Student for student: Peer learning in music higher education

Anna Reid
Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Australia

Michael Duke
Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Australia

Abstract
Students of piano and saxophone were asked to explore what peer learning meant to them. Following instrumental-based discussions, and with no intervention from faculty, the students developed a series of videos intended for use with incoming students. This article analyses the students’ discussions and videos, and describes the complexity of students learning from each other in informal peers contexts. Instrumental culture appears to impact on the forms and priorities for peer learning.

Keywords
peer learning, peer mentoring, saxophone and piano learning

Background
Students in higher education find themselves in learning contexts that include formally-organized classes and curriculum and also contexts that are informal, fluid, and dynamic. Students can learn from each other as cooperative peer learners focused on a specific task and perhaps reflecting on and critiquing each others’ work within formal, teacher directed situations. They can also learn from each other waiting for classes to start, in the college coffee shop, in the nearby park, in the mutual study session, and so on. Students, by the act of being a student with other students, become part of a complex community where disciplinary know-how and identity entwine. Peer learning is a way of describing the process of becoming acculturated into a specific discipline. Music performance students find themselves in the center of this complexity where formal studies, inter-year music making and in-between times on and off campus may impact on their musical development.

Corresponding author:
Professor Anna Reid, Associate Dean, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, The University of Sydney, 1 Conservatorium Road, NSW 2000, Australia.
Email: Anna.Reid@sydney.edu.au
In this article we explore how music students learn from each other using their own descriptions of important aspects of peer learning.

**Peer learning**

Peer learning has come to mean many things across a range of different contexts. It can mean one student tutoring another, it can mean students working on joint projects in a cooperative way (Slavin, 1990), it can mean students assessing students (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson 1999; Nagel Ebert-May, Weber, & Hodder, 2005), and/or it can describe a form of interaction between learners. Reise, Samara and Lillejord (2012) have recently summarized a series of research articles on peer learning and suggest that the following three outcomes are common to most peer learning activities.

First, positive effects on students’ achievement. Second, in the current mass higher education system peer learning activities can reduce the workload of the teaching staff. Third, the need for including the development of generic skills related to future employment can be promoted by learning practices where students work together. (2012, p. 601)

The first focuses on the most important aspect of higher education, that the student learns something that is valuable. The research reported in this article supports this position. The second outcome assumes that peer learning activities will ameliorate high teacher workload, presumably through a reduction in marking load (for setting up peer learning in formal situations takes a great deal of effort). Finally, there is an assumption that peer learning fosters employment-related generic skills, which all focus on some sort of defined outcome. Peer learning has a variety of guises in higher education that emphasize different aspects of student learning.

Boud, Cohen and Sampson (2001) defined the location of peer activities as being either formal or informal—that is, those that are defined by some sort of accrediting body using some form of assessment, or those that are defined by the learners themselves. The notion of humans learning from each other is a well-established one that permeates all cultures and all times. The interesting thing is the interplay between formal and informal situations where in formal situations it is intended that the learners should learn what the teachers already know, in contrast with more informal situations where the learner has more autonomy in deciding what to learn and how. Here we explore how learners learn from each other through informal situations.

In the USA this form of learning outside the formal curriculum has been described as “peer to peer” learning. Universities have long utilized the power of peer to peer relationships and, in a famous example, have used this powerful concept as a long-term strategy in collegiate living environments for the reduction of alcohol consumption amongst students. It has been recognized that important “messages” can be heard in informal environments (Hunter, 2004, p. 42) and these messages for the reduction of alcohol consumption have increasingly been backed up through the adoption of ‘peer educators’ who receive training on the message to be delivered. This is a form of social engineering using natural student networks to create a situation where change can occur. However, in this example peer learning is located in the students’ communal living spaces and is not usually related to a disciplinary cohort group.

