Article

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Reflection in the musical development of popular music undergraduates

Through the looking glass: A study of the role of reflection in the musical development of popular music undergraduates at the University of Liverpool

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written in the last 30 years about musical practice and performance, but there is little consensus over what practice really means, or how musicians progress by practising. Whilst academics historically focused primarily on the experiences of Western classical musicians and on individual learning in the conservatoire, more recent research has been devoted to popular, jazz and folk musicians. Informal behaviours such as aural learning, self-teaching and experimenting in the band are central to the ways in which popular musicians learn. The current research project has a major focus on the practice and performance of popular musicians as described in university undergraduate students’ reflective essays. This article offers highlights in the musical development of one cohort of popular musicians over the 3 years of their study, including examples of their practice behaviours, the development of technique, collaboration with band members through rehearsals, creating original material and gigging on and off the university campus. These findings point towards the possible role of reflection to support musical maturation of students, motivated by their membership of bands and a gradual development of technical skills, linked directly to set lists and band aspirations to perform off-campus.

KEYWORDS

practice

performance

popular musicians

reflection

formal/informal learning

Introduction

In the ‘Art of Practice’ research project at the University of Liverpool, Department of Music, I investigate how students of classical1 and popular music2 acquire the knowledge, skills and expertise of practising. The main object of enquiry is to discover how individuals develop musically through practice. This highlights an investigation into the process of practice, as well as the educational and social context of the learning. This article presents a review of relevant literature and reports on the experiences of popular music undergraduates, based on data gained from reflective essays for the 3 years of their study, and in one-to-one interviews with the Head of Performance and selected students.

Background

It is well documented that practice is a key part in the development of musical performance excellence (e.g. Austin and Haefner-Berg 2006; Papageorgi et al. 2010). Classically trained musicians often report 10,000 hours or 10 years of practice to reach professional standards (Ericsson et al. 1993), although the assumption that expert status is the result solely of time spent practising has been challenged recently, for example by Hambrick et al. (2013), who highlight other factors such as IQ and personality. Despite the extensive research that has been conducted over the last 30 years by academics into the practice habits of classically trained musicians, much of which is reviewed by Miksza (2011), researchers have not agreed on a single model of musical development, which encompasses practice behaviours. Hallam (2001: 28) investigated expert practice and conceded that even the definition of an expert is open-ended. However, she concluded from interviews with 22 professional musicians that they do indeed ‘learn to learn’.

In the absence of consensus about what an individual does to become an expert, I consider the strategies that are thought to support learning, which may variously be grouped under titles such as metacognition, self-regulated learning or independent learning. Outside the field of music, Zimmerman (2002) describes how high-school students in the United States were helped by their teachers to develop self-regulated learning strategies, which he links to metacognition. The key elements that promote more effective self-regulated learning include setting proximal goals, self-awareness, monitoring progress, self-motivation, effective time management, attributing causation to outcomes and the ability to apply and adapt newly gained knowledge to future behaviour and skill development. This is all well and good, but these psychological models have largely been applied to describe the practice habits of classical musicians. How do these models align with the behaviours of popular musicians?

Green (2002: 16) gives a definition of informal learning, based on the behaviours including those of adult popular musicians, and reveals that popular musicians are largely self-taught, influenced by their peers, and work aurally with reference to audio or video material, rather than using printed notation. Lebler (2007, 2008) explored peer learning and assessment amongst popular music undergraduates and highlighted the importance of university courses mirroring professional practice in the music industry in the sense that students learnt to produce recordings as well as performing. This compares with the wider skills, which comprise informal learning identified by Welch et al. (2008), which include the professional skills of networking, listening to music of preferred genres and making music for fun. Mak (2009) describes non-formal learning as highly contextualized, and typically involving high levels of participation from learners, which is typical for popular musicians working in a band.

