“She did miracles for me”: An investigation of dissonant studio practices in higher education music

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Abstract

In research focused on studio-based instrumental and vocal learning there is a good deal of evidence indicating that the interpersonal relationship between teacher and student can have an important effect on the success of their work together. There are occasional references in the research literature to studio apprenticeships that have proved ineffective, but the evidence for this tends to remain indirect or anecdotal in nature. The current paper takes advantage of an opportunity presented within a broader project, to explore the nested case study of a student who, exceptionally, reports that her teacher’s approach is not appropriate for her at her current stage of development. The implied dissonance within the studio is explored through the “rich transcription” of interview and video evidence, highlighting issues of authority, trust and communication.

Keywords

performance pedagogy, instrumental and vocal teaching and learning, studio-based learning, musical apprenticeship, higher education music

In the research focused on studio-based instrumental and vocal learning there is a good deal of evidence indicating that the interpersonal relationship between teacher and student can have an important effect on the success of their work together. The character of the relationship may vary as pupils pass through successive stages of development (Burland & Davidson, 2002; Mills & Smith, 2003), but its importance stands, even at elite levels of achievement (Manturzewska, 1990; Sosniak, 1985). Further variety has been identified among different styles of music, with the “significant other” appearing to be particularly important for classical musicians (Creech et al., 2008; Hewitt, 2004).

The research evidence we have suggests that students in higher education music regard their experience with the studio system as generally – even abundantly – effective. For example, Gaunt (2009) in an interview study with 20 conservatoire students found all of them “overwhelmingly positive” in their views of one-to-one tuition, and “delighted” with their teacher-student relationships. On the other hand, three of Gaunt’s respondents recalled having been so dissatisfied as to change teachers; they were more likely to be critical of past than present studio relationships,
reporting in terms of “considerable anxiety” and “painful stories” that it had been difficult – even “impossible” – to raise concerns with their previous teachers (p. 193, p. 203).

Gaunt reports that conservatoire students can be “fearful of what might happen should the [one-to-one] relationship falter” (p. 193). This tendency is explored by Hanken (2011), who refers to the “logic of appropriateness” that governs behaviour within organisations (pp. 246–247) – specifically, the music academy – alongside the need for trust and authority in successful apprenticeships, quoting one student who felt that criticising her teacher would be a potential “catastrophe” (p. 50). Teachers themselves may be less reluctant to discuss difficulties in studio relationships, though references in the research literature tend to remain indirect: for example, Purser (2005) in an interview study with six conservatoire teachers, mentions “rare” cases in which a lack of “personal chemistry” in studio lessons led to students changing teacher (p. 292). Gaunt (2008), interviewing 20 conservatoire teachers, reports that more than half had experienced difficulties with studio relationships, and that “the tendency was to remain isolated, and to deal with difficulties largely through personal reflection” (p. 234).

It would seem that difficulties within studio relationships may be regarded by participants as a private issue, to be resolved or borne in silence unless the student takes the potentially painful step of changing teacher. With a scarcity of evidence, and an apparent reluctance of participants to discuss such difficulties directly – either with researchers or with each other – the nature of the difficulties remains unclear, though they must vary with studio practices and with the attributes of individual participants. The varying difficulties possible, whether they include problems with communication, mismatched agendas, or personal friction, have been grouped loosely under the metaphor of “dissonance” (Burwell, in press). Given the perceived importance of a successful apprenticeship, the investigation of dissonance in the studio system would seem an important task for researchers.

Dissonance in the studio

To date, the best research evidence of dissonance in the studio has emerged almost incidentally from case studies that were not explicitly aimed at investigating problematic studio relationships. Burland and Davidson (2002), for example, conducted telephone interviews with 18 young musicians who had attended a specialist music school, in order to compare the experiences of those who had, or had not continued to pursue performing careers (p. 125). Although they concluded that music as a determinant of self–concept was a better predictor of eventual success than relationships with influential others (p. 135), the researchers reported that the musicians who were no longer pursuing
a performing career tended to perceive parental, teacher and peer support negatively (p. 126). These musicians were further distinguished by a failure to develop “coping strategies” (p. 130) for dealing with their environments, either pragmatically or internally.

