

**If the shoe doesn't fit: A case and a place for collaborative learning for music  
practice in higher education**

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**Biographical note**

Melissa Forbes is a lecturer in music at the University of Southern Queensland in Toowoomba, Australia. Her PhD research examined the use of collaborative learning for first year music practice courses at USQ. Current research interests include music, health and wellbeing, contemporary commercial music vocal pedagogy and alternative pathways to and through music education. Melissa is a Churchill Fellow, and maintains a performance career as a jazz vocalist. In a former life, she was a corporate lawyer of little renown.

## **Abstract**

This article reviews relevant literature to provide a rationale for the use of collaborative learning for first year music practice courses at an Australian regional university. Higher music education is still grappling with the challenges posed by the Dawkins Review and ongoing reforms in the sector. These challenges include increased public accountability, budget cuts, larger and more diverse student cohorts, and a need to prepare the majority of students for portfolio careers. The rise of participatory culture poses additional challenges to the nature and purpose of today's higher music education. Recently, increased interest in the use of collaborative learning has emerged as a way to respond to these challenges. In this article, the decision to implement collaborative learning at an Australian regional university is supported by an examination of the ways in which these systemic, institutional and cultural forces manifested as pedagogical challenges in this context. Theoretically, the introduction of collaborative learning is framed by Wenger's social theory of learning and the literature on collaborative learning. Recent research also demonstrates the benefits of collaborative learning for higher music education. More than a budget-saving measure, this article posits that collaborative learning can be an effective alternative or supplement to existing pedagogical models in certain higher music education contexts.

## **Keywords**

higher music education, collaborative learning, social theory of learning, music performance tuition

## **Introduction**

One of Gloria Steinem's most famous provocations is "If the shoe doesn't fit, must we change the foot?" (1983, p. 228). If a pedagogical model no longer "fits" a particular educational context, must we change the students, or rather, should our focus be on changing the way we approach learning and teaching? These were the questions faced at one regional Australian university approximately five years ago, when a confluence of circumstances meant that the use of the traditional one-to-one model in first year music practice courses had become problematic. This article is a theoretical piece which reviews relevant literature to contend that certain higher music education (HME) contexts may lend themselves to a collaborative approach to the learning and teaching of music practice and performance.

In Australia, sweeping educational reforms during the early 1990s created various challenges for HME. These challenges included increased public accountability, budget cuts, and a need to prepare students for portfolio careers within a rapidly evolving workplace. Some 25 years later, the aftershocks of these changes still reverberate throughout the academy, and the pace of reform during the 2000s has not abated. Whilst the nature of teaching within this environment is gradually changing (Crawford & Jenkins, 2015), others claim that the task of investigating alternative models of teaching and learning in HME is urgent, because it is increasingly difficult to maintain the quality of traditional models due to funding cuts and the emergence of larger, more diverse student cohorts (Grant, 2013). In addition, the rise of technology and participatory culture poses broad challenges for education (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2006) and specific challenges for HME. Participatory culture in this sense refers to the relatively recent phenomenon of individuals viewing themselves predominantly as producers of cultural product rather

than consumers of it.

There has been increasing interest in the use of collaborative learning as a way to respond to challenges such as these (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013). However, there has been little research on the use specifically of collaborative learning for music practice or performance in HME (see also Hanken, 2016). In order to establish the case for collaborative learning in certain HME contexts, this article will examine the larger socio-cultural forces currently shaping HME. A brief exploration of the institutional, systemic and cultural challenges facing HME provides the broader context for the potential role of collaborative learning. The article then describes specific circumstances in which collaborative learning was introduced for first year music practice and performance at an Australian regional university. A discussion of Wenger's social learning theory (1998) and the theory of collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1999) provides a frame for how and what learning takes place within collaborative learning. The article concludes with a survey of recent research demonstrating some of the benefits of collaborative learning for HME.

### **Mapping today's HME landscape—Institutional, systemic and cultural challenges**

The Australian higher educational landscape changed radically during the 1990s. In 1988, the Dawkins Review heralded sweeping changes in Australian higher education. These changes included new funding models and student fee contributions, the amalgamation of institutions and increased accountability measures for universities in relation to courses and research (Dawkins, 1988). These reforms resulted in the “academization” of HME whereby conservatoires and institutes of advanced education were subsumed into universities in both regional and metropolitan areas. The *Review into Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan,

Nugent, & Scales, 2008) recommend a demand-driven funding system with further reforms, including increased targets for the number of students studying at tertiary level and the uncapping of student numbers for bachelor degrees. After a period of transition from 2008, 2012 saw the establishment of the full demand-driven funding system for bachelor degrees (Department of Education and Training, 2015).

