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Singing for real: Using high stakes assessment strategies as authentic learning experiences in the development of vocal performers at the tertiary level.

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Abstract

This paper considers the results of a preliminary investigation into the way that high stakes assessment strategies can be used as authentic learning experiences in the development and training of vocalists within a tertiary music environment. The paper begins by defining the nature of live performance and the way that high stakes assessment strategies emulate live performance experiences. They can therefore be used as authentic teaching and learning tools through both formative and summative assessment processes that can positively contribute to the development of the student vocalist as they strive to achieve their performance goals. Finally, the paper suggests areas for future research to optimise the performance outcomes of these authentic learning experiences in the context of the tertiary music environment.

Keywords

Vocal training
Authentic learning
Music education
Formative assessment

Introduction

Tertiary level training in the performing arts provides opportunities for performers to spend a concentrated amount of time in the pursuit of excellence in their performing activities. Students who choose to train as a vocal performer within a tertiary performing arts environment may have already spent a considerable amount of time developing the skills of performance while others may be very new to the performance experience. The role of the teachers within the tertiary institution is to challenge these performers to take their performance to ever-increasing levels of excellence through a carefully structured teaching and learning framework that takes into consideration all elements of artistic endeavour.

An important part of this teaching and learning framework includes assessment and Colwell (2002) suggests there are two types of assessment, each with a specific purpose: summative assessment that gives an indication on the worth of a finished product and formative assessment that provides feedback to assist in the process of moving towards the final goal or product. In tertiary music education, both types of assessment process are used to develop the performance skills for singers with formative assessment being the primary source of evaluation in music education Colwell (2002). The primary purpose of formative evaluation is to improve the performance and this continually occurs within the context of studio teaching where the teacher and singer work on the development of technique, style and musical interpretation.

However, there are still several stages that the singer must progress through in order to be able to competently present their performance within the high-stakes environment of a public concert or audition where there may be a summative goal. This paper considers the results of a survey of tertiary vocal students who comment on their experiences in preparing themselves for public performance through various formative assessment processes that gradually increase the stakes by providing authentic learning experiences within the parameters of a formative assessment process.

The ‘high stakes’ nature of music performance

The very nature of musical performance suggests that whenever a musical performance takes place in front of someone else, regardless of the relationships between the performer and the audience, some type of high-stakes assessment situation has occurred. Performances are judged as they are performed and heard. The stakes surrounding these performances may be at different levels and increase as the performances take place within contexts of ever-increasing importance to the performer: private lesson then group lesson or workshop, and then to public performance, audition or performance examination. However, it still remains each of these musical performance situations contain some level of high-stakes assessment.

Live performance is, in its essence, a transient art form that occurs in real time and is never truly repeatable. Furthermore, the ratio of time taken in preparation and the time in performance is enormously high in favour of the preparation time. Davidson (2002) suggests “a clear relationship has been found between the accumulated hours spent engaging in ‘formal’ practice (scales, technical exercises and repertoire) and achievement” (p. 93). The performer needs a high level of motivation to persevere with this long and often lonely process of preparation for performance. However, in order to achieve excellence as a performer, the preparation process must always keep in mind the public performance goal where the stakes can increase significantly.

In addition, these performances are judged against very subjective criteria that, according to Rubidge (1996), Taruskin (1995), and supported by Epstein (1996) are significantly affected by the times and culture in which the performance occurs and are "inextricably linked to the work's history, which is formed and informed by its

previous performances" (Rubidge, 1996, p. 219). This complicates the learning process for vocalists as they use their cognitive skills to analyse recordings and performance practice of historic performances, develop their technical skills to try to emulate these high standards and master the psychological pressure that comes as a result of their increasing awareness of their strengths and weaknesses as performers.