Hays, Minichiello and Wright (2000) interviewed 15 teachers in higher music education about mentoring, and distinguished rather sharply between relationships that were either ideal or negative. One of their informants described a teacher with a dominating personality, “extremely manipulative emotionally and a parent figure who managed to run my life”; other informants, however, seemed to be referring to more generalised cases when they spoke of “dependency”, a “guru” style of teaching and “occupying the student’s space” (pp. 8–9). These reports seem to position teachers as the agents responsible for dissonance in studio relationships; Nerland and Hanken (2002) however point out that both teacher and student are likely to be “emotionally exposed” in the studio setting (p. 180), while the teachers interviewed by Gaunt (2008) remarked on the danger of over-investment on the part of students: “They put all their eggs into the one basket, which is you, and if this relationship fails…” (p. 230).

Evidence of one student’s emotional investment in studio relationships emerged from a broad study drawing on 67 lesson observations, complemented by interview and questionnaire evidence, to investigate the conduct of instrumental teaching in higher music education (Burwell, 2005, 2006, 2012; Burwell, Young, & Pickup, 2004; Young, Burwell, & Pickup, 2003). The phrase quoted in the title of this paper – “She did miracles for me” – came from a third-year undergraduate student who reported liking her current teacher but who fondly recalled nevertheless the teacher that she had had at school. The student, known as Beth, had been asked about her experience before coming to university, and replied “I had a really good teacher at [school], and she was brilliant and amazing and I loved her.” Encouraged to explain, Beth went on:

Well, she dealt with all the emotional crap that comes with it. ... When I got to [that school] I was only Grade 5, and I went up to post–Grade 8 in two years, from doing nothing beforehand, just because she pushed me. She had this amazing way of making me feel really bad if I didn’t do any practice.

Beth’s situation has been explored in depth in a nested case study, reported elsewhere (Burwell, 2012). For the purpose of the present discussion it is noted that when she spoke of her relationships with teachers, she tended to cast them in the active role, herself in the passive: at school, it had been her teacher performing the miracles, and if Beth succeeded, it was “just because she pushed me”. Similarly, Beth discussed her current teacher not in terms of his professional attributes but of
what she felt he should be doing for her, lamenting, “it’s not that he doesn’t push me; it is just that, although he wants me to do well, I need to be forced to do well” (p. 175).

This evidence was complemented by the “rich transcription” of a filmed lesson observation (Burwell, 2010, 2012), which suggested that the dissonance in the interpersonal relationship between Beth and her new teacher was affecting, or at least was associated with, the success of their work together. For example, Beth’s nonverbal behaviour showed traits of anxiety (p. 185), and she contributed only minimally to lesson dialogue. Her teacher’s approach, in turn, seemed constrained by Beth’s relatively passive behaviour, so that much of his energy was devoted to instructing, encouraging, persuading this particular student to participate in her own lesson.

Within the same broad study, two further examples of dissonance were identified by students themselves, in semi–structured interviews. The students, including Beth, had been asked to describe the approaches taken by their teachers, and to comment on how appropriate those approaches were for them, at their current stage of development. The responses were generally positive, and Beth herself spoke positively of her current teacher: if her previous teacher had not existed, “he would be perfect”. Of 27 informants, only two gave directly negative answers to this question. One of these was a third-year guitarist, known as Gavin, who argued that his teacher’s approach needed “more self–discovery, exploring different ways of doing things”: his situation is the focus of a nested case study, reported elsewhere (Burwell, in press). The second student who expressed dissatisfaction with her teacher’s approach was a first-year singer, known as Sandra, whose response appears below. The interviewer’s speech is shown in italics.

*How appropriate is your teacher’s style and her approach for you, at your stage of development?*

I don’t really think it is actually. I just don’t feel comfortable sometimes with it. I feel a bit let down. I asked her last week “How am I doing in comparison to everyone else?” because I just feel that I am not as good as what she is used to. She doesn’t encourage me as much as I want her to.

The research data included a filmed observation of Sandra’s lesson with her teacher, along with semi–structured interviews conducted soon after; the interview with the teacher, in particular, was substantive and carefully reflective. The availability of this data seemed to provide a rare opportunity to investigate an instance of dissonance in the studio, in some depth: what might be learned from a close description of a lesson given to a student who, exceptionally, expresses dissatisfaction with the approach taken by her current teacher?
Methodology

The need for more description of studio lesson behaviour has been emphasised by Jørgensen (2009), who argues from a quality improvement perspective that research and educational theory can inform the reflections of both teachers and institutions (p. 111). The broader project from which the current study is drawn has often involved generalisation of teacher–student behaviour across a large number of lessons (Burwell, 2005; 2006; Young et al., 2003); in addition, however, a selection of individual lessons has been described, through the ‘rich transcription’ of data (Burwell, 2010; 2012; in press). This term has been derived with reference to thick description, which incorporates the intentions of participants; it is applied through the consideration of interview data, alongside the analysis of multiple layers of lesson behaviour – performance, verbal and nonverbal. The inclusion of all three layers might provide an enriched and more reliable account of the lesson interactions (Peräkylä, 1997), particularly in that some of the behaviours would be more conscious – and more consciously controlled – than others (Argyle, 1988).

