

**Commission for the Education of the
Professional Musician (CEPROM)
24th International Seminar**

*The Legacy and Lessons of
Professor ‘Dumbledean’
In Memory of Professor Glen Carruthers*

**July 13th -16th , 2022
On-line**

**Hosted by Southern Cross University,
Lismore, New South Wales,
Australia**

PROCEEDINGS

Edited by Associate Professor Annie Mitchell

ISBN 978-1-922303-12-7

Transformative impacts in the existing curriculum: A study of developing learner agency and broadening career horizons

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Abstract

Establishing a career as a performing classical musician is strongly linked to 1) facing fierce competition during and after professional studies, 2) the ability of developing a multiplicity of skills that go beyond the craft of the instrument/voice, and 3) being flexible/agile to adapt to the constant changes and demands of the music industry. However, music majors seem to realize this towards the end of their studies in higher music education. This leads to an enormous pressure to become employable when they graduate, leaving many to depend on luck and stressful learning on-the-job situations. Considering this situation, higher music education is under political scrutiny, as it should not only produce graduates, but employable ones – thus, maximising revenue generation. This asks for curricular transformations that have the potential to support music students in becoming agentic and embracing a learner identity – that is being artistically and professionally autonomous, and ready to embrace lifelong learning as an exciting part of their careers. This paper presents a socio-constructivist intervention to broaden career horizons and develop the much-required learner agency in 7 classical music majors. Authentic and scaffolded strategies related to employability in the

music industry, relevant lectures and seminars of increasing difficulty, as well as a panel discussion with international musicians was offered to all participants as part of their studies during a semester-long class. Preliminary results indicated certain areas for improvement common to all participants such as social interaction and communication skills, variety within and beyond performance roles, and occupational and emotional literacy. Taking that into consideration, resources on critical reflection and career planning were further developed during the study. This supported the participants in embracing a positive attitude to learning, a more inclusive view of career pathways and musical identities, and an openness to discussing concerns with colleagues—all aspects related to musicians' learner identity.

Keywords

Agency, career development learning, employability, growth mindset, higher music education, identity construction, learner identity, metacognition, self-regulation

Dedication:

To Glen Carruthers. A dear friend, sage advisor, brilliant mind, and valued colleague.

Introduction

Around the globe, music majors study music because they are passionate about it. They may have a notion of how difficult it can be to establish a career in performance, but the excitement of being able to dedicate themselves to music overrides all else. Burt-Perkins (2008) and others have found that music students' career related concerns tend to surface in the first year of study, when they see the quality of music making around them. These concerns are often heightened as students become more aware of the nature of music careers and the fierce competition for work.

Awareness also comes in the form of negative media and graduate outcomes statistics. Many Western countries conflate graduate employment rates with the quality of post-secondary education, fuelling negative media about the arts and increasing pressure to produce “employable” graduates (Ramberg et al., 2019). In Australia, for example, the assumed economic unimportance of the Arts and Humanities led the Federal Government to increase student contributions for these programs, making them far more expensive than programs in science, engineering, and maths (Titelius, 2020). The economic value of creative higher education for graduates in relation to their employability is also a concern in Europe (e.g., Bloom, 2020; REACT, 2021), where economic inequalities in the music industry (Bull, 2019) and increasing cuts for arts education are becoming the norm.

Despite a persistent narrative about the divide between higher music education and the realities of musicians’ work (Bennett & Bridgstock, 2015; Calissendorf & Hanneson, 2017; Dobson, 2010; López-Íñiguez & Bennett, 2020; Schmidt, 2014), there are myriad examples of innovative curricula and pedagogical approaches that have had a transformative impact on students’ career thinking. Glen Carruthers (2019, p. 209) wrote that many institutions have tried “to reconcile curriculum and identity, broadening the scope of higher music education to include more career-relevant courses ... and modules”. However, as Glen pointed out there is often “a missing link. Although identity and curriculum can be symbiotic, a catalyst is required to bind the two together. The catalyst lacking in most legacy curricular is agency” (ibid). This article describes the impact of fostering music students’ learner identity to encourage the agency through which students might begin to create their musical futures.

