Real time and virtual: tracking the professional development and reflections of choral conductors

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ABSTRACT

Professional development in conducting is inconsistent across the U.K., leading to a lack of confidence amongst teachers. This paper outlines the continued tracking of the professional development of choral conductors in their skills, knowledge and perceptions of their own progress. The course Choral Conducting, Leadership and Communication takes place over some five months during the spring and summer terms at the Institute of Education, University of London. The students on the course are a mix of i) those on a one year postgraduate initial teacher education programme (PGCE), ii) full- or part-time students on an MA in Music Education Programme and iii) those serving teachers who take it as a non-award bearing CPD course. Students attend four one day practical conducting workshop seminars and are also required to study on-line in a virtual learning environment in the intervening periods. Here they reflect on practice during the face-to-face teaching sessions and in their own professional context through up-loaded video extracts. In addition they retrieve other appropriate study materials and are required to peer assess and form small support groups in discussion forums. This paper describes the progressive development of inclusion of a virtual learning environment (over the period of two years) and the outcomes of this innovative approach to teaching choral conducting which supports face to face teaching.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND TO THE CHORAL AND MUSICAL SITUATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Singing has recently gained acknowledgement by the Secretary of State for Education for England as being an important musical activity. While many music educators are clapping their hands with a feeling of "I told you so!" initiatives are being taken throughout the country to enable and empower teachers to develop their skills in leading such activities.

In the UK financial support from the government and Local Authorities has been given to those initiatives that aim to promote music activities with children in and out of school (as in The Sage Gateshead as a 'Home for Music and Musical Discovery') and particularly programmes that support singing activities (for example, the £10m 'Singing School Project' developed in Manchester and the £10m government-funded National Singing Programme called 'Sing-Up'). Nevertheless, other research suggests that music educators and choral conductors may reflect on their teaching and conducting of primary school children or early adolescents with a sense of anxiety and uncertainty (Bresler 1993). The reason is probably because they feel 'under-prepared' for working with the developing and 'uncertain' voices of the children. And ironically, it may be that those who can most assist children's discovery and appreciation of their musical and vocal potential are often

themselves unaware of that potential, for they have never received any vocal or singing preparation themselves (Gackle 2000b).

OUTLINE OF RESEARCH: TRACKING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Research in music education that seeks to define high-quality preparation in choral conducting education should provide a basis for strengthening the position of choral activities in schools and communities. On the one hand, if choral conductors can be prepared effectively in professional practice, it may be that more people will be encouraged to take up the role of a choral conductor with confidence. On the other hand, their effective attitudes and behaviour during choral activities might make more children and adults experience satisfaction and exhilaration that derive from choral participation, which can lead to lifelong choral membership.

The paper outlines the research into the tracking of the professional development of groups of teachers and students who perceive themselves to be lacking in appropriate skills to lead and conduct singing in schools and other contexts. However, the main thrust of this article is to convey the significant development of using (i) video recordings of practical conducting sessions for review and reflection; (ii) research into the self-perceptions of the students as conductors and their professional development in the area; (iii) the development of the course to include a Virtual Learning Environment to enable those on the course to study more effectively and efficiently outside the classroom. We believe this to be an innovative move in what is normally a face-to-face musical activity.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CONDUCTING IN THE UK

One way for schools and other communities to benefit from studies in choral conducting activities is for the interest not to be overly focused on methods, but to embrace how a practice works and what meaning it has for all people involved in the particular context. The first speculation concerns the quality and effectiveness of the practices used by expert choral conductors, while the second echoes Hookey's (2002) apprehension of what professional knowledge is acquired in such communities of learners. Such apprehension is related to the context and nature of choral conducting preparation that is offered in academic institutions or independent bodies. With respect to choral education, where expert provision is available – and this is uneven across the UK (Rogers 2002) – teachers may be able to achieve support for professional development in and through their institution, such as by attendance at professional development short courses or by sustained visits from a choral specialist. However, workshops and seminars as contexts of preparation appear useful in motivating and raising consciousness, but are often unlikely to produce lasting changes unless there are follow-ups.

With respect to choral activities in school environments or in community settings, there seems to be an agreement by the research community on inadequate support mechanisms for music education (Hookey 2002; Leglar & Collay 2002; Bennett 2007). As a matter of fact, primary school teachers particularly admit that they lack the confidence to lead choral

activities. Their lack of confidence, which possibly stems from inefficient instruction and training that they received during their undergraduate studies or teacher education, appears to trouble them more than the lack of status of music in the school curriculum (Temmerman 2005; Bennett 2007). The situation for secondary school teachers is influenced by the paucity of conducting courses in universities in the UK for music undergraduates and postgraduates (Durrant, 1998; 2006).

