

# MUSIC MENTOR: THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT 2010

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## **Abstract**

How do the bad boys and girls of rock and pop fit into the formal VET training sector without losing their identity? The idea of training for participation in the modern music industry was once criticised by industry stalwarts as bound to fail. These graduates from the 'school of hard knocks' could envisage no other path than their own. The research data looks at the realities of VET training today in the sector and examines the unique take on 'music based' training, found in one TAFE college. The obsession with instrumental mastery encountered in conservatoriums of music is contrasted with training experiences, routinely pursued in a TAFE college, which indicate that it is 'adaptability' rather than narrow 'mastery' that is the truly required skill for best potential success in the contemporary music world. Just as conservatoriums of music are now attempting to visit issues of employability and business skills for their students, TAFE VET is attempting to tackle the issue of large teacher to student ratios in areas of training where conservatoriums once routinely provided one-to-one tuition. In Music Mentor: The Action Research Project 2010 the proposition that peer mentoring might in part alleviate the effects of large teacher / student ratios was examined utilising a pilot mentoring scheme. Students of all different levels of musical accomplishment routinely present at TAFE. Accommodating this diversity is a key challenge for teaching staff. High level semi-professional industry practitioners in one class with virtual musical neophytes? The challenge was and is to see if it is possible to turn the mismatch from a potential burden into a positive for the training. The data suggests peer mentoring is a natural for consideration in this scenario. A key finding from the research is that students, would rather be mentored one-on-one, by their peers than by a college teacher, no matter how highly and broadly regarded that professional may be. What are the social aspects of the discipline of music that should make this so?

## **Introduction**

What it actually means to be trained as a musician in a music industry relevant way defies easy definition. The work life of many thousands of musicians attempting to find success as music artists may shadow the following archetype:

Band member composers compose songs and in ensemble mode devise stylistically and market relevant arrangements capable of being effectively performed utilising available and relevant technology. To attract an audience they institute, at least in the beginning, effective (and affordable) marketing schemas.

## **Generalists and specialists**

All band members have to be across big picture concepts such as rhythm and sound texture building in stylistically 'authentic ways' acceptable to the target market. In addition to this however, to be viable band members, individuals have to also 'specialise' in discreet skill areas needed by the band. Singers need to have subtle and effective control over vocal aesthetics and need to specialise in this in the same way that synthesists (keyboard players) need to know how to create effective contemporaneous sounds from their synthesisers. In short all members must be across the generic skills but also be required to specialise in their discreet area. In a band context others with different skills, not necessarily more advanced skills, may assist learning in their fellows. And indeed it is to their advantage to do so.

“Studies focusing on learning in garage rock bands illustrate that such specific learning contexts function in various ways as knowledge - building communities and could potentially create an expert culture” (Garage rock bands: a future model for developing musical expertise?, HEIDI WESTERLUND Sibelius Academy, Helsinki, Finland. *International Journal of Music Education* 2006 24: 119, p122)

Bereiter and Scardamalia (Beretier, C & Scardamalia, M. (1993). *Surpassing ourselves. An inquiry into the nature and implications of expertise.* Chicago: Open Court A cited in Westerlund) visit the notion of first-order and second-order learning environments. First order environments would include institutions such as music universities. Learning in these environments occurs “*through adaptation and problem solving*” (Westerlund).

“In second-order environments (e.g. hip-hop culture or research into music education) problems occur in adapting oneself to the changes caused by the activities of other people. A second order environment is a conditioning environment in which growth is a continuing requirement of adaptation to that environment”. (Bereiter and Scardamalia (Beretier, C & Scardamalia, M. (1993). *Surpassing ourselves. An inquiry into the nature and implications of expertise.* Chicago: Open Court A cited in Westerlund)

Music students in being assigned to pop bands at the Nirimba college are required to function as valid musician participants within those bands. A lot of second-order environment learning takes place in these groups. The mentoring scheme, in the TAFE Entertainment action learning research project, introduces what could be thought of as an extension of the second-order learning environment, as outlined above.

Mentors and mentees placed in the self-regulating self-determination context devised for the action learning project exhibit learning traits that might come under the banner of “guided participation” as expounded by Rogoff. The band as a learning environment in colleges is not a strategy of course that passes without some questions being raised.

