



McCaleb, Murphy ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9867-9909> (2021) Teaching Through Ensemble Performance. In: Timmers, Renee, Bailes, Freya and Daffern, Helena, (eds.) Together in Music: Participation, Co-Ordination, and Creativity in Ensembles. Oxford University Press

Downloaded from: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/4469/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

[https://global.oup.com/academic/product/together-in-music-9780198860761?resultsPerPage=60&facet\\_narrowbybinding\\_facet=Ebook&lang=en&cc=gb#](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/together-in-music-9780198860761?resultsPerPage=60&facet_narrowbybinding_facet=Ebook&lang=en&cc=gb#)

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repositories Policy Statement](#)

# RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at  
[ray@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:ray@yorks.ac.uk)

## Introduction

Strategies for teaching ensemble performance in higher education historically draw on lecturers as conductors or mentors. Ostensibly mirroring leadership in Western classical ensembles, these traditions have solidified into a pedagogy which can easily remain unexamined through habit or presumed beneficence. This adherence to tradition may prevent opportunities to explore potentially more efficient and effective ways of working.

Underpinning this traditional approach to teaching ensemble performance is a presumption that 'successful performance, in which students execute their individual part accurately in the manner dictated to them, is [...] evidence of successful learning' (Mantie, 2012, p. 118). This prioritisation of product over process has been highlighted in research over the last decade on choral and wind band performance (see Freer, 2011 and Allsup and Benedict, 2008, respectively). Freer describes this as the performance-pedagogy paradox, proposing that leaders of pedagogic ensembles feel tension between presenting a high-quality performance and providing high-quality learning experiences (Freer, 2011). Although these outcomes are not necessarily mutually exclusive, he suggests that successfully achieving both is the exception rather than the norm – and I agree.

Traditional models of ensemble pedagogy mirror elements of transactional and transformational leadership in accordance with which side of the performance-pedagogy paradox they are most subject to. Transactional leadership prioritises goal achievement whereas transformational leadership focuses on group members' individual development (McCaleb, 2014). In this context, transactional leadership emphasises the achievement of successful performances whilst transformational leadership focuses more on the development of the ensemble members.

However, just as Freer proposes that the performance-pedagogy paradox can be resolved through balancing both goals, these two kinds of leadership may be balanced in a third path. Professional chamber ensembles exhibit qualities similar to the business model of alternating leadership, where members assume '*ad hoc* leadership positions [...] by temporarily and freely [alternating] back to be observers, followers, and so forth' (Andert et

al., 2011, p. 54; cf. McCaleb, 2014). This case study investigates how this style of leadership might be applied within higher education, where the lecturer rehearses and performs within student groups.

## **Method and Pedagogical Approach**

In my work at York St John University, I have used observations of rehearsal videos and focus groups in the 2017/18 academic year to assess participatory ensemble teaching across all three years of an undergraduate music programme. Working with thirty four students across five groups, these ensembles included

- three jazz combos (Hancock Ensemble, 14 students; Bru, 9 students; and Beck, 8 students) where I played bass trombone,
- one soul band (12 students) where I played bass trombone and made transcriptions and arrangements, and
- one acoustic folk band (Storytellers, 5 students) where I played accordion and sang.

My involvement in each ensemble was based upon two key tenets. First, I am a musician, just as my students are. Thus, I operated the ensembles in such a way as to be no more or less musically important than any of the students. To this end, none of the ensembles traditionally used a conductor, and I played instruments in them that are rarely used to lead. This mirrors Leonard Tan's description of democratic musical participation, where 'every player has to participate actively and thoughtfully in order to render the whole greater than the sum of its parts; there can be no "spectators." No one does everything, but everyone does something' (2014, p. 66). Second, it was not necessarily my place to provide solutions in rehearsals. Rather, a maieutic approach was anticipated to encourage students to make decisions about the ensembles for themselves. Allowing students to play a larger leadership role (even temporarily) should allow them to 'learn musical independence as they might learn civic participation, by *making musical decisions that matter*' (Shieh and Allsup, 2016, p. 33).

