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# **Navigating the wilderness of becoming professional**

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## **Abstract**

The wilderness is often conceived as a place where persons can become confused or get into a wild condition (Nash 1982) and the 'wilderness years' as a time of uncertainty where the vastness of life, choices and roles bewilder actions that could be taken. Such spatial and temporal conditions could aptly be applied to graduates making the transition from safe contexts of educational preparation to becoming professionals at work. Our paper examines the nature of learning discovered by recent graduates participating in a symphony orchestra-initiated development program designed to nurture them through the transition to becoming professional orchestral musicians. We argue that this empirical example helps to support a conception of learning as an embodied and constructed experience with others in context. Here, learning to become 'a whole musician' is facilitated by guided contextualisation, a process that differs from conventional discussions of skill-based novice learning and mentorship. The competency that is being developed is one of learning how to become, forming a sense of identity as broader musical citizens as well as becoming members of more instrumental communities. Such attributes of graduateness are less about applying disciplinary or generic skills and more about committing to a form of lifelong learning that is relationally-based, a critical part of graduates developing a fitness for professional practice and the persistence to emerge from the wilderness to becoming professional.

Keywords: graduateness, becoming professional, mentoring, skill learning

## **Introduction**

Employers regularly highlight the trend that formal courses are failing to produce graduates with the requisite characteristics to be immediately productive in their particular workplaces (Hesketh 2000; Willis & Taylor 1999). Further, employers see the role of preparing young adults to join the workplace as an instrumental role of higher education, a role that is the source of ongoing debate (Brown, Hesketh & Williams 2003; Harvey 2000). Perhaps in reaction, higher education authorities in various parts of the world have examined the notions of 'graduateness', 'generic/key capabilities/skills/attributes' and 'employability' with the objective of understanding what attributes are expected of graduates and how such attributes might be taught, defined or assessed (for example, Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell & Watts 2000; Higher Education Quality Council 1995; Mentkowski and Associates 2000). Such generic skills or attributes typically include communications, teamwork and critical thinking, aspects that transcend subject-oriented disciplinary skills.

We believe that skills (whether disciplinary or generic), attitudes and attributes are important foundations in preparing for work. But during this particular stage of life, that of young adulthood (for many, seeking first full-time employment), we argue that learning is implicated more in formative notions of identity about becoming professional and notions of self in relation to others. This period of time is generally

known as the wilderness years because they are ‘years of great promise as well as great peril, a time when the young mind can open afresh to the stimulation of great questions and the nourishment of worthy dreams’ (Daloz 2003, p.20). Our paper argues for the notion of a living curriculum (Bath, Smith, Stein & Swann 2004) consistent with developing an early appreciation for lifelong learning and a preference for embodied and contextualised learning that may require new structures of collaboration between higher education and industry.

We first address the deficiencies in common theories of skill learning targeted at novices and highlight how theories of mentoring can be restated to address these deficiencies. We then discuss three themes arising from an empirical case study (Johnsson & Hager 2006) that we researched on graduate learning to become professional orchestral musicians. Our findings suggests that this form of learning, while utilising disciplinary skills of performing and playing instruments and generic skills of communication and groupwork, can be better characterised as forming a professional identity that encompasses a multiplicity of roles. Under this construct of learning, generic and disciplinary skills intertwine in context to generate a living curriculum (Bath et al. 2004), one that does not stop when one ‘graduates’ but rather forms part of an ongoing process for lifelong learning. Thus ‘graduateness’ encompasses the notion of ‘employability’ (Harvey 2000), but more significantly jump-starts the beginning of many transitions during a lifelong journey, rather than checks off the milestone transition to employment or professional practice.

