

“The Connection Itself was the Project”: Capstone Experiences for Emerging Professional Musicians Through WIL. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

During their studies, musicians transition to work-readiness, develop a professional persona and graduate from skills acquisition in a traditional master-mentor relationship towards heterarchical collaboration in ensembles. Over the final year of an undergraduate program in performance, students, faculty/industry mentors and course coordinators worked collaboratively to implement a music work integrated learning (WIL) project, culminating in public performance as a capstone experience. This phenomenological case report outlines how a student group with diverse skills formed a complex adaptive system through inclusion, connection, support, and collaboration culminating in a final public performance and this practice report. Through this process, students obtained a broad range of graduate skills as well as professional musical competencies within a functioning heterarchy. In creative and performing arts, WIL can positively produce professional outcomes that appear indistinguishable from professional practice in the industry at large. This can be a model for transformative WIL in other disciplines. In addition, this research and practice report was prepared primarily by students with a faculty mentor, providing yet another set of graduate skills for musicians seeking portfolio careers in the arts.

Keywords: Music; work integrated learning; WIL; complex adaptive system; performing arts; collaboration.

The Project

This practice report documents the process of a work integrated learning (WIL) project in the performing and creative arts from the perspective of student participant authors and their faculty mentor. As phenomenological auto-ethnography of rehearsal and performance, this student-led formative process produced a capstone experience demonstrating professional competency. Each group member also gathered contemporaneous data, reflecting on their process and how their learning/career paths/perspectives have changed as a result of the project. Our findings show the unique innovations contained in this WIL, and the ways in which contemporaneous auto-ethnographic research can build self and group efficacy in professional rehearsal and performance.

In the creative arts, any performance requires a detailed project plan, implementation reflections, professional performance outcomes and evidence of knowledge growth in the student cohort. The brief for this capstone WIL experience was broad:



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Performers were to lean into portfolio skills, acting both as performers and composers, librettists, instrumentalists, directors, producers, marketers, designers. Identifying and fostering these portfolio skills was also an important element facilitating the creation of a unique public and professional performance and recording. Students were given a faculty mentor with industry experience and a series of masterclasses to teach skills in professional competencies such as marketing, grant writing, public speaking, negotiating contracts, producing, designing and directing music performances. These frameworks, once set, were then reinforced by group discussions on all aspects of collaborating, securing, composing, rehearsing and performing the work with a faculty mentor, along with post-performance reflections.

This practice report is unique in describing both formal and informal connections between students, between students and staff, students and industry practitioners, students and their audiences, that result in an organic circular mentoring process (Yeo & Rowley, 2020) preparing a public performance. The analysis of this web of relationships is conducted using student reflections pre, during and post project, along with faculty observations. This contemporaneous data shows a picture of individual and group moulding towards a common purpose, informed by growing comprehension of how to implement professional project aims and goals. This WIL project places professional expectations on students and then enables students to reflect on their obtained competencies and graduate qualities.

The Work

A Requiem is a structured Catholic liturgical ritual of death. In this WIL, a group of undergraduate performance students researched and discovered an extant Catholic Requiem Mass by Johannes Ockeghem (1410-1497), perhaps the earliest surviving requiem. It was also discovered incomplete, mooted to have possibly been composed for Charles VII's funeral in 1461. As this course was delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic, the students' choice of this piece as the foundation of their collaboration was on point, functioning as a telling metaphor for their own personal experiences during the pandemic lockdowns, and an apt vehicle for exploring the suffering and death of many Australians during this period. This context served also as a prompt for the creation of four extra movements to complete the hitherto unfinished Requiem. The new material was based on students' personal experiences of the pandemic, culminating in the final song, *The Only Colour Left is Blue*. The Requiem thus mirrored experiences of loss, insecurity and change occurring in real time for participants, reflecting a contemporaneous approach to the definition of Requiem (a memorial for one who has died; a ritual to acknowledge and process death, from the Latin *Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine*; a liturgy to mark loss and change).