Recent decades have seen dramatic increases in student enrolments and the number of tertiary education providers in Australia. In 1989, there were 19 public universities and 309,401 Commonwealth support student places; by 2014 these figures had increased to 37 and 601,600 respectively (Department of Education and Training, 2015). The role of one-to-one teaching within a massified tertiary sector subject to funding pressures is a challenging issue to contemplate for music educators. One-to-one teaching is, and has traditionally been, the primary pedagogical model within HME for practical and performance tuition for instrumentalists, vocalists and composers (Carey & Grant, 2015; Carey et al., 2013; Gaunt, 2008; Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013; Grant, 2013; Hanken, 2016; Virkkula, 2015). Within this model, a master teacher transmits specialist technical, expressive, interpretive and performative skills to the student apprentice. Due to its very nature, however, it is difficult to service large numbers of students efficiently and effectively using the one-to-one model.

Educational reform has introduced greater demands across all disciplines for financial accountability and, consequently, evidence-based justification for pedagogical models. Since the reforms in Australia and elsewhere, there has been an increase in research into the one-to-one model and an acknowledgment that more research is needed in this area (e.g. Bjøntegaard, 2015; Carey & Grant, 2015; Carey et al., 2013; Gaunt, 2008; Gaunt, 2010; Gaunt, 2011). The increase in research into the

one-to-one model demonstrates that there is momentum within the academy to make the practices of one-to-one explicit by illuminating its unique character as an effective pedagogical model for the development of an individual student's practical and performative skills. Despite increased research, there are concerns that the funding model now in place for Australian institutions fails to take into account the special requirements of one-to-one tuition (Global Access Partners, 2011).

Whilst there is a growing body of research that demonstrates the value of the one-to-one model in certain contexts (see Carey & Grant, 2015 for a summary) there is, conversely, research highlighting its deficiencies. For example, Gaunt (2010) found that the power imbalance in one-to-one teaching in some cases hampered student development. Furthermore, one-to-one lessons did not tend to prioritize reflective learning strategies or planning for career development (Gaunt, 2010). Mills (2002) found that, for students, teaching styles in one-to-one were not readily transferred to other contexts. The role that peers might play in learning and teaching in the one-to-one context is generally "neither articulated nor encouraged" (Hanken, 2016, p. 366). Within HME, the tenor of the one-to-one model is also apparent in group contexts (Gaunt, 2008; Gaunt, 2010; Hanken, 2016). Whilst some student-led, non-conducted ensembles and chamber groups in conservatoires can display at least some characteristics of collaborative learning, even ensemble studies in HME have tended to mimic the one-to-one model in a group setting (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013).

In addition to the financial pressures of delivering one-to-one tuition and modest evidence to date for its benefits, the literature acknowledges that pedagogical approaches within HME should prepare the majority of students for portfolio rather than specialised careers (Bartleet et al., 2012). Music graduates are increasingly maintaining portfolio careers which combine a broad range of employment activities

(Bartleet et al., 2012; Carey & Lebler, 2012; Feichas, 2010; McWilliam, Carey, Draper, & Lebler, 2006). Some reviews of Australian HME undergraduate programs have taken place in response to these changes (e.g. Carey & Lebler, 2012). At the very least, Gaunt (2013) argues for reflection on the purpose of HME and the ways in which HME might need to adapt to prepare students for their likely futures.

HME also faces cultural challenges. In addition to strong participation in informal learning (see e.g. Derbyshire (2015) on the UK context), today's students participate in creating art as well as consuming it and rarely question their right to do so, for example, on the basis that their skills are not yet sufficiently developed. Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robison (2006) refer to this phenomenon as *participatory culture*. Recent research has explored the democratising potential of participatory culture for music education (Partti, 2014; Partti & Karlsen, 2010; Westerlund & Partti, 2012). Participatory culture embraces the values of musical open-mindedness, cross-genre flexibility and mobility (Westerlund & Partti, 2012). Notions of authentic expression are subordinate to shared ownership and hybrid aesthetics; individual and shared goals co-exist; participatory culture enables people—anyone, not just those deemed fit—to explore who they are and how they might express themselves through music (Westerlund & Partti, 2012).