### **Novice and young adulthood learning: Theories of skill and the influence of mentoring**

Theories of novice learning have long debated the notion of phases or stages where skills (cognitive, perceptual or motor) are acquired progressively towards competence or mastery (Fitts 1968; Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986; Shuell 1990; Dreyfus 2001). Indeed the foundations of competency-based education and training programs are still based on such notions (Hager 2004). The growth of influential research on how novices move progressively through these stages by watching, imitating, modelling and being guided by experts has been the focus of literature in the domains of social cognitive learning (Bandura 1977; Wolek 1999), mentoring (Kram 1988; Kram & Hall 1996; Daloz 1999; Darwin 2000) and communities of practice, specifically in moving from legitimate peripheral participation towards full or other forms of participation (Lave & Wenger 1991; Fuller & Unwin 2003; Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson & Unwin 2005).

The challenge with ‘stages’ theories is at least two-fold: one, the assumption there are a finite number of stages or that at some stage, learning can be complete when novices become full members or acquire expert-level skills (a critique of Lave & Wenger 1991 that Fuller et al. 2005 highlighted); and two, that stages are distinct allowing articulation of stage characteristics that can be readily assessed and checked off systematically (‘not competent’, ‘competent’) at worst in context-free situations. As attractive as stages of learning are in their simplicity, we believe that learning is a more complex phenomenon. An individual may already be an expert violinist but this does not mean she can become an expert orchestral musician playing the violin. She may be an expert interpreter of Shostakovich music but always remain a mediocre interpreter of Ravel. Furthermore, individuals may be simultaneously members of

multiple communities with quite diverse approaches to learning and mastery outcomes when, for example, the composition of those communities change.

In our view, learning remains essentially a collective and relational phenomenon. Mentors or individuals who are significant role models in the lives of others often called their protégés, can influence the quality of learning, particularly for novices at the cusp of adulthood. Early theories of workplace mentoring have similarly theorised stages of mentoring as lifecycles with beginnings and ends, and mentoring relationships as dyads between mentors and protégés within organisations (Kram 1988). Such theories can be described as ‘functionalist’ in that they typically discuss the roles of powerful senior-level mentors who facilitate career sponsorship and psychosocial, empathetic support of more junior members in the organisation (and sometimes out of the organisation across careers). More recent mentoring theories have challenged the asymmetrical power relations of traditional dyads, suggesting that mentoring is less a *role* than the *character* of the relationship (Darwin 2000, our italics) and that creative use of mentoring can lead to co-learning or generative learning (Bokeno & Gantt 2000). We believe such relationally-based conceptions enhance current views of novice learning and our next section discusses a recent case study we researched that shows how creative use of mentoring with young adults leads to meaningful learning.

### **Case study: Learning to become a whole musician**

We investigated the learning experiences of recent Music School (a generic term to cover tertiary institutions offering music qualifications) graduates participating in a development program initiated by the Sydney Symphony orchestra (who gave us prior permission to disclose its identity). This research forms part of a broader portfolio of empirical case studies investigating the features of informal learning across a variety of workplaces. Our research method included semi-structured questioning of how participants understood the role of the professional orchestral musician, what knowledge, skills and attitudes it required and what learning facilitated their perceptions of being and becoming professional. Our research participants comprised developing musicians who were recent graduates (called Fellows within this program), professional musicians who were full-time employees of the professional orchestra and who acted as mentors to Fellows for the duration of the program and program staff who directed and administered the development program. We complemented these interviews with researcher observations of participants-in-action within orchestra rehearsal and performance situations.

Participation in the development program (more formally known as the Sydney Symphony Fellowship Program) required a one-year dedicated commitment with selection via competitive audition. The concept and construct for the program grew out of prior experience with a separate and simpler orchestral training program targeted to tertiary-level students. Fellows become immersed in a broad range of activities including performing chamber music concerts, attending master classes with visiting international soloists, tutoring school children during regional tours and performing a series of adult and school concerts within a small orchestra (about half the size of the professional orchestra) sitting side-by-side with their professional musician mentors. Fellows are paid a modest stipend that is not close to full-time entry musician salaries, but their role gives them preferred status for additional casual

work to fill temporary positions in the main professional orchestra. Thus the structure of this development program differs from traditional work-based learning programs (Bailey, Hughes & Moore 2004) or apprenticeships (Wolek 1999) where educational study and workplace experience occur simultaneously, or from induction programs that occur when employees are hired permanently for a job in a company.