This approach falls under the broad umbrella of social constructionism (Burr, 2003), which implies a critical stance taken toward postpositivism, a focus on interactions between teacher and student as they collaborate to construct studio behaviour, and the assumption that like all human action, this will be historically, culturally and institutionally situated (Säljö, 1997; Wertsch, 1991). The rich transcription of a single case is undertaken to explore pattern and meaning in the particular or singularity, emerging from the participants’ “historical background, social context, observed behaviour [and] reflections on his or her past and hopes for the future” (Radley & Chamberlain, 2012, p. 393). Peräkylä (1997) acknowledges the limited generalizability of qualitative case studies, but argues that the aim of a qualitative case study is to show how social practices are made possible, by describing “the very details of the participants’ action” (p. 215). Rather than seeking to generalise behaviour across a population, the case study can contribute to generalisation on conceptual grounds, which can be tested as further cases are identified and explored in “an ongoing revision of the explanation for what has been found” (Radley & Chamberlain, 2012, p. 392).

Consistent with the protocols established by the host university, the research project was focused on participants who were not classified as being particularly vulnerable, were involved only through informed consent, and were assured of anonymity in reporting; the topics under investigation were not classified as being particularly sensitive. The data collection included filmed lesson observations and semi–structured interviews with teachers and students undertaken shortly after their lessons were filmed. Teachers and students were asked for some biographical information, with an
emphasis on their experience in music education; each was invited to characterise the other, in
terms of their approach to studio lessons; and they were asked to reflect on their filmed lesson in
particular, recalling what had happened today and reflecting on how that might compare with their
notions of both typical and ideal lessons. All participants were invited to comment on whether or
how the presence of the research camera had affected their lessons.

For the analysis of individual lessons, as mentioned above, three layers of behaviour were
distinguished. Aspects of non–verbal behaviour, including the use of space, mutual positioning,
gesture and posture, were noted and described. Performance behaviours from teacher and student
were timed in seconds, and the use of performance material mapped across the structure of the
lesson, while verbal behaviour was measured in terms of wordage, and categorised according to
function. These rather general tools were employed again in the current study, though some of the
categories of behaviour seemed more relevant, now, than others, while further categories for
analysis emerged as the study went on. This was partly because the individual case was inevitably
distinctive in itself, and partly because of the purposeful identification of lesson features that might
be related to the intentions and attitudes of participants: this in turn might cast some light on the
nature of any dissonance in the studio. Although this implies selective description, Yin (1998) points
out that all description is selective, and argues that without the guidance of some preconceived
topics, descriptive studies risk either attempting too much – while remaining unknowingly selective
– or failing to fulfil their purpose.

Results

The findings are divided between interview evidence, touching on the musical biographies,
perceptions and attitudes of teacher and student, and a descriptive analysis of the filmed lesson
observation, divided among nonverbal behaviour, performance activity, and verbal behaviour.

Interview evidence

According to her interview, Sandra began taking formal voice lessons when she was sixteen; she
discusses her previous experience in music chiefly in terms of choral participation, and when asked
what her ambitions are, says that she would like to have a “career using my voice”. Pressed to
elaborate, Sandra adds that she is “very sure” that she does not want to teach; she would like to
“get into the theatre”.

Results
Sandra’s lesson was filmed toward the end of her first year as an undergraduate, studying voice with a teacher who for the purpose of this report will be known as Theresa. She says almost nothing about Theresa as a person, and indeed never refers to her by name, instead using the pronoun she 26 times during the interview. Asked about her teacher’s approach, Sandra tends to focus on how her lessons function, and what Theresa is, or is not, doing for her. In the extract below the interviewer’s speech is indicated by italics.

_Tell me about your current teacher. Just give me an idea of her approach, her temperament, et cetera._

_We spend most of the lesson warming up, and she teaches me different methods of how to produce different sounds. Then we go through the pieces. I find it quite difficult sometimes to do the pieces because we haven’t arranged for an accompanist for the actual lesson, so it is very difficult to work to my advantage._

Although she does not say that her teacher is responsible for this situation, Sandra reports that Theresa is “concentrating more on the playing” than her teaching. She goes on to pick out a number of other perceived shortcomings in Theresa’s approach. For example, “her style is to make me bring out a big sound” though Sandra’s song – _Se tu m’ami_ by Pergolesi – is “very light”; Sandra likes “going really high and trying to gain the full benefit of my voice” but “she is making it a medium to high voice”.