In contrast to participatory culture, bars to participation in HME have traditionally been high. Students are expected to have a certain level of formal training and in Australia and this is usually undertaken through the Australian Music Examinations Board exams (Daniel, 2005). Many of today's prospective music students do not travel this path prior to university, particularly if they are popular musicians (Lebler, Burt-Perkins, & Carey, 2009). The very fact of institutionalising music learning is itself a potential bar to participation, in that the authority of

knowledge lies with those within the institution—the “master teachers”—and the “storehouse of knowledge” (Luce, 2001, p. 21) students bring with them is undervalued. Today’s students learn music in myriad ways, for example, by playing computer games or apps and making content for social media. Sitting formal examinations is increasingly becoming less common (Derbyshire, 2015; Folkestad, 2006). Rather than viewing the reconsideration of bars to entry as a lowering of standards, context may demand that both the content of and intent behind entry requirements are revisited (see also Feichas, 2010). On a practical level, given the changes to university funding and the removal of student quotas in Australian higher education, opening HME up to broader participation in the Australian context at least seems inevitable. Indeed, this is already occurring, as will be seen by an examination of the current case.

### **Collaborative learning and its role at one Australian regional university**

The issues raised thus far are germane to the specific case of delivering music practice courses to first year students at the university in question. As previously noted, one-to-one tuition has a longstanding tradition and is the most widely-used pedagogical model for music practice and performance within HME. How do we as educators respond if such a pedagogical model is no longer suited to the educational context in which it is being used—what do we do when the shoe no longer fits? It is important to note that the re-examination of the use of the one-to-one model in the current case should not be taken as a criticism of that model but rather as a necessary response to the specific context and the impact of tertiary sector reforms discussed above.

Historically the university offered a Bachelor of Music with a focus on classical music and one-to-one tuition. The university also offered named bachelor degree



programs in other creative arts disciplines such as theatre and visual arts. These programs were replaced in 2009 with a Bachelor of Creative Arts (BCA), a three-year program in which students could major in one of four creative arts disciplines—visual arts, theatre, creative media or music. One of the primary drivers for introducing the BCA was to reduce the number of courses offered in the creative arts thus reducing the budget for delivering creative arts courses at the institution. The BCA offered students both specialist pathways and cross-disciplinary options to study more than one creative arts discipline.

In contrast to the previous Bachelor of Music program, many students were auditioning for the generic BCA with little prior formal learning of music theory (see also Feichas, 2010). Increasingly, students were auditioning with contemporary or original repertoire and many were self-taught, using methods such as YouTube videos, or had little to no formal practical music tuition. This is in contrast to other HME contexts (usually conservatories in large metropolitan centres) where students have received, in some cases, extensive individual tuition prior to tertiary music studies (e.g. Lebler, Burt-Perkins, & Carey, 2009). Other students were primarily theatre majors who wished to take some music courses. Again, these students had little formal music training. More generally, the university's student profile includes many first-in-family and lower socio-economic students who may have had limited learning opportunities prior to university (Forbes, 2013). Taking all these factors into account, it had become unreasonable at this particular institution to expect students to “fit neatly into the traditional expectations” of conservatoire training (Lebler et al., 2009, p. 232).

Given many BCA music students' interest in and practice of popular music, the use of the traditional one-to-one model tuition seemed an unusual fit. Learning

popular music in self-directed, self-motivated ways is not unusual (Green, 2001) and this is frequently conducted in informal settings such as school rehearsal rooms, at home, or now, with the advent of smart phones and other devices, anywhere. The more formal learning environment of one-to-one was at odds with students' experiences of learning music informally. It must be emphasised again that the issue was not the one-to-one model itself. Rather, there was disconnect between the immediate educational context of the BCA and the traditional one-to-one model for music practice.

In response to these circumstances, a collaborative model for first year music practice courses was trialled for BCA music students in 2012. It was anticipated that collaborative learning would better support the students as they presented, i.e. as popular musicians and self-directed learners who were accustomed to informal and social music-making with minimal experience of one-to-one tuition. In place of one-to-one tuition, first year students were team-taught (rather than taught by a single teacher) as a cohort through weekly classes. Classes were a combination of "all-in" workshops and rehearsal time for small ensembles. These small peer-based ensembles were a key feature of the model, in which students worked independently to arrange, rehearse and perform versions of popular or original music. Instrumentation for these ensembles was varied and driven by the skills of the cohort (e.g. one ensemble consisted of voice, guitar and tuba). Instrument-specific group classes were provided to support students on their instruments or voice. Whilst there were no individual lessons for first year students starting in 2012, students in higher year levels still received individual instruction. This is still a feature of the BCA program.

