

RESPONDING TO A FRAMEWORK TO MENTORING MUSICIANS

Judith Webster, Royal College of Music, March 2007

This talk presents thoughts on a key question posed in Peter Renshaw's presentation, which I consider to be vital to the whole mentoring process with musicians,

"To what extent might the mentoring process include a 'musical conversation' that encourages the musician to be reflective about their music-making or improvising in the moment of action? How far might this approach help to capture those subtle nuances and implicit understandings that are caught in the moment but are not easily put into words?"

However, firstly, some comments on two other points raised.

On **reflective practice**:

"Mentoring musicians, whether they are professionals, students or young people, has to be approached with understanding and sensitivity, especially as the 'conversation' could include non-verbal dialogue or exchange. This can affect the dynamics of the mentoring relationship."

Reflective practice requires a fundamental shift for musicians the complexity of which must not be underestimated ie from the personal, or subjective, to the impersonal, detached or objective, in relation to their own musical emotional experience.

In my experience, musicians can be reluctant to reflect on a 'special' musical experience which cannot adequately be expressed in words and they may subconsciously protect its integrity by avoiding such analysis.

On **reflexive practice**:

"How might one characterise the nature of reflexive practice or 'reflection-in-action' in ways that makes sense to musicians?"

Reflexive practice is a concept I struggle with, without reference to a practical situation familiar to me. My reference point is a music therapy session (my own experience as a practitioner). In this context, the music therapy session is where the learning actively takes place, change is facilitated directly through the musical interaction between the therapist and client. The therapist then undertakes an analysis of the recording of the session in order to make explicit, and understand more fully, the interaction and its implications. This then informs future work.

The practical session itself (ie the music) could be described as reflexive practice, with the post-session analysis being the reflective practice. The learning and change takes place implicitly in the here and now of the music session, but is not articulated or reflected upon verbally. In this scenario, the therapist then reflects on the session alone (rather than with the client), clearly a departure from the mentoring relationship when this process would be undertaken jointly.

To quote Peter Renshaw,

"Most musicians have chosen music as their primary means of communication. In general, they connect with each other through making music together, less through verbal, analytical, reflective processes."

The question this poses for me then is whether the mentoring relationship *can fulfil its true potential* if it does not include an opportunity for mentor and mentee to relate to each other in music.

Three examples below illustrate the limitation of a mentoring relationship with musicians which does not include musical interaction:

Example 1:

6 Royal College of Music students undertaking the new Postgraduate Diploma in Creative Leadership spent their first term working together in a range of contexts, including community settings. Student feedback revealed that they felt they needed to get to know each other musically in order to relate to each other more fully in their work and study. They requested a collective musical experience, not geared towards external goals associated with the course, which allowed them to improvise as a group.

Example 2:

The RCM course is designed on the premise that students work with a learning partner from a musical tradition different from their own, and that each partnership undertakes two placements in a community setting. This can be compared to a co-mentoring relationship.

One such partnership involves a professional violinist with a conservatoire training from a ballet orchestra and a self-taught guitarist working as, and defining himself as, a community musician. Despite many conversations regarding working style, ethics, and musical identity, the two students identified a strong need to make music together in order to facilitate their relationship.

Example 3:

A professional musician colleague has agreed to undertake a mentoring role as part of a formalised scheme for an established conservatoire. His mentee is a postgraduate performance student. Training for the role has been limited, however, documentation has been provided as a guide. In talking to the mentor, he is very clear in his view that he is not able to adequately support the student without relating first on a musical level. In this instance, for him, this means hearing the student play and developing the mentoring relationship from there. For him, his primary means of relating to the student, and therefore being of subsequent use as a mentor, is through a shared musical experience.

Development

Informed by current experience, next year I aim to introduce facilitated improvisation sessions for the student group at the Royal College of Music ie a practical musical experience without specific goals related to the training, which can be reflected on as a group and as individuals as a precursor to learning partnerships and co-mentoring work. This will specifically bring together reflexive and reflective processes, allowing the musical interaction to inform the group's awareness of each other, which is drawn out verbally and articulated by and with the group. The work will be facilitated musically by myself, with Peter Renshaw's involvement in facilitating the reflective practice. If this can be done in a meaningful way, it should pave the way for co-mentoring work within each learning partnership, which will remain in place throughout the entire academic year.

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