DEVELOPING A COURSE IN CONDUCTING

One significant feature of any course, but in particular ones that are concerned with the development of skill, in this case practical music skill, is the very need to practise and reflect on practice. This is through self-evaluative methods. In the context of a Masters-level course in Choral Conducting, Leadership and Communication, the development of on-line supportive activity in between the face-to-face (f2f) teaching sessions was considered essential and salient to the real nurturing of awareness of skills and knowledge in the area of choral leadership. The support from the Institute of Education's Pedagogic Research to Embedded E-Learning (PREEL) project during 2007 enabled this development to take place. The main difficulty lay in the fact that, with a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) as part of the learning methods, much time and effort was spent in preparation, articulating details of the teaching and content of each face-to-face session. In practical music activity, especially rehearsing music, the conductor is dependent on the craft skill of responding in real time to the technical and expressive needs of the singers as they travel on their musical journey through pieces of music. This means that all cannot be planned.

METHODOLOGY

The first part of the research study took place during professional development workshops and seminars in the *Choral Conducting, Leadership and Communication* course within the School of Arts & Humanities at the Institute of Education, University of London (IOE). Students attended a four-day course over a period of five months and were asked, through a series of questionnaires, to reflect on their initial perceptions of themselves as conductors and, subsequently, on their progress in their own professional locations in between the taught sessions. Students were encouraged to reflect on their own progress through video-recordings taken of their conducting sessions that were uploaded onto Blackboard (Bb), an e-learning environment.

A qualitative design was considered the most appropriate for this evaluative, on-going research, as the intention was for the course participants to reflect on their practice and for the tutors to monitor the development of each participant over time. The methods used were extensive observations through video snap-shots of the workshop seminars, distribution of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with some randomly selected participants. Data was collected during the course in the spring and summer terms of 2007. The research study is entering its second phase in 2008, with the increased use of the VLE Blackboard to enhance student reflection on their development and learning.

The production of audiovisual materials can be an unobtrusive method of collecting data (Denscombe 2003), and in the case of choral conducting preparation, the use of video is also allied with instruction in choral conducting. All practical workshops of the course were filmed in order for the participants to observe themselves after the teaching sessions and reflect on the feedback they received from the tutors and co-participants (indeed, feedback from peers was encouraged throughout.)

As long ago as 1993, Johnson (1993) examined the use of video-recordings for self and peer assessment and instructor feedback in evaluating the conducting skills of music student teachers. Since then, the use of distance learning as a mode of learning has developed widely in higher education and many courses across the subject range now use a VLE as the sole teaching and learning method, or as a complement to face-to-face seminars. While music instruction is often thought of as being reliant on face-to-face contact, the current research project, sponsored and supported by PREEL is being undertaken to explore the development and efficacy of a VLE in addition to face-to-face as a tool to enhance learning. In particular, the intention is to use the VLE in 2008 and beyond to enable students to reflect on their own practice more objectively and be able, through the uploading of video material from the teaching sessions, to reflect, comment on and analyse the practice of other students in the group as well. The importance of reflection was indicated quite clearly in students' responses to the questionnaires.

An interesting dimension to the research was the students' perceptions of the nature of conducting, the nature of rehearsing musical activity and the self-perceptions in the role. The students revealed that they often didn't know what they didn't know! A number of students were able to report on a distinct growth in their confidence in conducting as well as noticeable improvements in singing quality of those they conducted.

In essence some of the interesting findings were connected with the need to provide strategies for effective and expressive conducting rather than being overly concerned with the technical aspects of beating time. Effective teaching also impacted on choral singing quality. The skills required of an effective choral conductor have been articulated (Durrant 2003) and discussion over the nature of professional development in the area has also been researched (Durrant 2006).

RESPONSES AND REFLECTIONS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The demographic information about the participants (n=15) in the first questionnaire (January 2007) indicated that the course included a variety of age ranges between early 20s and 50; the majority (14/15) had a degree or other qualification in music and they had attended a conducting course before, either during their undergraduate studies or at Continuing Professional Development (CPD), school workshops, summer schools, as a college course, in private tutorials or during PGCE training. With regard to the environments where the participants conduct choral groups, most of the participants seemed to operate within primary schools (9) and church settings (6), whilst a few worked in a secondary school (3) and one in a special-needs school. Some participants conducted more than one choir.