From this initial trial (which still contained aspects of the one-to-one model with the presence of teacher-led workshops and instrument-specific group classes),

the model developed into what is described in the literature as a model based on *collaborative learning*. The role of peers in learning and teaching became more central as the model developed. Collaborative learning began more generally in education because of a concern that “the hierarchical authority structure of traditional classrooms can impede learning” (Bruffee, 1999, p. 89). Within HME, the role of teacher and student has generally been “institutionally regulated” (Bjøntegaard, 2015), with the teacher viewed as a “master”, “maestro” or “expert” in their area of practice who transmits knowledge to the student (Persson, 1994; see also Hanken, 2016). Rather than transmitting knowledge from expert to novice, collaborative learning first and foremost requires knowledge to be socially constructed within a community of learners. According to Bruffee (1999) this is a reacculturative process whereby students gradually transition into new knowledge communities. This transition first occurs through vesting authority and trust in their own group. With more confidence and gains in interdependence, students vest authority and trust in their class community and finally, students vest knowledge and trust within themselves (Bruffee, 1999).

The role of the teacher is to facilitate this transition. The most obvious way this is done is through the teacher strategically placing students into small groups. Bruffee (1999) explains that this process requires the teacher to consider a number of variables such as “degree of heterogeneity, group size, ethnic background, phases of work, and so on” (p. 29). Placing students in groups to make music together involves some understanding of the personalities involved—to strike some balance between leaders, followers, introverts, extroverts etc.—students’ skills sets, levels of abilities and some consideration of deliberately cultivating diversity. According to Bruffee, group heterogeneity best maximises learning opportunities. The teacher’s primary

role is therefore social organization and setting appropriate tasks and “creating the conditions in which collaborative learning can occur” (Gerlach, 1994, p. 10).

The author’s experience of teaching within collaborative learning accords with McWilliam’s (2009) descriptor of teachers who teach to foster creativity—the teacher is not the “sage on the stage” or the “guide on the side” but rather the “meddler in the middle” (p. 281). In addition to social organization and task setting, teachers within collaborative learning settings require a high level of disciplinary skills, and the ability to improvise pedagogical solutions. Within the BCA, students were strategically placed in small ensembles with particular consideration given to creating instrumental heterogeneity in the groups. For example, each group would usually consist of at least one vocalist, a guitarist or pianist and a single-line instrument such as saxophone or violin. Students were challenged to arrange repertoire to suit the available instrumentation. In addition to managing musical challenges, students had to negotiate the social challenges of small group work, including organising rehearsal times, giving and receiving constructive feedback, learning positive leadership skills and navigating the sometimes fraught process of working with peers without constant teacher supervision.

After the early years of the BCA in which the one-to-one model had become a poor fit in the circumstances, research conducted during 2012 showed that the move away from the one-to-one model towards one based in collaboration had created a cultural shift (Gearing & Forbes, 2013). Collaboration engendered in the students a sense of excitement and musical purpose, both individual and collective, and students began to take responsibility for their own learning (Gearing & Forbes, 2013). These initial findings led to the further development of the model and the author undertaking her own PhD studies into collaborative learning for music practice (Forbes, 2016).

Findings indicated that collaborative learning increased students' individual and collective musical agency, that students valued highly both the musical and non-musical outcomes created by collaborative learning and that collaborative learning can provide a vehicle for both professional and paradigm reflection for music educators (see also Gaunt, 2013; Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013).

### **Social theory of learning and recent research on collaborative learning in HME**

The introduction of collaborative learning for first year BCA music students can be seen as part of a slowly increasing trend in HME in which pedagogues and researchers have explored and adopted socio-cultural views of learning (e.g. Barrett, 2005; Latukefu, 2010; Latukefu & Verenikina, 2013; Rikandi, 2013; Virkkula, 2015). Gaunt and Westerlund (2013) connect this trend to the paradigmatic shift in education theory which views learning as social (see also Grant, 2013). Gaunt and Westerlund view the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) on apprenticeships and Wenger's social theory of learning (1998) as breaking new ground in developing our understanding of the social nature of learning and the development of expertise more generally.