Theresa is represented as the active agent here, but this is not itself a subject of complaint from Sandra. Indeed, when Theresa “really pushes” her regarding the connection between vocal registers, Sandra approves: “I get very frustrated because I find it very difficult, so it is good that she is doing that”; similarly, Sandra finds it difficult to perform communicatively, and says “I want her to really push me to do it because I want to be able to do it!”

The interview schedule invited participants to comment on whether the research camera had affected their lessons. For Sandra, today’s lesson was better because the camera was there, and “she” (her teacher) “was a lot more cheerful”:

_There was more communication between us, and she kept on saying “That’s good” and “That’s nice”. I was thinking, “Good. Thank you”._

The tone here, and her previously-quoted remark that she would like more encouragement, seem to suggest that Sandra feels that compliments are her due, and elsewhere in the interview she adds, “I am the sort of person that, if I am doing something right, I would like to be told”. She indicates that encouragement is not always forthcoming, however; and neither is a satisfying choice of repertoire,
which Sandra seems to regard as the teacher’s prerogative. Normally, any flexibility in their interactions depends on Sandra’s initiatives: “usually I say, rather than she asks: usually I say ‘I am not really happy with that’”.

Theresa’s own interview is more wide-ranging, as she discusses her previous experience in learning and teaching, and general issues related to both. She is a mezzo soprano with a broad range of expertise and interests, and formal qualifications related to performance rather than teaching; she has been teaching voice for three years. Asked to characterise her student, Theresa reports that Sandra has “basically... good talent”, but that she does not prepare well for her lessons, and shows some unwillingness to take risks: a “middle-aged spirit in a twenty-year-old body”. This attitude is associated with some constraint on her vocal development, in that Sandra “inhibits herself... inhibits the sound that she’s making”.

Theresa describes Sandra as being “very abrupt”, sometimes challenging her in lessons to explain what she is being asked to do; this is particularly likely when Theresa tries to appeal to her student’s imagination. Theresa invents an example, and explains her own view of it:

The way that she asks me [is like] “Why am I doing this?” “It’s an idea, I’m trying to get you to realise how the sound comes forward, and – ”.

But, in another sense... I feel quite pleased that she feels free to ask me, and also it makes me work a bit harder to know exactly why I’m doing something.

Theresa’s willingness to reflect critically on her own teaching is in evidence elsewhere in her interview, and she agrees that her teaching would be better focused if she had an accompanist present in lessons. More significantly, she feels that her approach to teaching was affected today, not so much by the research camera as by the close proximity of performance examinations. Sandra has not learned her songs from memory, though Theresa says “as far as I’m concerned it’s crucial”; today she felt that she was forced, by Sandra’s lack of readiness, to take a more instructive position than usual. Indeed, this might be related to Sandra’s general approach to her lessons:

[When I am teaching stronger students], I’m actually much more flexible, and it’s to do with – I think – a greater level of trust, that what they’re doing is – that they’ve actually taken part; [that] in their own practice during the week, they’ve thought about it... If there’s ever any doubt about that, I always adopt a ‘command’ strategy... Partly because I just think that it’s sort of my responsibility as well. You know. But it’s very – so much nicer when –

When you don’t have to.
Theresa acknowledges that she might be partly responsible for “setting this up”: she represents the student attitude as “You’re our teacher, so you – you know – you do the work”. In response to such an attitude, says Theresa, “I go into teacher mode”.

*Video evidence*

*Nonverbal behaviour.* The filmed lesson observation falls into two broad segments. The first is focused on technique (00:40–12:23), and during this time teacher and pupil adopt loosely fixed positions. The teacher is effectively locked into place because of her use of the piano, and she remains there almost throughout the lesson; the student adopts what seems to be an habitual position in the nook of the piano with her profile to the camera, which has been placed to capture the images of both participants. Twice in the first few minutes Theresa encourages Sandra to sing to the camera (00:54, 05:04), without any lasting effect. The frame in Figure 1 was captured at 00:44, with the anonymity of participants protected by the simple “artistic effects” of Word Picture Tools but the mutual positioning clear. Sandra’s posture is bolt upright while she sings; she puts her hands on her hips from time to time, and sometimes places one or both of her hands on the piano. Theresa’s posture, perhaps surprisingly, is less exemplary, but this is perhaps her piano-playing posture rather than an example of good vocal practice.

