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Illuminating constellations of peer mentoring: the case of Music programmes in Higher Education

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Illuminating constellations of peer mentoring: the case of Music programmes in Higher Education

Formal peer mentoring schemes are often viewed as supportive mechanisms enabling individuals to engage with role models to scaffold the acquisition of social capital that aids successful transition between different educational or professional environments and to inspire and motivate decision-making processes. This study explores the findings of mentor exit interviews conducted at the end of a pilot peer-mentoring scheme to support aspirations for progression into postgraduate study that was delivered within a UK conservatoire's Faculty of Music. These exit interviews illuminated constellations of informal mentoring platforms, implicit within multiple sites where the 'horizontal' structure of music programmes (UK FHEQ levels 4-7) intersects with principal instrumental study and associated activities structured in 'vertical' departments. The findings suggested that these reflexive multi-directional exchanges are not formally conceptualised as 'mentoring' but recognised within the subject area, and hold potential transformative power in supporting students in their transition throughout higher education and beyond.

Introduction

The philosophies and concepts underpinning music curricula in higher education are varied. Many conservatoires' focus on vocational training of professional musicians as performers, other programmes may concentrate on theoretical or historical understanding of musical constructions, whilst there are a spectrum of programmes that offer some combination of both. How music students, with increasingly divergent interests and backgrounds, can be better supported throughout their programmes of study and in preparation for graduation and transition into the diversity of creative industries, is a key motivation for this discussion. Here we consider areas within higher education music curricula that implicitly contain informal peer mentoring opportunities, which could be employed to enhance approaches in supporting progression of students. This issue is particularly pertinent in striving to best support those from non-traditional backgrounds to transition into postgraduate study.

We analysed mentors' progression narratives and reflections on participating within a pilot mentoring scheme, provided during exit interviews. Aspects noted by the participants in the pilot project were greater understanding of routes of progression into further study and modes of networking with regard to developing employment opportunities. Unexpectedly, we also identified hidden cross-year peer mentoring, and this identification is, we suggest, an example of potential 'progression support sites' within pre-existing infrastructures and curricula. It is posited here that intersections of activities across and within programmes and departments can generate constellations of intergenerational peer mentoring opportunities and the value and effectiveness of pre-existing implicit mentoring exchanges could be enhanced through framing such opportunities more explicitly when considering programme design and faculty infrastructure. We suggest points to consider with programme teams to aid the identification and utilisation of sites within curriculum to develop more explicit opportunities for constellation mentoring. We also suggest there is value in understanding more fully the nature and extent to which pre-existing cross-year and cross-programme contact impacts positively on individuals in order that this can be further augmented more systematically to support the acquisition of social capital that aids transition or success within learning contexts and to inspire and motivate decision-making processes. Furthermore, as these potential platforms are discipline specific, they may be more effective in supporting evolving individual student's needs and aspirations than a 'bolt on' separate peer-mentoring programme.

Mentoring and Progression Research

In recent years, a focus on barriers to higher education in the UK has shifted from undergraduate to postgraduate progression. The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, chaired by Alun Milburn (The Cabinet Office, 2009) suggested that postgraduate level education was linked to access to 'the professions' and to potential financial barriers that those from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds may face. Similarly, the so-called Smith Review of Postgraduate Education (Smith et al., 2010) suggested that gaps in data prevented further understanding of the current postgraduate population. An emphasis on data and specifically gaps in progression data have been seen as a challenging barrier in itself for the higher education sector to overcome to better understand how this can be defined and researched in order to generate postgraduate specific interventions.

The UK government review 'Students at the Heart of the System' (BIS, 2011) bought these ideas together to direct the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) to investigate this further. The political impetus to raise numbers and widen access to postgraduate programmes of study was then reflected in a number of initiatives developed and funded within the Postgraduate Support Scheme (PSS). This programme of activity funded by HEFCE was established to explore what support was needed to widen access, to increase the knowledge about what barriers to postgraduate study look like, and how widening participation to postgraduate study may be understood as different or similar to that developed to support entry into undergraduate study (Wakeling, 2015).

