

# Responding to the challenge: giving pre-service classroom teachers a musical language and understanding

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## Abstract

Pre-service teacher degree programs are increasingly crowded with subjects covering the wide gamut of knowledge a teacher requires. Ensuring musical knowledge and language for classroom teaching poses a difficult problem for teacher educators. This article examines the challenges of including in the pre-service classroom teaching program a music sequence of learning that successfully imbues an understanding of music. It demonstrates how music education has been carried out at Charles Sturt University on the Albury-Wodonga campus over the last five years. It also discusses the difficulties of retaining successful music learning in the new cross-campus degree, due to external limitations and cross-campus facilities.

Keywords: teacher education, creative arts, music education.

*Australian Journal of Music Education* 2010:1, 71-77

## Introduction

Pre-service teaching degree programs respond to many outside influences such as political change, professional requirements, and academic integrity. Higher education reforms have a heavy impact, usually requiring a limiting of resources for delivery of academic programs. Internal influences also affect program design including values and expertise of designers. This paper reflects on changes that have influenced the varied stages of inclusion of music education within a pre-service teacher degree program.

A sequence of music subjects at CSU Albury was developed inside a teacher education degree in 1995 because of academic staff's realisation that teachers need first to understand the language of music before teaching music to children. Staff believed that students need to learn by doing and that all personal skills learned needed to be applied immediately to practical teaching skills. All students at the Albury-Wodonga campus learned first to play keyboard and then how to use this knowledge and skill to teach young children. Staff

designed a program that would have desirable outcomes for a well-rounded, professional classroom teacher or early childhood professional.

Since the first program design there have been three reviews, and continuing to include the music component has been a challenge. In the newest revision of the program, this effective stream of learning will no longer be maintained. Those responsible for the provision of musical learning and understanding face the most difficult challenge thus far and innovative measures are sought to overcome the problems.

This paper also evaluates the original sequence of music subjects and discusses ways the academics are planning to continue providing students with a basic music understanding that enables future classroom teachers to confidently pass this understanding on to children.

## Background

In 1995 a new Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) was created on the Albury-Wodonga campus of Charles Sturt University (CSU). It was built from the most positive aspects of earlier

Bachelor of Teaching programs delivered on the Wagga Wagga campus. One of the features of the earlier degrees had been the ability to deliver sequential practical music classes over a period of four or five semesters because Creative and Expressive Arts subjects were smaller and more frequent. Four or five semesters of smaller subjects in music enabled the lecturers to assist students to gain a credible competence in music practice, equivalent to about two years of individual music tuition, and sometimes encouraged students to continue their personal development in music beyond University.

The next two major reviews to the program made apparent the external pressure to provide compressed learning in all subject areas. Course designers devised changes to be attractive to the student as a prospective client or consumer, as well as ensuring high credibility within the professional field. The problem of maintaining a useful sequence of music instruction in the program-design posed a problem that was solved by attaching the practical music study to Professional Experience subjects, thus maintaining the momentum of four to five semesters of learning.

Academic staff members who were designing the new program were committed to the implementation of a sustained stream of study for music. There were several reasons for this commitment. Briefly, these were:

- awareness of perceived problems with classroom teachers' musical understanding;
- an appreciation of the need for teachers to have basic music literacy;
- the expectation that musical understanding could be derived from basic learning in practical keyboard classes;
- the expectation that learning and skills acquired in keyboard classes could be related and adapted to students' future work with children in the classroom.

From the authors' personal experiences, and from other research (Bresler, 1994; Harvey, 2008), it is well known that many teachers do not give satisfactory music experiences to children. The

reason given by most of the participants in Bresler's study was that they (the teachers) could not sing or play (p. 4). Furthermore, The National Review of Music Education reported that teachers from general education degrees "indicate that they lack sufficient knowledge, understanding and skills and accompanying confidence to teach music" (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005, p. 13). Even to decipher the music section of the Creative Arts Syllabus of NSW (2006) requires a basic understanding of music literacy with its concepts and vocabulary. Brown's opinion is that children "can still enjoy and experience music through listening, singing, creating, performing, and moving, but students who cannot read music would nonetheless be considered musically illiterate" (Brown, 2003, p. 9). Elkoshi's research concluded that teachers should teach music literacy because it enhanced children's imagination and associative thinking (Elkoshi, 2007). The NSW K-6 Creative Arts Curriculum (2006) requires students at the highest level (Stage 3) to be able to "notate as a means of recording and communicating musical ideas" and to identify "musical concepts and symbols" (p. 89). Given that not all schools in NSW and Victoria have music specialist teachers, general classroom teachers need to have sufficient music skills to follow the curriculum. If children are expected to be musically literate, then, a fortiori, so should classroom teachers.

