a problem in a three bar passage:

The solution to practise bars 79-81 is firstly hands separately. Right hand does the octave chords, followed by broken chords and finally the 1-3-2-4 pattern. Second, play the left hand. The key point of playing left hand is to find the location. As a result, a slow speed is needed to feel the intervals. Finally, play hands together, from slow speed to medium and go back to slow speed again, (YH, 2015).

Another Chinese pianist described how she identified that pedalling in Chopin’s Prelude 21 was challenging, as the sound was not clean. More specifically, she linked the physical action of using the pedal to her interpretation of the piece thus:

I use pedal, maybe I can do better, but it is not like that. Thus I try to change my mind. I started to focus on the voice and the feeling. When I practise, I pay more attention to listening to the effect of voice. Then I found that use of pedal is no longer a mechanical plan, it is an activity to feel the music, and use the pedal becomes unconscious and spontaneous, (YD, 2016).

This comment implies a holistic approach to rehearsal, understanding that the mechanics of playing the piano should be combined with artistic interpretation, which is something which Huang and Thibodeaux (2016) found challenged the Chinese students with whom they worked.

The American singer related how she had profited from identifying her mistakes through using a practice diary and recounted how she had used metacognitive practice strategies linked to singing techniques to make her practice sessions more efficient. She related a breakthrough in understanding intonation from a performance workshop thus:

I stopped at the chorus and was asked to sing a single interval – a perfect 5th – using a straight tone in order to find out where the two notes were in relation to each other. I’d never done something like this before for myself – broken the problem down to something as simple as singing a single interval. By singing just the interval without vibrato, slowly and carefully, I better understood how the interval sounded and where it was in my body. It was kind of life changing, (MM, 2015).

In conclusion, whilst 23 of the M Mus students did not describe metacognitive practice in their reflective essays, it is notable that five Chinese students and one American student were able to describe higher-level thinking skills and practice behaviours which are described under the umbrella of metacognitive practice strategies. We turn now to the overview of the two cohorts and an assessment of the progress made in learning about practice below.

Chinese M Mus students – approaches to reflective writing

The degree of reflection evidenced by the reflective essays of the M Mus students is documented in Table 5 below:

Table 5: Descriptions of practice in reflective essays

Description of practice	M Mus 2015-2016	M Mus 2016-2017
No mention of practice/practice diary	1	
Description of using practice diary, narrative about technique	4	2
Description of deliberate practice strategies	5	8
Insights (i.e. describing at least one change in practice behaviour)	1	2
Accounts of metacognitive practice strategies	4	2
Total number of participants	n=15	n=14

The data above suggest that with the exception of one student, all the musicians recognised that a practice diary could be used as an aid to practice. Some, (n=6), described what they had learnt about technique, either as singers or pianists, without thinking about how these new pedagogical approaches could help them to progress. Descriptions of deliberate practice strategies were reported by 13 students. Three students, one Chinese and two from the UK, reported insights into their practice, without applying these insights to change their practice strategies. Finally, as discussed above, six students wrote about metacognitive practice strategies.

Looking at the data from a different angle, 28 out of 29 students were able to write about the use of a practice diary and describe what they thought correct technique entailed.

Figure 1 below compares M Mus data from reflective essays with similar data from undergraduate classical musicians, who write a reflective essay at the end of the first year Classical Performance Module:

