
TEACHING THE TEACHER: HOW THE ISOLATED COMMUNITY CAN GROW AND DEVELOP ARTISTICALLY FROM THE INPUT OF EXPERTISE

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ABSTRACT

In most regionally isolated communities in Australia there exist pockets of musical ability. Music teachers are plentiful away from the capital cities and it is largely from these teachers that the local isolated community learns its musical skills.

However it is self evident that the level of technique learned by the student can only equal that of the ability of the teacher. In capital cities teachers have access to methods of developing their own musical abilities by working with professional performers at music academies, attending masterclasses, etc. These opportunities are generally not available to the teacher in a rural community.

This paper will demonstrate the development of a model for building learning communities by importing a skilled professional performer into the local community to work with teachers. This model is the preferred theoretical method advocated by professional groups throughout Australia, rather than the older model of teaching at the grassroots level, that is, the professional performer working with individual students. Anecdotal evidence and personal experience will provide examples of the effectiveness of this community based teaching model.

INTRODUCTION

There is little published literature on the subject dealt with in this paper. The nature of the model, being an innovatory approach, necessitates much of the material being anecdotal.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 1996) there are 7,113 persons in Australia who describe themselves as music teachers. No easily available statistics divide the teachers into those who reside in an urban location compared to those who reside in rural areas.

The above statement does not assume that the majority of the 7,113 are music teachers in capital cities, it is merely a statement of total numbers. It can be inferred from other means that there exists a large number of music teachers who reside, and presumably teach, in geographically isolated or regional centres. According to the latest list from the Music Teachers Association of Queensland (MTAQ, 2001) there are 28 annual Eisteddfods in regional areas of Queensland alone. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that in Queensland there are 1,302 people who describe themselves as professional music teachers (ABS, 1996). It is not an improbable leap of logic to assume that there must be local music teachers in each of the locations where Eisteddfods are held, and their surrounding areas, to service the needs of local performers.

There is much printed material available for the isolated teacher to research for professional development in the fields of the theory of practice. The literature is abundant with texts and treatises. However, for practical development of performance skills, printed texts are of limited use.

It has been my experience in the music profession that any performance teacher, without external stimulus, must work continually to maintain their music technique. Marianne Uszler noted that "private teachers are those most likely to be in the recycling business. Many teach as they have been taught – using the same methods, pieces, pencils and metronomes that shaped and defined their own early music world." (Uszler, 1985). To improve the teacher's own performance technique and develop his or her teaching strategies, without guidance, is an uphill task. It is a hard task for the individual student, unless impressively gifted, to improve his or her technique unless the teacher is of a higher level of accomplishment to guide and train. This means that if the teacher has taught the student to the level of his or her own technical capability, then it will be indeed rare for the student to progress any further. It would need outside intervention to train the teacher to a higher standard or level of accomplishment for that teacher to help the particular student progress. The same can also be said of the teacher trying to improve not only his or her

physical instrumental technique, but also to improve teaching skills and to learn and assimilate new teaching and observational strategies.

The ability to access quality teaching above the level of the capability of the regional music teacher is indeed difficult. There are several options which are available to music teachers in capital cities. There are the Conservatoria or Music Departments housed within the major universities where quality professional level teachers are available for lessons. There are also the ABC orchestras in each capital city, whose members are frequently willing to work with other musicians to improve their skills. For the vocal teachers, there are the skilled soloists in the three remaining full time professional opera companies (Opera Australia, based in Sydney; Opera Queensland, based in Brisbane; and the State Opera of South Australia, based in Adelaide).

There exists only one regional Conservatorium or Music Campus in Australia outside metropolitan areas, the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music in Mackay, housed as a school within the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts in Central Queensland University.

Access to the opportunities available for regional music teachers compared to their city based colleagues is fraught with disadvantages. There is the cost of travel in such a large country as ours, and with the recent failure of regional airlines, the short but expensive journey to a large centre to attend lessons in person is an impossibility for some.

