

MAKING SPACE a learning journey

The insights that the two complementary processes of Mentoring-Coaching and Critical Response have given me has transformed my understanding of my work at Guildhall. In making an audit of the work I have done, and am engaged in, I realise that at the heart of it is the desire to place the individual artist at the centre of their own learning, be they students of drama, music, music leadership or music therapy. It is to empower them to see and shape their own journey. My introduction to working with musicians was as an actor and theatre practitioner. I saw my value as bringing skills and tools for understanding performance from a sister discipline. It was a way of sharing my craft as a performer and offering aspects of it initially to singers, and later to instrumentalists, thus giving them a new perspective on their own craft. What I brought in particular was my belief in the ensemble shaped by my experience of working in an independent physical theatre company, a strong belief in the body as the carrier of energy, and that the changing physical shapes of an ensemble brings intensity and meaning to the space and therefore to an audience.

I had employed these beliefs in directing projects in the Drama department, using this information and associated exercises as a way of binding a group together in order to work on a text, to create a unique performance fashioned both from the text and the group's ideas. I saw myself as a creative catalyst, a shaper, an editor and director of other peoples's energy and skills. Essentially I was using these factors as material for my own visions. I am proud of this work, it is entirely valid and wonderful. It produced performances full of invention, collaborations between actors and singers e.g. with Armin Zanner "A Party for Ernst Krenek," [vimeo link](#) "...think only this of me" with Christian Burgess.



Beyond this work however, the word "teacher" kept troubling me. I didn't feel I was a teacher, and held the term at arm's length because of the conflicting feelings it brought. It was a conundrum for me because I was teaching and inhabiting that role but I felt it didn't describe what I could offer or wanted to create in the room.

I didn't have a systemised body of craft to teach, nor did I want the students to consider that what I was offering was separate from the craft they were already learning, but that it was another essential strand of their work on song, score or performance. I felt there should be a way that I could nourish and help uncover ways of extending the learning that was already under way in the students I was meeting in the Conservatoire.

How to untangle these thoughts? Many of these issues began to become clear in the work at the ICON seminars which I had been attending and helping to shape of since 2007. Here the concept of "coaching moments" within teaching was introduced by Robert Schenck from his work at the Gothenburg conservatoire. I began to understand that as a teacher I had many ways of enabling learning, some very direct and instructional and some containing the principles of coaching. I began to identify and practise moments when I could offer a space for the students and I to question and reflect together. Added to this was the Liz Lerman's work on empowering the artist to "own" their work through artist-centred feedback.

Also a seminar entitled "Student as Teacher" raised for me and others the question how to allow and enable a real exchange in a teaching room between a teacher and student?

These issues and work with Jo Hensel and Richard Benjafield in the Wind Brass and Percussion department at Guildhall made me hungry to find new ways of understanding what I could offer to instrumentalists who as performers inhabited a land beyond text. In 2011 I used an Erasmus award to visit the Academy of Music and Drama in Gothenburg to research how these ideas were being used there in the teaching of Robert Schenck and Gunilla Gardfelt.

Alongside this work I found that ICON's focus on reflection as a way of deepening creative work was gradually changing my perceptions. As an actor involved in creating from the dark and unknown place in myself, it seemed dangerous and counter-intuitive to shine a light on the creative process. I had the image of pulling up seedlings to examine their roots in order to determine how they were growing and thus killing them. I held the idea that scientists, academics and researchers could only spoil and lay waste possibilities at this stage. Their place was to assess and judge after the creative work was done. So in believing that I was connected to my creative life only by "a cloud of unknowing" I prevented full ownership of my possibilities. This also meant that I denied the possibility of full ownership and growth in my colleagues and students as well. An ICON seminar offered one, if not more, dedicated moments to reflect on the learning coming out of the sessions and that knowledge's possible applications. Any of the ideas we explored were to be used to make a difference to ourselves or our institutions. The experience of learning then reflecting, either in writing or verbally, in pairs or small groups, prepared me and gave me an appetite for new understandings and a re-focusing of the work I was already doing.

Into this landscape was introduced Guildhall's Mentoring-Coaching initiative led by Jane Cook. I had begun to work as a mentor for MMus students on the Leadership pathway and was aware of how unskilled I was. From the outset the Mentoring-Coaching development with its use of questions and its belief in the students' own resourcefulness, began to change my perspective on my role as a "teacher." I began to examine my preparation for a session with students, trying to ensure I shared the energy and decision making with them during the lessons and gave time for us to reflect together during and after any creative project (as shown in the accompanying film). I

was also able to question my own assumptions about what was useful to them. The principle in coaching that a student or client can, with a coach alongside them, tackle and respond positively to the challenges they may face, changed how I perceived my role. This understanding and a new awareness of how I learned, gained through role-play exercises and peer feedback practised at ICON, enabled me to re-experience how energising and positive it felt to be given space and ownership of learning. I also became aware of how creative it feels to allow the learner to discover using their own energy and vision instead of, albeit with the best will in the world, trying to co-opt others to my version or strategy to arrive at any required learning.

