Peer and Self-assessment in Music Ensembles  
Louise Denson and Duncan D. Nulty

"The only true way to listen is with your ears and your heart." (Julie Landsman)

The context

Jazz Instrumental Ensemble is a co-requisite (mandatory) course for students who undertake study in the instrumental performance major in jazz within the Bachelor of Music at Griffith University’s Queensland Conservatorium of Music (“The Con.”). Ensembles are small groups of (7 to 10) musicians who practice, learn and perform together. They will normally consist of bass, guitar, piano, drums, from 3 to 5 horns (saxophones or brass) and sometimes also a vocalist. Ensembles are therefore a small team, where each member has a (musical) role and where the performance of every member is critical to the success of the whole. An ensemble will work together for two semesters. It is axiomatic that peer and self review is an integral feature of the operation of ensembles. In addition, as with other teams, for example in Business, members take other roles too, such as leader, communicator, coordinator, negotiator, researcher etc. These play their part in respect of the musical practice, learning and performance, and also in respect of other organisational and procedural tasks which musicians undertake to record and promote the ensemble. Thus, learning in Ensembles is not only about music.

In any given year at the Con there are between 8 and 10 Jazz Instrumental Ensembles, depending on total enrollment. There are two ensembles which have a more specialized repertoire: fusion and Latin music, while the others all perform a selection of standard, original and contemporary jazz repertoire, as determined by the ensemble tutor and the students as the year unfolds. (At the discretion of the jazz area head, a semester or two of Jazz Instrumental Ensemble can be replaced in a student’s program by Large Jazz Ensemble (big band), Jazz Vocal Ensemble or another Conservatorium ensemble, e.g. World Music Ensemble, New Music Ensemble).

Students are placed in the ensembles on the basis of auditions which are conducted during O Week. While it is often the case that students in a given year level find themselves together in an ensemble, the audition process allows, for example, for a
first year student with a higher than average level to be placed with more advanced students: this creates a learning environment which will challenge the beginner student, utilizing his/her skills to the best advantage within the area.

Similarly, an upper year student who has a below average level of facility on his/her instrument can be placed with less experienced students: this avoids a situation where students feel they are being held back by an ensemble member who is not up to their level.

Each student will normally take 6 semesters of ensemble in a 3-year program, or 8 semesters in a 4-year program. In each semester, course delivery is scheduled for 2 hours per week and comprises 10 weeks of rehearsals, one of which includes a formal peer review exercise (described below). In addition, in each semester each ensemble is required to perform at one jazz workshop – which take place weekly.

Assessment

The assessment of students in Jazz Instrumental Ensemble is based on:

**Participation** – students are required to attend regular rehearsals, accomplish weekly tasks, contribute to the rehearsal process, show professionalism and maturity of attitude, participate in peer review exercises, participate in all scheduled performances, etc.; One example of this is the weekly jazz workshops. Each of the ensembles is required to perform once each semester at these workshops. General discussion follows during which the ensemble rates their satisfaction or otherwise with their performance. Other students are invited to comment and offer suggestions for improvement. This takes place under the guidance of a tutor, and there is an opportunity for the ensemble to try a piece again incorporating some of the suggestions.

**Performance** - One assessed public performance in the “Ian Hanger Recital Hall” or at “Jazz Café”. The Ian Hanger Recital Hall is part of the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, adjacent to the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC). It seats 200 patrons and hosts over 200 events every year. It is an intimate venue and perfect for solo and chamber music as well as lectures, demonstrations and rehearsals. The Queensland Conservatorium's free Jazz Cafe, is an informal setting on the lawn outside the Conservatorium where staff and student groups from the Conservatorium present a wide variety of jazz styles and tunes.

Students are required to liaise with the events officer to supply a photo, biographical information, personnel and repertoire lists. They are also responsible for ensuring all equipment and instruments are in place for their performance. In short, students are expected to undertake their performances within the Con as they would a professional engagement. Two ensemble tutors assess these performances.

**Recording** students organize a recording of 15 minutes duration themselves, either self-recording, or having a music technology student come into a rehearsal to record them. This is then assessed by both other students in a peer review exercise, and by staff. Only the staff mark is used in grading, but this is because of the logistics of collating marks, not because of the inaccuracy of student peer-assessment.
Self and Peer-Review

Self and Peer-review is fundamental to the weekly conduct of Ensembles throughout all year levels of study in the Bachelor of Music – so much so, that it can be overlooked for what it is. Musicians must develop the skills to critique their own performance. In this respect, individuals (under guidance) practice doing so in each week of ensemble – just as they do whenever they play in any circumstance. Musicians must also develop the skills to critique the performance of others. Again, this is practiced under guidance in each week of ensemble through constructive critique of the other members of the ensemble. Given that musical performance (except solo performances) depend on the integration and interactions between musicians, it is also necessary for musicians to develop the skills to critique the integrated whole of which each member is a part. Again, through weekly guided practice in ensembles, students practice and develop these skills.