The importance of being a learner

In precarious industries such as music, the task of remaining employable demands the regular and strategic self-renewal of skills and knowledge (Gill, 2002), realised through a *learner identity* (López-Íñiguez & Bennett, 2020; 2021; López-Íñiguez et al., 2022). Alongside learner agency, this study sought to develop a learning mindset among student musicians, fostering their curiosity about the many developmental and exploratory opportunities made available to music students (Brown, 2009; Ha, 2017; Varvarigou, et al., 2014).

In the pre-professional context, “learning how to learn requires learning to be a learner” (Sinha, 1999, p. 41) who is open to exploring possible futures and to regulating identity and career thinking in line with each new experience (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). We defined a learner identity as a central identity of socio-constructivist orientation with which individuals identify and construct themselves as learners in different educational and developmental contexts (Falsafi, 2011).

Theoretical framework

Perceived employability – students’ confidence that they will successfully transition into the workforce – is strongly correlated with efficacy beliefs. Efficacy beliefs underpin student health and wellbeing, retention, study success, academic engagement, and agentic behaviours (Berntson & Marklund, 2007).

Following Vygotsky (1978), we sought to create a constructivist learning ecology (Barron, 2006). Specifically, we designed a replicable class that featured authentic and scaffolded strategies in support of students’ metacognitive engagement, active participation, and experiential learning. The study was grounded in the three modalities of learner identity construction defined by Falsafi (2011) as *in* activity, *on* activity and *cross* activity (see Figure

1). Such construction is situated and encompasses both intra-psychological (e.g., motivational, emotional) processes involved in the construction of learner identity, and the inter-psychological processes developed through working and learning with other people (Falsafi & Coll, 2015).

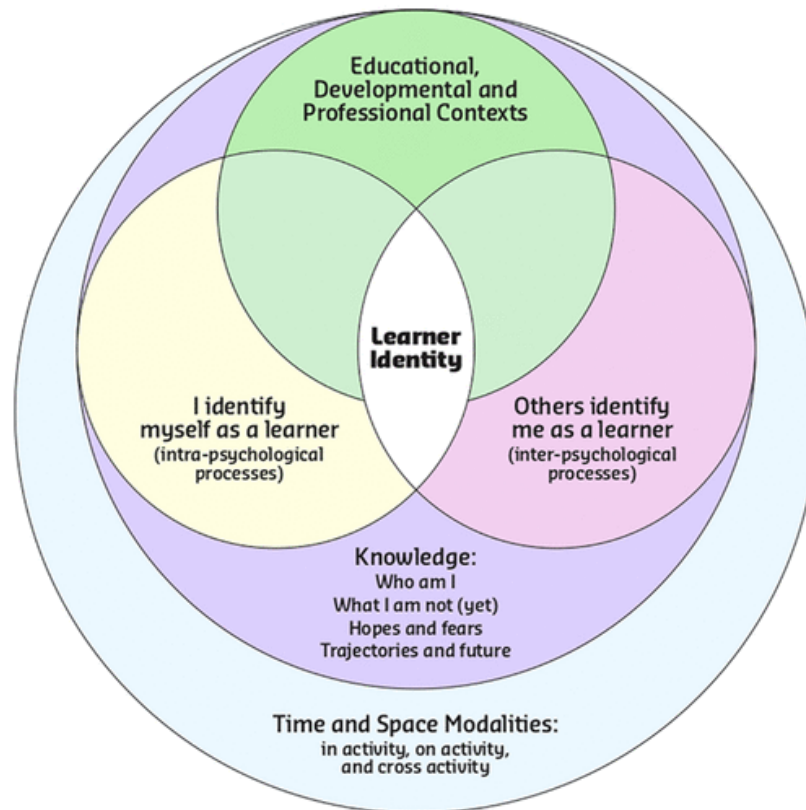


Figure 1. Characteristics of the learner identity model. Reproduced from López-Íñiguez & Bennett (2021), with permission.