Green (2002: 4) and Folkestad (2006) presented the notion that musical learning can take place across a formal–informal learning spectrum. There is little research available, which attempts to posit a theory for musical learning for popular musicians; Smith (2013a: 22) developed a ‘Snowball Self model’ to describe the complex nature of the development of drummers, pointing towards the need to include social and psychological factors to understand musical development. Jorgensen (2011) has highlighted that learning may take place outside of lessons and lectures, pointing once again to a more informal approach. Furthermore, popular musicians may regard formal approaches to learning as ‘anti-establishment’, as Parkinson (2013) noted. It would seem, then, that classical and popular musicians adopt different approaches to learning, which may also have implications for assessment in each genre.

Assessment – both formative and summative – is a key part of the individual, group and institutional process employed to track progress. Musical assessment varies from institution to institution and by musical genre, including peer and faculty assessment (Ginsborg and Wistreich 2010; Lebler 2007, 2008). Individual assessment can also be enhanced by reflection, using a personal diary or formal written account of learning. Reflective practice – as an approach to learning – has been embraced by tertiary educational institutions in England, Scotland and Wales over the last two decades, following theories of reflective practice developed by Schön (1987) and refined for educational practice by Ghaye (2011) and Pollard (2002), amongst others. The original idea, which made reflection attractive in an educational setting, was the notion that reflection can bring about individual learning, and is therefore ‘a good thing’, an assumption that Boud (2010) points out is rarely challenged. It is reported that reflective journals or practice diaries offer one type of tool to develop metacognitive thinking skills. For example, Leon-Guerrero (2008) emphasized that music students need to develop skills in reflection in order to develop their understanding of practice and performance. However, given the non-linear, informal learning of popular musicians, the notion of productive reflection is perhaps helpful, as Boud (2010: 33) explains:

Reflection is an open, unpredictable process. It is dynamic and changes over time. It necessarily has unintended consequences … it deals with matters that do not have a ready solution and are not clearly formulated and as such, it cannot be controlled and managed as a routine process.

As I discuss below, written reflection as an assessed part of the performance module for undergraduate musicians at the University of Liverpool is a feature that offers an element of uniformity between the popular and classical musicians in this research project. As Mak (2009: 42) suggests, openness to different styles of learning, including reflection, could be a unifying factor that brings together formal and informal learning, paving the way for lifelong learning.

The research question

The primary goal of the research into the practice and performance behaviours of music performance undergraduates at the University of Liverpool is to establish how, through written reflection, they understand their own development as musicians over a 3-year course. In order to explore the students’ musical development, I draw upon students’ reflective essays, supplemented by tutor and student interviews and student focus groups, to identify how musical development relates to established theories of musical learning, and highlight the factors (individual, group, sociological and cultural), which influence this process. The research question I discuss is ‘What are the key factors identified through students’ reflections which contribute to the musical development of popular musicians taking the performance module?’.

The institutional context

The University of Liverpool offers 3-year undergraduate programmes in Music and Popular Music. The intake each year is approximately 65 students, who can choose the performance module in all 3 years of study. I focus below on the core elements available to popular musicians, whilst acknowledging that classical musicians follow a similar course of study. Students on the classical performance module give one assessed recital at the end of the year, combined with a reflective essay documenting their experiences of practice and performance during the academic year. The popular performance module requires musicians to perform twice a year in December and May. These performances are assessed by university faculty staff using a standard marking protocol generating 70 per cent of the final grade. All performance students – both popular and classical – are expected to keep a practice diary or online practice blog. The diary is used as a prompt for the 1500-word end-of-year reflective essay about the individual experience of practice and performance, which is marked according to agreed criteria generating 30 per cent of the final grade. The two tutors for popular (and classical) performance hold weekly 2-hour workshops for students, as one of the tutors explained in interview:

The first years – pop and classical – get a lot of input in class into aspects of learning and practising. Some sessions are people explaining in front of the class what their one-to-one instrumental or vocal lesson content has been, followed by ‘how’ they practised it, what problems arose, discussions as to how it could be practised and then all have to make notes as to what they could use.

It is important to note that the tutors take care *not* to ‘instruct’ their students how to practise, echoing Boud (2010) who claims that productive reflection should not be controlled. Even though bands may be visited during rehearsals, coaching from tutors is deliberately kept to a minimum; the emphasis is on a process of self-discovery, which is enhanced by discussion with peers and tutors. This concurs with Cowan’s (2013: 4) approach, as a mentor to engineering students:

I want to empower each learner supportively […] I try to help them to be the best that they can be – but always leave them to decide what to do and how to do it. I certainly do not instruct, or tutor.