Apart from demographic information, the first questionnaire also inquired into the participants' motivation for enrolling on the course. Their answers suggested that most of them had positive singing experiences as choristers either in school or the church or they wanted to professionalize conducting knowledge because it was part of their job. Some of the responses they gave were the following:

> I have 3 choirs and I don't know how to conduct them.

> One part of my job is to conduct a choir. I would like to learn more skills and improve my teaching.

> …promoting other's enjoyment of choral singing is very appealing.

> Small changes in conductors' gestures can evoke large difference in singing by groups, but why does this happen? How?

The participants were also asked to identify the three most important attributes of a choral conductor as well as express their expectations from the course that they had undertaken. The characteristic that was common in almost all participants' questionnaires was communication (clarity; effectiveness through personality and gestures; affirmation). The list also included characteristics related to musical ability interpreted as aural skills, sense of rhythm and dynamics; clear and effective gesture – conducting style; personality; knowledge of vocal technique, performing style and singing skill. Other characteristics such as knowledge and understanding of repertoire; strong leadership also as knowledge of what you want and how to communicate it; enthusiasm, inspiration and engaging others in music making; empathy with students and friendliness were also mentioned. Lastly, characteristics such as patience, having musicianship, having a kind of musical vision, offering students a learning experience, creating a positive atmosphere in rehearsals, having interest in singing and confidence were also mentioned by the participants.

With regard to participants' expectations from the course, a small majority (8/15) identified conducting technique and gestures as the primary skill that they wanted to develop. Fewer (6) mentioned communication skills and leadership skills. Finally, elements such as self-reflection ("knowing my weak points/reflect on my practice"), confidence, rehearsal planning, repertoire, develop vision, musicianship, singing skills and knowledge of theory were also listed.

The second questionnaire (March 2007) asked the participants (n=12) to reflect on the practice after the first session. From their responses it appeared that the majority (7/12) had tried such suggestions as using alternative gestures and hand positions, not mouthing the words of the song being conducted and exploring breathing, entries and cut-offs. What is more, some individuals mentioned that they explored different facial expressions; ways to relax; they tried to get away from the piano and they used swaying and analogies during rehearsals.

The third questionnaire (May 2007) asked the same reflective questions as the second questionnaire. From the responses (n=10), eight placed particular emphasis on non-verbal communication, warm-ups, breathing and not mouthing the words of songs they conduct. What is more, five pointed out that they modelled appropriate body posture, have relaxed their body, have stopped beating time, have stopped looking at the score and have "put the

music in context to help the voice match that". As a result of their adaptations and changes, they reported that the choir was reported to follow the conductor better, choristers seem more relaxed and had more responsibility.

A second section of the questionnaire focused on self-efficacy statements that derived from the course outline. In this section eight indicated that the course enhanced their understanding of the relation between gesture and sound satisfactorily as well as their understanding of the voice. As to the role of the conductor, six of the participants recognized that they have gained a thorough understanding of that role. With regard to confidence in choral rehearsing style, communication/interpersonal skills and gesturing effectively, nine claimed to have acquired a satisfactory level of confidence. However, three felt they needed more confidence in dealing with vocal/choral problems.

The last questionnaire (June 2007) included a self-efficacy second part in which the participants (n=10) were again asked about their understanding and confidence. Apart from that, they were asked to evaluate the artifacts (music repertoire, handouts and videos of themselves in practice) used in the course. The self-efficacy statements revealed that participants mostly felt confidence in choral rehearsing style (five participants), gesturing effectively (six) and dealing in practice with singing development (six). Four felt confident about dealing with vocal and choral problems (a slight increase on the third questionnaire). In contrast, six of the participants did not seem to have acquired enough confidence to explore various choral conducting techniques including entries, cut-offs and patterns.

On the topic of understanding, seven claimed to have understood the close relationship between gesture and sound and five the notion of communication and interpersonal skills in choral conducting activities. However, gaining understanding in the science and workings of the voice seemed to be an area which called for further attention. Regarding the use of resources during the sessions of the course, six of the participants found the music repertoire used during the sessions very appropriate and the reading literature and handouts mostly appropriate. What warrants the attention of the researcher is that the use of video was unanimously considered very beneficial by the participants although, it was described by one participant as "the least enjoyable" part.