*Figure 1. Spatial behaviour, 00:44.*
The second segment of the lesson is focused on repertoire. The frame in Figure 2 shows the typical spatial behaviour during these lesson segments, effectively a default position adopted by the participants, who read and refer to the score on the piano stand: eye contact between the two, as might be expected at this close range, is infrequent and brief. Once again Sandra has a tendency to put her hands on her hips, though she is less likely to do this while she is singing; Theresa, when she is not playing, often raises her right arm to keep contact with the music stand, the arm crossing between her and Sandra, who is rather standing over her.

Figure 2. Spatial behaviour, 17:01.

The mutual positioning is altered when Theresa persuades Sandra to return to the nook of the piano, challenging her to attempt her song from memory: “I’d quite like to see what you’re doing facially: do you think you know most of this?” (32:31). Sandra seems uncomfortable with the change of position; she objects, saying “I’m not really DOING anything with my face” (32:53), and “I can’t do it!” (33:09), and although she proceeds to sing the introduction and chorus of her song from the nook of the piano (33:20–34:40), she returns to her previous position immediately afterwards (33:42). Table 1 shows a transcription of the ensuing verbal dialogue alongside notes about nonverbal behaviour.

Table 1. Transcription of verbal dialogue and non–verbal behaviour, 34:43–35:16.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Dialogue (student in italics)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34:43</td>
<td>Yeah! It's good for you to come away from the piano, and really</td>
<td>Sandra gazes at Theresa’s face, throughout this exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>-------</td>
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<tr>
<td>34:46</td>
<td>[Yeah] Sandra overlaps Theresa talking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34:47</td>
<td>and you had, even more that time in terms of what you were doing with the – sort of like –</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34:53</td>
<td>Theresa plays a piano cue, then sings in half voice (1 second); another cue, then sings in full voice (4 seconds)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35:01</td>
<td>You know. And by the way, next year, whatever musical they do I want you to audition for it. So, you can prepare an audition piece. Okay? On “by the way”, Theresa looks directly at Sandra, now quite close, and raises an instructive index finger. On “okay”, Theresa smiles &amp; nods, hands on hips, though her shoulders are raised as if not quite sure.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35:13</td>
<td>Right, so that you can laugh? Theresa laughs a little</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35:16</td>
<td>No! No; because I think you’ll grow so much in your performance. Um – that was much better. Just watch, when you do go up keep the mouth long. After “No! No”, Theresa turns her face away and talks to the score.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The nonverbal behaviour in this episode appears to indicate some frustration of the teacher’s intentions. Theresa has asked Sandra to perform from the nook of the piano, but Sandra returns without comment, at the first opportunity; Theresa makes a further attempt to be assertive with her suggestion about a future audition, but her authoritative gestures seem to be undermined by a moment of laughter, and by her seated position under Sandra’s steady gaze. For the moment, at least, the attempt is abandoned, as the more detailed business of the lesson is resumed.

Performance behaviour. In all, vocal performance lasts for 1152 seconds, which in a lesson of 45 minutes represents 43% of the lesson time. The piano is heard for a total of 1215 seconds, or 45% of the lesson time. Sandra dominates performance behaviour, contributing 994 seconds or 86% of the total: although several of her contributions last only a few seconds, they are typically longer, with the longest lasting 144 seconds. Theresa contributes 158 seconds or 14% of the total performance time: her contributions are typically very short, being distributed across 54 instances. These consist in 21 “full voice” demonstrations, only two exceeding five seconds in length, and 33 cues, performed in “half voice”.

The initial, technical phase represents 26% of the lesson time, 35% of the student performance time, 19% of the teacher performance time, and 44% of the piano playing, which is almost continuous during the vocal exercises. Thus, relative to the rest of the lesson, this phase is characterised by more piano playing and student singing, but less teacher singing. Although Theresa sings less now than later, she is more likely to give demonstrations than cues, and 73% of her singing during this
phase is performed in “full voice”. After the technical phase, the lesson is devoted to repertoire items, Pergolesi’s *Se tu m’ami* (13:02–28:49) and Piaf’s *L’accordeoniste* (29:00–43:10). Each song is given a simulated performance when it is first addressed, with the teacher sketching in some accompanying figures, reduced at times to single bass notes.

The piano is played exclusively by the teacher, and overlaps the singing, which is almost never unaccompanied. Theresa tends not to interrupt Sandra while the student is speaking, overlapping only one word; however, she is the more likely of the two to speak over singing (139 words), as she coaches Sandra’s performance; and she is even more likely to speak while the piano alone is sounding (239). This is not a particular demonstration of multi–tasking – playing an instrument and speaking at the same time – and indeed Theresa rather struggles to play fluently; rather, she tends to allow the pedal to sustain the piano sound for her, while she speaks and makes gestures with her hands. Sandra never speaks while her teacher is singing, and rarely while the piano is sounding (5); she is much more likely to overlap while Theresa is speaking (48 words), but much of this consists in back–channelling, the minimal, non–substantive responses typically given to a dominant speaker.