As the Head of Performance explained, reflection enabled students to develop critical thinking skills about their own practice experiences and behaviours.

Methodology

The data for this project were drawn principally from the students’ reflective essays, which were made available to the lead researcher at the end of each academic year, after formal assessment results were made public, supplemented by semi-structured interviews.

Close reading of the student reflective essays (n=32 for each of 3 years) resulted in the identification of common themes as described by students. A research project based on self-reported behaviours begs the question of whether student behaviour is voluntary, or determined by their tutors (Cowan 2013). However, in the 96 essays examined in this study, I could identify only five named references to the tutor for popular music, suggesting that the undergraduates were independently describing their personal experiences. In addition, the essays were read by an independent professional popular musician (performer/recording specialist) working in music education to verify the identification of the main themes.

Qualitative data drawn from the reflective essays and interview transcripts were examined based on the principles of textual analysis. Following McKee (2003), the focus was on understanding how students make sense of their practice behaviours. Repeated close reading of all the available narratives was considered to be the most appropriate method to gain an understanding of how students’ behaviour and attitude towards practice was changing, which is similar to the ‘zooming in’ approach of Johansson (2013) and methods adopted by Green (2002) and Smith (2013a) in exploring data generated from interviews with popular musicians.

Ethical approval was obtained from the university Ethics Committee in October 2012. Students were given information about the research project and a total of 47 signed a consent form to confirm that they understood the nature of the study and wished to participate, and that they were free to withdraw at any time for any or no reason. This form also offered an opt-in clause for taking part in interviews. As a full-time music teacher in London and part-time doctoral student, I made considerable efforts to keep my distance from students when conducting focus groups and one-to-one semi-structured interviews in order to avoid influencing the content of reflective essays, and I was not involved in any marking or assessment of the cohort.

Findings

Themes in reflective essays: First-year popular musicians

The popular musicians were a diverse group. Their ages and backgrounds varied, including those who were mainly self-taught, those who had had some instrumental or vocal lessons and those who already considered themselves to be experienced performers. Some had received classical training, including one cathedral chorister; others already had some experience of performing with established popular musicians. It is important to note that students are not admitted to the university on the basis of their practical abilities as performers, but in accordance with academic criteria derived from their final examinations in secondary school or college. This goes some way to explaining the wide range of abilities in the cohort. In close reading of the reflective essays, three main themes emerged related to musical development: (1) technique, (2) insights and (3) targets (see Figure 1, below). Whilst the majority of these students tended towards a narrative description of their experiences in the first year in their reflective essays, 25 articulated some kind of insight into their own development as musicians. A minority of students, either with extensive experience of playing with bands, or who were already working with older, more experienced musicians, exhibited much deeper levels of reflection, both in terms of their individual development, and about the process of band rehearsals.

Figure 1: Main themes in reflective essays – first-year popular musicians (n=32).

Technique

As Green (2002) reminds us that popular musicians are largely self-taught, it was perhaps surprising to find that the nineteen popular musician students who took regular lessons wrote about technique. Maybe this reflects the institutional expectation that lessons are a ‘good thing’ in a department where classical and popular musicians mix socially, and the fact that – as noted above – several of the musicians have received prior classical training. A focus on technique can also be seen in light of what Smith (2013a: 26) describes as ‘hybridized learning’, a term that he uses to describe the way in which the drummers in his study adopted a variety of different learning approaches. Many of the student vocalists accepted to a greater or lesser extent that practice was necessary to develop their skills, reflecting their prior experiences of individual music lessons at school. In particular, they were very positive about their one-to-one lessons, even though they reported a relentless focus on warm-ups and technique, which was new for many:

Before I had any lessons from Anne, I didn’t always warm up before individual practice, but by having these lessons, I now know the importance of a decent warm up and so before practising in the future, I will always warm up.