As a previously unfinished work requiring composition and collaboration to complete, this Requiem became a powerful contemporaneous musical response to mourning the pandemic, reflecting each participant's own experience of loss of freedom, and challenges to health and personal autonomy. This resulted in the creation of an eclectic work, with the student composer and performers collaborating to complete the Requiem, with new material, and parallels to students making sense of the pandemic itself. The final performance was a rendered recording as the pandemic lockdown itself interfered with our planned public performance.

Context of the Project

This capstone WIL project embeds graduate qualities, including musical competency, the artistic persona, embodiment, public communication skills, collaboration and improvisation, within real-world high-stakes performance outcomes. This practice report will show that self and group efficacy as experienced during this process led to increased professional competency in all members of the student team and created a shared belief that this experience was worthy of a professional practice report for this publication.

This practice report provides evidence for providing an experiential focus for learning professional planning, performance and reflection in the arts. Professional practice reports are used in the health sciences, as an offshoot of evidence-based medicine, with the aim of providing real-world examples for research methodologies and treatments. In the creative and performing arts, there is also utility in creating professional practice reports, but for a different reason: Typically, the success of a professional performance is measured by audience/critical reaction, rather than the analysis of process. This unit allowed students to learn the skills of project planning and implementation, to analyse process, along with building skills and talents needed to successfully perform in a professional context. The tasks and assessments provided in this course, as evidenced by this group's process reflections, creates a community of shared process knowledge, and mirrors the conditions of professional arts practice.

Literature Review

WIL is the integrative practice of marrying professional practice and theoretical knowledge for student learners. Dean et al. (2020) champion non-placement WIL as industry-like settings that are simulated or authentic, with the goal of creating innovative outcomes for students. Music learning is traditionally a master-mentor atelier practice, and even in the university setting, students are primarily taught in one-on-one mentorships and masterclass classrooms at the majority of conservatoria around the world. This method is tested over centuries of artistic practice and effectively embeds technical and historical practice knowledge. Graduate professional skills can also be taught by this method, but may be anecdotal and varied in quality, based on the existing skills of the master teacher. In response to the challenges of producing technically proficient and professionally attuned musicians for the 21st century, the Sydney Conservatorium of Music developed a Fourth Year Project unit as a yearlong WIL experience in music performance, with an express outcome of teaching higher level professional competencies in the context of a group heterarchy, leading to public or rendered performance as peak capstone experience for graduating students. The Fourth Year Project units are also part of a university wide initiative to provide WIL experiences across-disciplines as real-world embedding of graduate qualities.

Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory measures a person's belief in their own ability to influence an event, and their perception of that event. Reid et al. (2019) evidence the growth of a sense of self in musicians as directly related to moving from expert student to novice professional. This generally occurs in collaboration with others: "Music ensemble performers...must coordinate not only their actions, but also their joint expressive goals" (Chang et al., 2019, p. 205). This project unit opens the possibilities for WIL to be university-guided but ultimately driven by students, a scaffolded but collaborative approach that empowers graduates' sense of self, both in their individual creative competencies, performance and professional skills, and in effectively managing themselves and others in collaborative environments. In this case, the outcome was an authentic and high-stakes WIL experience of public performance, leaning in to expressed graduate qualities and creating work-ready creative/performance graduates.

In the context of this WIL project, competency and emergence of shared goals were valued aims (Sawyer, 2006). Very little research has been done on complexity theory and musical performance, but considerable work has addressed group dynamics and complex adaptive systems (Miller & Page, 2007). There are psycho-social benefits to the complex adaptive process of building a musical ensemble (Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2007). Each ensemble adapts to its own set of rehearsal, collaboration and performance rules (Morrison, 2001) creating a unique culture, usually a heterarchy (Berlow, 2010) where safe-to-fail experiments lead to certain repetitive, group-sanctioned repeatable behaviours. Ensemble music making is a complex adaptive system in practice which develops improvisatory skills applicable to other contexts (Sawyer, 2006).