This change in the way I have been thinking about, and planning my work has been evident in the series of classes I run for 1st year classical singers at Guildhall. I co-teach the classes, which are named Text into Song, with a singing teacher.

We explore song texts for meaning and intention, I offering a drama perspective with appropriate exercises, he bringing his knowledge of the score, the musical context and a wealth of performance experience. Thus we endeavor to create a situation where the material is examined in a holistic way and the students are encouraged to take control of the material and investigate it as fully as possible. He and I have made time to share face to face group feedback. I have also for the first time asked the students to respond to some reflective questions on the journey of the work, asking what they have got from our time together. It has enabled us as a co-teaching team to talk about the work through the lens of a student's perspective. We have learned what is valuable to them, how what we are offering impacts on them and what is productive. We have also found through talking about the work as evidenced in their responses, how freeing this can be for our own conversation together; how we could see and plan with greater clarity and openness with each other. It was about the work not about ourselves. We could examine our plans without conflict, simply by using positive questioning because there was shared information and understanding of the issues. This ongoing project is growing and being nourished by our shared vision of giving the students space to embody and find an authentic voice in a song text.

With this experience of positive collaboration as a template I used a similar reflective process again in my work on Opera scenes where I was co-directing for the first time with a colleague. We shared the rehearsal room and the responsibility for the production. We met afterwards and used our experiences and the student feedback as material to reflect on our work together. This I see as a synthesis of a coaching process and critical response possibilities.

I wanted as a way of charting my journey to take a closer look at a particular example of my teaching work. I began by working with an illustrator to create a visual map of my journey of the last few years (*See Mind Maps*). I chose an eight week project I have done for the last two years with third year classical singers using Shakespeare soliloquies and duologues to explore thought in text. In order to examine what the impact the coaching course and my use of the CRP has had on my work, I decided to focus on this year's sessions and to identify the differences in my approach from previous years. I documented on film a rehearsal, the sharing in performance, and the way of assessing and giving feedback (*see film "Making Space- a learning journey"*). I also, for the first time, asked them to respond to some reflective questions on the journey of the work. I now feel confident that I can use the structure of critical response to interrogate both myself and the

students in a really useful way...so not being “perfect” or “inspirational” is transformed into a proper perspective and use. I can use open questions and structured feedback to evaluate and make clear to myself what I am doing in my work, and how I am doing it, a protocol that enables me to move forward without negativity and self-criticism. If I own my own journey for better or worse I can change what didn’t work and therefore move forward. So obvious but so hard to disentangle emotion and negative judgement from actual content when it is oneself that is the subject/artist.

Failing in public is the fear that haunts many performers. To open up intention and exploration in relation to the work in question rather than cover it up with personal insecurity or opinion is transformative.

To work with a structure that enables both the student and teacher to give feedback that focuses on the work not the personal, creates a place of growth and creative exchange. *see filmed feedback session Making Space*. I noticed when reviewing the filmed material that I asked many questions of the students and allowed them to discover meaning and find pathways through the text. I followed what they found useful in the sessions and was able to adapt the following sessions to what they were asking for in their work on the text. I realised that I also taught at certain points, giving them strategies to uncover meaning but I found a way then to stand back and allow them to continue to explore without driving their learning towards how I thought it should proceed. In the feedback sessions I tried not to respond to any requests to tell them whether they were good or bad, but asked them to reflect on what they had learned and could carry forward into their work as singers.

When I work with a musician I am looking for ways to help a performer to re-connect to the excitement and energy that the performance space offers. I am looking for ways to enable them to find a pathway from themselves through the score to an audience and back. An uninterrupted connection where they are certain and confident at all points. The exercises I choose are ways for them to experience and practise being present and at ease..not at the mercy of judgemental voices or the feeling that the performance space is fearsome and owned by someone other than themselves.

How to give them a place to practice away from the usual landscape?

How to practise the new concentration on “what I am offering as a musician” not on “how I am being perceived...”?

How to pose the questions not deliver verdicts? for example

“What do you need to become the performer you would love to be?”

“What do you want from your teacher”?

How to surprise them with the ideas that enable them to reconsider their position and find a new enjoyment in themselves as creators as well as excellent performers of repertoire?

This may sound a bit inflated, but as an antidote to seeing a musician who is daunted by judgement and the failure to be perfect, it is a powerful possibility. These ideas have been developed and supported by the positive feedback model which Liz Lerman has constructed and they continue to help me explore my interactions in a teaching situation. I saw in the filmed work and in the students’ feedback how they valued the creation of a safe space to learn and a place to

explore and exchange. The response of a singer to the question “Were the sessions different in their approach?” was

“...people dared to try things out, whether it was right or wrong.”

“I guess people felt that they started to become in charge of their work and ideas, rather than being prescribed them.”

This confirmed my sense that their engagement in the work was of a different quality and ownership of their learning was exciting and to be embraced.

For me satisfaction in a teaching context is about bringing the whole of myself into the room. As I began to use the coaching model and artist led feedback at significant moments in my work, I started to experience the teaching room as a place of creative exchange. The difficulties I had experienced when believing that I was primarily an imparter of knowledge have lessened. I have a new understanding and excitement about my own possibilities within a Conservatoire. There has been a new synthesis of the elements of myself that I employ in my teaching.