(TH)

These students were perhaps coming to terms with a more formal approach to musical learning, which, for some, might lead to insights into the roles played by more experienced musicians. One guitarist persevered with the technical work on chord voicings, alternative chord shapes and modal scales in his lessons and reported that this enabled him to be more creative when working with others, whatever the genre (Table 1):

One thing I have learnt is how I always need to be able to adapt to the type of band I am playing in as I have realised how differently many musicians work.

(JS)

It is perhaps significant that this guitarist came from a musical family: his father was a well-known manager and promoter of jazz festivals in Northern Ireland, and the student quoted above had been exposed to many professional musicians during his childhood. This may account for his more formal approach to the development of technique. On the other hand, a guitarist who had been self-taught prior to coming to university was dismissive of the idea of personal practice:

Although I appreciated [that] these chords and scales were useful, and perhaps vital in my progression to becoming a better player, I found the practice tedious, bland, insipid and dull.

(DM)

This comment highlights the fact that a more formal pedagogical approach did not work for all. Some students reported that they were more likely to find their own resources to support individual learning such as playing along with audio or video tracks, using YouTube lessons and working aurally, without the involvement of an instrumental or vocal tutor. This echoes the ‘anti-establishment’ culture of learning embraced by popular musicians discussed by Parkinson (2013).

These comments suggest that using ‘practice’ as a term to describe individual work to improve technical or interpretative skills (as reported by the majority of classically trained student musicians) can be quite misleading in the context of popular musicians. ‘Practice’ is used by popular musicians to describe a much greater range of musical activities and encompasses many informal learning situations in which musicians will learn from each other, or experiment with new material in a band rehearsal, harking back to Smith (2013a) who described the multitude of activities, which a drummer might include under the term ‘practice’.

Insight

The popular musicians’ weekly tutor-led workshops offered opportunities for bands to perform to each other and gain peer and tutor feedback. In addition, the tutor spent three evenings a week coaching bands in rehearsal. It seems clear that he was keen to encourage first-year bands to bring a creative twist to their cover versions. Here is a typical comment from a student:

By jamming along to and transposing songs from a wide range of different genres from hip-hop to deep house, I have gained an insight into alternative scales, intervals, phrasing and percussive techniques that can be used to great effect in creating original sounds.

(CS)

Another guitarist’s commentary stood out from his peers’ as he gained experience not only from bands, but also by playing for a musical theatre production, recording how he dealt with a large amount of unfamiliar material. He listened to the musical numbers, practised difficult passages and ensured that he had the appropriate guitars and equipment. His comments suggested that he was displaying behaviours more typical of his classical peers, in the sense that he prepared before the rehearsals and focused on technical aspects to ensure that he could play fluently:

The rehearsals were incredibly different to the ones I have with the university band. Due to the small amount of time we had to go through the songs, we all had to be concentrating and 100 per cent prepared for it.

(AM)

Targets

It was somewhat surprising to find that just over half the students (n=17) mentioned only *general* targets, either for improvement within their first year or for the second year. This seems to be in line with DeNora’s (2000: 62) comment that identity is constructed in a social context and as such, band identity, I would suggest for popular musicians, may be more important than individual identity. This may go some way to explaining why there are no clearly defined individual goals to be found, as many of the student musicians saw their musical development within the band. Furthermore, as many first students explained in their reflective essays, they were not making much progress in their tutor-assigned bands, and thus perhaps found it hard to set specific targets. This requires some explanation.

At the start of the first year of study, students were assigned to bands by their performance tutor. This led to considerable difficulties for many of the students: nineteen musicians reported problems with attendance at band practices, saying ‘We never knew who was going to turn up, it caused tensions’ and ‘Attendance hasn’t always been 100 per cent. I can’t perform if nobody else shows up’. Students had access to dedicated rehearsal spaces within the department, but even this did not facilitate regular rehearsals for many of the bands. Reasons given for lack of attendance included part-time jobs, going away for long weekends and involvement in other bands outside the university, which were considered more important. This relaxed attitude to rehearsals was also observed by Söderman and Folkestad (2004) in their study of hip hop musicians who were similarly unconcerned about being late to rehearsals and recording sessions.