As Hanken (2016) explains, whilst our understanding of apprenticeship within the context of practical music instruction has traditionally focused on the master's or teacher's role, Lave and Wenger's (1991) work demonstrates that peer learning is in fact central to how apprentices learn, namely, through participating in communities of practice. The introduction of collaborative learning in the BCA is an example of communities of practice in action, as articulated in Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning (see also Virkkula, 2015). Further refining the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger's social theory of learning focuses on learning as social participation. This concept of participation is more than simply being involved in certain activities—it encompasses “*practices* of social communities and constructing

*identities* in relation to these communities” (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). At the heart of Wenger’s theory, the concept of communities of practice provides a framework for thinking about knowing and learning as a process of social participation (Wenger, 1998). Wenger’s framework characterizes learning as social participation, constituted by community (learning as belonging), practice (learning as doing), meaning (learning as experiences) and identity (learning as becoming). Thus, the transmission of skills which predominantly characterises one-to-one tuition is subordinate in collaborative learning to learning as social participation which, when effective, leads students to a deeper understanding of their own musical and personal identities (Wenger, 1998).

Wenger’s theory explains how students learn within collaborative learning, namely, through social participation. In terms of what students learn, collaborative learning has much to recommend itself within HME. It is an excellent vehicle for fostering generic skills (Forbes, 2016; Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013; Virkkula, 2015), creativity (McWilliam, 2009; Sawyer, 2006), joint problem solving and a variety of other skills pertinent to professional life as a twenty-first century portfolio career musician (Forbes, 2016; Hunter, 2006; Lebler, 2013). Collaborative learning also has more general positive effects, such as increased retention, student satisfaction, self-initiated and self-directed learning, lifelong learning, critical reflection and evaluation (Hunter, 2006; Lebler, 2013). Christophersen (2013) summarises the broader educational literature which documents the positive effects for students, including “improved intellectual achievement, deeper understanding of subject matter, increased empathy, respect for others and co-operation skills” and even renewed enjoyment in teaching for staff (p. 77; see also Gearing & Forbes, 2013).

Most of the recent research into the role of collaborative learning in HME has

focussed on instrument-specific group classes, rather than heterogeneous music ensembles, as was the case in the BCA. Some examples of research on instrument-specific group classes include Bjøntegaard (2015)—horn students; Luff & Lebler (2013)—horn students; Latukefu (2010) and Latukefu & Verenikina (2013)—vocalists; Rikandi (2013)—pianists within a teacher training program; and Daniel (2004, 2005)—pianists. In contrast, Virkkula's (2015) recent study of the role of community of practice in HME focused on heterogeneous jazz and popular music ensembles in a Finnish conservatory. Professional musicians mentored student ensembles in a workshop setting. Virkkula suggests that socio-cultural learning practices can play an important role within music education. Participation in the workshops facilitated students' conception of themselves as musicians.

Other recent studies have examined learning environments in HME which blend pedagogical models, for example, collaborative, one-to-one and master class settings. Luff and Lebler (2013) reflect that the blend of collaborative and individual learning is appropriate, effective and enjoyable for the teaching of orchestral horn students. Bjøntegaard's (2015) study, which examined the effectiveness of a combined approach comprised of group and individual lessons and master classes for horn students, found the approach to be "the best way of educating students as responsible, reflective and professional musicians" (p. 23).

## **Conclusion**

Collaborative learning can address many of the challenges posed to HME. In terms of responding to the impact of higher education reform, collaborative learning is economical to deliver, and is also an effective way to teach generic and creative skills in preparation for portfolio music careers. This article posits that collaborative learning is, however, much more than simply a budget-saving measure. Learning

collaboratively speaks to many of today's students' pre-tertiary experiences which are increasingly centred around social participation, informal learning and participatory culture. Not all students wishing to study music at tertiary level travel the traditional pathways prior to audition. In line with current educational policy, collaborative learning has the potential to broaden participation in HME. Whilst regional contexts and popular music lend themselves to this type of learning, there is also potential for the use of collaborative learning in more traditional conservatoire settings (for a number of examples, see Hanken, 2016). Both the current case and recent research demonstrate that collaborative learning can be an important alternative or supplement to existing pedagogical models for music practice and performance in certain HME contexts.

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