“The open, informal and collective learning processes at work in the everyday practices of many popular styles differ in several respects from those of institutional education. To what extent and how such ‘alternative’ learning processes can be used (and to what extent they are even necessary) in teaching popular music within music education institutions remains an urgent question” (Bjornberg 1993, p73 as cited in “How Popular Musicians Learn” L Green 2001)

Informal learning practices are seen, by some, as part and parcel of genuine and valid production processes of modern music. The valid production of music of our time, being seen as contingent upon them.

### **VET, not University**

TAFE style contemporary music training is quite different to conservatorium of music training (commonly sub-sections of universities) where players do acknowledge the skills of other performers but concentrate on becoming masters of their instrument whether that is the fluegel horn or the tympani. So important is the total mastery of the chosen instrument that traditionally conservatorium students could expect to receive one to one tuition on their instrument. In a TAFE VET tertiary music skilling context one-on-one training has never

been on offer, the advised/suggested student/teacher ratios found in the curriculum documents circa 1997 stated a 2/15 ratio at best. Implementation costs have meant that even a ratio of 15/1 was starting to look like a luxury from the mid 2000's on.

The question must be asked, "How much of a 'master' of their instrument do VET students need to be, to be competitive in the multi-skilled and constantly evolving entertainment industry? Perhaps 'adaptability' rather than narrow 'mastery' is the truly required skill.

## **Diversity**

Advances in now widely available technology have introduced opportunities for aspirant musicians that simply didn't exist at the start this decade.

Fans on the sidelines can crossover into music-making activities quite readily in 2010. Technology has always driven the music industry. Anyone with a laptop computer can make technically high quality music in the digital domain previously only available to those with the funding to hire a professional recording studio.

"There used to be a musical elite and it included the people that ran the studios and had the means to make music when nobody else could. But there's no kid growing up in Brixton now thinking 'I wish I could get into a studio'. They just get Logic (*a Macintosh computer program*) and start making music..."

"It's pop, but not as we knew it". James Blake music artist interviewed by Neil McCormick, Telegraph London (undated) published in Spectrum, Sydney Morning Herald February 26-27 2011.

## **Composition: An expanding definition**

Are recording artists, irrespective of genre, now simply 'content providers' in the digital age? With the explosion of DJ style mixes as a discrete music market even the definition of what it is to compose music, at least in contemporary music terms, is necessarily under review.

"Sound. Think of it as a dance of neologisms, an anemic cinema for the gene-splice generation where sign and symbol, word and meaning all drift into the sonic maelstrom. This is a world where all meaning has been untethered from the ground of it's origins and all signposts point to a road that you make up as you travel through the text. Rotate, reconfigure, edit, render the form"

(Paul Miller : *Rhythm Science*: MIT 2004)

Editing and sonic enhancement as 'music making' is creating DJ performers who can consistently draw huge crowds, once the province of pop and rock stars only. Do DJ's practise (on their 'decks') just like aspiring guitarists practise guitar? Are they putting in the hours of research dedication to find 'source material' that a concert violinist might lavish on the examination of scores from a discrete period in the classical music repertoire?

## **Relevance**

"...very little research has looked into popular musician's perspectives as students within formal education. Although we can hazard likely guesses, we have as yet only a slight knowledge and understanding of the reasons why so many past popular musicians, despite being highly motivated towards music making, often turned

away from both instrumental tuition and schooling. Similarly, whilst popular music has entered formal education in the last thirty or forty years, little is known about the impact that it's presence is having on young popular musicians: whether for example, it has resulted either in changes to their informal practices or in improvements in their responses to formal education..” (L. Green ‘How Popular Musicians Learn’ 2001 p7).

Ensuring relevance, in a continually and rapidly developing artistic field, is perhaps the greatest challenge facing educators in contemporary music. Musicians immediately turn away from what they perceive as culturally irrelevant tuition. On the basis of relevance alone peer mentors have a special potential edge in communicating learning to young musicians.

Being in the company of other creative industry aspirants can create a context for learning. A context that is a learning enabler.

### **The tendency to look to others**

Leveraging off the experience and skills of more advanced creative practitioners in the music industry is a well worn strategy especially amongst young musicians.

“In my research into the diversity of job categories of the music industry, virtually all respondents have cited on-the-job experience as the most effective way to learn, and often the only reliable way. But at the same time specific skills need to be acquired. Traditionally these skills have been gained through having a teacher or mentor who could guide the student through what is essentially a self-directed learning program. Much of what is required has to be learned through intensive individual practice and research. There are no easy ways to acquire the skills.”

(Bach to the Future: Michael Hannan Paper delivered at the Bach to the Future Conference Melbourne October 21, 2000).