Reise, Samara and Lillejord (2012) also recognize the power of informal peer learning and call for “more investigation into the complexity of interactions in peer learning” (p. 602). An important finding of their investigations into the complexity of interactions is the role of relational knowledge or competence that is implicit in peers’ interactions with each other. Topping (2005) asserts that attention and thoughtfulness should be applied to the form of organization underlying the peer
activity. Hence, when a peer activity is planned, it has a “target purpose, context, and population, and with reasonably high implementation integrity, results are typically very good” (p. 635).

In just such an instance of thoughtfulness, but in a formal learning context, Lebler (2005) instigated a peer-learning process in a course for popular music. Interestingly, a major outcome for students in such a course is the ability to engage with each other in co-created performances. Many of the learning activities prescribed in the course were undertaken by students without the constant intervention of mentors or tutors. In other words, students started to learn from each other because there was a common task to achieve. It is important to note that in a musical context much of what is presented as an outcome of learning is a co-constructed work of musical art.

Nagel et al. (2005) provide an example of peer assessment from the field of environmental ecology which allowed fellow students the opportunity to comment on the quality of cooperative learning experiences. Cooperative learning is when a group of students work together towards a defined learning outcome (such as the presentation of a group project). The intention of this form of learning is to develop students’ cognitive, intellectual, social, and leadership skills. Peer assessment is the logical extension of cooperative learning where responsibility is placed on student peers to evaluate and critique their colleagues’ work and/or learning interactions (Nagel et al., 2005; Blom & Poole, 2004). Eisenkopf (2010) reports on an experiment where students were focused on a specific learning task (a puzzle game) with the collaboration of various individual peers. They found that different peers impacted on the learning outcome, saying “the prospective partner motivates a partner” (Eisenkopf, 2010, p. 365). In this sense, the anticipation of working with a specific person had an effect on the overall outcome of the task.

In our research, the notion of ‘peer’ is taken to mean a student of the same instrument. According to Boud and Lee (2005), a peer is usually a student in the same learning situation (such as a class) or in the same cohort (year of study). In a music school it is common to have similar instrument groups in ensembles that include students at different stages of their courses. In our discussion of informal peer learning, we are also making an assumption that learning does take place outside the more formal assessable environments.

Most research on peer learning is focused on specific interventions made by faculty within formal learning spaces. This form of intervention includes creating learning tasks that require cooperation from two or more class members. Sometimes the intervention includes peer assessment where students are asked to critique aspects of the group’s work. There is an assumption that some form of enhanced learning takes place as a result of these interactions and that students learn from each other. Additionally, Reise et al. (2012) suggest that most studies on “peer learning situations … use a set of means to promote student autonomy and agency in learning” (p. 611). Our study takes a somewhat different approach. We agree that a component of peer learning (regardless of situation) is the promotion of autonomy and agency. We suggest that students are capable of articulating what is important to them about learning in formal situations or in the more informal/social situations that arise. Hence, our research focuses on students’ perceptions of their learning from each other.

There is a practical need to look at the quality of learning that occurs in informal peer-for-peer spaces in higher education. Peer learning can lead to high-quality learning outcomes and does not often include the expensive intervention of highly-paid faculty. In the context of music education, this is even more important, as the one-on-one teaching environment that is typical of conservatoire training can be financially constraining. Russell (2009) addresses this problem through an investigation of graduate music students working with undergraduates. His work suggests that there is value in advanced music students working with others less experienced. However, although a senior student could be considered a ‘peer’ (and that student learned a lot about teaching), the context of the sessions adopted a typical teacher-developed learning environment. Undergraduates
involved in the course also questioned the ability and authority of the senior student at times. Our project involves students of the same instrument (either piano or saxophone) who may be at different stages through the course.