Focus groups led by myself at the end of each academic term provided insight into the students' experiences. I minimised my influence in the focus groups by speaking in broad enough terms to limit students' second-guessing intended topics or answers, avoiding

providing personal opinions on any of the topics discussed, and not discussing this strand of my research with my students during this academic year. The students were aware that this research was on ensembles and how they might improve, but no other information was provided. Having transcribed, anonymised, and thematically coded these conversations, key topics emerged (cf. Vaughn and Turner, 2016). The appropriateness of this coding and emergent topics was verified by another member of university staff.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Overall Impact of a Participatory Ensemble Teaching*

Regular engagement with the decision-making that shapes an ensemble appears to benefit students' development as ensemble musicians. As noted within the focus groups at the end of the academic year, members of all ensembles thought they improved, both in terms of 'coordination in performance, on a technical level' (P7, Soul Band) and how 'the group got more confidence and more comfortable' (P15, Hancock Ensemble). In particular, students spontaneously commented in these focus groups how they would 'listen out to everyone else playing and having [their] own ideas, [...] therefore contributing to [the ensemble development]' (P5, Soul Band). Likewise, they spoke of how important they felt it was to have the opportunity to voice their opinions, which would help them lead their own ensembles in the future (P1, Soul Band and P18, Storytellers). As Shieh and Allsup remark, decision-making is 'understood as a capacity or power, one that is cultivated with, through, and beyond a lifetime of thoughtful engagements' (2016, p. 34). Engaging with many musical decisions in rehearsals increases students' capacity for dealing with technical challenges, as well as boosting confidence and gaining artistic independence as individuals.

### *Equality*

The democratisation of the decision-making process was noticed by students throughout rehearsals and at the end of the project, with remarks in the focus groups including 'everyone has a equal voice' (P4, Soul Band) and 'we all have an opinion and we all are like an equal' (P18, Storytellers). This equality extend to myself, with one student saying 'our

feedback and like concerns was just important, as important as yours; [...] you don't get that in other ensembles' (P25, Beck). However, this equality was not without conditions: 'Everyone there had the chance to input their own opinion. [...] If they didn't speak up, [...] it's their fault [...]. The chance for ownership there all the time' (P15, Hancock Ensemble). Students viewed this democratisation positively, with one remarking that they thought that it was 'probably what's made this [group] more successful than if you did decide to just solely lead' – success, in this instance, being interpreted as the overall quality achieved in the performance (P8, Soul Band).

Midway through the project, some students indicated discontent with some of the decisions I had made on their behalf. In Soul Band, two members wanted more say on larger interpretative decisions that went into the arrangements being performed. One pointed out that if she had done the arrangement, she would have made it fit more in the current range of her instrument (P9, Soul Band). Another suggested that harder harmonies were evenly spread amongst the singers, allowing them to feel 'like we had more control over what we were doing' (P8, Soul Band). As Shieh and Allsup clarify, 'an appropriate standard for fostering musical independence might well be the exhortation that *students make musical decisions that matter*' (2016, p. 31). Following these students' comments, I deliberately refrained from making arrangements for the remaining three ensembles, and elected not to choose any repertoire for Storytellers. In this group, these students remarked as to how I was more the 'focused facilitator' (P20, Storytellers) and 'stabilisers on a bike' (P22, Storytellers) than the key decision-maker.

### *The Role of Lecturer*

Whilst I may have aimed to step back from traditional leadership, there was a risk that this would not be evidenced in action. However, that does not appear to be the case. One student remarked that I was 'the one that was drawing our attention to things. [...] It was us as a group that decided what would happen and how we'd do it' (P15, Hancock Ensemble). Placing responsibility on students this way was pivotal, as one remarked 'there's a difference being told what you need to improve and recognising it in yourself' (P25, Beck). One student said 'You made us actually think about what was wrong ourselves' (P3, Soul

Band), and another specifically pointed out that I ‘ask more questions rather than statements’ (P7, Soul Band). Another student commented ‘you gave us the puzzle and we had to put it together’ (P11, Hancock Ensemble). Students often compared this approach to leadership more as being a ‘focused facilitator’ (P20, Storytellers) who played in the band as well (P26, Beck). Whilst the students were not privy to the motivations underlying my strategy as an ensemble leader, they clearly noticed how it had deviated from tradition, commenting that I should’ve been ‘the leader’, and yet I somehow wasn’t (P22, Storytellers).

My efforts to stay out of the spotlight were particularly noticed by one student, who pointed out in a focus group that I was the only member of the Hancock Ensemble *not* to solo: ‘in the actual performance, you took a relatively [...] back seat approach, but in the rehearsals you were very much at the forefront’ (P15, Hancock Ensemble). Stepping back in this way took some getting used to, both for me and the students. It was frustrating to recognise an easy solution to a rehearsal issue but not to act on it immediately – instead, encouraging the students to identify and resolve the issue for themselves, a strategy which ran counter to students’ expectations. Most praised how helpful this approach was particularly in comparison to other ensembles. It was somewhat disheartening to hear how students were so used to hearing leaders ‘just going “you’re wrong” or “let’s just do it again”, or [saying] what’s wrong in such a technical way that nobody could possibly understand’ (P7, Soul Band) or how one student would be ‘afraid to speak, never mind say that I’ve done [something] wrong’ (P28, Beck).