It becomes a major problem for all self employed people when time which would be otherwise spent on income generation is spent on other activities, even if these activities may lead to self growth and development. "More independent studio teachers depended on their business for a living wage, unlike those in earlier decades who only supplemented a spouse's income" (Burns, 2001). This is no different for music teachers, and any lengthy stay away from their private practice becomes a financial penalty that, combined with the cost of travel, accommodation, and the cost of lessons, makes any such venture a major financial consideration.

In this country there has never been the European tradition of the itinerant music teacher. In the past when musicians visited regional centres for AMEB (Australian Music Education Board) examinations or to judge

Eisteddfods, or when major orchestras toured regional centres, there have existed opportunities for these experts to share their skills in the community. These opportunities are rapidly drying up, due mainly to the economic rationalism that has invaded funding for the Arts in recent years. As Francois Klaus, Artistic Director and Choreographer of Queensland Ballet, so eloquently states "A world which is governed by economic rationalism is not healthy for the arts because its benefits to the community, like those of the environment, are not easy to quantify" (Klaus, 1999). He goes on to say "Yet government support for the arts remains limited, and I feel the reason is that Australian governments do not view the arts as important."

Orchestras rarely, if ever, visit regional centres more often than once a year, and the AMEB now only examines in the largest of each state's regional centres, all members of smaller communities having to travel to attend examinations.

Australia is not alone in this situation. In recent e-mail communications to me Canadian music teacher Sean McLennon wrote "As for professional development, there is very little opportunity in the community. There are provincial and national conferences that we can attend. Sometimes we fly somebody in to give a workshop. Or, as we did in 1996, we left for a year to study at a university...of course all of this travelling is quite expensive" (personal communication, November 29, 2001).

So what opportunities exist for the regionally isolated music teacher to improve his or her own skills and why is this important? It is very important in terms of the isolated teacher's professional growth, or professional development, and its effect on lifelong learning for the teacher's local community. It can be argued that every teacher needs "knowledge of strategies, techniques and tools for creating and sustaining a learning community, and the skills and abilities to employ these strategies, techniques and tools" (McInerney & McInerney, 1994).

In a country that is not skilled-music-practice oriented, help for professional development for the professional musician is extremely limited. For example, in a recent (24 March 2002) internet search on www.yahoo.com.au, searching only Australian sites, and using "professional development" and "music" as my search criteria, I found only one site. A similar

search substituting "sport" for "music" yielded 5400 listings. Although, in honesty, I did not search every listing generated by the sports search, most of the sites that I did find were sporting organizations offering professional standard coaching for existing players, on both an amateur and professional level, and sporting coaches.

It is a recognised fact in music teaching that students, once they reach the level of the technique of their teacher, rarely progress until they move on to a teacher with more experience and better technique than the teacher with whom they currently study. This may be an impossible proposition in even a relatively large regional centre. In Mackay where my campus is situated, a city with a population of 60,000, there are four recognised teachers of the voice, including myself. An exceptional student, if I was not in this city, would have to relocate to find expertise in teaching that would help them progress technically.

The alternatives that exist today are limited, and ultimately unsatisfactory. There is one area, although still in its infancy in the music teaching arena, which may eventually prove to be a worthwhile solution. That area is video-conferencing or electronic communication.

"The use of distance learning technologies, particularly two-way interactive video teleconferencing capabilities, is proliferating rapidly as higher education institutions reach out to wider audience bases, develop closer ties with their communities, and forge relationships with distant peers. In short, music colleges are rethinking what it means to go to school" (Wright, 1997).

This example is especially relevant to a technologically advanced country such as the United States, where universities proliferate and high speed video links are ubiquitous throughout tertiary and secondary institutions. But, as Wright so clearly states in his paper:

"The limitation with any video teleconferencing delivery platform is in the bandwidth...in the eyes of many, current video teleconferencing systems are no match for the exacting audio standards musicians feel are necessary to present a viable alternative for the professional teaching at applied music."