**Communities of practice**

Where the idea of peer learning could legitimately be considered a learning activity, these activities are part of a broader environment, a community of practice. A community of practice may be a broad concept such as the attitudes, values, and practices of an entire conservatoire, or a subset of the broad practice such as the attitudes, values, and practices of the wind ensemble. Hewitt (2009) suggests that musical style can be interpreted as a community of practice (after Lave & Wenger, 2001) and focuses on three aspects of musical style that comprise the practice “(1) pedagogical practices, (2) performance practices and (3) practices of transmission” (p. 330). In this sense, musical style incorporates the “normative practices associated with how the repertoire of a style is curated and passed on to other musicians” (p. 331). He suggests that students entering the world of music higher education gain access to each of these three worlds through—as Lave and Wenger put it—“legitimate peripheral participation.” In this sense, students move through experiences that are situated in musical contexts and interact with contexts with varying and developing confidence. Peripheral participation is seen as the precursor to complete participation when students are competent and active participants. Reid, Abrandt Dahlgren, Petocz, and Dahlgren (2011) point out that the idea of a community of practice, which was developed to describe business relationships, slips easily into higher education parlance as it is a means to explain group dynamics. However, they also suggest that the notion provides educators in higher education with challenges. For instance, in the business workplace people are motivated with financial rewards for participation, but in the educational learning space students usually receive a grade that also qualitatively differentiates them from others in the course. They say:

> Workplace groups generate a particular sort of knowledge-in-action that becomes part of the culture of the workplace. The knowledge that is generated by group learning in universities is often limited to those particular group members. The cultural artefact of that knowledge moves out of the institution with the students, leaving the next group to rediscover aspects of the same knowledge. (Reid et al., 2011, p. 132)

A provocation for our study is provided by Hewitt: “it is tempting to assume that students wish to belong to one particular stylistic ‘camp’ and are therefore to be habituated only into the community of practice associated with that style” (Hewitt, 2009, p. 335). The manner in which our conservatoire is structured is to place students in different “units.” Hence, the piano students have a timetable that strongly encourages inclusion in a pianistic community where formal piano classes are followed by breaks where informal musical discussions can take place with the same group of students. The saxophone group are a subset of the “wind” unit, spending some of their formal learning with other wind instrument students. Therefore, they have breaks that encourage discussion amongst a range of peers. Of course, both groups are included in joint harmony/history subjects—but this is an example of another community of practice. The unit structure provokes a “stylistic camp” and therefore allows us to investigate the variation between each groups’ peer learning in the informal aspects of their studies.

A second provocation, provided by Reid et al. (2011), suggests that the specific knowledge of a peer student group is essentially lost to the institution when that group leaves. An aim of our research was to enable the student groups to develop an artefact (the DVDs) that would enable a communication between the original group and subsequent students.
Additionally, peers’ relational knowledge mediates interaction. Relational knowledge can originate both inside and outside the classroom. It may consist of conventionalized patterns of interaction, concrete shared history, as well as conceptions of peers’ characteristics, and their relations to self and others; in short, social patterns (Reise et al., 2012. p. 618). The musical and extra-musical aspects of musical styles constitute the elements of a community of practice and participants move fluidly within the community depending on their relation, status, and activity within it. The concept of legitimate peripheral participation within a community of practice was introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991) to describe what happens when a newcomer attempts to join an existing community. In a music situation, the manuscript, seating, and ensemble work become the normative practices that define that specific community. These practices need to be accepted by newcomers if they wish to become part of that community. These practices do not necessarily define the community (that may be more to do with its purpose), but they are a necessary part of membership. This is a useful theory in which to situate our own research. While there is a lot of research explaining the processes and outcomes of peer learning within formal situations, there is little that looks at peer learning in the non-assessed social situations that students inhabit.