Sandra had remarked in her interview that Theresa is “making” her voice “medium to high”, though she prefers to sing higher: it may be worth noting therefore that her songs reach E and G, a 10th and a 12th above middle C. While this may not seem particularly high, Sandra’s voice weakens in quality and pitching as she approaches these peaks. Perhaps she is not at her best today, however: it seems possible that in spite of claiming otherwise, Sandra has been affected by the presence of the research camera, or indeed by participating in lesson activity with which she is avowedly uncomfortable.

**Verbal behaviour.** Verbal behaviour was quantified in terms of wordage; Theresa proved the dominant speaker, contributing 91%, with Sandra contributing 9%. Theresa’s verbal behaviour was divided among four functions that had emerged in the transcription of an earlier case study (Burwell, 2012). Coaching Sandra as she sings represents 4% of Theresa’s total wordage; of the rest, 39% consists in giving information; 37% in elicitation – asking or instructing the student to respond, whether through performance, speaking or thinking; and 14% in giving feedback on the performance immediately preceding.

The initial, technical phase of the lesson is characterised by distinct verbal behaviour from both teacher and student. It occupies 26% of the lesson time and 28% of the teacher’s wordage, indicating that the volume of teacher talk now is fairly consistent with the rest of the lesson, but the technical phase, representing a quarter of the lesson, includes only 3% of the student’s total
wordage. During this phase Theresa delivers much more than a quarter of the total wordage devoted to coaching (78%) and elicitation (38%), but lower proportions of feedback (22%) and information (16%).

Because Sandra had emphasised the issue in her interview, Theresa’s verbal behaviour was also examined in terms of teacher approvals. These were identified according to their function, determined by the context rather than any inherent valency of particular words: so, for example, Theresa says “okay” 42 times during the lesson, but the word might function as a rhetorical question, such as “Stay on the voice all the way down, okay?” (03:24); or an habitual sentence-starter, such as “Okay, so let’s put it together” (21:07); as well as an affirmation of success, such as “Okay, good” (30:49). In all, there are 84 incidents of approval from Theresa, uninterrupted by other behaviours, and this represents a total of 413 words. Most of the incidents are brief: 40 of them consist of one word only, with “good” occurring 28 times, “yes” and “yeah” four times each, “lovely” twice, and “excellent” and “right” once each. There are also 20 two-word incidents. The longest incident consists in 13 words: “Good, that was not bad at all; and the um – that was lovely” (28:54). There are only three incidents of approval in which Theresa is verbally explicit about what she is praising: “That wonderful sound you had on the hum” (05:24); “That was a much better ring on the sound” (20:55); and “You’re not taking a breath there, which is good” (25:11).

Sandra’s verbal behaviour is minimal in quantity. Her longest uninterrupted speech is of 25 words, occurring shortly after the initial rehearsal of *L’accordeoniste* (31:11):

> How many verses do I have to do? Just two? Or one? The ones with the easiest words. I can’t really say the words there.

Later, Sandra has a speech of 20 words about organising her next lesson (44:00). She produces only two other speeches of more than 10 words: one when she explains rather awkwardly that she will not be performing *Se tu m’amì* from memory: “Well, I’d like [the score] there, but I’d like not to use, have to use it” (28:39); and the other a few seconds later, her voice brighter and more assertive: “It’s a shame we didn’t have an accompanist here this morning” (28:49).

Sandra, who reported in her interview that she “usually” takes the initiative in lessons, does so verbally on nine occasions, accounting for 50 words. One of her initiatives has just been quoted; three more concern the scheduling of the next lesson. Sandra changes the subject temporarily when she is asked whether she has decided what verses she will use, in *L’accordeoniste*, almost talking to herself while searching for her score before returning to say “How many verses do I have to do?” Once she apologises spontaneously for a wrong note; once she asks for a prompt; and twice she
makes some objections: “I can’t do it” (33:09); “It doesn’t quite fit” (42:56). These remarks are counted as initiatives in that they interrupt the flow of the interaction, but it seems clear that none of them are preconceived – that Sandra has not brought questions or issues with her, to the lesson.