Marr (2014), Austin and Vallely (2014), and Wilson, Hunter, Spohrer, Bruner and Beasley (2014) identify progression as an area that is expanding our understanding of what widening participation is. Melling and Jones (2001) and Wilson et al. (2014) identify mentoring as part of the tool kit of widening participation. Roland (2008,p.65) previously suggested that mentoring could contribute to community building as part of a social justice agenda: "community building in the educational setting through mentorship and citizenship may foster sustainable intercultural connections through a shared vision of educating for inclusion."

Mentoring delivery exists in a variety of models and has been widely explored both from a pastoral and well-being perspective as well as from a learning perspective. Many models draw on adaptions of business sector models to support new entrants into a particular environment. In a widening participation context, mentoring interventions consider ways perceived structural barriers to participation and success can be challenged (Wallace, Abel, and Ropers-Huilman, 2000), in contrast to policy practices that adopt deficit-model approaches that seek to raise aspiration in identified groups of disadvantaged students (Wilson, Hunter, Spohrer, Brunner and Beasley, 2014). Some traditional models of mentoring utilise the experience of more 'senior' individuals to assist the induction process, however this approach to mentoring can invoke significant ethical issues regarding power dynamics, particularly when the mentee is viewed as a protégé and an exertion of power may be possible (Moberg and Velasquez, 2004, p.101). This model of mentoring, explored in relation to supporting new teaching faculty within a Higher Education context is described by Sorcinellia and Yun (2007,p.58) as a 'top down' approach that is based on the transference of experience and associated expertise.

There are interventions that are more reflective of approaches that promote change on and for students rather than those which engage and partner with students (e.g. Gail Thomas and Hanson, 2014). Paczuska (2004) explored student mentoring as a way of developing sites of learning communities and through a similar theoretical approach, Abelev (2009) examined the experience of first generation US-college entrants through the lens of Bourdieu's *habitus* and identified the role of an ambassador-type mentor that was able to model institutional patterning to the first generation students. For Wilson et al. (2014) mentoring not only serves

to identify established patterns of interaction, but also ways of connecting individuals with different forms of knowledge and ways of navigating these patterns and developing social capital.

Peer mentoring suggests a model where there is mutual learning regardless of the varying degrees of experiences, but is particularly emphasised as a way of supporting those who may be more vulnerable or less likely to successfully progress through a higher education programme (Terrion and Leonard, 2007). For Dodgson and Bolam (2002,p. 53) peer mentoring, where students from different year groups support students as they enter higher education support the transition experience "following the principle of minimising the unsuccessful induction of new individuals to new contexts and explicitly increasing retention of students from non-traditional backgrounds." In the context of widening participation, and increasing participation and potential correlation of retention and success issues, peer mentoring offers a potential platform for supporting students in their development as learners and as future professionals (Cartney and Rouse, 2006).

Cross-age, or intergenerational mentoring is a form of mentoring that also supports social development (Noll, 1997) and has also been identified as a site for peer mentoring (Wilson et al. 2014). Karcher (2009, p.292) suggests that cross-age peer mentoring "can have beneficial effects for both the mentees as well as the mentors who provide it". Collings, Swanson and Watkins (2014) highlight the growing interest and employment of peer mentoring within higher education and explore its impact on student well-being in transition into Higher Education that correlates with what Karcher (2008,p.140) describes as potentially creating a developmentally supportive environment that has a number of "social, emotional and academic benefits".

Multi-mentor networks respond, according to de Janasz and Sullivan (2004), to the increasingly complex academic environment where a hierarchical mentoring relationship is no longer realistic, nor desired. The dominance of dyad-based mentoring as the focus of mentoring research (Molloy, 2005) has evolved into the *mentoring network* or *constellation,* which for academics provides an alternative mentoring model "...that encourages a broader, more flexible network of support, in which no single person is expected to possess the expertise required to help someone navigate the shoals of a faculty career." (Sorcinellia and Yun, 2007, p.58) contributing to the professional socialisation necessary for the development of academic identity formation, supported by the ability to access professional networks (Clarke, Hyde and Drennan, 2013).

The multi-mentor model utilises multiple collaborative couplings founded on cross-cultural and non-hierarchical ethos that confronts in its design ethical issues found in more traditional mentoring platforms such as the hierarchies maintained in traditional mentoring coupling of one 'experienced' and one 'inexperienced' partner (Colvin and Ashman, 2010) and how power and control must be acknowledged and mitigated within the design process of any peer mentoring programme in higher education (Christie, 2014).