### **Mentoring**

There is often the assumption that the competitive nature of the performing arts leads individuals into egocentric behaviour – the rock star syndrome – and that this, accordingly, precludes socially supportive collaborative structures being formed that would support mentoring or peer tuition. The literature however suggests otherwise.

“There is strong support for the view that mentoring systems have a positive effect on the learning context by creating communities which are collaborative rather than competitive. Mentoring systems can reduce the level of anxiety in students and increase intrinsic motivation. Colleges and universities are investigating the effect of collaborative approaches to learning, based on the assumption that:

. . . students learn best when they enter into a social intellectual community with other students, faculty, and the community around them. A social intellectual community brings students and faculty together in the quest for knowledge. It encourages the university community to collaborate on scholarly projects, discuss books and ideas, create reading and writing groups, develop new learning

technologies . . . and in other ways create sustained and sustaining relationships that are both academically based and personally satisfying. (Baum 1999 as cited in Bond)”

(Student Mentoring : Promoting high achievement and low attrition in education and training; Austin Bond NCVET 1999)

### **Loosely Paired**

The decision by the researcher to essentially only loosely pair mentors with mentees and to allow all learning topics to be agreed strictly via negotiation was based on an acknowledgement of all of the afore mentioned in this section. The decision respects and reflects how things actually are in the aspirant and mainstream music industry as opposed to colleges of music. Students who feel excluded from a learning community are prime candidates for withdrawing early from courses. With the diversity of skills presenting in VET music courses it is logical that confident adept students be paired with less confident and experienced students. Mentoring programs have the potential to bind together student cohorts with widely diverse individual skill sets.

“There is growing conviction in Australia that mentoring models may provide a solution to high attrition and failure rates. Despite policies and various forms of financial and infrastructure support, participation of minority students is still low.” (Student Mentoring : Promoting high achievement and low attrition in education and training ;Austin Bond NCVET 1999 P11)

### **Findings and Discussion**

**Based on the written and interview data collected three main themes were evident.**

They are:

- Music students generally express a preference, at least in principle to be mentored by their student peers, rather than by staff who could be rostered on to that task.
- Student mentors are quite capable of developing highly effective and user responsive mentoring provision with little to no input from music staff. Participation appears to lead to heightened self-esteem.
- Music students at TAFE appreciate and value the fact that music training, designed to assist entry into the contemporary music industry (pop music training), is broad based and markedly different in approach to the type of training offered by conservatoriums in relation to classical or jazz music.

Other minor themes included:

- One on one training with another student was a more ‘relaxed’ way to learn than the ‘standard college approach’ to training.
- Mentors should be acknowledged, perhaps via a certificate of recognition, for the work that they do.

- Some things in music can't be taught, only eventually realised by the learner.

These themes underpin what is the main argument of the paper, which is that, as peer mentoring is a regular feature of the music industry or rather the industry of music, it is entirely appropriate, for training institutions, to integrate carefully designed (and arts appropriate) peer mentoring schemes into the fabric of their music delivery.

### **Theme 1**

Music students generally express a preference, at least in principle, for mentoring by their student peers, rather than by staff that could be rostered on to that task.

This was somewhat of a surprise finding and it underscores the sense of shared destiny that some musicians on a cultural learning curve appear to feel. Perhaps the generation gap is at play here, with the usual suspicions that those outside the cohort 'just don't get it', no matter how much of a 'kindred spirit' the students might think their teacher is.

The unerring confidence that students had in the ability of musician mentors to make a positive difference to their mentees was evident from the tone of the conversations undertaken with research participants. Understanding how to be productive in the art of contemporary music appears to be a universal goal. Students both mentors and mentees know and accept that even the least amongst them may have something special to contribute in certain contexts and that changes of context can cause changes in meaning. A simple change of context, within a contemporary music landscape, can make the trite seem profound and the profound seem trite. Being a perceptive unblinkered individual seems to be widely appreciated as worthy personal development goal.

### **Theme 2**

Student mentors are quite capable of developing highly effective and user responsive mentoring provision with little interference from music staff. Participation appears to lead to heightened self-esteem.

Quite a lot is expected from mentors, when there are no learning boundaries set. All creative people benefit from parameters of some sort, these act as a focussing aid usually. Rather than inhibiting they can actually deliver a sense of direction, even perhaps, a sense safety and counter-intuitively, even liberation. The researcher felt that a future study, where varying degrees of prescribed content were trialled, might illuminate the best balance between mentors and mentee self-determination and maximum ease and efficiency of delivery for the both in contemporary music training.