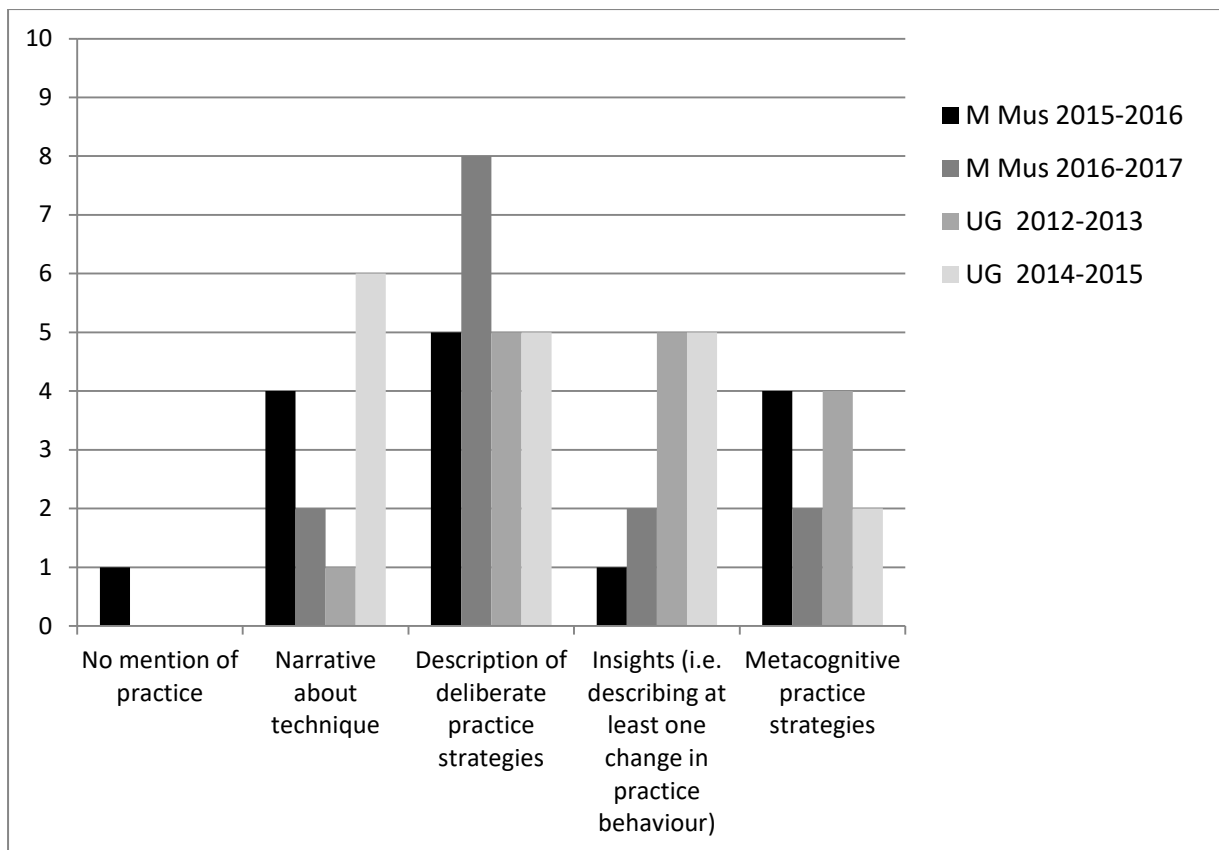


Figure 1: Comparison of descriptions of practice in reflective essays (n=62)

The notable differences are that undergraduate musicians are more likely to describe one or more changes in their practice behaviours, (n=5 in two cohorts) whereas only two Chinese M Mus students and one pianist from the UK wrote about insights. In terms of demonstrating the use of metacognitive practices, the frequencies were similar for both courses.

Long term effects of learning about reflective practice

Mak (2009) has written of the benefits of reflection across all musical genres and suggested that the development of effective reflective practice may lead to life-long learning. The question posed by this pilot study is whether reflection as a pedagogical approach is effective with students with different cultural and educational backgrounds. The comments below are taken from the reflective essays of both cohorts of students.

In China we just play the score, no more thinking, no more analysing. But in the UK, I have been taught by our tutors, you have have to think as a musician, (NL, 2016).

This pianist's comment demonstrates an understanding of what has been taught, although the language used does not necessarily imply full acceptance of the new way of thinking, something which the Head of Performance also touched upon in interview:

For some of the Chinese it's such a profound shift from their enculturation that they find it difficult to make that leap. If you do take them aside in week 9 or 10 and direct them again as to how to practise, they begin to see the point of it, but there is always this baggage about 'Do I trust this new way of doing things?' (TS, 2016).

