

## **LIFELONG LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN CONSERVATOIRES**

### **Rineke Smilde**

Lifelong Learning may be defined as a concept which, over an entire lifetime “...transforms experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and the senses” (Jarvis, 2002).

The Lifelong Learning concept goes further than ‘continuing education’: it is an important conceptual framework for improving musicians’ employability and adaptability.

The innovative dimension of the Lifelong Learning concept lies in its new approach to the process and context of learning (Fragoulis, 2002).

Important characteristics in this concept include:

- A distinction between formal, non formal and informal learning;
- An emphasis on ‘learning’ as opposed to ‘training’;
- Different approaches to learning, including, for example, learning ‘on the job’ or ‘applied to the setting’ (‘related to the context’)
- Professional and personal development;
- Context related assessments.

It is important to create adaptive learning environments in which students of conservatoires can be trained to function effectively within a continuously changing professional practice. If the concept of Lifelong Learning is to permeate the Conservatoire successfully, it means that change is inevitable, organically connected and interwoven, at all aggregate levels, and that it will touch in the following order: the (educational) organisation, curriculum, teachers, students and alumni.

### **Educational Organization**

A dynamic synergy between the Conservatoire and the outside world is needed. Strategic alliances and partnerships are important to help reinforce the learning environment of the Conservatoire. The Conservatoire needs to constantly fine tune and adjust to the needs of the profession, and vice versa. Competence-based learning has to be positioned and analysed within the context of a constantly changing workplace.

Conservatoires should provide learning environments where students like to be, where they experience self-worth, excitement and challenge. Research shows that in order to be motivated for lifelong learning, students must “learn to learn” under conditions in which they can manage and motivate themselves..

A challenging learning environment in the Conservatoire can be created by the establishment of cross-over between musical disciplines; it also encompasses informal learning in non-formal learning contexts. Thus a transition takes place in which the Conservatoire becomes a veritable artistic laboratory supporting a learning culture. The leadership provided by heads of departments in forging this learning environment is therefore crucial.

## **Curriculum**

The curriculum that emerges from the Lifelong Learning conceptual framework is based on the acquisition of competencies, team-teaching, and a mechanism which encourages and receives feedback from external partners. It values both tradition and change, is reflective of the outside world, and re-evaluates existing knowledge.

Such a curriculum can be very individualized, providing a variety of learning paths, which include the development of one's portfolio, context related assessment and peer learning. Assessment and learning go hand in hand: what can be learned can be assessed, what can be assessed can be learned. Assessment in lifelong learning should give students the confidence, enthusiasm and commitment needed to face new challenges.

New forms of learning should be mirrored in examinations. An ability to reflect on the professional, cultural, and societal environment at large is important. This can be assisted by the use of 'transformative skills': an ability to dialogue with the world, a capacity to adapt, lead, listen, and take on challenges.

Lifelong learning implies flexible curricula, individualised learning paths, a continuous exploration of new technologies, study of unexplored areas and a re-appraisal of existing knowledge.

## **Teachers**

If curricula and assessment are to be reshaped, the nature of teaching will necessarily change as well.

The most critical factor in quality teaching is quality learning. Teachers need to be lifelong learners in the first place.

A successful implementation of a Lifelong Learning Conceptual Framework in the Conservatoire is highly dependent on teachers' competencies. Teachers are powerful role models for students in Conservatoire environments; they model the musician's future career by demonstrating a capacity to adapt creatively to change and put this into practice both as a teacher and as a professional. Teachers can be pivotal in transformative processes. Without their example students are unlikely to be motivated to become lifelong learners.

Balancing tradition and change in the curricula need not mean that the Conservatoire gets rid of master-apprentice schemes, but rather a shift in emphasis whereby the "master" invites, encourages inquisitiveness, discovery, and the ability to question. Reflective practice and personal development for teachers is essential. Teachers are encouraged to become "enablers" rather than simply transmitters of knowledge.

## **Students**

A personal development plan should be central for students, leading to a relevant development of their portfolio, guided by teachers whose role is that of a mentor.

Self management should be encouraged by asking basic questions such as 'what do I want to contribute as a musician to the society', 'where do my strengths lie', 'what drives me, what motivates me'; in short, *questions of identity* should be addressed. Students need to feel they are part of a learning culture from the very start.

## **Alumni**

A solid alumni programme is important for provision of continuous information about the relevance of the curricula and changing needs in the profession to which students and alumni will need to adapt. Alumni programmes provide a basis for ongoing dialogue

between the profession and the Conservatoire, and as such are critical to maintaining the relevance of Conservatoire curricula to the professional world. Research by the AEC shows that alumni are eager to stay in touch, and appreciate being kept informed by their former school.

**New educational approaches and new learning environments in Conservatoires which integrate the lifelong learning concept will provide:**

- A collaborative learning environment which is non-judgemental, with a strong commitment to quality;
- Enhanced cross-over between musical disciplines, fostering of a capacity to adapt and be flexible, and the development of new communication skills through interactions with different audiences, societal and cultural contexts;
- The possibility to explore and take risks in a safe environment, thereby leading to increased self-confidence;
- An artistic laboratory, whose challenging learning environment reflects the workplace, encompasses informal learning in non-formal learning contexts and connected to strategic partnerships. The Conservatoire can thus become a living, experimental and experiential experience for its students. Its ethos and culture are important contextual factors contributing to the motivation of students (OECD, 2000);
- A culture in which ideas can be transformed entrepreneurially and indeed where the concept of entrepreneurship is a valued one. This needs to be woven organically into the curriculum;
- Increased personal development emerging from an awareness of one's identity as a musician, fostered by self-exploration, reflection, and personal development;
- Curricula, teaching and learning, as well as partnerships which are effective, ambitious, and innovative and thus establish a strong intrinsic motivation for Lifelong Learning amongst students;
- Continuing Professional Development integrated into all aspects of Conservatoire life: through the implementation of a conceptual framework of Lifelong Learning in the Conservatoire. This in turn leads to the emergence of informed musicians who can interact in different professional contexts, whose attitudes are open minded and sensitive, who can listen and respond, who can be flexible and adapt, and for whom a culture of continuing professional development is a given.