Hence, the work of creating a vocal performer of excellence requires a curriculum that nurtures the whole singer and a suite of assessment strategies that recognise the unique parameters of vocal performance. These assessment strategies need to find ways to provide students with appropriate feedback and be flexible enough to meet the needs of student performers at various stages in their development. With the implementation of various formative assessment approaches, students will be able to develop skills that will enable them to bring their performance to increasing levels of excellence even when the stakes of the performance begin to increase through their studies and future performing career.

The debate surrounding the value and use of high-stakes assessment in education needs to be acknowledged (Colwell, 2002), but it is generally agreed that musical performance, whether at a public concert or an audition, can be high-stakes with the "height of the stake depending upon the importance placed on the task by the individual or the culture" (Colwell, 2002, p. 1129). The summative assessment instruments used to evaluate music performance at the tertiary level, such as public concerts or performance exams, are primarily high-stakes assessments and they are used to make significant educational decisions about the students (Gregory. & Clarke, 2003). They often occur at marked intervals through a program of study and are used to validate the continued academic progression of a student.

Another aspect of the debate on the high-stakes nature of music performance is whether in fact this is an authentic learning experience for students and whether it will create opportunities for singers to acquire the skills necessary for a successful embarkation into a performing arts career. Colwell (2002) suggests that almost all assessment in music is authentic but the "more important concern is the transfer of what has been learned" (p. 1129). March (2000) suggests, within the context of school-based curriculum design, that authentic learning and assessment tools should be rich, real and relevant. His article suggests that learning tasks that reflect real-life situations, encourage critical thinking and allow students to relate personally to the task at hand will provide greater opportunities for authentic learning. Applying this within the context of the performing arts, the strategies that students encounter through their undergraduate study should be designed to both reflect real-life situations in the performing arts industry as well as help students to identify areas for improvement through their own development of critical thinking skills and application to their own personal development as performers.

The research methodology

Twenty-five vocal students studying within a tertiary music program were asked to complete a questionnaire on their experiences as vocal performers when they performed at vocal performance workshops and whether their experience performing

in this type of environment provided an authentic learning experience which prepared them appropriately for concert performance.

The aim of the questionnaire was to provide some quantitative data on the perceptions of the students towards this type of learning experience. The sample is relatively small, and since the sample were all students from one tertiary institution, the results will only be able to be discussed as a case study. There was no attempt at this stage to analyse qualitatively the reasons behind these perceptions but it does begin to tease out student's perceptions on the height of the stakes in vocal performance workshops, which have a formative assessment goal, compared to the concert performance environment where assessment can often be summative in nature. Further research studies can then be undertaken to analyse this topic further and gain deeper understanding of the role of high-stakes assessment strategies in the teaching and learning framework for vocal performance.

The research results

The responses to the questions revealed some common themes and these were gathered together and the results placed in the following table:

What do you see as the main purpose for vocal workshop?					
Performance experience	Constructive criticism/feed back	Deal with performance anxiety	Repertoire knowledge	Build confidence	Develop technique
32%	28%	14%	2%	6%	18%
Does performing at vocal workshop prepare you well for performance at a public concert or exam?					
yes	no				
100%	0				
How?					
Performance experience	constructive criticism/feed back	Deal with performance anxiety	Repertoire knowledge	Build confidence	Develop technique
26%	35%	21%		12%	6%
How is your workshop performance different from your performance at a public concert?					
More anxious	Less anxious	Same level of anxiety			
52%	32%	16%			
Do you prepare your workshop performance differently from your performance for a concert?					
yes	no				
56%	44%				
Do you find the comments from workshop helpful?					
yes	no				
100%	0				
Do you incorporate these into future performances at concerts?					
yes	no				
100%	0				

The first question asked the students to define the main purpose of the vocal workshop. Many of them identified multiple purposes with 32% of the responses stating that the main purpose was to gain performance experience with 28% citing gaining feedback and constructive criticism as the next most important purpose. Within the context of performance experience, 14% of the responses highlighted the fact that the workshop experience helped them deal with performance anxiety and a

further 6% identified the building of confidence as an important role in the workshop experience. 18% of the responses included the notion that they could improve their technique either through their own performance or by watching the performances of others and listening to the feedback provided. All of the respondents agreed that performing at vocal workshop prepared them well for performance at a public concert or examination with most respondents suggesting that it was the feedback they gained at workshop that helped the most.