More often than not, the term "complex adaptive system" is described rather than defined, as "diverse agents that learn, ... that interact with each other in nonlinear ways, and therefore, ... self-organize, ... have emergent properties, and... co-evolve with the environment" (McDaniel, 2007, pp. 22-23). It is also described in terms of the level of "self-organization", "hierarchy", "emergence" and "learning" (Edson, 2012, p. 499). There are others who focus on "self-organizing" and "sense-making" (Sprauer et al., 2016, p.1). All these characteristics of complex adaptive systems are evident in professional music ensembles. We describe how this occurred in this instance using a phenomenological approach as a practice report of a complex adaptive system which led to the embedding of graduate qualities and professional performance.

Edson (2012) relied on Yin (2003, as cited in Edson, 2012, p. 500) to justify the rationale for "conducting a single, revelatory case study... when a situation exists in which 'an investigator has an opportunity to observe and analyse a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific investigation' (p.42)". Phenomenology allows the researcher to investigate, analyse and theorise on a subject's past experiences as phenomena. Investigators have been using phenomenology in their research on performer's experience in musical performance, including Esler (2007), Holmes and Holmes (2013), Geeves et al. (2016), Sweet and Parker (2019) and Papageorgi and Welch (2020). Experiences of members of this WIL project group are described in real-time reflections and post-project analysis. These reflections describe an emergent complex adaptive system based on repeated behaviours of the individuals and the group, further evidenced by the success of the professional performance outcome. This is applicable to WIL in other disciplines, as a model for creating truly professional experiences with real-world outcomes, and for upskilling in collaborative workplace efficacies.

Study Description/Methodology

Five participants in a musical ensemble, along with their industry-based academic advisor, with input from the two course coordinators, documented their shared experience of designing and participating in this unique WIL experience, building a phenomenology of their collaborative music practice. This practice report is unique in that student experience guides the

outcomes, and also guides the process itself. This practice report uses student reflections at various parts of the process, along with faculty and industry observations, to create a meaningful narrative analysis of the process, perceptions and performance outcomes of a complex adaptive process in the creative/performing arts.

Students were gradually introduced, over the length of the project, to the concept of a complex adaptive system, and how these spontaneously occur in creative and performing arts WIL. Performers are used to collaborative practice and rehearsal as part of their education in performance; they are also used to a strict master-mentor atelier model for learning their instrument. The wider skills attained by analysing the group dynamic in real time are applicable to individuating strengths and weaknesses, but also to optimal functioning of creative and performing groups: "...the group itself began to function far more cohesively after our initial individual approaches were aligned under a collective and compartmentalised goal." Acknowledging that a complex adaptive system is at play allows participants the agency to then theorise as to the optimal system for role delineation, flexibility, creative collaboration and professional performance outcomes.

Five students (three female and two male, including one international student) and one faculty member (female) participated in this research by maintaining and compiling self-reflections over the course of the year. These were collected and analysed for evidence of cohesive and collaborative thinking, and emergent phenomenologies. This qualitative data from student reflections and faculty observations were captured at the beginning, end and post-project. Short excerpts from the student participants' reflections are presented throughout the discussion to illustrate the findings.

Findings

The findings show that not only was a highly professional and unique cultural work of import produced, but participants were able to recognise and observe the system they were a part of, and how that system could be formed to create the optimal conditions for rehearsal, growth, and collaboration in future creative performance. Of particular importance was the idea that "equal" is not a desired goal in a creative complex adaptive system. More than "equality", "respect" for roles was a much more valued goal by the end of the project. "Vulnerability" was also a valued trait in creative work. Participants commented on the importance of open, transparent rules, including relinquishing control, respectful communication styles, setting parameters and remaining accountable for individual areas of control. This was reflected back to the group by faculty partners to reinforce the message: "I have learnt...to not be overly attached to ideas and allow them to evolve with others' contributions."