In the project that we present below, we have deliberately (as in Topping, 2005) set up an environment that will foster peer-learning interactions in a predominantly informal environment. The aim was to encourage students to think about their learning in an autonomous way without the structured intervention of an authority. It was postulated that this sort of activity would enable students to pose problems and solve them collegially, and that the learning that occurred would be specific to the students’ own needs. Baker and Krout (2012) found that collaborative learning through the co-construction of a song enabled students to reflect on their learning during music-therapy training. Part of the brief for their students was to create a song about anything that they were experiencing at the time (however, the students’ work for the activity was closely prescribed, p.138). This study has parallels with our own that imposed a similar approach through a focus on student reflection on learning with peers, and an open focus to the development of a representative work—in our case scripted and performed videos.

The project

Typically, instrumental students receive individual lessons and combine knowledge developed in those lessons with practice-based ensemble experiences (Reid, 2001). However, there is very little opportunity for peer-learning interactions to enable students to explore variation in their learning and performance styles (Hunter, 1999). These peer interactions could be essential in developing students’ appreciation of their own artistry and that of others in their peer group (Havnes, 2008). Facilitating strong peer relationships will also enable ongoing friendship and practice-based relationships during and beyond the students’ time within the conservatorium. Students at the conservatorium come from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. The peer-learning project is a vehicle through which the participants are able to examine some culturally-related performance learning practices (Jenkins, 2009).

In this project we sought to facilitate a series of like-instrument discussions amongst students focusing on their most effective learning styles. We aimed, through student-directed peer discussion groups, to enable instrumental students to develop peer-learning networks. The students were informed that the project was about how they learned from each other and that following discussions to tease out their reactions, that they would then develop a DVD to enable future students to hear their advice and stories. This enabled the project to adopt an inter-cohort perspective.

The students were provided with a series of prompt questions for their discussion, for example: How would you typically learn in a personal practice session? How would you typically go
about learning from your friends? Are your ways of learning different from each other? How could you explain to others how you go about learning? The questions were derived from a phenomenographic perspective that aims at finding the maximum variation of experience within a group that is involved in a similar context (Marton & Booth, 1997). The first question would enable students to reflect on their own experience and the second was intended to help students tease out the learning interactions they may have with their peers. The following question would help students elaborate on their views. The questions were prompts only, allowing the students’ sessions to roam according to the importance of the issues raised within each group. As the groups had no faculty intervention during their discussions, the process was intended to allow students to make autonomous decisions regarding the flow and content focus. The groups each met at least four times during the project for discussion with the prompt questions only being used as a start for the first session. The groups kept their own records and provided a summary of their deliberations to the project team at the conclusion of the project. They then devised a series of short sample recordings of practice-based learning activity. The video recordings were based on the groups’ prior discussions and the only instruction from the project team was that the video should be for use with new students and should focus on how students learn from each other. Two groups were involved in the study, a group of pianists and a group of saxophone students. There are two major differences between the groups: the pianists usually work on their own with only limited collaborative piano activities, whilst the saxophone students regularly work together for group performances. It was anticipated that students involved in the project would develop evaluative skills through reflective practice, create opportunities for group-based musical practices, develop an understanding of their own approaches to learning and also an appreciation of variation in effective learning styles.

The peer activity was not based on any sort of formal enrolment and the outcomes of the group meetings and activities were not related to any form of assessment for their degree. Essentially, each was a group of five (piano) to nine (saxophone) student musicians who were simply asked to come together to talk about how they learned from each other, and, once discussed, to put together a video that would be useful for incoming first-year students. In this way, the project team thought that the students’ own ideas regarding learning in their specific instrumental environment would be made apparent through the video construction. The material that follows is a summary of what the students reported as their conjunctions and disjunctions about learning from each other, the affordances of their instrumental grouping, the aspects they found helped, and those that didn’t. The facilitators (also students, who organized the meetings and also did the background work to set up the recordings) were paid an honorarium, and all students who participated were provided with an A$150 voucher for music purchases. This program was supported by a Teaching Innovation and Performance Scheme grant from the university and has ethics approval.