With the pressure of the first assessed performance in December, one might expect that bands would quickly agree on the songs that they would be performing. But twelve individuals struggled to agree on repertoire for their gigs: ‘There was a divide in musical taste. We were unable to decide on songs’. Eventually all the students managed to finalize their set lists, but not without some arguments, which were mentioned in eleven of the reflective essays:

This band was in all honesty a nuisance. Many of the scheduled practices were half empty, with the few practices that were fully attended, rife with arguments, raised voices with lots of finger pointing and shoulder shrugging.

(DM)

The 2012–15 cohort seems to have been particularly keen to describe their negative attitudes towards tutor-assigned bands. However, it would be foolhardy to attribute too much significance to this finding, as these negative experiences have not been replicated by subsequent groups of students. The pedagogical aspects of first-year students playing in friendship groups, or in tutor-assigned bands, fall outside the remit of the current focus of research.

Themes in reflective essays – second-year popular musicians

All 32 popular musicians continued with the performance module in the second year. Of these, 22 students explicitly mentioned going to lessons provided by the music department, with 1 student taking private lessons in town. This represented an increase of four students in comparison with the first year – and this seems to underpin one of the areas on which they focused in their reflective essays, namely technique and performance craft. In the discussion below, I focus on two areas – individual practice and band practice/working on original material. In particular, songwriting is so central to the development of bands, that it is arguably impossible to divorce the creation of new material from the process of band development. It is important to note that from the second year, students were free to form their own bands, either within their year group, or including other musicians on campus, or, in two cases, students rehearsed and performed with bands operating wholly outside of the university environment. In accounts of both individual and group practice sessions, I have explored whether students adopted informal or formal approaches to individual practice and band rehearsals.

Individual practice

Not surprisingly, with a great deal of time spent in band rehearsals, there were fewer accounts of individual practice in the second-year essays, and several students made it clear that what they practised on their own was linked to what they were rehearsing with their bands. A female vocalist reported:

On top of lessons, I also practise on my own. My solo practices are enjoyable, […] although I feel like sometimes because I am on my own, I will slack off and maybe not be as picky with my playing as I would be in band practice or in my lessons: I do better when I am accountable to somebody.

(KM)

Based on the available data, for many of the popular musicians at the University of Liverpool, a conscious awareness of the need to develop technique appeared to emerge during the second year, strongly motivated by positive experiences in collective musical performance, such as bands. Unlike their classical musician peers, more of whom had grown up with a culture of individual practice, my data show that popular musicians developed the motivation to practise individually as a result of playing in bands, which they had formed themselves in their second year, or were already members of outside the university. This is echoed by one of the most experienced guitarists in the second year, who was already playing professionally outside the university. He recognized the value of developing jazz guitar techniques in his lessons and becoming more creative, compared with his first year:

I have improved my versatility as a guitarist because I’m now getting used to playing in different styles and being more creative in music that I would normally only listen to and not get to play with a band.

(JS)

Band practice/Working on original material

If the band was the centre of focus for learning for popular musicians, then it seems worth exploring how the students describe their band rehearsal sessions. Green (2002) describes a variety of different models for generating original material, ranging from a single composer bringing music to the band in an almost finished state to collaborative jamming based on a single riff or musical idea as a starting point. The same processes were seen in the student bands at the University of Liverpool, driven by the rapport between musicians. One singer described the process of rehearsal thus:

I feel we understand each other as musicians to the point that, if one person has an idea that they’re struggling to articulate, someone else will know what they are trying to say, and help them explain it to the band.

(BH)

One bass player explained in detail how a new band *Defunkt* worked in the second year, revealing a shift towards more formal rehearsal techniques:

We began to plan our practice slots more carefully, running through the songs we had, consecutively and collectively discussing ideas for new songs with a hands on approach to playing them as we discussed what direction to follow, and focusing on sections of songs that we felt needed work instead of wasting time by running through the whole song.

(JM)

A mature student described the change that occurred in attitude to practice in the second year. Perhaps it was the challenge of managing band rehearsals in another city, which led to a greater focus on individual practice, which, in turn, made rehearsals more effective:

The thing that made the band gel together so well, is that everybody actually goes away from practice and does their utmost to learn their own parts as best they can; everybody comes prepared musically for the next practice. This is ideal, as when we go to practise our songs, we are doing just that – practising our songs, and not learning them.