The creative work, the process of its development and the experience of the group, can be seen as metaphors cast in the Ockeghem Requiem movements themselves. This began to create a particularly creative phenomenology based on the categorisations contained in the Ockeghem Requiem:

1. Introit (the introductory process, and evidence of Inclusion - the early meetings and guidance of the faculty setting the agenda)
2. Kyrie (*Lord Have Mercy* - the growth of group connection - group realisation of the scope and size of the project)
3. Graduale (*Step* - building systems of support, evidence of the development of a complex adaptive system - step - evidencing the path taken to begin to sing/perform the work, the project planning and rehearsing)
4. Tractus (*The work, outcome and message* - meaningful collaboration in the performing arts being the singing of psalms as evidenced in rehearsal and the project development itself)
5. Offertorium (work readiness - evidenced through the *offering* of this performance in public and secondarily through the publication of this collaborative practice report)

These existing five movements, from which the goal of this project drew, provide the metaphor for the development of the complex adaptive system which so successfully led to a professional performance, a world premiere and a timely cultural commentary on the polarities of death and rebirth during the pandemic. Using phenomenology, this report evidences the changing language of participants as the project developed, both about the work itself, the development of a complex adaptive system, and their own contributions and perceptions of self within said system.

Discussion

Introit - Inclusion

The early planning stages of the project can be understood in three parts, all of which are centred around inclusion. Firstly, students established a respectful dynamic in order to devise a final outcome. Solo endeavours in musical performance and/or composition had at that point dominated the students' undergraduate studies, the early years of which focus on discipline knowledge passed on from industry professionals (Reid et al., 2019). The students in this group realised the need to place personal agendas aside and "work...for the sake of the group". The students also felt they could open up and share their ideas, for instance: "I felt that my concerns, ideas and feelings...[have] been met with a collaborative mindset and with sensitivity"; and the fact that the group consisted of one composer and four performers meant that students showed respect for less familiar disciplines, "learning from [the] expertise...of those more experienced in the area". Once the final outcome was conceptualised, students identified how their own strengths and weaknesses would play out in the WIL project. These were both industry-related, including "experience in choral singing" and "experience writing reflective electroacoustic musical works," and relating to previous group-work experiences, "I (am)...sometimes controlling when it comes to group work".

Our reflections formed the basis for devising a Project Proposal, assigning responsibilities to each member. There was a clear delineation between the obligations of the composer, who was "required to produce five original works," and performers, who were "required to learn, rehearse and perform both Ockeghem's Requiem and the new compositions". Repeated references to "our composer" suggest a separation within the group based on discipline. Furthermore, language such as "must," "required" and "responsible for" demonstrates the value of accountability and even when the flexibility of deadlines was discussed, students had to "be assigned to step in and help". These assigned roles can be seen as the students' expectations of the collaboration rules that Morrison (2001) and Yeo (2016) identify as characteristic of a musical ensemble functioning as a complex adaptive system. The roles also facilitated equality in the workload between group members and "equal" appears repeatedly in the data. Simultaneous to these three planning stages was the shift in the role of the faculty mentor, who initially helped curate ideas and negotiate group dynamics, but eventually provided "support, but no specific instruction" as necessary. This shift was especially evident with the completion of the Project Proposal, when students took ownership of their ideas and the need to share them effectively: "The program helped me to be more content with meeting situations, convey ideas more clearly". In doing so, the students were able to establish a common goal, like the coordinated "joint expressive goals" identified by Chang et al. (2019, p. 205).

Kyrie - Connection

A complex adaptive system of this kind is dependent on a number of variables imposed by a variety of influences including but not limited to goals, abilities, context and motivation.

Goals

Analysis of the students' responses to the pressure of an omniscient deadline provides insight into the challenges that students experience as result of the variability of a WIL project such as this. The observation that "at times we were a little too ambitious, and it was not possible to do the work to a high enough standard" is in contrast with "all group members have been constructive and honest when sharing ideas and setting deadlines" would suggest an incongruent perception of the achievability of self-determined goals. The recognition that a complex adaptive system is at play in this context in conjunction with the clear correlation of data relating to the high efficacy of flexible and informal self-determined goal setting in a WIL context identified by Buchanan et al. (2022) would account for the overall success of the project, despite the differing goals of each student.

