What Students Tell Us About Our Rehearsals

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Conductors in elementary school to university settings have argued for decades that participation in bands, orchestras, and choirs is more than just 'activity' for the students. By and large, they have been successful in helping others to understand that significant learning occurs and that what happens in rehearsals is worthy of academic credit, i.e., that the learning is curricular in nature. An underlying premise for these conductors has been that music ensembles are in reality 'classes' in which students acquire or advance individual and group playing skills, and gain conceptual understandings about music. Goals and objectives are set and evaluation takes place. It is all very simple. Or is it?

I will never forget the day when, after a somewhat arduous rehearsal, one of my conducting advisors muttered to me something about what the students in his university band did, or did not, understand about what the experience is all about. I was surprised to learn that my longstanding mentor, an extraordinary musician and conductor, apparently did not have the omniscient qualities I always had attributed to him. Actually, I was relieved. Often, I had wondered what my students really understood, and whether or not it was relevant to the objectives I had set for them. I couldn't help but think that I might be more effective in my role as a conductor and teacher if I better understood the people I was attempting to educate. When I confessed my similar but less rabid curiosity to my mentor, he laughed and said, "Well, have you ever asked them about what they understand?" The answer, of course, was no.

We all know there is more involved in conducting ensembles than beautiful gesture and effective rehearsal technique. There is a complex dynamic process going on that involves a relationship between the music, instructional content and goals, methodology, and the uniqueness of learners. We know that students learn through experience, and by what they observe us doing both on and off the podium. We also know that it is important for teachers to be aware of what their students know, think, and are able to do.

Knowing Our Students

The importance and value of knowing our students is well-established in education. This knowledge routinely informs our teaching, determines content, and shapes curriculum. Accordingly, we stand to gain from investigations of the understandings that students bring to our music rehearsals and the understandings that are developed in them. There are important questions that need to be answered: To what degree are the students in our ensembles aware that there is a unique process going on in rehearsals? What do they already know? What do students perceive as being rehearsal process? How do they come to their understandings? Do their understandings influence the nature of their participation in musical activities outside of their ensemble classes? I firmly believe that answers to these questions are relevant to what should happen in the ensemble classroom.

The purpose of this article is to present the findings of a study I carried out that was designed to look at these issues. The study involved seven undergraduate students who were members of a conducted university music ensemble. Subjects appropriate for the study were identified through consultation with the conductor of the ensemble. This consultation was used to generate a population that included males and females, students who had different musical roles or voices in the ensemble, different backgrounds, and different majors (e.g., applied music, music education, and non-music majors). Three broad questions focussed my investigation. They were:

> What are the formative experiences that arouse in learners an awareness of 'process'?
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> How do learners notice and come to understand process in rehearsal settings?
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> Do learners' understandings of process enhance their ability to accumulate and draw upon ensemble experiences in other musical settings?

Madsen and Duke (1985) point out in their study of perception in the classroom that differentiated aspects of perception make such studies difficult. They say, "What one would like to receive in feedback, or specifically what one perceives one would like to receive, makes it difficult to plan and implement instructional feedback systems because those systems might need to be different or even antithetical to one's own perceptions." (Madsen & Duke, 1985, pp. 212-213) James Byo's (1991) discussion of research in perception versus reality indicates that students can be inaccurate when asked to recall specifics of teacher behaviours. Accordingly, I avoided posing direct questions and simply asked the students to talk about their past and present experiences. I also

avoided using the word 'process'. I felt I was less likely to solicit statements and information that the students might feel I wanted to hear or was expecting to hear.

Formative experiences

Knowledge of the events that influence the thinking and actions of students is helpful to us in generating vital, interactive learning environments. Accordingly, I was interested in exploring formative events in the lives of band students. When asked to describe his pre-university musical training, one student talked about his private lessons.

> Most of my lessons consisted of working out of a book and working on different techniques. When I look back on it, I didn't understand many of the concepts that we were discussing. I understood the basic way to do them but I did not understand what my responsibility as a performer was, what my responsibility as a student was. I usually depended on my private teacher to spoon-feed me things and I didn't take anything that he gave me much further than he had. I understood that it was necessary for me to master certain technical devices, but I wasn't aware of an overall agenda or curriculum. The overall plan was never really given to me as a student. I think it would have been beneficial if it had been.

Implicit in this statement is that the student now recognizes there is significance in the relationship between the what's and the why's of music instruction. Explicit in the statement is feeling that some knowledge of this relationship is, or at least could have been, valuable at the time.

Later, the same student said,

> I had not developed my critical thinking skills. I had not developed my personal responsibility for learning, my personal responsibility for performance. I basically accepted my teacher's role as the giver of knowledge and I would be the receiver of knowledge. I didn't have any basis to question or criticize what he was giving me or to evaluate what he was giving me because I didn't have anything to compare it to.

Again, we learn that the student no longer views teachers and students respectively as "givers" and "receivers," and that there is a dynamic process happening that goes beyond simple knowledge or behaviours.