### *Graduateness as understanding beyond self and skill*

Fellows found that after years of educational preparation focused on improving individual instrument skills and techniques, that other dimensions become important in a professional environment. This partly requires understanding what constitutes culturally acceptable protocols and obligations to others:

The etiquette that comes with playing in an orchestra is just as important [as the musical interpretation] because obviously there's a hierarchy of older players who need to be respected and expect you to respect their ways of doing things. And they want you to learn; at the same time, they want you to learn the way they've done it. And yes definitely not tread on anyone's toes, which means not playing before anyone, not playing while people are speaking, to take it seriously but at the same time, not to be stiff so-to-speak.

One time I [and another developing musician] got into big trouble because [we] hadn't learned [our parts] for the first movement of Tchaikovsky Four ... The mentor just said: It's unacceptable, I would never do that; go home and learn your part. It was just a read-through so we didn't take it seriously. But we looked really bad and I felt really bad. Then when he came down on us, I felt even worse and that's a definitely a lesson that I've really kept. (Developing musician, Interview 3).

More importantly, learning to become professional is about becoming part of a community that shares practical and holistic experiences; about learning how to work *with* rather than *against* or *in comparison to* others:

It's a lot more competitive when you're younger actually. [At Music School] you want to show you're better than other people and you're going to make it; you show off by playing the hard bits louder and faster and cause the music to be reasonably unsettled ... Professional musicians are always aware there's enough time to interpret every bit of music at one point; they never overplay their instrument, which is what younger people do all the time – play too hard and kill the instrument sound (Developing musician, Interview 3).

It's a professional engagement, where they're working alongside professionals. Here (pointing around the classroom where the interview is being held), it's a student environment where professionals teach them, lecture to them. So the interaction is very different. And if it is work ... you're much more side-by-side with someone ... When we teach someone here ... you're very rarely playing together ... the student will play to me, I'll listen and then I'll demonstrate something; it's very much a sort of ... table tennis thing ... rather than playing doubles (Professional who also teaches at Music School, Interview 8).

To some extent, the emphasis on disciplinary skills during higher education reinforces a selfish focus on individual achievement: trumpeters compete against other trumpeters for a place in the school orchestra, or to win a music competition, or to gain entry into music camp. Since orchestral performance depends on unity of sound whereas a solo performance less so, professional orchestral musicians must, in essence, subjugate self in relation to a greater whole. This is an experiential process that is very difficult for educators to provide:

A lot of good Music Schools will get the whole ... brass section together and run some excerpts from that symphony as a brass section. But there again, you can get a whole feeding frenzy happening where, you know, the First Trumpet might be a really loud player and you try to play up to that instead of having a conductor out the front saying: no, you're too loud for the strings and the winds. You only learn that, when you are actually *in situ* ... I guess you can learn a lot about the theory and about your own instrument in a lesson and that's important. But I think when it comes right down to ensemble playing, there's really only one way: you really have to suck it and see (Professional who also teaches at Music School, Interview 11).

Interestingly, numerous participants volunteered how dangerous they thought specialisation (just focusing on their own instrument) was for their playing; they offered as examples playing contemporary music in addition to classical, listening to opera and all forms of artistic expression, composing and teaching as activities to enhance their proficiency as orchestral musicians.

### *Graduateness means contextualising across multiple roles often implicitly*

We found that learning to become a professional orchestral musician is not about understanding a single role as a performing professional in an orchestra. In fact, the growing multiplicity of roles recognises the dynamic nature of the profession and the difficulty in ascribing a single notion of identity to practising professionals. For example, a professional orchestral musician might include becoming an instrumental player, performer, specialist interpreter of particular types of music, chamber group player, composer, teacher, mentor, educator, cultural advocate or small business owner. Such roles are distinguishable but also overlap to some degree. Understanding these roles occurs frequently by watching and modelling (Bandura 1977) often implicitly. Importantly, adapting to different roles also helps to strengthen the intertwining and value across roles, especially the importance of teaching:

I wouldn't have expected I'd have to go out and create my own work. I thought there'd be institutions that offered me work. Now you have to be more proactive and create your own quartet and market it ... Just like everything else, the whole business will change a lot in the future too (Professional, Interview 8).