In Australia, as in the United States, according to John Barnes, the Electronic Technical Officer for the Mackay Campus of Central Queensland University, the best video conferencing links

that Telstra offers is a 6 channel ISDN connection at 384 kbs (personal communication, November 20, 2001). While this is adequate for conversational connections, and indeed is used extensively in my school for inter-faculty meetings, the quality is still not good enough for the standards required for high grade professional music instruction.

Picture and sound quality are erratic and, from personal experience attending many videoconferences, the quality of both sound and vision are frequently and irregularly interrupted. This would necessitate much repeating of both performance and instruction during an 'online' lesson in an advanced setting, where the interpretation of minutiae is of the utmost importance.

The major drawback with ISDN connections is the availability. Large government bodies, private corporations of substance and universities are the majority of the users of this form of communication in Australia. The availability of this platform is rare in the regional setting.

The lesser alternative is connection by videoconference over the Internet. While there are many local Internet Service Providers scattered throughout Australia's regional centres, the speed of connection, and therefore the picture and sound quality, negates this method in any serious teaching situation. The fastest speed modems in current available technology run at 56kbs. Picture quality and sound quality are reliant on the local telephone network and in personal experience I have found them even on a conversation level less than adequate. Satellite transmission has excellent download speeds, but is reliant on modems using the telephone network for upload transmission. This method is excellent for the broadcast of pre-recorded visual and sound media but, due to the upload speed constrictions, is impractical for the same reasons that I have cited for Internet connections.

Gary D. Wright quotes Case Western Reserve University Vice President for Information Services, Raymond Neff, who wrote in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in May 1997 "For all in success in transmitting text and images, the existing Internet has some fundamental limitations: It cannot handle the real-time transmission of sound and moving images" (Wright, 1997).

However, I feel the major argument against using the current technology for teaching music can be found in the following statement:

"...the real function of music begins at a point where words, intellectually apprehended have no place. Its inherent significance is outside the range of the purely rational mind. A special exercise of the imagination is needed in order to recognise a musical idea in a particular series of sounds, or to recognise in musical ideas a disciplined expression of deep and obscure human emotions" (Abbs, 1987, 100).

The process of the teaching of singing in particular is eloquently put by Pamela S. Wurgler: "If concepts are learned through experiences, and learning experiences center around sensory perceptions, the teacher must "feed" the senses to promote the greatest depth of learning" (Wurgler, 1997). This "feeding" of the senses is particularly difficult when student and teacher are removed physically from each other.

Good teachers of practical music skills must make minute observations of sound, body position, technique, and musical interpretation, while observing unconscious signals from the performer. Sometimes all of these in unison can be translated into practical help. The subtlety and nature of many of these observations are only possible when the student and the teacher are in the same physical space. I believe that it is beyond current technology to reproduce the qualities of face to face contact.

At a recent NACTMUS (National Australian Council of Tertiary Music Institutions) meeting, I spoke at length with Nathan Waks on the subject of the teaching of music in regional Australia (personal communication, June 8, 2001). Mr Waks is Chairman of the Board of the Australia Council, the major arts funding body in Australia. In our conversation he told me of the new vision he has for the practical teaching of music in regional Australia, using as a tool the annual tours of the respective State Orchestras. His idea was, that when performing in regional areas, various members of the orchestra would make themselves available for lessons with local musicians, thus increasing the musical standards of the community. This increase of the musical standards of the independent music teachers benefits not only the teachers themselves, but the local community as a whole. It becomes a benefit as seen in terms of the lifelong learning of the general non-musical community at large as "the activities of

independent music teachers and their students are part of the news of the community. After all, even the words community and communicate have a lot in common" (Maris, 1998).