When asked to talk about early university ensemble experiences, he responded,

> At one point they were 'rehearsals.' They became 'classes' when I started studying conducting last year. That opened up my eyes to a whole different aspect of rehearsal because it was no longer just what 'I' was doing. It was about what 'he' was doing and he was getting other people to do. It broadened my awareness of an ensemble setting and of his gestures. Now I don't sit in rehearsal to rehearse any more.

Now we see that this student underwent a significant change of thinking, not only because of a conducting class, but also because a concurrent ensemble experience provided a model of successful rehearsing by a teacher/conductor.

A third-year instrumentalist recalled that,

> When I was in high school, I decided that I wanted to be a band teacher and so I wanted to see what he did ... how he got people to do what he wanted, how he went about rehearsing things.

This student recognized well before any university conducting or methods courses the notion of interactive process in rehearsing, and that understandings of this process could be acquired, in part, through observation and reflection. Again, it is likely that the formative nature of this student's high-school rehearsals is a result of the what's, how's, and when's of rehearsing being observable and successful.

A student who later revealed a remarkable understanding of process in rehearsing commented about her pre-university private lessons and an outside-of-school ensemble experience:

> My [private] teacher was quite demanding. We did scales and the technical studies. I guess I really didn't understand the significance of them until later. I tended to rely on his suggestions in musicality instead of branching out and finding my own ways.
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> Going to orchestra was a different experience. I learned a lot by observing the conductor. I remember I could just sit there in rehearsal and not know anything that was going on around me. She would be talking to the strings, and my attention would be completely focussed on her. She was very emotional when she would conduct, and she had a way of just letting you know how to bring out the best in the music. She knew so much about the piece and she knew so much how she wanted it to sound. She could express that to you ... the way she would conduct ... she was so into the music. She was unaware of anything else that was going on outside of what we were doing.

Clearly, participation in this orchestra was a formative experience for this young musician in that it alerted her attention to process, and stimulated an interest in it.

In the next quote, the use of the past tense in the comments about

temper tantrums is revealing. It indicates that this student already had formed a special awareness by the time he had reached middle school.

> I wasn't as much of a musician then, I was more just a kid playing music. I don't think I had any role models that showed me what a musician is and what good music is. Sometimes it was sort of discouraging when he would throw those little temper tantrums. They just seemed a little ridiculous. It didn't seem like that was necessary to convince us how to play music, to get upset about it. I have always felt that you can't be negative in order to get a positive result. You have to go in a positive direction in order to get a positive result.

Another student concluded their recollections of pre-university experiences with an interesting comparison of their former middle- school and high-school conductors.

> My [middle school] conductor would educate kids through his gestures, and he would talk very minimally. He would communicate with his body, with the baton. Kids were forced to listen, forced to watch, because if they didn't, they would miss something, and it got results. I find that the director I had in high school talked a lot and the more he said ... the less he said ... the less people listened. I look back on the rehearsal techniques that he used and they weren't terribly organized. There wasn't a lot of learning or teaching involved.

Most of the interviewees indicated that an awareness of process was aroused not only by the teaching manner of their conductors, but also by the uniqueness of the setting, and the challenges of musical performance. Summarily, students tell us that it is important for conductors at all levels to be aware that there are musicians in the ensembles that are engaged in both the music and the process of rehearsing. In other words, young or old, they notice!

Understanding in rehearsals

In striving to learn more about what our students know, I asked the students also to talk about their present ensemble experiences. The degree to which they were reflective and analytical about the process was surprising. For example, one student said,

> I spend time sitting in rehearsal watching the conductors, watching what they are doing, watching and evaluating if what they are doing is effective or not. Thinking about the different techniques that they use, thinking about the different responses that those techniques get from members of the ensemble, thinking about how they deal with problems.

Another student said,

> I do a lot of comparison. I compare different styles, the informative style that Professor [deleted] uses as compared to the not-a-whole-lot-of-talking style that Mr. [deleted] uses. The tyranny that Mr. [deleted] uses. I try to find good aspects and things that work in all of these approaches, and then I try to identify the parts of those approaches that don't work because I think there is a certain amount of validity to any style. So, how can I use different aspects of each technique, of each aspect, to be a more effective conductor? That's the way I go about studying it. I don't write things down. Maybe I should keep a journal or maybe I should talk more with them one-on-one.

This last comment raises another question. Should we be talking more to our students about these issues?

In the following statement, a student attributes observable differences in process to the amount of experience that conductors bring to the podium. The student also is in agreement with Kennell's (1989) model of applied instruction in that 'conceptual' issues are dealt with more efficiently with demonstration, and that 'skill development' requires strategies that normally involve talking.

> The really good conductors that I have observed don't talk very much. Most of the younger conductors tend to speak a lot because I'm not sure they are comfortable gesturing, or that they are comfortable with their conducting style, so they have to rely on more verbal cues. I have noticed a good conductor finds problems, identifies problems, has preconceptions about what the problems are going to be and fixes them before they even happen because he has a plan as to what he wants to fix. When problems arise, or discrepancies between his musical opinion and what is actually happening, he can take care of it very quickly, very efficiently. And when he takes care of it, he doesn't explain his ... musical interpretation. He gives technical advice as to articulation, and he speaks in technical terms. A lot of younger conductors will talk more. They will go a little bit more into their musical ideas, give more description of the mood that they want to achieve, using lots and lots of words.