Project Context and Overview

In 2015 as part of the PSS, a London-wide consortium led by the Royal Veterinary College and Access HE, was established and known as the London Postgraduate Mentoring Project (LPMP). The purpose of the LPMP was to examine the potential impact of peer mentoring on non-traditional UK higher education participants particularly from ethnic minoritiy and lower socio-economic backgrounds, and those with disabilities who are currently underrepresented in postgraduate study.

As part of this initiative the INSPIRE/ASPIRE pilot-mentoring scheme was devised for a specialist higher education institution with a student population of c.1,000 studying on

undergraduate and postgraduate practice-based programmes in Music, Dance and Musical Theatre. It was delivered by the Learning Enhancement Unit, and managed by the departmental Projects Manager, who also supported the mentors in their role.

The INSPIRE/ASPIRE scheme appointed seven mentors from a pool of 10 postgraduate applicants. Criteria for selection included empathy for others, and a commitment to widening participation. The mentors demonstrated diverse educational, career and life experiences to inform dyad-based mentoring relationships with undergraduate students. The mentor's induction outlined the ethos of mentoring and specifically how the approach was designed to be open to the diverse interests and potential support needs of each individual mentee in promoting progression to postgraduate study. Musical coaching and advice relating to performance or assessment was outside this remit, thus distinguishing between the role of the mentor and that of a teacher (Mullen, 2010). Mentors were required to document the scheduling and content of mentoring exchanges with the Project Manager and to provide ten contact points with assigned mentees. These could be face-to-face or via digital platforms depending on the needs of the individual mentee.

Undergraduate students were invited onto the scheme via programme leaders and the Student's Union. The initial response resulted in only one interested student making contact with the Project Manager. Programme Leaders and other senior staff promoted the scheme via e-mail, on the Programme VLE pages, and in seminars and tutorials. The project only subsequently attracted 3 mentees, but as a proportion of institutional population, the uptake was not dissimilar to other pilot projects (as identified at the project conference). The size and funding of the project was reduced, and the project team embarked upon a process of exploring why uptake was so low.

At the end of the scheme, exit interviews were conducted with the mentors in a semi-structured focus group format. This format allowed mentors to interact and to compare and contrast their experiences both of mentoring and their own postgraduate progression narratives.

The exit interview intended to identify:

- any major themes or issues that arose during the pilot ;
- which mentoring approaches for this type of institutional context would be most appropriate to develop, in particular considering why undergraduate take up had been limited;
- their insights with regards to pivotal influences that impacted on their own/other's educational journeys that could support others.

Mentor exit interviews were recorded and kept on a central streaming database that only the project team had access to. The project team, both arts education specialists, were then able to analyse further and identify themes relating to progression and mentoring.

Findings

Social and Professional Networks

Mentors reiterated what has been described in much literature relating to widening participation and progression into undergraduate study in describing the impact of networks, both social and professional in supporting them in their own decision- making journeys. This particularly related to a subset of issues pertaining to trusting and navigating information, specifically on institutional websites, which mentors described as 'not the same as being able to ask someone you trust'.

Discussion topics included:

- The importance of having teachers 'connected' to the music industry and creative sector;
- Knowledge of and access to opportunities such as consultation lessons, masterclasses, open events;
- Importance of initiatives such as student orchestras for exchange with students from other institutions;
- Potentially evolving career goals;
- Benefits of part-time study versus full-time study;
- Issues viewing postgraduate study as an assumed part of training of professional musicians as performers in certain fields but not 'why', or 'how' to be fully informed to choose the nature and select direction of postgraduate pathways rather than merely approach as a *'it's just kind of what you do next'*;
- The realisation of how different other individual journeys to postgraduate study of music could be. Every journey is different - a route into a conservatoire is very much an individualised process, with different rationales, experiences and multiple variables.

Cross-year group contact and non-structured mentoring

As part of the exit interviews we explored why an extra-curricular mentoring programme specifically targeting 'non-traditional' participants in higher education was not so attractive to undergraduate students, non-traditional or otherwise, and responses indicated the value of more 'authentic' informal mentoring exchanges. Thus the mentors were asked '*where do you have contact with students from other year groups within your programme and associated activities*?' The flexibility of the semi-structured interview model enabled us to map cross-year/ programme interaction across the Faculty of Music to examine whether opportunities for student contacts across the different levels and programmes within the Faculty were a substantial feature of the learning environment.