It was from this conversation that the model I propose was born. This proposal assumes that it is either the performer or the local community who initiates the working arrangement. The performer's contact could grow from familiarity with the community because of historical ties, or their own performance history in the community. Even the local community itself, with the aid of professional arts funding bodies or the local council or government, could instigate the process of contacting the professional performer. Grants are available from the Australia Council to engage professional performers and often these applications necessitate the performer providing some teaching to the local community as part of the grant approval procedures.

I am a teacher of the voice and so my observations have been drawn from my own teaching practices. Although I am a professional classical singer, I teach contemporary voice as well. The focus on the following model uses voice, but it could easily be translated into any type of musical performance. The teaching of piano, woodwind, guitar or any other musical instrument that requires technical expertise, could benefit by the proposed model. For example, in a paper published in the *American Music Teacher* the piano pedagogy community at large welcomed the stimulus provided by the sharing of ideas among professionals in teaching related workshops where the workshops were attended by not only professionals themselves "Advancements in piano teaching and piano pedagogy were stimulated by interaction and sharing of ideas among professionals by means of specialized journals, teaching-related workshops and conferences" (Burns, 2001).

Programs similar to the ones supported by many professional sporting organizations could serve as a model to develop my proposed model. I find it somewhat sad that this level of isolated community professional development is well established in this country in the sporting field. Many professional sporting organizations arrange regional skill development programs for sporting coaches, referees, etc. For instance, a quick Internet search will provide many instances of football associations that hold workshops throughout the year in isolated communities using professional players and coaches to improve the standard of local

organizations. Such organizations are not in existence – to my knowledge – in this country for music. Perhaps it is due to the paucity of government funding of the arts and that "the population in general does not consider them very important, or sees them as elitist. The 'elitist' tag is the core of the problem" (Klaus, 1999).

There would need to be recognition within the community of its own particular musical needs. It is unlikely that there will be strong collaborative ties between the teaching members of any one practical discipline within small communities. This is a matter of historical truth, the reasons for which do not lie within the parameters of this paper. Suffice it to say that fellow teachers of the same discipline are usually unwilling to pool resources, this is especially so in the case of teachers of the voice where much suspicion exists on the correct method of delivery of technique, and indeed on exactly what 'technique' is.

It would seem that the most ideal method for establishing the needs of the community would entail calling meetings of interested parties. The technique of 'scaffolding' in an educational sense, if adopted to establish the needs, would benefit not only the participants at the meeting, but also the local community and its lifelong learning. This technique, if used, would prove an important tool that could be applied to other suitable goals or projects that may need assessment or analysis within the local community.

"Scaffolding, as most will be aware, is placed around the outside of new buildings to allow builders access to the structure as it rises from the ground. Once the building is able to support itself, the builder removes the scaffolding" (Hammond, 2001). Scaffolding, as an education definition, "refers to support that is designed to provide the assistance necessary to enable learners to accomplish tasks and develop understandings that they would not quite be able to manage on their own" (Hammond, 2001).

It would seem that the most logical approach would be that the professional teacher would try to assess the basic needs of the teachers within the community for his or her discipline. This could be accommodated easily either by spending some time in the community with the teachers before work began, or simply by submitting a questionnaire to the individual teachers in advance. The questionnaire would not need to be specific, but could be phrased in

general terms to assess the deficiencies or problems which exist in each of the teacher's studios. In my long teaching career I have found that most problems encountered in the teaching studio (in terms of study of the voice) are limited in number and found worldwide. These basic problems of technique are engendered within all teaching practices due to the nature of the vocal physiology and the response of the vocal apparatus and body in response to being trained. The experienced professional performer will be able to both devise the questionnaire with this experience in mind, and to recognise the local problems from the responses received from distribution of the questionnaire.