(AS)

Looking at the self-reported experiences of the second-year students, it seems fair to say that due to the requirement to write a formal reflection on their experiences, the popular musicians showed a developing sense of what effective individual or group practice entailed. For those students who were involved in bands that were performing regularly, or were invited occasionally to play as session musicians, there was a deeper understanding of the learning process, which in many ways mirrored the developments I have identified for the classical musicians in their second year, which are discussed elsewhere (Esslin-Peard et al. 2015). Most importantly, popular musicians moved beyond ‘play-through’ behaviours and developed some metacognitive practice strategies, such as overcoming technical challenges by practising a small section of the song.

It is perhaps helpful to look for other indicators, which may explain this shift towards more formal approaches to practice and rehearsal by examining the uptake of individual lessons over the 3 years of study. Unlike their classical musician peers (n=15) who all took lessons for 3 years, an increasing number of the popular musicians took advantage of this offer in the second and third years; see Figure 2, below.

Figure 2: Popular musicians – lessons over 3 years (n=32).

One drummer explained why she did not take lessons in her first year:

I have never had any instrumental lessons. It was never part of my agenda, growing up. Mostly because it was time-consuming, costly, and there weren’t many female drum teachers. The first ever drum lesson I had was in Liverpool [as an undergraduate student]. It was an interesting experience. For me, it was like going to the dentist for the first time.

(LF)

This recalls the discussion of the challenges facing female drummers by Smith (2013a: 139–40). This female drummer subsequently revealed that she had started lessons in her third year, illustrating a change in attitude:

Perhaps I felt a bit more relaxed because he was a friend before a teacher. And it is all very casual. I learnt new rudiments and learnt to like the metronome. I am a lot more solid with tempo than I was last year.

(LF)

The data show that there was an increase in uptake in the second and third years, perhaps because students heard that lessons could be useful and found tutors with whom they worked well. As students realized that they needed technical competence to perform in public, they were more likely to turn to professional peripatetic teachers for individual lessons and support.

The notion that individual practice facilitates the development of technique, supported by regular lessons, was not self-evident for many popular musicians, who often appeared to work through musical challenges during band rehearsals, rather than practising on their own.

In the second year, 20 students mentioned practice, and 24 mentioned technique, but there was only one record of a student describing individual practice. This mature student with over 15 years’ experience of playing in bands before he went to university described how he would practise for 1–2 hours a day, first looking at band material, and then pieces of music that interested him personally. It is interesting to note that this student did not take lessons, perhaps because he felt that he had already developed his technique sufficiently to meet the needs of his regular band. In summary, the reflections of the second-year popular musicians revealed an increasing awareness of more formal approaches to rehearsal and practice, with a clear preference for practising with the band, rather than individually.

Themes in reflective essays: Third-year students – taking control

The data gathered from the students’ reflective essays covered a wide range of topics, and an account has already been given of a broad range of factors, which influence musical development in the first 2 years of study (Esslin-Peard et al. 2015: 141–42). In the third year, there was a marked difference between the progress made by students who were in bands playing in the city of Liverpool and further afield, and those playing for course assessments on the university campus. Of the 32 students in the cohort, only 12 students played in just one band for performances, which would be assessed by faculty staff in December and May. Practice became more important for all the students, related to the needs of their bands, whether for university assessment or external gigs. Undergraduates reported both a more disciplined approach to individual practice and more focus on technique, as the following comments illustrate: ‘This year my practice has become much more focused’; ‘disciplined and intensive private practice to improve my technique’. These students also displayed behaviours that pointed towards the deliberate use of metacognitive practice strategies: ‘I started by practising the difficult things, slowly at first, then gradually increasing the tempo’. Some students who were in multiple bands described their practice as aimed at developing their craft within bands, rather than on their own, noting that they were not motivated to develop their technique in private practice, as a guitarist explained: ‘My personal practice is sparse: from playing for eight hours a week in bands, my motivation [to practise alone] is low’.