**What the students observed**

The two student groups had a series of discussion sessions; they first teased out what learning from each other meant, and then they discussed a means of communicating this to “first years for orientation” and devised a video to express this learning. The groups then had the use of a media developer who helped to film and edit the materials developed by each group. The final product has since been shared with two incoming cohorts of students during orientation, where the participants are also mentors for the new students. Curiously, they also play the part of “movie star” to the new students, who recognize their student mentors. The discussion that follows is the participants’ own descriptions of what learning is.
The pianists

It is tempting to take the students’ written descriptions of their learning as a prioritized list. Although the project as a whole focused on the concept of learning from each other, the pianists’ summary commenced with the concepts and actions they considered important to their individual practice. Of immediate importance was students’ choice of repertoire that consisted of “what I like,” “needed for a competition,” “my teacher recommends it,” “hearing a peer perform a piece well,” and “talking to friends about repertoire choices.” Listening to, and hearing about, different repertoire from other students seems very important. The range of different works encountered with peers could be familiar or not and these extra choices influenced their own decisions. The pianists then talked of learning on a micro level, which consisted of:

1) Learning the notes—“some just learn the notes,” “some try to learn the notes whilst considering musical issues,” and “some try to memorize everything in addition to learning the notes,” “students are quite comfortable approaching their peers for advice on technical problems.” One student suggested that he was delighted when finding suggestions for fingering in library books—a rather curious way of learning from an unknown peer!

2) Analysis of musical issues—some students suggested it was fine to speak to friends about analysis, but there was an overwhelming feeling of distrust for this with the majority seeking advice from teachers.

3) Memorization—this is a large part of the work for student pianists and part of the culture of pianism. Students spoke about “muscle memory” although this was acknowledged as “unreliable.” They suggested other techniques such as the “signpost method” where they have a “safety net” of passages in the music that are securely committed to memory; “visualizing the keyboard” and “hardcore analysis.” The idea and dilemmas of memorization were a constant source of discussion for the student pianists, suggesting that this is a core element of their learning. While it seemed that most students admitted that it was their teacher they approached for memorizing advice, at least one student indicated that he had adopted the approach of one of his friends.

4) Working together—here, piano students were able to identify activities that were carried out together and that had an impact on their own learning. This consisted of some moderate collaboration in practice sessions (although one student said that he could not practice if someone was listening), performance practice consisting of “running through” works prior to a formal performance (the aim here was to calm nerves), sharing tips on how to overcome anxiety (“eat a banana, it helps to retrain the memory”), actual formal performance workshops (where they could hear and observe each other), and seeking feedback following a performance (or not).

On the whole, the student pianists placed a high value on their teachers’ knowledge and advice and suggested that advice from peers was nice, but not necessary. As part of their discussion, the group looked at the value that studying at an institution had rather than simply undertaking lessons. Overwhelmingly, the students suggested that the value of institutional study resided in the things that happened outside formal structures. This included the availability of friends to discuss repertoire, the opportunity to listen to others playing repertoire and hence being able to personally analyze different approaches and interpretations. They also acknowledged the curious role of tension provided by the competitive environment. This enabled them to benchmark their own performance and encouraged them to improve their own standard.
Following these discussions, the piano group devised their media production. Please go to YouTube to have a look at it (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJ9DApYuHMQ “SCM Peer Learning (piano)”). The video commences with a joke where the “reporter” is ejected from a practice room. Later in the video, the rejection is reflected on, which has the effect of showing that peer learning has a place, but is not the only thing that should be important—individual practice and teacher advice are prominent.

**The saxophonists**

In their general discussion on learning, the sax students acknowledged that speaking with peers about learning issues was important as the teacher–student dynamic represented an hierarchical relationship, while discussion with their friends did not. In that sense, there is no formal consequence of admitting some deficiency to a friend rather than to a teacher. The students said “this allows for more openness about frustrations and thoughts about mutual struggles.” The openness that is generated between peers allows for the free interchange of “valuable information.” A characteristic of the sax group, in contrast to the pianists, is that many of their formal activities involve ensemble work. Therefore, there are naturally-occurring times when they are together: before or after rehearsals, or in the local coffee shop waiting for a rehearsal to start. So the nature of the learning environment is distinctly different for this group and it affords a different sort of response. They said: “this camaraderie amongst peers also serves as a source of motivation and inspiration.”