Discussion

The point of departure for this purposefully-selected, nested case study was Sandra’s remark that her teacher’s approach to their lessons is not appropriate for her, at this stage of her development. Sandra’s self-reported perception has been taken as an indication of dissonance within the studio relationship, and the rich transcription of lesson behaviour alongside teacher and student interviews does reveal points of dissonance: claims against which there is conflicting or at least complicating evidence.

There are various specific dissonances – tensions, contradictions, misunderstandings: Sandra regrets that her voice is being made into a big one, while Theresa reports that the voice is self-inhibited; Sandra likes to sing high, but she struggles with quality and pitch in her upper register; Sandra would like a career in music theatre, but seems ill-prepared for both her lesson and her forthcoming performance exam.

The assertion that “we spend most of the lesson warming up” proves incorrect in Sandra’s estimate of the timing, and her characterisation of that initial phase of intense, collaborative technical work seems rather loose, though perhaps it would be unreasonable to expect that its function is fully self-explanatory. If Theresa wanted to make it more explicit, presumably she would need to turn to information and feedback, and such a turn might help, too, in raising Sandra’s awareness of the strategies behind the technical work, perhaps by discussing the inhibition of the voice or the difficulties with the higher register. However, the proportions of information and feedback are minimised during the technical phase, in favour of high levels of coaching, elicitation and demonstration.

Sandra wants more encouragement from her teacher, though the video evidence shows an abundance of approvals and compliments. The perception of approval might not be related simply, however, to the frequency of approvals, and arguably the intended encouragement might be compromised by the way it is managed. Theresa offers 84 incidents of approval in a 45-minute lesson, but most of them are brief, perhaps to the point of seeming automatic; and they tend to be non-specific, which may give them less weight, in Sandra’s mind, than the more critical support in which they are embedded. At the same time, verbal approvals should not be the only kind available
in studio lessons: positive feedback should also come from the student’s perception of her own performance success, as regulated and supported by the teacher (Duke & Henniger, 1998, p. 484). In that case, many of those apparently-automatic approvals should have marked, for Sandra, a series of felt successes; again however she does not appear to understand the function of the activity in that way. The suggestion that Sandra should audition for a musical might have been an opportunity for Theresa to register a more explicit and meaningful vote of confidence in her student, but this is not followed through, and with some rather awkward verbal and nonverbal behaviour at this point, it is not clear that Sandra will trust either the suggestion or the implied compliment.

Sandra discusses lessons in terms of her own personal comfort and encouragement, but does not refer to her teacher in any personal terms. She behaves in ways that are more or less congenial to Sandra, who relies on her to make repertoire choices, to “push” issues of technique and communication, and to encourage – in short, as Theresa herself asserts, to “do the work”. Theresa reports that Sandra is likely to be “very abrupt” in challenging her, and since the teacher is willing to talk over the sustained piano but the student is not, it is tempting to suggest that Theresa is using the instrument effectively as a way of holding the floor. Some of Sandra’s nonverbal behaviour might also present a challenge to her teacher, as she resists suggestions to sing to the camera and to maintain a more formal performing position away from her reliance on the score. It is the reliance on the shared score that keeps Sandra standing beside her seated teacher, but this stance also constitutes what appears to be a dominant posture (Argyle, 1988, p. 97), an impression highlighted when Theresa raises an arguably defensive arm between them: the frame shown in Example 2 might be interpreted as an assertive student standing over a relatively inexperienced teacher, who seems more likely than her student to take a self-critical view of her own contribution to lessons. These observations might be associated with frustration or a lack of sympathy between participants, but there does seem to be something self-defeating about Sandra’s approach to her own learning.

Without a more confident, more empowering understanding of how studio–based lessons might function, to borrow a phrase from Sandra, “it is very difficult to work to my advantage”.

Issues

What might be learned from this rich transcription of a case of studio apprenticeship in which the student reports dissatisfaction with her teacher’s approach? The report itself is hardly proof of either failure or success in the teacher’s approach, nor in the teacher–student relationship; both the interviews and the filmed lesson observation are mere snapshots of activity within a long-term and evolving joint enterprise, the history and outcomes of which lie beyond the boundaries of the case.
But it does appear to be exceptional for a student in higher music education to articulate dissatisfaction outside the closed setting of the studio, about an ongoing relationship; and the limited interview and observation evidence therefore offers a rare opportunity to investigate what might be at issue when dissatisfaction is felt.