Someone can give guidance by just being there – it's kind of a mental moral support. Because music is a lot about communication, you can actually improve by copying someone by watching them from the corner of your eye. Just as much as if someone was sitting there and giving you instructions (Developing musician, Interview 2).

Of course some of us are more natural teachers than others [but] being involved in teaching or mentoring can only be good for your playing. And being an active performer can only be good for your teaching (Professional who also teaches, Interview 8).

This contextualisation process is valuable as a source of learning about ongoing practice for mentors as well as their protégés, as Bokeno and Gantt (2000) have theorised:

It's easy to sit in a job and think this is what I do. Suddenly someone [like my protégé] comes in with a new [piece on his instrument] and makes you think about it again. Yeah, it's been a two-way learning street (Professional, Interview 11).

I see the mentoring process as vital for both sides – it's important for learning, for being mentored; [but it's also] important for us because it confronts us with ... well, what *are* we looking for? What *are* we trying to train our musicians to do? (Professional, Interview 8, emphasis by participant).

### *Graduateness through citizenship in practice*

Our previous point on the value of contextualisation as ways of adapting raises a final point that we describe as learning citizenship. We believe demonstrating citizenship facilitates becoming professional but goes beyond a specific profession to support the concept of lifelong learning. Citizenship represents a connectivity and identity of self with society at-large. People learn citizenship ‘through the informal context of everyday life [for it concerns] the learning of a capacity for action and for responsibility ... the learning of the self and of the relationship of self and other ... that extend beyond the personal to the wider cultural level of society (Delanty, 2003, p.602).

In our specific example, the heritage of music passed along from the great masters such as Mozart and Beethoven is essentially re-enacted by current practitioners when they perform the works of these great composers. Therefore ‘becoming professional’ in the whole musician sense is, in essence, about stewardship of practice that transcends practitioners:

The musician is just one link in the chain ... part of a much greater thing. Because of this link with musical heritage, all musicians have a responsibility with regard to education, both self-education and the education of future generations. After all, the great composers of the past were teachers, composers, players and so on (Developing musician, Interview 12).

Such notions of cultural citizenship may be generating some traction through the creative use of cross-sector collaborative partnerships. For example, Carnegie Hall and Juilliard recently announced the formation of their Academy (two-year fellowships for fifty aspiring postgraduate musicians) that included a proposed collaboration with the New York City Education Department (Tommasini 2006). These Fellows develop teaching skills by spending one and a half days per week in sixteen public schools to inspire students and to instil an appreciation of music. The value of musicians as ‘engaging proselytizers’ and as instruments of community outreach creates ‘a new paradigm of what it means to be a musician’ (Tommasini 2006, p.29). It also appears to provide supportive evidence for new forms of network-based learning (Bottrup 2005).

### **Discussion**

Our empirical example of developing musician experiences has highlighted the nuances of understanding what it is to become professional. Although disciplinary skills are both a requirement of entry and form part of a practitioner’s contribution when joining a professional practice, learning here is much more about searching for connections to various forms of identity. At this particular stage of life, graduates are in search of occupational identities (Kram 1988) or even broader notions of social identity (Delanty 2003; Jenkins 2004).

Further, this openness to seeking of identities is enhanced by how roles, rules and relations (in the integrative manner discussed by Emmet 1966) are contextualised through ongoing enactments of practice and therefore learned emergently. Here, learning is embodied and organic using cognitive, emotional and conative senses (Beckett & Hager 2002) rather than a focus on transfer of knowledge and skills (Royer 1979) or evolving through stages of competency (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986).



The interactions between professional musician mentors and their developing musician protégés are central to the design and delivery of this development program. Over time, mentoring of Fellows has evolved into dialogical relationships where mentors jointly learn with the potential for broader learning diffusion into the larger professional orchestra.