It is worth noting that Queensland Education Department boasts that 30% of musicians in the Australian Youth Orchestra come from Queensland where "the school music program is quite famous and acclaimed" (Department of Education and Training, Queensland Government, 2006). Most Queensland schools have music specialists and at least two Queensland generalist teacher education universities have dedicated music subjects with choices of optional extra music subjects. According to Ian Harvey (board member of the Music Council of Australia and head of the Australian Music Association), overall, Australian music education does not compare well throughout the world either. He says Australia

rates “poorly” in comparison with countries such as Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Hungary, Finland, Norway, Sweden, France, Tunisia and Morocco, in its provision of music education in primary schools (Harvey, 2008).

So, within the teaching staff there was a commitment to strive for strong music education at the time of the earlier reviews. New, but distinctly different, Bachelor of Education programs were designed and offered on the Bathurst campus and the Albury-Wodonga campus of CSU, allowing each group of teaching academics the ability to give each program its own ‘flavour’. The way each campus solved its problems for teaching and learning in music therefore differed. For example, the Bathurst campus had a staff member who was enthusiastic about ukulele playing and encouraged students to learn through the social network of community groups. The Bathurst campus also provided the sector with a specific Primary qualification as well as Early Childhood and within the Primary degree was able to offer discipline-based Arts subjects. Historically then, that campus had built up specialist resources and a lab for music learning.

Staff at the Murray School of Education (MSE), Albury-Wodonga campus, decided to use keyboards as the medium for a basic music education. Using singing or the voice was ruled out because of the authors’ experience of considerable student anxiety about singing. This anxiety is exemplified by the following incident. A class of student teachers were asked to greet each other by singing their names (soh-mi) at the start of a class. When the class was asked to reflect on memorable musical experiences both positive and negative, one student offered this very singing of their name as a major negative experience. Abril (2007) stated that this anxiety can prevent students from becoming confident to teach music to children. Even though recorder is often the choice of instrumental instruction in primary schools, learning through this medium was rejected for the university students because one cannot sing and play the recorder at the same

time. Guitar was considered a good instrument with which to engage children in singing, but was rejected due to its emphasis on chords rather than more universal notation. Keyboards were chosen as being an inexpensive option for students to focus their musical attention and as a suitable classroom tool. It was believed that knowledge of key structures and general musical language could be learned more visually on keyboards. Appell (1993) and Bissell (1995) found three important advantages of using the keyboards in classroom teaching: individualisation of student learning, the possibilities for music literacy and the scope for creative experiences.

### **Keyboard as medium at MSE**

At MSE, a lab of 15 keyboards connected to the tutor’s console enabled students to be timetabled for 30-minute group lessons on a weekly basis throughout the semester. The students were introduced to musical understanding through an adult beginner piano text that introduced keys and music concepts as well as getting the student to ‘play’ very quickly. Study notes were provided in order to continually draw the students’ attention to the possible application(s) of their learning to the classroom. The keyboards have the added advantage of providing various choices of sounds and rhythms as well as recording facilities, all easily accessed while using earphones. Learning occurred through private tuition, tutor-to-student through the console; playing together in unison and parts; and general instruction to the whole group.

With regard to the accessibility of instruments, the keyboards and a piano were made available for students to practise. However, many students chose to purchase or acquire their own keyboards, recognising the value of the instrument for multiple purposes within the classroom setting. They were encouraged to begin building a repertoire of children’s songs that could be used specifically for children. This collection would be relevant to the creative arts subject and other subjects for use across the school or early years’ curriculum.

## Relating the musical learning to the classroom

As the students learned, and enhanced their personal skills in music playing and understanding, they were also shown how these ideas could be transposed or translated to the classroom. As many of them were beginners themselves, they began to understand how they might teach young children the elements and practical skills of playing instrumental music. The tutors also demonstrated how the songs and styles of music, along with extension activities could be adapted to the classroom. Examples of these processes were: the application of pentatonic composition and arrangements on tuned percussion instruments when the student teachers were introduced to the black keys on the keyboard; composition of songs for classroom situations using the practice exercises (this also helped the students to use their voices whenever possible throughout the musical learning journey); appreciation of different styles of music (classical, folk, pop, and rock).

This learning culminated in the final year practicum where the students were required to implement musical activities in both pre-school and primary settings. The results were remarkable, with students relating stories of success and mutual enjoyment.