Method

The study explored students' career-related thinking and confidence and drew on the findings to transform a previously generic class on career development into a student-facing career intervention. We asked three questions:

1. To what extent might a semester-long class be transformed using student-derived data?

2. How effective is the intervention in helping students to become conscious of their learner identity?
3. Is this approach scalable without additional funding or curricular space?

Participants were purposefully selected and came from five different nations and diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Invitations to participate were relayed via the head of the music department. Students signed consent forms following the guidelines of the national advisory board and students were not obliged to participate. Ethical approvals were obtained from the institution's research ethics committee. The seven participating students (P1-P7) were classical musicians (female $n = 5$, male $n = 2$) enrolled in post-graduate studies.

Participants committed to participating in research seminars across a 12-week semester and they were compensated with one study credit following the European Transfer Credit and Accumulation System (ECTS).

Phase 1 featured semi-structured interviews with each participant. In Phase 2, participants created personalised employability profiles using an online tool (Bennett, 2019). The tool prompted students to rate their confidence in relation to self-management and decision-making, academic self-efficacy, self-esteem, professional identity, conceptualisations of self and employability, emotional intelligence, and career commitment and agility.

Findings of Phases 1 and 2 informed the design and content of four 90-minute lectures and seminars of increasing difficulty (Phases 3A and 3B). Phase 4 featured a discussion panel with eight musicians who were internationally recognised as being highly proficient in multiple roles. Student participants provided feedback on all four phases via email. The study employed phenomenological, lexicometrical, and descriptive analyses as appropriate for each phase.

Results

Phase 1: Interviews

Participants' professional profiles and developmental needs were coded by applying lexicometrical analysis using Leximancer software to the interview transcripts. Participants highlighted the importance of *performance* but also the need for variety within and beyond performance roles. To achieve this, they realised the need to develop greater industry awareness alongside personal, artistic, and professional autonomy. All participants articulated the need to develop their skills and industry experience. Increased autonomy was again a feature, as was the need to develop work-life balance.

Participants noted that social interaction and communication skills were crucial to establishing and maintaining their careers. They also recognised the importance of *networking*. However, the development of such skills was sometimes labelled as something to tackle "in the future", despite being described as urgent. Finally, participants discussed personal commitments, life design, and the need to think ahead.

Phase 2: EmployABILITY self-reflection

Students' responses to the online employABILITY tool (Bennett, 2019; Bennett & Ananthram, 2021) revealed a lack of confidence in students' self-report of occupational literacy. Analysis revealed that this related to a lack of career exploration, career/industry awareness, and occupational flexibility. These concerns were evident in the phase 1 narratives. Lack of confidence in emotional literacy related to managing the emotions of others and to managing one's own emotions, particularly in relation to stressful situations. These themes were explored in Phase 3.

Phase 3: Classes developed from the student data

Phase 3 featured four 90-minute lecture seminars. The classes had previously focussed on issues of generic importance to musicians' career development. The intervention enabled the classes to respond to the specific needs of the students, using the findings of Phases 1 and 2. Resources within a freely available online music career toolkit were employed to scaffold the learning; these included resources on critical reflection and career planning.

Participants articulated their strong commitment to a career in music and they recognised that this commitment demanded a learning mindset, resilience, patience, motivation, confidence, courage, industry awareness, stress management strategies, a positive attitude, and mental wellness. Three of these themes are drawn out below.

Planning a career

Participants identified multiple long- and short-term goals and they were aware of the need to create a sustainable income through multiple roles. However, they expressed inadequate understanding of small business management, career management, and work generation.

Participants emphasised that insufficient career awareness was inhibiting their ability to make informed career decisions, and they wanted more exposure to the work of experienced colleagues and the career narratives of successful musicians alongside strategies with which to develop their professional networks.

Ethical behaviour

Some participants had experienced competition and exclusionary practices from established performers, suggesting the need for early career mentorship and peer networks. Participants

requested information about musicians' rights and obligations, both in relation to these practices and also on practical matters such as what rates to charge for their work and how to manage under-prepared or difficult colleagues.