Once the needs of the community are recognised and assessed, plans should be put into place to arrange a workshop for the imported professional performer to work through relevant issues with the local teachers. This should happen over a weekend or for one or two days during the week. The aim of the workshop is initially for the professional performer and the local teachers to develop a common vocabulary and a mutual understanding of problem solving. Bringing together the local music teachers for group discussion and workshop is invaluable as: "Peers have a crucial role to play in the scaffolding of one another's learning. Group learning environments, if properly structured, encourage questioning, evaluating and constructive criticism, leading to a restructuring of knowledge and understanding" (Naylor & Cowie, 2000). Longer periods of time are not necessary for the first meeting. An initial short intense two day period is more than adequate. The workshop should be held informally in a casual relaxed atmosphere, its primary aim to provide an arena for collaboration and the exchange of ideas between the imported professional and the local teachers. The unique feature of this initial workshop is that the professional performer either demonstrates technical issues or uses the local teachers themselves to illustrate the most common problems. From these demonstrations, the professional can provide both technical support and strategies to overcome common problems. It is not necessary to labour the point that all teachers of performance are, or have been, performers themselves on the instrument that they teach. If, in the case of voice teachers, the teachers are all retired, or no longer sing themselves, then the professional singer must either demonstrate personally, or invite the local teachers to provide one or two students to be examples. This latter course of action is not to

be recommended, as the purpose of this type of model is for the professional performer to not only pass on technical and performance expertise, but also to improve the teachers' personal performance ability.

If the professional performer comes to the local community to work with the teachers, then the cost savings would be immense compared with the cost that would have been incurred had each teacher individually travelled, paid accommodation, and spent money for individual lessons with the same professional in a capital city.

As previously stated, most technical problems are universal for each performance discipline. Every experienced professional performer will have mastered these problems, and have developed excellent strategies for solving these common problems either for their own performance or for use in their own teaching studios. I have found, when teaching teachers who are geographically isolated, that it is finding these problem-solving strategies that is of the most importance for developing their studio work. It cannot be stressed too strongly that the professional performer would be unwise to advocate that his or her technique is the only method which works. Demonstration of the professional performer's strategies to overcome technical problems will stimulate the local teachers to analyse and formulate ways of translating each strategy into practical application, within their own understanding of what they believe technique to be.

Another visit would be planned for a second meeting, at an interval of no more than six months, for a one day workshop. In the meantime, perhaps using electronic media such as the Internet or e-mail, the individual teachers should keep in contact with the professional performer to discuss implementation of the issues dealt with at the initial meeting. These issues would undoubtedly contain questions of putting the problem-solving strategies into practice. Another important step should be to provide a follow up questionnaire to the participants immediately after the first workshop. Merely completing such a questionnaire would provide some self-generated feedback to each participant, but more importantly the questionnaire would provide information to the imported professional performer in order to help formulate the structure of the next meeting.

The second meeting need only be for one day. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss the strategies learned at the first workshop and to develop the vocabulary of understanding between the local teachers and the professional performer. This workshop is important as it functions as a reflective tool to examine the successes and misunderstandings of the first workshop, and whether the participants were able to assimilate new technical and performance techniques and put them into practice.

In my experience with these workshop situations, I have found that another follow-up session is not needed. The enthusiasm generated by the release of frustration over pre-existing 'unsolvable' teaching problems has proved to be a catalyst to draw teachers in the community closer together and to cooperate with each other – in most cases for the first time.

Again, the 'scaffolding' method of working with concepts through the workshops will prove to be invaluable. Mercer (1994) lists the following as points unique to scaffolding:

- students could not succeed without the teacher's intervention,
- the teacher aims for some new level of independent competence on the student's part,
- the teacher has the learning of some specific skill or concept in mind,
- there must be evidence of students successfully completing the particular task at hand,
- there must also be evidence that learners are now able to go on to deal independently with subsequent related tasks or problems.

It would seem from the above list that these points in particular are the ones I wish to address in my proposed model of professional performer working with isolated local music teachers.