## The developing course

Variations of the music sequence have been running for thirteen years, although over time there have been changes in tutors, bringing with them slight adaptations to the music teaching. In 2007 the focus was on individualised teaching. With the aid of the earphones, the tutor emphasised the process of listening to every student individually during class and going to the aid of any student who was having difficulties. Students each learned at their own rate and misunderstandings were quickly cleared up. The students certainly made progress on the keyboard. They learned to sight-read and play simple chords, and this skill transferred to playing suitable

children's songs. However, with the tutor spending so much of the half-hour lesson on individuals' needs, there was a lack of time for sufficient relating of the newly acquired music/keyboard knowledge and skills to other practical classroom teaching skills.

There have been attempts to use other learning strategies for those who have a physical or intellectual difficulty with keyboard learning. These have included computer programs and streamed tutorial classes. For example, two students who had previously completely misunderstood the concepts of music literacy were able to follow a self-directed music computer program until they had a basic understanding. Both of these students had initial negative feelings about learning the keyboard but the computer programs seemed to change their attitude enough for them to return to keyboard classes. On the other hand, as would be expected in a large group of students, there were some who already had music skills and could play a keyboard. These students were streamed into a music enrichment class.

## Student feedback

Early in 2009, online anonymous surveys were given to second, third and fourth year students to ascertain their opinions and feelings about the keyboard classes. Most of this year's beginners claimed that they "had absolutely no idea of reading music" and also that they "had no idea how to teach music to children". Many students who had completed three semesters of keyboard lessons, chose the following comments from the bank of statements offered: "I can read simple music", and "although I found it hard, I now feel good about my achievements". It was reassuring to read that a third of this group of students "now (felt) confident to teach some aspects of music to children". Most fourth year students who had completed four semesters of keyboard also chose the statement that they could read music and were confident to teach some aspects of music to children.

Bresler (1994) found that when student teachers were given a music course, the success in terms of whether the teachers eventually teach music in the classroom seems to be related to the students' perception while they are studying of the relevance and usefulness of the music course. Some of the fourth years stated that the music that they had learned to play on keyboard was not relevant. The music learned was a variety of folk songs, jazz and transcribed classical pieces. It had been earlier noted that students had complained in class that they did not know commonly known songs such as "Lavender's Blue", "Down in the Valley", "Mary Anne" and "Clementine". A lack of knowledge of basic folk songs and nursery rhymes makes it evident that today's tertiary students have themselves suffered from poor music teaching in their kindergartens and primary schools. This feedback has shown that in future we should make more explicit the need for learning a particular repertoire. Students will need convincing that traditional children's songs are still relevant and enjoyable. Future classes also need to focus more on connecting the keyboard learning to the classroom.

The three reasons for committing to a sustained stream of study of music in 1995 – individualisation of student learning, the possibilities for music literacy and the scope for creative experiences – are still relevant. Students' understanding of the music language is important. It is essential to individualise tuition to give students confidence. The keyboard is still our preferred vehicle for learning but keyboard, music literacy skills and choice of repertoire must be demonstrated to be relevant to classroom teaching.

Although the case of students' anxiety to sing is still relevant, Susan Kenney's reminder of the power of song (Kenney, 2008) to lay foundations of music understanding and literacy, and the Kodaly philosophy of emphasis on singing before reading in the music education of children (Choksy, 1999; Wicks, 2009) is a suggestion worth examination. Hess's observation of school children is ours too:

"In the general music classroom, they (teachers) face uncertain singers, inaccurate singers, and uninterested or defiant singers, as well as eager children who sing with appropriate head tone and good intonation" (Hess, 2006). It also seems that even as far back as 1990, it was found that we Australians (and Americans) have had a cultural lack of enthusiasm for singing in public that is not seen in many other countries (Sins, 1990). How can we overcome this fear, uneasiness or lack of enthusiasm for singing so that our students *will* sing with children? Sins suggests that singing in large groups is one answer and this group singing has to become natural – done often and made enjoyable.

In half-hour weekly keyboard classes, when time is so limited, the teacher should be the natural singer, urging students to join in. Tunes played on the keyboard could also be sung. Other large group activities such as the Creative Arts lectures could incorporate more group singing.

## Challenges for the new course

In 2007, further revisions to undergraduate degrees were initiated. These changes were in response to the University drive to reduce its number of subjects, particularly those with small enrolments. Therefore the rationalising of similar subjects into one led to a complete revision of the B. Ed. (EC & Prim) from single campus offerings to cross-campus teaching of a singly structured program. This meant that the sequence of learning attached to Professional Experience would not be sustained. The varied levels of expertise and resources on each campus had to be considered before planning new approaches to students' gaining musical understanding. For example, the campus with guitars and ukuleles had two expert teachers while the third newer and smaller campus had no instruments and the lecturer was not so confident.