Abilities

Given that students were in the final year of tertiary music study, their musical skills were not a cause of contention in this project, one member describing their peers as "excellent musicians and creative artists". The ability to meet deadlines and be held accountable for their assigned tasks, however, was mixed. Some students identified "differences in preparation" which meant that deadlines were not met and "it was not possible to do the work to a high enough standard". Students responded to these mixed abilities in varying ways. One student saw the inability to meet deadlines as a stimulus to work independently "without the input of others," whereas another saw slowed progress as an opportunity to "be more patient...kind and listening, putting other people first". Two students took on the work of others in addition to their own, later reflecting that they "should have communicated with individuals upfront". These varied responses, when repeated, characterised the complex adaptive system, in which members felt "the work (was) not equally prioritised by all group members".

Context and motivation

Reid et al. (2019) identify that extrinsic motivation prompts creativity for musicians. The fact that this project took place in a university context and was a requirement of the students' degrees was a source of extrinsic motivation for students who saw it as a curricular experience, initially "[envisaging themselves] exhibiting musical skills learnt in [their] degree". However, the group's resilience and ability to move beyond difficulties arising from complex adaptive system behaviours, such as not meeting deadlines, inconsistent perceptions of the group's common goal and the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns, demonstrates the intrinsic motivation required for sustainable musical careers (Reid et al., 2019). The challenging circumstances in which the project was eventually created also led the project to take on a new meaning. The online nature of the collaboration meant that "communication" was less frequently identified as problematic, replaced by rhetoric associated with "respect" and "cohesiveness". Ultimately, a growth in connection between the students became evident as they united under the requirement to produce a body of work:

Perhaps the connection itself was the project...

We've worked really hard on this project over the last year, and it's turned out to be quite meaningful, and a little bit cathartic for all of us.

The WIL nature of the project was not identified as a source of intrinsic motivation in the pre-performance data, but the benefits of the project for work-readiness were identified extensively in post-performance reflections, as will be discussed.

Graduale - Support

The course structure lent itself to a variation of faculty support as the demands of the project evolved. Whilst students were provided with "broad professional skills" in lecture format, the students were challenged by the professional nature of the work to learn independently "from the expertise of" those more experienced... [as would] realistically be expected of a professional". The ability for respondents to consistently identify their individual "accountability" throughout the duration of the project is reflective of the high authenticity of industry simulation and is a direct extension of the findings of Dean et al. (2020). Of equal importance was their ability to value and allocate tasks. One student reflected: "others had been accommodating to have relieved me from most of the administrative duties so that I could better manage my creative work". Another noted: "should it eventuate that one task is more difficult than we had anticipated, other group members will be assigned to step in and help". It is important to recognise the "unexpected toll" of the COVID-19 pandemic on the creative processes of the team. With the requirement to transform a live project into a digital output, while working remotely, the students "ended up creating a bit of a production line...that ended up being more successful than [they] could've hoped for". Loosely defined roles based on perception of self and the function of self within the complex adaptive system allowed the group to not only work efficiently together, supporting the concept of "the aspect of being" (Reid et al., 2019) but also to adapt under the influence of the "paradigm shift" presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tractus - Meaningful Collaboration

As faculty support increasingly left the complex adaptive system to function as its own iteration, participants began to see their own strengths, weaknesses, fluid roles and identities within the group. Each individual was challenged to "reflect on the concept of a Requiem... and what was important to them", collaborate creatively with one another and produce an eclectic completion of the Requiem. The cohesive portrayal of intentions is a derivative of the attitudes such as "listening to each other's input and taking these ideas seriously, being careful in the way we give feedback; and yet not shying away from constructive criticism" displayed in rehearsal and project development. Sitting at the crux of the development, was one-to-one meetings between vocalist and composer. These meetings between composer and vocalist resulted organically from the desire to produce a meaningful and collaborative output. This gave the students the opportunity to "express [their] own compositional ideas confidently and creatively" and have them "[gel] unintentionally" as a result. These collaborative meetings may therefore be defined as critical nodes of the complex adaptive system at play.