Bokeno and Gantt (2000) suggest that ‘the diffusion of learning in organizations becomes a matter of relationships among learners, where the relationships are what is practiced, and the learning is what happens rather than the other way around. It is the *relationships* – rather than the learning labs, dialogue experiences, and training programs – that cultivate learning, disseminate learning, and maintain learning processes as a way of organizational life’ (Bokeno & Gantt 2000, p.245, our italics). We believe this is also realised through ongoing enactment or stewardship in practice-based learning (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina & von Savigny 2001). For the graduates in our case study, the metaphor of ‘the whole musician’ captures the multi-dimensionality and openness with which a practitioner must give and take in recognising a shared journey of discovery with others:

The Whole Musician model provides a structure to mindfully integrate individuals with the institutions that train, support and employ them, in the context of the ways these various communities and others interact ... The issue of defining and developing the "self" is central ... [but] the quest for authentic vocation [is to recognise] that an individual’s ultimate success and opportunities for personal fulfilment are inextricably linked with other individuals and the communities in which they interact (Weller, 2003).

Thus, there is an enhanced sense of a shared world, ‘a shared stake, something in common ... that lies at the core of being human’ (Daloz, Keen, Keen & Parks 1996, pp.2,4) that connects human beings to each other. Although an orchestral musician is someone in a profession, becoming a professional (orchestral musician) means learning not only about performing your instrument, joining the orchestra, being in a job or at work but about living a shared world with others where worthy dreams are at stake.

The issue is to what extent could this kind of learning occur within contexts of educational preparation, i.e. could Music Schools realistically provide this kind of experience? Although Bath et al’s (2004) research into explicitly embedding graduate attributes into tertiary curricula showed potential for a symbiotic relationship between generic skills and disciplinary skills enhancing both, we believe that context-sensitive judgements in practice are more critical elements to novice learning; such experiences are difficult for educational institutions *by themselves* to provide. A group of trumpeters at Music School practising the brass section of a Bruckner symphony can rehearse repetitively to achieve technical excellence on their instruments - the right notes, the preferred breathing techniques, following the composer’s markings for note duration or volume in a particular section. However, it is not until those trumpeters play that Bruckner symphony in an orchestral performance with the rest of the orchestra, that a practitioner really understands how to adapt individual action to produce the needed unity of sound suitable for that orchestra’s chosen interpretive style of Bruckner, that size of orchestra or to suit the acoustics of that particular venue.

As illustrated by our case study, guided contextualisation or teaching in this mentored sense is ‘preeminently an act of care ...[mentors] walk at times ahead of our students,

at times besides them; at times we follow their lead' (Daloz 1999, p.244) – *by helping others become, you also learn to become yourself*. Such programs as illustrated by our case study and the Juilliard/Carnegie Hall Academy program are indicative of innovative collaborations that are developmental in purpose. These designs and structures may be more successful at achieving the attributes of gradueness because they provide opportunities to contextualise in practice and to experience forms of identity-making during the crucial period of young adulthood. Such pathways facilitate learning during critical transitions to the workplace at graduate levels (Escolas 2004; Fielding 2006) or even earlier when the youth of today start work at secondary school ages (Billett & Ovens 2007; Vaughn & Roberts 2007).

## **Conclusion**

The learning experience for graduates during the wilderness years is formative and often transformative. Rather than remaining a time of confusion, this period can be crucial in forming a fitness for professional practice and should be more proactively guided through new forms of cross-sector collaboration. Sydney Symphony Fellows after completing their development program have moved onto permanent positions in the Sydney Symphony orchestra or other prestigious orchestras domestically and abroad, indicating effective employability success. But beyond this instrumental outcome, our participants indicated a heartfelt appreciation for the nurturing and care that mentors offered: a wisdom voluntarily shared. It is this form of learning that we believe allows novices to emerge from the wilderness to understanding what it is to become and be a professional.

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