Just over half (52%) of the respondents stated that they had more performance anxiety when performing at workshop than in a public concert with 16% stating they had about the same level of anxiety at both vocal workshop and public concert. 32% of the respondents had less performance anxiety at vocal workshop compared to a public concert.

All of the respondents found the feedback from vocal workshop useful and all of them incorporated this feedback into their future performances. However, in the area of preparation for performance, they were almost evenly divided on whether they prepared themselves differently for vocal workshop and public concert performance. Slightly over half (56%) prepared themselves differently for workshop than public concert with all of this group stating that they took much greater care with their preparation for public concert performance than vocal workshop performance. Only 44% believed they put the same level of preparation into the vocal workshop performance as they did the public concert performance.

Formative Assessment in a High Stakes Environment

Formative assessment strategies are those that allow students to obtain feedback in a timely way without the pressure of having it 'count' towards a final grade.

Assessment that is conducted with this outcome in mind can be an authentic teaching and learning tool in all areas of learning and is particularly effective in the performing arts.

The master-class or performance workshop is a useful forum for the conduct of formative assessment strategies within the context of a high stakes assessment environment. A master class or performance workshop allows the developing performers to have the opportunity to perform in front of their teachers and peers. As a result, there is the opportunity to receive immediate feedback regarding both the technical and artistic elements of the performance. Being able to achieve excellence in performance in the privacy of one's home or even in the studio in front of a trusted teacher does not necessarily guarantee that this performance will be able to be replicated in front of others. The stakes are considerably heightened as personal expectations, peer expectation and the performance history of the work itself all play a part in creating a judgement of a performance. This is borne out from the research data from this particular case study that stated that 52% of the respondents were more anxious about their workshop performance than a concert performance. Many of these cited the fact that their friends and peers were present and they were aware that in workshop "these people know everything and can pick your mistakes!" (Questionnaire respondent).

Despite this environment reflecting some of the high stakes parameters of public performance, its primary aim is still as a formative assessment tool. The feedback is immediate and appropriate to the level of maturity of the performer. Such feedback includes discussions on the security of the technique in being able to achieve the purposes of both the composer and the interpretation suggested by the performer. If the technical foundations are weak, the interpretation will flounder regardless of the level of confidence or psychological control manifested by the performer. As students engage in workshops and master classes, they soon come to realise the importance of careful studio preparation and practise before embarking on a public performance. Bonetti (1997) asserts that there is no substitute for thorough preparation when facing an imminent public performance of any kind. She goes on to say "performance fears are surely lessened when we have prepared securely and wisely in the months before the performance" (p. 61).

Another important formative assessment task involves assessing the level of communication that was achieved between performer and audience. Practising by oneself is an important part of performance preparation, but every performer needs another 'set of eyes and ears' who will provide intelligent and useful feedback on whether the composer's intentions were met and the interpretation given by the performer met the demands of these intentions. Just over 28% of the respondents cited that gaining feedback on their performance was one of the purposes of the vocal workshop. Furthermore, they stated that listening to the feedback given to others was an equally important outcome of the vocal workshop experience.

The formative assessment strategies adopted in master classes and workshops have added benefits for those who attend as observers. It is not necessary to physically perform in order to gain important skills. There is much to be gained by all the participants and observers as they listen to the feedback provided to their peers, and apply this to their own performance development.