Communication between the professional performer and individual community-based teachers becomes a long term activity spontaneously generated from the two meetings. In recent times I have had contact with teachers who I have taught, and illuminated points of performance practice and technique, using the vocabulary that was originally established with the local teachers in the earlier meetings. This is extremely helpful to solve problems that arise from time to time during the regular teaching

regime of any performance studio. Most teachers have felt reinvigorated both in their own performance and in their teaching studios (see Case Studies) even after limited exposure to professional expertise.

The frustration that most isolated teachers of performance feel should not be underestimated. Unlike their urban counterparts, they are unable to easily access help with problem solving for their own performance abilities nor to improve their own performance and therefore teaching abilities. I have tried this proposed model myself on a limited basis, and it has proved effective. In fact so effective, that one of the students cited in the following case studies continues to lobby me regularly to work further in her community. A wider study would require funding on a national level, but together with strategies devised in collaboration with universities, music institutions, and professional performing bodies could provide a way of supplying instruction to budding music students throughout the country by *teaching the teacher*.

The following two case studies contain material that illustrates the argument of my paper. Permission has been obtained from the individuals to discuss their individual cases in this paper.

CASE STUDIES

Case 1

During 1999 my university sent me on a regular basis to a nearby regional centre, Rockhampton, to teach singing to community members. This was part of a non-tertiary community access program that my unit (Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music) offered to the public.

Two of my most enthusiastic students were both local teachers of singing. Both of them had become, in their own words, stagnant in their own technical abilities, and in their teaching strategies. My teaching period in Rockhampton lasted only eight weeks on one day per week. During that period the two local teachers were continually asking for extra lessons, within the confines of their budgets. Each student had four lessons. Lessons were limited to one per fortnight, due to the number of students wanting to work with me, and to the availability of a teaching space.

I recently contacted one of these students, who had been trying to continue her work with me, by offering to drive over 400km each way for a one monthly hour long lesson.

I explained to her the reason for my phone call, which was to discuss the model I am proposing in this study. She was extremely excited about the prospect of this model actually coming into practice and told me that she was in desperate need of more lessons as she felt that she had progressed as far as she could go alone without more help from someone of my experience in both performance and teaching strategies. She told me that the four lessons that she had with me during my Rockhampton teaching period had "changed not only her singing life, but also her teaching life" (personal communication, November 26, 2001). The technique and problem-solving strategies that I had taught her had manifested in the way that she transformed her private teaching practice, injecting her new approach into the technique that she taught her students.

Case 2

The student is enrolled in a tertiary degree at my institution, studying a voice major with me. This student runs a successful voice studio in Mackay, with a large number of students from beginner to more advanced students. Since studying with me, she has rethought her entire approach to both her personal performance and her teaching practice. The effects of this were made apparent during the recent local Eisteddfod when I was able to observe my own strategies on posture and technique clearly shown in students from her teaching studio. "With the combination of your lectures and lessons with you, I have been able to consolidate my private study and lessons with previous local teachers into an understanding for the first time of what teaching and learning really is" (personal communication, 2001). This student has been encouraged by the success of her understanding of technique and teaching strategies and, after graduating, has planned to undertake post-graduate studies to further enhance her ability to teach and educate local performers.

It can be seen, in conclusion from the above case studies, that providing professional expertise to enthusiastic and receptive teachers in isolated communities can indeed filter down to the students in each of the studios mentioned above. It is indeed fulfilling, as the provider of this professional expertise, to see the results of teaching the teachers in performances by students of each of these teachers. I have been gratified to hear Eisteddfod judges praising the technical capabilities of not only my own students in competition, but also students of the

case study teachers who have embraced the same techniques and performance strategies learned from me in workshop and private sessions. The new technical and performance strategies that have been learned by the teachers in the case studies, and their students, have enabled the local communities in both locations to develop lifelong learning abilities and therefore enrich the musical expertise of each of the geographically isolated communities.

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