As with the pianist group, there were aspects of learning that seemed critical:

a) Supporting each other through practice—here, students recognized that each was experiencing a similar sort of “struggle” with many of them “labouring on the same things.” The language used to describe learning here is quite curious, emphasizing the difficulty of the works being learned, the hardship of individual practice, the persistence required to move through the “tedium” of practice. As with the pianists, seeing how more senior students tackle a “problem” helps because it “shows a possible next step in one’s personal development.” This is important, as the senior students showed a form of intermediate position between the junior student and a professional. They said “this is less daunting than seeing and hearing the more advanced level of teachers or professionals.”

b) Hearing—obviously, for music students hearing, and consideration of what is heard, makes a difference to the way in which an individual will in turn play a work. “Listening to them play and imitating them also provides a source of knowledge, whether this be in an ensemble or performance.” For the sax group, hearing is a little like the pianists’ analysis concept. They point out that listening to others enables them to develop their own musicality as it shows them different perspectives on the interpretation of a work. They suggest that the comments and ideas of peers generate different ways of conceptualizing things. “This can happen when just talking about or hearing things and then taking it to one’s individual practice. It may only be a simple little tip or idea, but has a significant impact.”

c) Perspective—here the students describe a range of different influences on their performance. This can include the peer group, listening to others perform, working with cross-instrumental groups, which improves the idea of aesthetics, working with non-saxophonists, which is valuable “because their vision is more holistic in nature.” The sax students suggest that it is a combination of all of these different ways of listening and doing that makes a huge difference to their own interpretation of works. “Therefore, when combining the various perspectives of peers with regular teacher instruction, there is a greater chance of learning to happen to the utmost.”
The two groups clearly have different expectations for learning from each other. This is an important finding, as it is easy to consider music students at a conservatoire as a homogeneous group. Consequently, it is intriguing to examine the videos that were produced by each team. We should emphasize that teachers were not involved in the development of the video scenarios, and that material that students decided was important for their incoming peers was not edited out in any way. Therefore, the written material above should be seen in concert with the videos produced. The written material is the students’ own recount and reflection on the processes important to peer learning (or simply, learning) and plays a role in the interpretation of the videos. At face value, the videos are cameo situations typical of conservatoire practice, but at a deeper level, they represent the strongly-held views of the participants. The piano team’s video has already been referred to above. For comparison, the sax team’s work can also be found on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXkmm7dfhbY SCM “Peer Learning (Saxophone)”).

The videos

The content, structure and direction of the videos produced by the two student groups were devised without any input from the senior project team. What resulted were two different yet imaginative and informative recordings that present the student’s views on peer learning from their instrument-specific perspectives.

A common theme that can be gleaned from the two videos is the sense of community and camaraderie that can be attained through engaging in peer learning. The students talk of working with “like-minded people” and of being “inspired” and “motivated” by their peers. There are many examples in both videos of students empathizing and supporting each other through practicing. They touch upon what they feel are the most rewarding aspects of being in the conservatorium environment, including practical elements such as utilizing peers as a resource for repertoire and recordings. A particular importance is placed upon seeking advice, using their peers as a sounding board before key performances. Even the mere presence of their peers during a run through of a work is presented as an important opportunity for the student to gauge how well they have prepared the material. The videos show how the students are looking to each other to benchmark themselves, as well as honing their own skills of self-evaluation through critical listening and critique of their peers.