Some departments, depending on size and nature of instrument, have weekly department lessons delivered according to instrument (e.g. viola/ flute classes) rather than year/level. Additionally, some instruments have dedicated group classes, which supported the notion that students were in learning contexts across other year groups. Furthermore some instrumental teachers offer 'open lessons', which facilitate access for students to observe one another's lessons.

Cross-year group contact was also identified in further activities across the Faculty. Notably, ensemble music making such as the Sinfonia Orchestra, Concert Orchestra, Big Band and Jazz Groups offered opportunities for cross-year group participation with undergraduates working alongside postgraduates. Sometimes this involved postgraduate students coaching sectional rehearsals, or being rotated around different ensembles, particularly if they played an instrument that is in short supply. In Jazz Groups, bands formed across year groups and often resulted in professional gigs and socialising. Postgraduates also rotate around ensembles when instrument need required it. Mentors highlighted informal opportunities for cross-year group contact, in the 'corridor conversation' opportunities leading to postgraduate students being asked to listen to undergraduate students practice in order to give feedback on technique or musical qualities.

At curriculum level all students within the Faculty had cross-year group contact within a module called CoLab, which is a process-driven learning experience. Students from different disciplines and different years collaborate on projects developed by students and staff for two

weeks during each academic year when all programmes are 'off timetable' to facilitate this exchange and experimentation.

Discussion

Our exploration of cross-year group interaction enabled us to identify many sites where informal peer mentoring across programmes already exists in a variety of forms manifesting as constellations - networks of contact points and with varying rationales and scope that are dependent on the individual context, need, and social dynamics. These constellations are developed across musical environments as an ecology and are intersected by instrument, repertoire, and level of study as well as the profile characteristics associated with widening participation such as socio-economic background, ethnicity, and gender.

Further research was undertaken, such as considering the work of Mullen (2010) who explored the notion of spontaneous mentoring in student-faculty relationships. This spontaneous mentoring is informal, not managed, structured or sanctioned by the institution. There are parallels with some of the mentoring relationships we identified, where much of the peer mentoring that takes place is invisible within curriculum structures but is evidently taking place and so the challenge is to make the invisible visible without losing its essence and its effectiveness which is primarily based on its qualities as a spontaneous response to a need at that time.

Within a discipline and educational context, mentoring can be used to develop a sense of acculturation and/or academic success. This can be translated in order to efficiently understand these within the context of a discipline. Literature reviews (e.g. Jacobi, 1991; Crisp and Cruz, 2009) aiming to understand the knowledge base pertaining to the role of mentoring in undergraduate success identified that significant questions were left unanswered in the research on mentoring, particularly regarding a definition of what mentoring was in relation to academic success, about different intersectional qualities (race, gender, etc.) and what are the elements that make up a successful mentoring regime.

All the activities we identified are common within music education and the professional sector, e.g. one-to-one instrumental lessons, orchestras, jazz bands. It is possible to explore these activities as potential sites for embedding peer mentoring in a manner that supports music making practices. This promotes the networking approach advocated by de Janasz and Sullivan (2004) and Sorcinellia and Yun, (2007) combined with a networking skill generally acknowledged as a part of a professional musician's skill set.

Music curriculums can serve as a platform to develop embedded mentoring opportunities, which we suggest are particularly useful for students who are not so experienced within these settings and for progression into postgraduate and professional contexts. Whilst timetables, space, and individual ethos can pose challenges to be interrogated, as does the potential to dilute the energy of spontaneous mentoring, these are precisely the issues individual students will be navigating in their own learning journeys.

Johnson (2011) explores the utilisation of peer relationships in developing listening skills but by utilising the school-based ensemble structure as a context for developing the relationships. In particular, Johnson describes changing the participant structure within this context to one "that is designed to encourage student-to-student interaction [which] allows the clarinet player to collaborate with a stand partner or other section member, experimenting with different pitches and developing a deeper understanding of intonation. In this manner the students take responsibility for their own learning in a way that engages their attention" (2011, p.51). Similarly Lana (2013) describes the utilisation of peer mentoring within the context of children and community choirs, in a way to utilise the wide range of ages.

