

Group teaching: the current picture

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While the teaching of tertiary academic areas (e.g., music theory, history) is traditionally undertaken in class groups, group teaching of instrumental/vocal skills at the advanced level is less utilised across the sector, particularly within universities and conservatoria. Moreover, the distinction between group teaching and group performance *training* (e.g., choir, orchestra, ensemble) has been equivocal. Group teaching of instrumental/vocal skills in tertiary circles has often been associated with beginner skills, e.g., keyboard classes, yet the literature demonstrates that group teaching of advanced students is a more usual approach on the continent (Cahn 2003, Ritterman 2003), as well as in several tertiary institutions in the United States (Music Teachers National Association 1999, 2000, Daniel 2003). Additionally, group teaching is often confused with or regarded synonymously with the traditional master class which, in the current context, is often ancillary to rather than the principal model of learning.

The recent Australian Music Centre Survey shows that group teaching in the Australian post-secondary context operates in a variety of modes:

- Large groups (performance-oriented) e.g., choir, band or orchestra;
- Classes (practice/research-oriented) e.g., performance seminars;
- Small/medium groups e.g., keyboard skills, master classes, ensembles; and
- Small groups e.g., advanced student lessons.

Table 1 presents the data¹ and synthesises emerging principles in relation to the application, methodologies, promotion of and training for group work within the sectors.

Table 1 shows that group teaching is predominantly applied to class work, performance-oriented training ensembles, and ancillary use of master classes, with few cases of group teaching as a principal learning methodology being reported. Indeed, the question regarding the provision of training opportunities for staff engaging in any form of group teaching received the lowest response of the four questions, particularly in the university sector (58%). This finding, along with the general lack of training reported, suggests either an expectation for staff to be qualified prior to undertaking a teaching role, or that the sector relies on individuals' experiential learning and/or practice as a student and professional.

Since external pressures on 21st century higher education music providers continues to increase, given both economic factors and the emphasis on graduate outcomes, there is a strong imperative to address such issues as generic skills and employability. Many authors (e.g., Duckworth 1999, Baker-Jordan 2003) argue the value of group teaching in developing critical assessment, communication and independence skills, all of which emerge from interaction and the range of feedback processes inherent in this mode of tuition. Extant research regarding either one-to-one or group teaching/learning strategies is both inconclusive and insufficient in terms of evaluating the effectiveness of the learning environment (Kennell 2002, Daniel 2004). Hence, there is an urgent need for further research in terms of the development, application and review of teaching methodologies in the instrumental/vocal context. ■

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Table 1 – Synthesis of survey data

Area probed	University	TAFE	Private
Use of group teaching (major study students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large group training models dominate e.g. choir, orchestra, ensembles, classes and seminars • Master classes occasional offerings • Few references to regular small group work either alongside or in place of one-to-one tuition 	Dominates sector (5 of 6 respondents)	Master classes or large group training models dominate
Standard format and learning outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Format and outcomes reflect large group training experiences • Minimal data concerning small group models in all but two cases (1 – four students work on ensemble, common issues and confidence, 2 – three/four same study students in classes of 2-4 hours depending on level). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three of four responses reflect master class format or small ensemble work • One case – large group followed by small groups of 2-3 with periodic teacher involvements 	Responses reflect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • medium to large group classes • performance ensembles • master classes
Promotion of group teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some use reported across sector, although responses reflect ensemble or large group training, not teaching. • One-to-one predominates over group teaching practices • Three reported cases of incorporation into standard program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three of four respondents promote and adopt group teaching • One argues due to financial restrictions 	Responses reflect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promotion of one-to-one teaching • group work ancillary to one-to-one.
Staff training opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One response reveals training program in place (provision of resources, workshops) • Others report no direct pedagogical training programs but expectation to be qualified and/or capable. • Some use of generic professional development training reported. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No training reported. One case refers to feedback occurring later in the year as part of group teaching trial. 	None to minimal (generic only) training offered

Endnotes

¹ Off-task or irrelevant responses were not considered

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