The questionnaire distributed at the last session also asked the participants to identify the most and least useful parts of the course. Most participants considered the practical exercises based on theory, the actual conducting process, the use of video ("video clips – even works better than looking at the mirror on my own"), the sharing of repertoire and warm-ups as well as insights from course tutors and colleagues as the strongest features of the course. Concerning the least useful parts of the course, a few referred to "elements not applicable to the age and ability range" of their pupils.

On the whole, the participants offered positive feedback in relation to the course by making reference to "engaging and helpful sessions" that lead people to "…look at the theory behind the gestures". Among their other comments was a reference to the use of video that facilitated "…good learning [through] looking at the tapes and re-hearing the feedback", the nature of the sessions that encouraged learning "…from each other" through observations and listening to the feedback that the group offered. Moreover, some people mentioned that at the end of the sessions they felt more confident. At the same time,

participants suggested that it would have been better if the course took place more often and for fewer hours during the day. A few people also asked for more instruction in singing technique.

On a question enquiring into possible unexpected gains from the course, participants offered the following comments:

> [I] developed more confidence so that I was able to lead a good staff INSET. [I] used techniques (e.g. warm ups) to relax reluctant staff

> The holistic view of the voice, emotion and communication has had an impact on my teaching beyond choral work..

> …just seeing people from different backgrounds and different countries…and everyone has got their own style and you can almost see…I hadn't expected to see my personality and their personality so strongly reflected in the conducting..

> I really enjoyed singing…because I used to sing and I never sing now…I really enjoyed the fact that I was singing in a group, even I wouldn't have to practise…

Above all, the responses of the majority who undertook the course *Choral Conducting, Leadership and Communication* highlighted that they would like to develop further their gesture and conducting technique together with efficient use of time in rehearsals. They also expressed their desire to communicate with choir members in real situations, put understanding (mostly vocal) into practice and learn more about repertoire.

CONCLUSIONS: DEVELOPING THE VLE

The research study gave valuable insight into the development and enhancement of the course. Clearly, reflection is integral to any professional development. Musicians often work in isolation in their schools and other situations; this is particularly so in the case of conductors. There is only one in each ensemble! Hence, between the face-to-face sessions, it was thought important to develop a mechanism for sharing and discussing issues encountered during their individual rehearsals – problems and successes. Many students would be in schools, perhaps on teaching practice, and the thus benefits of sharing experiences through discussion forums were becoming clear. Through uploaded videos, students could observe other students in action and evaluate their problems and successes, both in articulated form and internally. This has led us to organise smaller groups of three or four students, where they could feel safe enough to be honest about their own and their group member's practice. Each student then has a role to play in the professional development of their peers.

The methods used in an effective teaching–learning environment should aim to help students obtain and integrate cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies for using, managing and discovering knowledge. Therefore, in a Cognitive Apprenticeship environment 'modelling', 'coaching' and 'scaffolding' support students in the acquisition of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, such as self-correction and self-monitoring, through processes of observation and guided practice. In addition, 'articulation' and 'reflection' help students

focus their observation on expert problem-solving and 'gain conscious access to (and control of) their own problem-solving strategies' (Collins et. al. 1989). Reflection can be enhanced by the use of various techniques for reproducing or 'replaying' the performances of both expert and novice for comparison. The uploaded videos would record tutor (expert) interaction with the student (novice) in the choral conducting practical sessions. Lastly, 'exploration' aims to encourage learning autonomy by pushing students into a model of individual problem-solving. Allowing students to explore is critical, since exploration is a natural culmination of the fading of supports (Collins et al. 1989; 1991).

During the course's delivery in 2008, the virtual learning environment will be core and integral to it. Participants will be expected to use the VLE Blackboard in order to: (i) gain access to music, research and other resources; (ii) gather information on the running of the course; (iii) reflect and evaluate, from the uploaded video material from the teaching sessions, their own and others' conducting within small pre-selected groups; (iv) upload their own video snap-shots of their conducting in their own professional contexts for reflection and evaluation; (v) use the opportunity to 'chat' to the tutor and peers in the discussion forum in between the teaching sessions.

This development promises to be an exciting one, and data will be collected in a similar fashion to the data analysed in this paper, in order to evaluate the effectiveness not only of practical conducting sessions and participants' self-reflections, but also the efficacy of a virtual learning environment as educational support.

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