Offertorium - Work Readiness

Work readiness was initially displayed in the group's ability to offer a meaningful reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic, embodied originally in a live performance and eventually (due to lockdown) in a digital format with a live-streamed premiere and a public pre-concert talk. In actuality, the projected benefits of the project to professional outcomes and work readiness are immeasurable. The skills gathered through completing this course have directly influenced the career path of each participant, their creative output and their professional self-efficacy:

I now have an even greater understanding of why project-based learning is important for musicians. Treating every concert as a project pushes us towards greater creativity.

without the experience of the project itself, I would not have been able to identify the strengths I can offer in professional work, or been encouraged to examine the areas where I needed to improve.

These developed skills culminated to produce a body of work which was in effect a professional output. Arguably, the language used by the students to describe their project is indicative of the professional quality of their output. For example, the students framed it as a response to “current events and common lived experiences...relevant to current issues in society” with the intention “for the audience to identify with the issues” explored. The focus on societal impact and audience response rather than focus on quantitative assessment and grading is clear evidence of the evolution from “student” mindset to “professional” intention at play.

Limitations

The effective and transformative outcome of the project for the participants is testament to the efficacy of WIL in performing arts contexts. The unequal division of work frequently mentioned in the student reflections, while in this example of a high functioning group, evidently “did not make the project unsuccessful” could alienate students who are less motivated or confident. Further research would need to be conducted to assess the relative impact of creative/performing arts WIL as complex adaptive systems with regard to both “successful” and “unsuccessful” project outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly disrupted the progression of the project and would likely have affected the psychological states of each participant, impacting their attitudes to work, motivation and stress levels. It would be valuable to conduct a similar analysis of a project completed under “normal” working circumstances.

Conclusion

Public performance is a great leveller, as audiences provide their own feedback loop on the success of the collaborative process. Thus, performers get three pieces of useful reflection - personal, group and exterior. This project shows the possibilities for creative and performing arts WIL informing other disciplines due to: 1. The necessarily collaborative nature of performing arts outputs; 2. The ease with which creative performers are able to recognise and adjust complex adaptive systems for their stated purpose; 3. How recognising the flexible roles of each person (node) within the complex adaptive system can build professional competencies and professional recognition, and finally; 4. Transformative WILs can and should place participants in professional workplaces, with hard deadlines and outward facing outcomes. Application of these principles is certainly not limited to the performing arts, whereby the notion of “public performance” is synonymous with a student’s interaction with the professional sphere of their chosen field.

Phenomenology is an effective reflective tool, whereby the emergent properties of a WIL can be examined by participants themselves in creative ways. Participants in this WIL were able to describe the phenomenology of our experience using measures and terms drawn from the project itself, which describe both the project itself, and each of our experiences in realising it, as well as the group dynamic which developed. In this case, a complex adaptive system occurred, which enabled effective collaboration, measured in a highly successful performance outcome. As students, we effectively moved from the master/student model to collaborative professionals through this tiered process, and our final reflections show how it has built professional competencies and self-efficacy across our group. This practice report can provide a model for constructing high-stakes WILs in other disciplines, where outcomes are public, professional level skills are required to complete the project. Professional competency is measured in that performance, but also in personal strengths-based realisations and interpersonal analysis of the complex adaptive system that this collaborative WIL facilitated.

Afterword

The production of this paper was written as an extension to the WIL project itself. The experience of co-authoring a practice report, a university faculty collaboration with recent graduates, allowed further academic and professional connections to be formed in the process. This was an introduction to working as colleagues rather than as students and professors as separate parties. Being an active part of this process reaps numerous benefits for the students, as they learn what is required to write an academic paper, the process of approaching and applying to journals and potential publishers, and, if successfully published, the students are able to take their first steps into the professional academic sphere. Learning this skill is arguably essential to the professional survival and longevity of most Australian musicians, as in the current Australian music industry, many professional musicians supplement their income with academic work and vice versa, and a career in music is rightly described

as a *portfolio career* in Australia (a career with many different work-types requiring a range of skills). Learning these skills in a free-to-fail environment with the guided support of academics, on a project in which students have played an active and vital role, enhances the learning experience tenfold. It provides students with a broad spectrum of industry skills and professional self-efficacy to deal with broad and complex industry expectations.

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