These approaches take an active design approach to embedding mentoring within the musical environment. Warren (2002) explores curriculum design in relation to widening participation and argues that separate academic support models have limited impact on effective transition and support for a more diverse student body. Warren suggests integrated or semi-integrated approaches to curriculum as a more effective approach. Based on our findings and discussion we propose four points for consideration that integrates an approach to constellation mentoring embedded within curriculum that combines the benefits of informal mentoring relationships but prompts a programme team to establish a more explicit design method.

1. IDENTIFY potential existing sites, including social media networks, for a mentoring curriculum to embed and extend a network or constellation approach. By working with students to map where these relationships already occur, programme teams can identify naturally occurring sites that can be nurtured to promote embedded support for all students.

2. FORMALISE the process of mentoring in order to give it status and to make visible the multiple narratives of journeys into and through higher education. Rather than waiting for spontaneous chances for conversations about progression, actively build a model written into the curriculum, where learners are supported in interacting with this design. This should take into consideration the 'ebb and flow' of mentoring requirements, including peak points around performance and assessment schedules.

3. AFFECT ASSUMPTIONS of both staff and students to develop understanding about the link between mentoring and the development of understanding and engaging with different social codes and how this links to widening participation knowledge. Understanding how students from non-traditional backgrounds perceive themselves as not participating within the dominant social or discipline codes and conversely challenging deficit-model narratives that position these students as lacking or deficient in their cultural capital. Embedding mentoring within the curriculum acknowledges that this is something to be broken down within the discipline itself. It reiterates what our mentors told us about not being aware of all the different routes into postgraduate study that were possible. By explicitly outlining this through curriculum exchange, the plurality of routes becomes visible rather than hidden at an individual level. Therefore, mentoring embedded within a music curriculum can go some way to expose the assumption that there are certain behaviours or routes that are required to gain access to, in this case, postgraduate study, that are unattainable to those from non-traditional backgrounds. As these embedded mentoring relationships are more complex and rich than a traditionally framed one-directional peer mentor role, we propose visualising these platforms as a constellation within which an individual maps their journey and traces connections and directions that are meaningful to their needs and aspirations.

4. TRANSITION into, through, and out of higher education focuses the mentoring curriculum as a dynamic, multi-modal approach to divergent needs of students. An embedded approach to mentoring using structures, including social media networks, familiar to music students and correlative with music environments (i.e. the ensemble) enables a dynamic towards utilising the interpersonal benefits traditionally associated with mentoring.

Conclusion

For those working with programme teams, it is important to consider implicit constructions that are naturalised within the subject domain but offer enhancement opportunities pertaining to student support, particularly in relation to progression and social development. Our exploration of cross-year group spontaneous mentoring could be a model for exploration in a range of other subject domains to assess how students may be learning from each other in ways we had not perhaps previously understood. Within vocationally orientated music

curriculums, platforms including ensembles and open lessons offer an opportunity to embed formalised mentoring taking advantage of the naturally occurring peer relationships formed within these contexts. A design approach to understanding the learning ecology from this perspective enables programme teams to construct more explicit opportunities for students of all levels to engage with. Partnering with students offers opportunities to understand progression journeys and how cross-year mentoring can support non-traditional progression routes, particularly by making visible different approaches to learning and learning journeys. It also enables an understanding of how connected learners are to each other and how these opportunities can be used to build communities of practice rather than reinforcing traditional hierarchical structures. This approach can be used to dismantle perceived and actual barriers in engagement and progression, primarily through unpacking assumptions about how our diverse learners make decisions about the next steps in their journey.

By utilising a constellation approach to mentoring, music students can become further skilled in networking, thereby building employability skills, without the curriculum being reduced to a mechanism for building an employable musician. By this we mean that the social relations promoted within such an approach to curriculum support an inclusive pedagogical practice as an explicit aim, but in doing so, promote an aspect that is an important element of a professional musician's 'tool-kit'.

The implications for community and progression are notable if these cross-year group opportunities as learning opportunities are multi directional and inclusive. Enhancing a mentoring-infused ecology can showcase positive exchanges and potential opportunities inherent in these episodes. Development of curriculum that embeds these opportunities can promote more inclusive and engaged community approaches and ensure that more students have access to communities of practice.

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