Another revealing comment included observations about the simultaneous nature of conducting and teaching.

> I try to notice the subtleties in the movement. When he says things he uses very few words but he uses words effectively. He will show you the music with his body, with the baton, his hands, with his face before we play it. Before you make it or while you're making it ... instead of playing it through, talking about it, talking about what

> he wants and trying to fix it verbally. He communicates while you're making music.

Another student spoke of similar understandings about the process of communicating and coming to understand the music.

> The most important thing that [the] conductor does is try and express the musicality of it and not what the beat is... [they] tell you exactly how to lift the notes or phrase it. It's not actually conducting. Through subtle nuances [they] really get it across exactly how to shape that note ... and sound. I think for the most part these gestures are given when the group needs the most amount of help.

Finally, some students told me that they notice how conductors deal with the realities of time, the abilities of the ensemble members, and issues of preparedness. For example,

> ...if he knows that he can get whoever to do it...within 2 minutes, he'll do that. But, he's not going to spend the whole rehearsal while we fix our notes. He's not going to waste his time on things that he has no control over. ...if the notes aren't there, the notes aren't there!

Other musical settings

Each of the seven interviewees made at least one comment indicating that they draw upon understandings acquired in their conducted-ensemble rehearsals while they are in other musical settings.

Student No. 1

> When I'm playing solos, when I'm playing études, I try to visualize the way a conductor would conduct different musical phrases or different musical gestures, and I try to play according to that because I can associate that visual aspect with the aural aspect. Maybe I'll try conducting it myself. I know how to transfer that over into my sound ideas.

Student No.2

> The sense of organization ... the sense of organization of the self and self-motivation. You must be motivated to practice your parts and solidify your parts so that nobody else has to worry about you or you don't have to worry about anybody else.

Student No. 3

> Rehearsal techniques, like isolating things, slowing things down, breathing together, things like that. I definitely use these in my private practice and in smaller ensembles. It seems to help to think about what would Mr. [deleted] would have us do.

Student No. 4

> I would actually learn stuff about [rehearsing] music that I hadn't gotten to in my lessons...

Student No. 5

> The way I look at a piece. I don't just look at the notes. When I sight-read I used to concentrate so much on getting every single note right, but now I concentrate more on the whole style of what we're playing.

Student No. 6

> Listening. In solo work, listening to what the musical lines are... Even when we're in [small] ensemble, to listen to who you're playing with at the time, intonation, keeping time, just being aware of everything.

Student No. 7

> How things fit together ... how they should sound ... the balance of a group. Ensembles, in general, definitely have improved [my] listening skills. ...how to make good music and what good music means.

Summary

Through this study, I hoped to complement and add some depth to notions which we might sense but have not examined extensively. The students I interviewed responded to my questions without hesitation and with a general enthusiasm for their ensemble experiences. They told me that they notice elements of the dynamic environment when it's there, and more so if it's successful. Indications were that this happens at all levels, i.e., junior high, high school, and university. Secondly, the students told me that they draw upon what they learn in their ensemble rehearsals when they are in other musical settings.

For many, general notions of things swim around in the head, and it is not until the process of articulating them that they become points-of-view, beliefs, or constructs. It is my sense that the students' views about process were, to some extent, 'constructed' when asked to talk about the rehearsal setting, and that they were dependent on somewhat unique experiences and observations. Therefore, I would like to conclude with several questions for us to consider relating to a 'course' which lies at the core of what we do in music-teacher preparation. One might think that these questions are, in a sense, rhetorical...and that in them is couched a message that something is being challenged, or that we ought to change something. This is not the case. But, the process of articulating answers might be valuable. Is it enough that important principles of music teaching in ensemble settings be modelled only? Should conductors and

students be articulating more about the rehearsal experience?

> How do we help people notice things that are important? Are there ways we can stimulate or improve the powers of observation?
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> Are there questions we should be asking our students about our effectiveness and our communication on the podium?
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> What should we teach prospective conductors about rehearsing school choirs, bands, and orchestras that relates to student perception and understanding?
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> Is there more to know about the special process of rehearsing on the university level? (University rehearsals are 'special' in that unlike pre- and post-university rehearsal settings, they are the site for learning about 'how' to rehearse.)
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> What are the possibilities generated by our knowledge of the perceptive nature of students?

Interestingly, Owens (1992), in a study of student perceptions and the retention and transfer of learning, indicates that student involvement in planning, implementation, and closure results in improved student performance.

It is important to continue the important research which focuses on conducting, teaching models, model teaching, and the history, psychology, and sociology of music. We have gained significantly from this work. In all these areas of investigation, we have much to learn from our students. So, let's ask them about they know and understand.

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