### *Power*

One theme that emerged from my own observations and notes was that of the power imbalance between myself and my students. Regardless of how democratic an ensemble is, the lecturer still acts as gatekeeper and validator – encouraging behaviours, expectations, and standards, and validating decisions and measures of quality. At times, this imbalance was willingly accepted by the students, one of whom remarked that they were ‘relying more on [my] judgement, because I felt you were the one who was familiar with the genre, so I was trusting you a bit more’ (P4, Hancock Ensemble). As the ‘validation of knowledge is

inseparable from issues of power' (Mantie, 2012, p. 107), the power relationship between myself and my students likely has implications for students' learning. Attempts at levelling the playing field through participatory lecturing bears resemblance to a 'truly active pedagogic encounter', 'one in which there is concern and care between parties, [placing] teacher and learner in a horizontal space' (Allsup and Benedict, 2008, p. 166). In later work, Allsup problematises this horizontal space, writing that 'the democratic classroom is indeed one where learners have a stake, a very large stake, in the outcome of their education; it is also a place [...] where power is shared and distributed. But having a stake in one's learning is not the same as knowing all that one needs to know to secure a desired end' (Allsup, 2012, p. 173). There is scope for more in-depth inquiry into this topic in music pedagogy *writ large*. It may be that encouraging creative autonomy in students requires more situations where they have the space to be independent – with opportunities for feedback on what they do given that freedom.

## **Conclusions**

Adopting participatory ensemble teaching in higher education has had several key outcomes. First, there is potential for students to feel increased ownership over the ensembles they participate in, encouraging achievement of higher quality performances. Second, equality in decision-making processes can encourage students to act increasingly as reflective practitioners. Third, undertaking this project has highlighted the complicated power relationships (and imbalances) that are at play between lecturers and students – a social context which might impact students' democratic engagement in both their learning and ensemble musicking. I do not think that this approach to ensemble teaching is to be adopted in place of traditional transactional or transformational leadership styles, but complement them, creating a broader spectrum of ensemble participation.

At this stage, it is difficult to tell what impact participatory ensemble teaching has on students' long-term musical development. Prioritising students' development as reflective practitioners within ensembles over traditional approaches to ensemble teaching does not negate the performance-pedagogy paradox – if anything, it exacerbates this tension between expected learning and performance outcomes. However, this research project

does illuminate how focusing more on students' learning than the creation of high-quality performances might necessarily change the roles I and my students inhabit.

There is scope within higher education music curricula to question the role of traditional teaching methods, particularly when those methods might minimise students' development as autonomous reflective practitioners. To borrow a call to action from Allsup and Benedict, 'Like it or not, we [as teachers] are role models for our students. We need to ask ourselves, "What is wrong with a particular educative model that perpetuates systems of domination and that serve less than transformative endpoints? Who does this model serve? And more importantly, who is not served?"' (2008, p. 170). Ensemble teaching in higher education can serve all of our students better, but lecturers need to be willing to break from tradition to explore the ways in which we might do so.



## Works Cited

- Allsup, Randall Everett (2012). Music education and human flourishing: a meditation on democratic origins. *British Journal of Music Education*, 29(2), 171–179.
- Allsup, Randall Everett and Benedict, Cathy (2008). The Problems of Band: an inquiry into the future of instrumental music education. *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 16(2), 156–173.
- Andert, Darlene, Platt, Alan, and Alexakis, George (2011). Alternative, Grassroots, and Rogue Leadership: A Case For Alternating Leaders In Organizations. *Journal of Applied Business Research*, 27(2), 53–61.
- Freer, Patrick K (2011). The Performance-Pedagogy Paradox in Choral Music Teaching. *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 19(2), 164–178.
- Mantie, Roger (2012). Striking up the band: music education through a Foucaultian Lens. *Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education*, 11(1), 99–123.
- McCaleb, J Murphy (2014). *Embodied Knowledge in Ensemble Performance*. London, Routledge.
- Shieh, Eric and Allsup, Randall Everett (2016). Fostering Musical Independence. *Music Educators Journal*, 102(4), 30–35.
- Tan, Leonard (2014). Towards a transcultural theory of democracy for instrumental music education. *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 22(1), 61–77.
- Vaughn, Porcia and Turner, Cherie (2016). Decoding via Coding: Analyzing Qualitative Text Data Through Thematic Coding and Survey Methodologies. *Journal of Library Administration*, 56(1), pp. 41–51.