One drummer who was playing in four bands noted the need for rehearsals to be productive: ‘Jamming is always really fun and quite relaxing to do, but I feel like this does not benefit in having coherent rehearsals’. Pressure on rehearsal time for some students, combined with regular performances on- and off-campus, stimulated them not only to practise more, but also to think more critically about their performance. One singer reported, ‘The band had more purpose than just to perform at the final [university assessed] performance. We started getting gigs at various venues’. There was also an increased understanding about stage presence. A vocalist explained, ‘The more I was gigging, the more confident I was getting, especially with my backing vocals’.

As two members of the band *The Sneaky Nixons* explained in interview, they regarded public performance as practice, whether the gig was good, bad or indifferent. The lead singer had been highly critical of individual tuition in his first year, but when he wrote about regular gigging, he focused on the importance of learning to deal with different venues, acoustics, technical equipment and playing to a live audience as well as recognizing that he was developing his vocal skills as a result of one-to-one lessons. Supporting a more famous band in another city was a tricky experience, compared with the home crowd, as the lead singer explained:

The away days in Manchester where you play in front of 20 people are tough trips. Especially compared to the previous night in Liverpool where the venue was twice as big, the crowd hit one hundred and pretty girls all come running to offer congratulations after the show.

(DM)

This view was echoed by another lead singer, underlining the importance of learning outside the classroom explored by Jorgensen (2011):

It is these gigs outside of uni [university] that I feel make us stronger as a band. It’s playing to a group of people who not only don’t know you, but on the most part don’t care if they offend you that makes it such an effective part of gigging.

(LT)

Many of the students took advantage of Liverpool’s vibrant music scene to see other bands live, which helped them to understand their own performances in a more holistic way, as one bassist related:

For me, it always feels like we are doing more than just playing a song. Instead, we are creating an atmosphere, creating an image for the audience. It doesn’t matter, when the song is playing, how intricate my bass lines are because the bass lines are not a single item, they are part of the collective.

(AS)

Drawing together the third-year student experiences, popular musicians who were playing off-campus had a deeper understanding of the wider context of their learning, namely learning to perform in a variety of venues and to create a product that was acceptable to audiences. Through their reflective essays, they began to recognize how to combine formal and informal approaches to practice to progress in their bands.

Discussion

Popular music researchers are, I would suggest, respectful of the ethos and culture of bands, which, in the past, may have made their own careers without external help, as Cohen (1991) relates in her study of two punk bands in Liverpool. However, recent research by Smith (2013b) stresses the complexity of the working lives of popular musicians who rely on diverse networks of others within the music industry to build portfolio careers. Does the reflective essay interfere with this seemingly complex process? I would suggest not, drawing on the notion of productive reflection posited by Boud (2010), as long as tutors allow students to reflect freely. What seems to be emerging from this study is that the assessed reflective essay may have stimulated critical thought about the learning process and it appears that the popular musicians adopted some of the formal approaches to practice, which would be considered normal for their classical musician peers. In many ways, their reflective essays revealed that they were working fluidly across the formal–informal learning spectrum described by Green (2002) and Folkestad (2006). However, it would be helpful to try to find a more objective measure of the progress of these popular musicians in the core cohort. In the absence of an exit questionnaire at the end of the course, I turn to the summative results for the popular performance module in their third and final years.

An analysis of the data from the thirteen students from the 2012–15 cohort who were awarded a first-class undergraduate degree (70 per cent of marks or over) for popular music performance showed that the most important factors pointing towards a high grade were writing their own material and playing external gigs (n=13), taking individual lessons (n=12) and recording in the studio (n=4). Importantly, as the music department does not offer lectures in songwriting, nor how to record in the studio, nor how to obtain bookings for external gigs, the numbers point strongly towards the power of self-directed and collective peer-to-peer informal learning, driven by the aspirations of members of the bands and a willingness to take risks beyond the university campus.