Developing Psychological Skills for the Performer in a High Stakes Environment

For the performing arts student, these master-class/performance workshops also provide regular opportunities to develop personal strategies for building confidence in performance while dealing with performance anxiety. The questionnaire results showed that 14% of the respondents highlighted the fact that the workshop experience helped them deal with performance anxiety and a further 6% identified the building of confidence as an important role in the workshop experience. For performers, lack of confidence and uncontrolled anxiety and stress can create immense barriers to the production of excellence in performance. One of the key areas addressed consistently by sports psychologists that have particular relevance to the vocalist is the area of building confidence. Various studies have concluded that successful performance raises expectations for future success and that conversely, failure will lower these expectations (Rodgers, 1997, p. 91). Accordingly, it is evident that the training for vocal performers needs to provide ample opportunities for successful performance in

formal and informal situations so that the confidence in performance is strengthened throughout their tertiary studies.

Vocalists must also face the immediate concerns of controlling their thought patterns while in performance and thus achieving a successful transition from the comfort and safety of the studio to the openness of the public stage. During workshops, performers are able to develop personal strategies to help them in this area of their psychological development. Since the workshop itself simulates the high stakes nature of public performance, they can begin to understand their own thought patterns and find out how they impact on their live performance. As stated by Horsley (1995), the dilemma that faces young athletes in performance is very similar to that of the vocal performer: gaining control of involuntary and spontaneous thoughts.

Positive self-talk and positive images are the hallmarks of confident athletes. They say positive things to themselves, imagine themselves being successful and in control, and keep their attention focussed on achieving the task at hand rather than worrying about the possibility of failing or of possible negative consequences (Horsley, 1995, p.323).

The importance of self-talk applies equally well in the area of music performance. Horsley goes on to say that performers need to understand how the mind works and the significance of self-talk in relation to difficult performance situations. Many students, over 52% in this study, find that performing in front of their peers is more confronting than performing in front of an audience of strangers. The negative thought patterns that are created when performing for peers can severely detract from the quality of a performance but positive thought patterns can be trained and developed given enough opportunity.

Another strategy for enhancing performance excellence is the combination of mental and physical rehearsal (Roland, 1997). Mental rehearsal involves the creation in the mind of the performance itself, bringing together all of the senses, but without actually performing. Roland states that it is possible to "train yourself to complete a performance perfectly even when you're still not able to do it perfectly in reality. It can be used to enhance your memory of words, music or steps without having to go through them physically" (p. 43). This strategy of using mental performance can be used to great effect for singers as they face specific issues with regard to practice. Their voice just cannot maintain the same number of hours of practice as an instrumentalist. Mental rehearsal can be an effective way to build self-confidence, reduce anxiety and increase skill development without compromising the physical health of the voice.

In sport, many high level performers use a pre-prepared performance routine of thoughts and actions that enhance their forthcoming performance (Boutcher, 1990). Every performer will have developed their own tailor-made process for bringing their physical, cognitive and psychological preparation to fruition on the stage, often in the form of a self-developed pre-performance routine. For many, it is arriving at the theatre early to establish a feel for the space and the stage, and then working through a carefully paced warm-up routine for voice, body and mind. It is therefore the task of the teacher to help the student to recognise and formulate their own personal

performance preparation routine that will be flexible to the growing emotional and physical needs of the performer and the tasks that are set before them in musical life.

Research Challenges and Future Pathways

A significant research challenge involves measuring the effectiveness of this type of authentic learning experience, the high-stakes environment of the vocal workshop, in the development of performers of excellence. The formative assessment process that is the fundamental purpose of the vocal workshop seems to provide an authentic learning experience that is real, rich and relevant and serves to equip students with the capacity to bring their performance to greater levels of excellence. This starts to become evident when students then perform in public high stakes assessment environments. The audience judges these performances against various benchmarks which are informed by their own experiences and perceptions, but which, nevertheless, provide performers with constant challenges to ever improve their performance quality.

For the researcher, the question of measuring the specific learning outcomes derived from this teaching and learning strategy provides opportunities for further enquiry. The curriculum for music performers will continue to be refined and developed as research findings begin to analyse the context within which performers will most likely acquire those specific skills associated with performers of excellence. Managing the many varied aspects of vocal performance will be the goal for vocalists as they face artistic and employment challenges in the future.

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