Scholarship

Although participants were keen to improve the quality of their playing and their ability to learn repertoire quickly, they were initially disinterested in engaging with their repertoire in a scholarly way. Over the course of the sessions, they began to describe the adoption of reflexive behaviour: for example, reflecting on their performances to promote new learning and improvements. Participants reported immediate benefits from the critical thinking activities and in the final sessions they expressed interest in both critical thinking and scholarly practices with which to research the music they were performing.

Wellbeing

Participants emphasised the importance of physical and mental wellbeing. Stress became more clearly defined over the course of the sessions and was attributed to financial insecurity and the impact of extensive work-related travel on both health and relationships. Participants requested emotional coping strategies.

Discussion

We adopted a learning ecology framework in which students played an active role in the inter- and intra-psychological construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). By designing the classes based on the student-derived data, students' learning and identity construction were historically and socially situated within in a community of practice (Norton & McKinney, 2011). As trust developed within the community, participants began to express doubts,

concerns, and possibilities. As a result, participants shared many stories of pre-professional and professional life, and these were combined to broaden their career thinking, career curiosity, and learner agency.

After the intervention, participants revealed a positive attitude to learning and a more inclusive view of career pathways and musical identities. Their eventual openness to discussing concerns with colleagues (the inter-psychological dimension) and the acts of recognising everyone as a learner within the situated educational space was a stark change from the Phase 1 activities.

Participants began to recognise that success as a musician demands more than performance excellence, and that identifying themselves as learners would support their ongoing professional learning (realising or avoiding possible future identities).

Finally, participants began to challenge the absence of career learning and other career-related capabilities within the curriculum, and they acknowledged that they would need to take the lead in meeting some of their career visioning and associated learning needs.

Conclusions and recommendations

The CEPROM theme *Transformative impacts* might conjure visions of major reforms. In contrast, we asked the extent to which a semester-long class could be transformed using student-derived data, whether such a short intervention could help students to become conscious of their learner identity, and whether the approach might be scalable without additional funding or curricular space. We took an existing, semester-long class broadly themed as career development, and used students' self-reported confidence data to inform the

content of the four lecture seminars. The study was undertaken without additional project funding and utilised a free student self-assessment tool and associated career learning resources.

The intervention had a transformative impact on student musicians' development not because of their particular learning needs but because they began to embrace both a learning mindset and the more inclusive musician identities needed for career exploration. The additional tasks included student completion of the online self-assessment tool, which was a 30-minute required task, and approximately one hour in which we discussed the results as presented in an educator report and selected resources from the online toolkit. We concluded that these tasks were far from onerous and were scalable to other classes and contexts.

The study illustrates the potential for in-curricular interventions to positively impact learner identity, career curiosity, and learner agency. Indeed, the diversity of views to which students were exposed when working collaboratively and discussing the results of their self-report developed rich discussions within the safety of a learning community. The use of established tools and resources ensured that student learning was scaffolded. These tools have the potential to support academic staff who are non-experts in career learning to understand and address these complex issues.

We acknowledge that the course into which we taught had a class dedicated to career development and that this is rarely the case. Professor Dumbledean would argue that this is no excuse for the absence of transformative learning experiences in the education of musicians. We end with his words, and with the intention of following his advice as we

identify further opportunities for students to explore their emerging musician identities and career thinking.

Often, courses were created because they reflected the teaching and/or research interests of faculty members, and these courses would align with the interests of students by chance rather than by design. Which courses should be maintained, eliminated, introduced or transformed, and which deserve enhanced funding or human resources, cannot be determined unless the connection between course outcomes and degree-level expectations is clear. (Carruthers, 2019, p. 23-24)

Acknowledgements

The study was undertaken during a fellowship held by Guadalupe López-Íñiguez, funded by the Academy of Finland (Ref.: 315378). The authors thank the students who were at the centre of this study.

Links to the research project and the self-assessment tool

- Research Project: <https://www.uniarts.fi/en/projects/transforming-musicianship-musicians-learner-identity/> Contact: guadalupe.lopez.iniguez@uniarts.fi
- Website to access the self-assessment tool: <https://developingemployability.edu.au>
Contact: dabennett@bond.edu.au

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