### **Theme 3**

Music students at TAFE appreciate and value the fact that music training, designed to assist entry into the contemporary music industry (pop music training), is broad based and markedly different in approach to the type of training offered by conservatoriums in relation to classical or jazz music.

Of the eight project participants who were interviewed 6 expressed the view that contemporary music training at TAFE valued their creativity. Their attitudes infer that the cultural gap between contemporary music and classical music requires a different mind-set in both teaching and learning for pop musicians. Peer mentoring to them (in this context learning from more or differently experienced others) appears to be a very natural facet of a

potentially optimal 'pop music' learning experience, which echoes Vygotsky's views on effective learning with others

There is debate about where contemporary music pedagogy sits in relation to established classical and jazz music pedagogy. The notion of 'adaptability' being more pertinent than 'mastery' in regards to contemporary music is perhaps worthy of a study in itself. This is particularly so given that in the world of music sales classical music accounts for about 1% of the market. It stands to reason that music that so dominates world sales in the manner that is accomplished by pop music is worthy of greater pedagogical scrutiny than has so far been achieved.

## **Conclusion**

The research question for this research project asked (in essence), what system can be put in place to enable skills sharing from advanced media students (*music*) to new students. Implicit in the question is the implication of a hierarchy based on knowledge. One thing that is abundantly clear is that students with a passion for the arts, in this case music, have much to share with others, from any point within the notional knowledge hierarchy and in any direction. Getting good at music involves realising and appreciating often subtle things, things of nuance – sometimes esoteric things. Learning takes place in contexts and contexts flavour the learning. The context of working with a mentor or mentee has been demonstrated in this research to be intrinsically valuable in itself for musicians, irrespective of the actual detail of the knowledge exchanged. In discussions recorded with participants there was a great enthusiasm displayed for working in a mentoring situation with a peer. Conversely there was little enthusiasm for working with teacher mentors for a variety of reasons, as noted in the data.

The research has revealed that passionate engaged people are more than able to cobble together efficient and meaningful learning agendas without formal directives relating to what must be covered, in an agreed mentoring context. This point of course is situated within the reality that mentor based learning is an *adjunct* only to formal curriculum based study. Mentoring after all is but a small part of any institutional learning story. The only implied expectation put to the mentoring dyads was that their activities and the learning outcomes should be of value. Who better to be the judge of that than the participants themselves. In all cases real training value, in this research project, was deemed to have been achieved by all of the participants. A side product of these activities was a subtle expansion of the collegiate atmosphere within the section. Non-participants made regular enquiries as to whether the program would run again – some hoped for late inclusion in the current scheme. And still others, not understanding that the mentoring regime was simply a trial, wanted to know if they could be included next year. Mentoring obviously caught the popular imagination amongst the music student cohort.

There appears to be a ready interest and willingness by many students within the entertainment section at Nirimba TAFE to share their knowledge. The research question contained the word *systematically*, the natural implication being that knowledge must take place within defined frameworks. Mentees readily accepted help from mentors, but in some cases this appears to have been on a somewhat 'occasional basis'. Undoubtedly the management of rather 'casual' student attitudes towards learning is a general problem in some VET training, and of course things are no different when the learning is taking place within a mentor assistance scheme. Sikora and Saha (2011) note the importance of comprehensive career guidance to alleviate the possibility of 'lost talent'. Perhaps defining what a career really might be for a musician could more fully motivate TAFE students with 'casual attitudes' to study.

Responses to the trial program were almost uniformly positive from the participants. There appears to be a need for the kind of personalised attention that peer mentoring can provide, but which standard TAFE classroom delivery cannot deliver. The idea of providing RPL to mentor participants was of interest but would require discipline that may have been beyond the scope of this early research. Further studies would be required in order to develop a set of culturally authentic music mentoring schemes and procedures, that would be consistent with training in this technologically and aesthetically evolving field. One fact that is evident from the literature and from the research data is that contemporary music is a very different discipline to jazz and classical music and as such requires training specifically developed for it. It is evident that any specially developed training would need to include mentoring as a core component. Between adherents in art movements 'like mindedness' presents as a key driver to succeed. Mentoring as a process seems to naturally support and enhance like mindedness. The best learning regimes are those that reflect the natural imagination, desires, vision and drive of all involved and of course what the discipline cohort happen to really, really like. Viva Music.



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