Authority would certainly seem to be at issue, and would be whether teacher–student interactions were felt to be dissonant or not: Nerland and Hanken (2002) explain that studio relationships are institutionally regulated, with authority invested in the teacher, and regarded as a resource sought and maintained by students:

[S]tudents both wish for and expect dominant authority to be allocated to the [teacher’s] position, and they deliberately subjugate themselves to their teacher’s perspectives because they trust what the teacher stands for, and assume he or she can initiate them into the profession. (Nerland & Hanken, 2002, p. 6)

For Sandra, authority seems an area of dissonance in that she seeks it in Theresa, wanting to be pushed and encouraged, but— from Theresa’s perspective— appears to undermine it, asking “abrupt” questions, resisting suggestions, distrusting encouragement, and expecting her teacher to “do the work”. For her part, Theresa herself seems uncomfortable with the authority invested in her, avowedly preferring a “flexible” approach but feeling forced to “command” when she cannot trust students to participate. Theresa’s discomfort with authority might be associated with her relative inexperience in studio teaching; it might be associated too with the patterns of spatial behaviour in the studio, the teacher seated with indifferent posture at the piano while the student stands erect and close, reading from the shared score. When Theresa does use overtly authoritative gestures, in support of her rather sudden suggestion that Sandra should take an audition, the attempt gives way to what appears to be embarrassed laughter from both of them. While it is open to interpretation and context–dependent, nonverbal behaviour is often closely linked to underlying attitudes (McCroskey, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006).

The collapse of what could otherwise have been a productive and meaningful compliment suggests that trust is a further area of dissonance, in that Sandra does not accept the suggestion of an audition at face value; Theresa’s apparent lack of confidence in her own suggestion might be set against her feeling that she cannot rely on Sandra’s participation. Nerland and Hanken (2004) assert that apprenticeships in higher music education rest “on mutual trust and dependency” (p. 2), and Chun, Litzky, Sosik, Bechtold, and Godshalk (2010) identify trust as “a foundation for effective mentoring relationships” in any field (p. 424). The latter also argue that either mentor or protégé can overcome perceived disparity in their formal relationship and engender trust through “emotional
intelligence”, consisting in the ability to “understand, regulate, and constructively use their own and others’ emotions” (p.424). This information will be more useful to participants however if emotional intelligence can be regarded not in terms of fixed attributes, but as abilities that can be learned and modified. Thus Dewey (1916) writes of “intelligent sympathy” (p. 121) and “intelligent action” (p. 78).

Engendering trust in these ways would depend on communication, itself an area of dissonance in Sandra’s lesson. Its first manifestation lies in the expressions of concern about their relationship by both student and teacher, to the interviewer rather than to each other. Of course, the data collection does not cover previous interactions; but the evidence from a single observation suggests that Sandra does not altogether understand how her lesson functions, or might function. Similarly, she does not seem to understand how her teacher functions, or might function: apparently unacquainted with Theresa’s vision of flexible collaboration, Sandra, like the clarinet student Beth, places her teacher in the active position, failing to contribute substantially to her own lessons and apparently expecting learning to happen to her, miracles to be done for her. This kind of attitude cannot be rare among undergraduate students, given what Keegan describes as “vast discrepancies in basic coping capacities found in people within the same life phase” (McGowan, Stone & Keegan, 2007); his constructivist-developmental theory proposes that late adolescents or young adults tend to define themselves in terms of relationships, feeling that they are controlled by them instead of authoring them themselves. McGowan et al. recommend that students be encouraged to self-author their own beliefs, so that they can “accept responsibility for internal feelings, decision making, and behaviour”.

This might seem to call for some more direct, frank and sympathetic conversations between Sandra and Theresa, explicitly addressing the student’s current stage of development, the teacher’s strategies for taking that forward, and the role to be played by each. It seems that the participants in this case felt able to discuss their work with the researcher, perhaps supported by the objective distance between the interview setting and the studio; a similar kind of discussion between the participants themselves would seem to be the next step, and yet it is not clear that either Sandra or Theresa feels that their current situation affords that. It is tempting to ask whether the institution might not be able to create opportunities for teachers and students to engage in structured, purposeful discussions of their aims and methods – mechanisms in which the very formality might provide the distance that both might need, to transcend the issue of personal trust. Jørgensen (2000) asserts that “the neglect of the institutional responsibility for the development of the students as independent, responsible musicians and learners” is a dysfunctional aspect of many
institutions (p. 74); and adds that we “cannot take for granted that every aspect of our difficult job as teachers is covered to its full extent by every teacher” (p. 75). If this is true, then it seems inadequate for institutions of higher education music to wait impassively while individual studios develop their own degrees of consonance and dissonance, dissonance or resolution. The centrality of studio learning for performing musicians makes it too important for its success to be left to chance.

Ethical approval

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References