On the other hand, a minority of students seemed to have fully grasped that reflection combined with practice would lead to independent student-led learning, a concept which Lin (2002) points out is very far from traditional Chinese pedagogical methods. We reproduce comments from two Chinese students below:

Practice should be a personal journey of self-improvement. In other words, there is no need to compare with other students, but communicating with other students is good. I hope I could understand the importance of visual/aural/intellectual/kinaesthetic/proprioceptive aspects of practising in the future, (YH, 2015).

Practice is a study process. You can learn plenty of knowledge that you cannot absorb from any textbooks, this knowledge is studied by your own experience, in other words, practice helps you to be your own teacher, (QZ, 2015).

One key reason that Chinese students choose to study abroad as Wu (2014) describes is in order to improve their career opportunities. Similarly, one pianist explicitly linked the use of a practice diary to her aspirations to become a piano teacher:

Practice diary can record my bad habits and let me avoid it. Although there are a lot of problems which I need to solve, it can improve my study skills, it is useful for me to become an excellent piano teacher. Therefore I am going to continue to write practice diary in the future, (YW, 2016).

The Head of Performance understands that after one year of study in the UK, the Chinese musicians will return home and should be able to readjust to working within the political and cultural framework of the Peoples Republic of China:

Given that the Chinese are going to have to return to China and operate within the Chinese cultural milieu anyway, I am always worried that if you send them back totally westernised, or totally Liverpool Music department-ised, then they will stick out. They won't be getting jobs. So I think if they get it there, and if they are being marked and told 'Well done, you are getting 65% or 70% on the reflective essay', then I think that seed [of reflective practice] is so well sown, that it cannot be unsown, (TS, 2016).

He went on to describe the development of a female pianist from a previous cohort, suggesting that perhaps learning about reflection through the use of a practice diary and writing the end of semester assessed reflective essay might have some longer term benefits:

There was a girl [NN] who really understood it and consequently got a first, got the highest mark of the Chinese students in her recital. She also understood the self-reflection as being essential in teaching and she is back now in China doing both those things very well, (TS, 2016).

Discussion, conclusion and areas for further research

Based on the pilot study qualitative data drawn from 29 M Mus essays, 24 of which were written by pianists, singers and one tuned percussion player from China, it emerges that the majority of students gain an understanding not only of instrumental and vocal technique from their peripatetic music teachers, but also gain their first experiences of using a practice diary,

supported and encouraged to think about *how* they are practising in the weekly workshops with the Head of Performance. For some, writing down what happens in each practice session leads to application of deliberate practice strategies, which, for a minority of students, results in insights into how their practice behaviours are changing. For six of the 29 students from the two cohorts, there were detailed accounts of metacognitive practice strategies and illustrations of how reflection through the medium of the practice diary changed the individual process of practice.

In comparison with other studies which have looked at reflective practice with undergraduate musicians (Esslin-Peard et al., 2015, 2016), it seems remarkable that students with quite different musical biographies coming from the Peoples Republic of China are able to overcome language difficulties and gain at least some understanding of reflective practice. As the Head of Performance explained in interview, he had to adapt his approach to teaching, ‘I am very patient. I get people who are better able to understand English to translate it into Chinese, over and over again.’ In the context of this pilot study, it is impossible to say whether this is due to the experience of the Head of Performance, who has been working with reflective practice with student musicians since 2005, or whether there is something about the cultural environment of a M Mus course with both Chinese and Western students which promotes a willingness to explore reflective practice.

There is much more research to be done here, for example, a longitudinal study of M Mus reflective essays to see whether there are trends in the development of reflective practice. It would also be beneficial to gain more information about students when they start their course, for example, by using a Background Questionnaire. At present it is not possible to say whether the experiences of learning about reflective practice on the M Mus course are long lasting. Further research is required with all students who have returned to China to see whether, for example, the use of a practice diary continues with graduates or whether they in turn introduce the notion of the practice diary to their own students. Discussions are also taking place within the faculty to offer an additional M Mus course in pedagogy, aimed at Chinese students who want to pursue careers as instrumental and vocal teachers.

Tertiary education institutions in the UK continue to face the challenge of working with students from mainland China and other South East Asian countries. This research project offers some insights into how Chinese students adapt to working with reflective practice and may be of value to academics working in other disciplines.

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