In investigating Liz Lerman’s CRP protocol in my teaching by defining myself as the enquiring artist new discussions have opened up which include and challenge the whole person both of the teacher and student. The time spent becomes a time of exploration for my creative ideas as well as a time to investigate their ideas and learning. The journey of the work was a shared imaginative adventure no longer a test of how well I could make them learn what I already know. For example in directing the Opera scenes and BMus3 singers dedicating a final session to CRP reflection with students the testing and asking questions about their own journey during the rehearsal processes enabled both of us to interrogate our artistic input, to look at both the process and the product together. As teacher and director the whole of myself was visible and validated. Neither the part of myself I perceive as a creative artist nor the part of myself I can offer as a “holder of wisdom” were dominant or suppressed, but supporting the work in the room. The conundrum I referred to of using only a part of myself in the role of teacher, separating my possible offers are resolved by bringing the whole of myself into the room.

Myself as a creator of artistic work, myself as responder to the students questions and imaginations, myself as a resource, a holder of expertise and experience all could be fully present in a teaching context. I have come to understand this through applying the coaching skills I have acquired, and through the active use of CRP.

Within the school are many highly talented musicians with successful careers, practitioners who as teachers are using skills that belong to their practice and artistry, a part of themselves that feels precious and to be shared, but not necessarily employed in the strictest “outcomes” model. They have skills and insights to offer but there is a creative exchange to be lost if “the artist” feels that there is a need to justify a role as “teacher” in the most limited understanding of the role i.e. the person who takes all the responsibility for their student’s successful learning. This is a relationship which many young musicians find reassuring, but ultimately fails them by preventing them taking their own personal journey. It also limits the possibility of a fruitful exchange in the teaching room.

In an organisation such as a Conservatoire with its deep well of high level practising artists this creative expertise can be harnessed through the structures that CRP and Mentoring-Coaching offer and create a community of fulfilled artist/teachers. It illustrates to students the nourishing aspect of working in a dynamic relationship with a companion/teacher. This approach can be a model to carry into work with colleagues in their future careers as musicians, and also gives them an understanding of how to share a dynamic relationship with other learning musicians in a teaching room. It banishes forever the notion that “those who can do, those who can’t teach” and offers to both student and teacher the possibilities of a bigger place to think, make and feel.

Appendix II: Visual Map



Appendix III: Reflection & Planning Notes

Text into Song notes on planning for the future

J E and I met to think through and learn from our co-teaching sessions beginning by reading the student's written feed-back.

Positives

Text....how to value and explore it.

Contexts and imagery understood

Physicality,

Owning the space,

Connecting to others in the work.

2 different practitioners offering their perspective to sung song!

Could be even better if...

There was clarity between 2 teacher's input

Song allocated in singer's first language at the beginning of the sessions.

For some, more singing.

J & D's thoughts

1 We could frame the journey of the work more clearly from the 1st lesson, both for ourselves and students. In order to underline J & I's shared belief and focus both of us in the room for the 1st lesson, 2nd lesson phonetics and text separately worked on.

2 Handout for them to have a hard copy of the journey of the lessons to remind them what we are exploring is not "the craft of voice" but considering and experiencing the skills and tools needed to communicate the essence and intention of a song. Text/Writer and Music/Composer.

3 We discussed how to choose a song appropriate to each singer from the outset without J having to go through what might seem to them an audition process and thus focus on singing too soon in the process. J had a thought that you (AZ) would have an understanding of the various voice types and character from their auditions and he trusted you to choose with him a song to begin and bring to the first session. This would mean that they came with an appropriate and known text from day 1 and we could begin to work on it. I would provide poem texts and as we progressed J would choose a 2nd song for each, appropriate to their personal journey. English as 2nd language students we might have to experiment with.

4 Re our co-teaching relationship as experienced by ourselves and the students we talked through what was the best way to explore the different creative perspectives we offer. We agreed that asking open questions of each other opened the discussion and made it possible to explore and understand each other's world and allowed the students to take part in our journey in the work without confusion or a feeling of having to take sides.

It was also clear to us that often it is vocabulary or strategies that make it seem as if we have different views because we are always unanimous in recognising and appreciating connected and expressive work. We both really liked what emerged when the students had to create a theatrical scene of their song text working in small groups to people the space....and consider how they needed interact with the other characters whilst being aware of an audience.

I said I would like to learn more about how J as a singer helps his students to travel from themselves to their emerging placed VOICE. What strategies enable them to understand and access connection in this new land! What are the pathways? So J is going to plan for me to be in his teaching room with a suitable student. I am very excited about that.

We talked about giving some sort of sharing at the end as I have done with RJ a previous co-teacher. However we had more time then.

We both have enjoyed what we have learnt from listening and working with each other.

For me it has been really positive and thought provoking to continue to understand the knowledge and craft that is a singers learning journey. It seems to me to resemble an iceberg, a shining sound held aloft by huge unseen mass of learning and craft, a weight that the listener is seldom aware of.