Conclusions and further research

From the perspective of curriculum design, the evidence suggests that there is a delicate balance to be maintained between offering popular music students a large amount of freedom to find their own way in this creative art, whilst still offering a scaffold of elements of formal structure, including tuition, the weekly lecture and regular assessment that is both formal and informal, formative and summative. The music department at the University of Liverpool is perhaps, from my outsider’s perspective, still managing the popular music performance module through a lens of western classical music instrumental and vocal pedagogy, with the annual performance assessment criteria based upon musicianship and performance skills. However, this approach begins to seem outdated in comparison with programmes being developed at institutions such as The Institute of Contemporary Music Performance in London (Smith 2013b) and Griffith University in Australia (Lebler and Weston 2015). As the current longitudinal data cover only one cohort of students, further research may throw light on knowledge sharing between different cohorts (i.e. more experienced and relatively naïve), which may support networks to facilitate the arrangement of external gigs, or choosing appropriate recording venues and help the music department to understand to what extent the introduction of assessed, written reflection can stimulate and support self-critical individual learning.

Whilst the development of popular musicians may appear to contradict the established learning path of classically trained musicians, this research project suggests that undergraduates studying popular music initially exhibited a strong bias towards informal learning behaviours. As they progressed through their 3-year programme of study incorporating written reflection, some began to adopt formal learning strategies, including some metacognitive practice strategies, to help them to perform more effectively with their bands. Moreover, for those who went into the studio to record, there was a clear understanding that the quality of the product they were producing, namely a potentially viable commercial track or music video, required more expert levels of performance. This echoes the findings of colleagues running the popular music programme at the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University in Australia (Lebler and Weston 2015).

To make the transition from a student popular musician to a graduate who continues to perform with a band whilst managing an incipient portfolio career to finance his or her musical passion is a tough call. Even for the members of a band that seemed to have made considerable progress over 3 years, reflection led to realism, as the lead singer and manager of the most successful student band of the cohort, *The Sneaky Nixons*, described in his final essay:

We have now signed two record contracts, released two singles and an EP with three more singles and a second EP on the way. We played three times in Manchester, once in Brighton and once in London, with many more dates to follow. […] Although we are far more successful than the majority of other incompetent university bands, we are still a million miles away from any real commercial success.

(DM)

Whilst the experiences he described may not be typical for the cohort, I would suggest that the requirement for the annual written reflection enabled the popular musicians in this study to push their independent learning as far as their motivation allowed. Research following the 2012–15 cohort after graduation, including occasional interviews, is ongoing and may shed more light on the musical development of the graduate popular musicians and reveal whether conscious reflection continues to be a part of their rehearsal and performance activities. Research is continuing with current students, which may reveal more consistent trends in the role of reflection in musical learning, which could have implications for programme design and changes in pedagogical approaches for popular music studies. Moreover, if reflection is going to have any lasting impact on popular music studies, it would be highly relevant to explore how it might be applied to wider areas of the popular music curriculum, such as entrepreneurship, networking and band management.

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Table 1: Table of sources for quotes from students.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Source** | **First Year (2013)** | **Second Year (2014)** | **Third Year (2015)** |
| Reflective essay, guitarist | AM |  |  |
| Reflective essay, guitarist |  | AS | AS |
| Reflective essay, vocalist |  | BH |  |
| Reflective essay, vocalist | CS |  |  |
| Reflective essay, guitarist/vocalist | DM |  | DM |
| Reflective essay, bassist |  | JM |  |
| Reflective essay, guitarist | JS | JS |  |
| Reflective essay, vocalist |  | KM |  |
| Reflective essay/interview, female drummer | LF |  | LF |
| Reflective essay, lead singer |  |  | LT |
| Reflective essay, vocalist | TH |  |  |

Note: Names have not been given, in order to protect the identity of participants.

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1 ‘Classical’ is used to describe musicians who have been educated in the tradition of Western classical music, for example orchestral instrumentalists, pianists and opera singers. These musicians generally have one-to-one specialist tuition from a young age and are accustomed to practising regularly and frequently on their own to develop their technique and broader musicianship.

2 ‘Popular’ is used to describe musicians who are largely self-taught and show a preference for popular music, jazz and folk genres. These musicians may learn from peers or musicians whom they admire and develop their musical skills aurally as individuals and/or within a band.