There are still two Creative Arts subjects over the four-year course, so instead of five sequential semesters of keyboard lessons there are now two. Austin suggested that with the small

amount of time dedicated to music in Primary teaching degrees, "it may be necessary for college instructors to make a paradigm shift" (Austin, 2000 in Berke & Colwell, 2004, p. 7). Austin used the analogy of teaching a foreign language, suggesting that the "goal be 'conversational' music skills, rather than comprehensive acquisition of musical concepts" (p. 7). The dilemma is finding the balance between learning enough of the music language to be confident in using it and passing the skills and enjoyment on to children.

It was decided to write the Creative Arts subjects broadly to include music instruction with each campus able to choose an instrument that could be confidently taught within the subjects. Students would have two semesters of instrumental classes that aimed at basic music literacy, while consistently learning how to use their reading skills to play other instruments that are likely to be in schools (such as glockenspiels). One half hour per week, taken from the Creative Arts subjects would be devoted to instrumental music. The remaining two and a half hours per week would comprise a lecture and a tutorial on other aspects of the arts, but dance, listening, singing and percussion instruments would be included. Care needs to be taken to ensure that there is correlation between the music in the Creative Arts lectures and tutorials and the understandings and skills learnt in keyboard classes.

## **Proposals for ensuring musical knowledge in the new program**

It is disappointing that, knowing the effectiveness of previous models, we need to frame other ways of achieving similar outcomes. The initial desire is to continue with a scaled-down version of the past model. We hope that students will maintain their enthusiasm and be keen to explore avenues of further personal development in music after participating in the two Creative Arts subjects. Academic teachers are continually considering ways in which this can be fostered.

Currently, the lecturer or tutor places the class materials into learning modules in the CSU online

system so that students can review their learning. Supplementing these modules with further musical resources is a possible strategy that could offer students a self-study process. This might become particularly pertinent if the looming economic cuts affect staffing for previous 'add-ons' like music. Indeed, since beginning the reflective process for this paper, moves have begun to further develop the 'distance' and blended learning approach to delivery of the entire undergraduate degree. This means personal development in music will need to be offered in chunks like residential schools for the new distance and blended learning approaches.

## **Final reflections**

So, where does that leave us now? One of the authors (W.S.), the keyboard tutor for the last three years, here reflects on the present situation.

*The beginner class is currently in the sixth week of the first semester of keyboard classes. Most students are enthusiastic and are enjoying the group playing together, especially using glockenspiels, chime bars and singing to augment the "orchestra". I am teaching the group as a whole, which means that individual needs may not be being well met. We are making slower progress than earlier classes on the keyboards but I can see that the effort to consistently relate new learning to glockenspiels and to percussion scores excites and empowers the students. One mature aged student excitedly announced, child-like, "Listen to this. I never thought I would be able to play the piano!" If some students leave the university with increased music skills, enthusiasm and confidence, the keyboard tuition will not be in vain.*

The second author (J.M.), who has been part of the whole process since 1995, here reflects on that process.

*It's been a curious and challenging task to consider the various incarnations of music teaching and learning during my (lengthy) time at CSU. The initial importance assigned to the value of musical learning for the individual as the means for*

*confident transference of skills to music teaching in the classroom has not diminished. If anything, it has been endorsed by the evidence of the experiences of the students who have undertaken the music classes and shown evidence in their final placement of being able to devise interesting and engaging musical learning activities for children in under-5 settings as well as Primary school classes. Knowing the value of these experiences leads us to struggle with comparable, or possibly better, ways to ensure quality learning continues to filter through to the classrooms of the future.*

## Endnote

Considering the Federal Government announcements (Bradley, 2008) on the proposed Higher Education reforms, we can expect that the ways we've responded to trying to maintain music education and learning inside the pre-service teacher degree may disappear completely. Without any external pressure to include adequate technical learning in any Arts education provision for student teachers, the existing offering of music will probably fall victim to the increasing pressure to run additional literacy and numeracy programs. Even the valiant efforts of those academics that value music and strive to 'fight' for its inclusion in pre-service teacher degree programs are facing what they see as insurmountable odds. The authors persist in striving for the aforementioned 'paradigm shift' in envisioning new ways to quickly 'turn students on' to the value of music learning, but concede that with dwindling numbers of supporters in the program design process, the battle may indeed be lost.

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