Although the pianists describe themselves as “solitary” instrumentalists who practice and perform alone, they do present a scene that discusses the important role that chamber music plays in their musical development. Here they talk about how this interaction enables them to develop their sonic palate through the imitation of other instruments. Another example is how they can learn to let the music “breathe” from working with vocalists and wind players. For the saxophonists, this element of ensemble playing seems more common and perhaps more intuitive. Through chamber music they are able to discuss concepts of musical expression, extended techniques, and the technical elements of performing.

Of interest is how the two groups present scenes in the videos that address the teacher/student relationship. Although willing to actively engage with peer learning, the pianists give an example that emphasizes and affirms a reliance on the student/teacher relationship. The saxophonists on the other hand present a scene where (perhaps unconsciously) they take on the roles of both the student and teacher themselves. In the saxophone example, of course the ‘student’ is not being assessed and the informal setting of the practice room disarms any possible hierarchical tension.

Conclusions

A concern of our university’s ethics committee was that the students could be identified in the videos. In the context of music performance, especially in a format that will be promulgated...
through the internet, the students were unequivocal in their need to be identified with their artistic and musical product. They had a very clear image of themselves as artists/musicians and that they should receive public credit for their work. This student perspective demonstrates a willingness for students to identify with each other in a collaborative learning activity. Although the project was not aligned with formal educational activities (and not assessed in any way), the student groups saw the video development as a part of their contribution to the overall culture of the institution. A year after the project, the same student group are now peer mentors for incoming students and actively involved in student engagement activities.

This approach is reminiscent of Wenger’s concept of ‘community of practice’ (1998). In that theory, participants move fluidly into a central space of involvement, or a more peripheral one, depending on the importance that the activity has to them personally and corporately. In Wenger’s theory, learning is not separated from action, but both are entwined aspects of life that lead to contextual learning. In other words, the music students were a part of a community of practice that enabled them to share an overall view of the sphere in which they are learning and working, bringing with it a sense of belonging and commitment. The student participants were able to reflect in action (Boud et. al., 2001) and come up with thoughts and activities that were domain specific. That specificity allows for connections to be made with students in similar contexts.

The peer interactions are also a means through which they are able to become “expert students” (Reid et al., 2011) who are able to “broaden their conception of their discipline and learning in order to include an essential and personal connection over and above their engagement with the discipline itself” (p.122). Formal learning situations are more likely to emphasize the content of learning (usually through required assignments or activities) but the peer-learning discussions enabled the students to focus on how they learned rather than what they were learning.

For the incoming students, a “second-order peer group,” there is a benefit in viewing early the experiences and thoughts of senior students. Cooperative learning in conservatoires is promulgated in formal situations by the very nature of the discipline that is collaborative through the construction of music. However, this project has shown that the spaces outside the formal curriculum are as important for the students’ overall development of their musical identity. The students have shown that there are transferable skills and attitudes that can be fostered through an informal peer-learning environment. Previously Symes and McIntyre (2000) have suggested that generic capabilities and skills could become the focus of pedagogies that enable the transfer of domain-specific skills through the development of reflective practice. The peer-learning project is an example of how these pedagogies may be enabled.

The videos devised and presented by the two student groups confirm the provocation provided by Hewitt’s work (2009). The piano video shows that students are well aware of the style of learning required, while the saxophone group perpetuates the concept that classical saxophonists are a rare species. Both groups chose to represent chamber music as an expression of collegial learning. As Hewitt suggests, the groups seem habituated into their specific community of practice. This is an important concept for tertiary music educators as awareness of the interplay between instrument specificity and informal peer learning situations will enable nuanced development of curriculum. In addition, the video material is a tool that enables the next cohort of students to encounter issues of personal and peer learning from the outset of the course. In our institution the videos are now used as a catalyst on orientation day to start the new cohort off on a discussion of their own learning and the environment (or community of practice) of the conservatoire. The participant group had become explicitly aware of their learning approaches and became mentors for the following cohort. This in turn has become a valuable component of the new student orientation program.
Funding
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References