Importantly, self and peer review when viewed in this fundamentally integrated way, is axiomatic to the development of professional competence, and occurs regardless of year level. Implicitly, the accuracy, validity, and complexity of students' judgments develop progressively throughout their study. It follows that self and peer review may be regarded as in-accurate, in-valid and conceptually simple in the earlier phases of learning when compared to the later phases. This view, however, does not take into account the developmental benefits of engaging in these activities from even the earliest stages of musicianship. Beginning students may not be able to construct for themselves nor make use of feedback which has the level of sophistication and richness which later year students can develop and use, but to deny these students the integrated opportunity to develop the skills needed until later in their studies would be counter-productive: it is only by progressively practicing such skills that they can be developed. In other words, one has to learn to crawl, then walk, then run: crawling is a necessary pre-requisite.

_Jazz Instrumental Ensemble_ also includes a more formal peer review exercise: the peer review of ensemble recordings. The reasoning behind this inclusion in the course is simply that it is often much easier to critique someone else than it is one’s self – but that the act of doing so, is a powerful way to gain greater insight into one’s own performance.

The procedure for the peer review of ensemble recordings is as follows:

Each ensemble is required to make a CD recording of its performance (see assessment section above). Two copies of the recordings made by each of the ensembles are handed in to the course convenor. These copies are then re-distributed to other ensembles for peer-assessment. Each Ensemble receives a total of 2 CD recordings to review and uses part of one of its scheduled ensemble rehearsal times to listen to the CDs as a group. The peer assessment discussion and process is guided by an assessment proforma (Appendix 1) and the ensemble tutor. One person is designated as a scribe, recording comments. Comments are then summarized and written on the proforma, and each of the 2 recordings overall is rated as a Pass, Credit, Distinction or High Distinction. The criteria are listed on the proforma, and students are encouraged to focus on the performances rather than on
the recording quality. (There is always a great variation in quality depending on the recording equipment used and the experience of the person using it.) Having more than one recording to review helps students to see the differences and learn to appreciate (through comparison) the strengths and weaknesses of each. The comments and marks are returned to the groups.

**Principles of Good Practice**

**Authenticity (Biggs, 2006)**

All the activities students undertake in ensembles are authentic to the profession of being a musician (The specifics of this are elaborated below). The tasks students undertake do not simply mimic what a musician does, they *are* what a musician does. The only feature to distinguish the students from qualified performers is their level of competence. As such, there is no possibility that students fail to see the relevance of the learning activities, and therefore, their engagement is maximised. It follows that levels of achievement and completion rates are very high (completion rates for all ensembles in the last year were at or near 100%).

**Alignment (Biggs, 2006): Preparing students for professional practice as working musicians**

One important activity for a professional musician is recording and formatting a demo. The recording assignment requires the students to select and prepare a repertoire suitable for the recording which will demonstrate their abilities both as individuals and as a group. They then need to schedule the actual recording, convert the data into a format that is printable on CD, burn the CDs, label them appropriately and hand them in. There is direct alignment between these learning outcomes and the peer and self-assessment activities students undertake.

**Developing skills of 'critical discernment' (Bowden & Marton, 2003)**

First, as noted earlier, self assessment is a critical skill for a musician, and one which is practiced whenever a person plays – be this when practicing or performing, alone or in ensemble. However, less experienced musicians in particular may have trouble identifying problems while playing because attention is divided between the task of physically playing and monitoring one’s performance. When *learning* to play, the balance of cognitive effort tends to be on playing the instrument, or on one’s self rather than one’s contribution to the whole. It follows that problems both in an individual’s playing (e.g. rhythm, realizing harmony in an improvisation, intonation), and in an ensemble (e.g. balance, dynamics, blend, time feel) become more apparent upon listening to a recording. This principle, if conceived generically, is not unique to students learning music but applies in all learning situations.

Second, students develop the ability to critically listen to and think about music. The peer review exercise requires students to listen critically to their peers’ work and to comment on it. Comments are meant to include both positive observations and suggestions for improvement. This takes practice and, particularly in the early stages,
Academic staff involvement (Boud, 1995; Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001)

Academic staff guidance to students in the development of their skills is important. In Ensembles, discussion is guided and encouraged by the ensemble tutor (who acts as a mentor to the students) and the proforma (Appendix 1). Discussion can include consideration of how best to express a negative comment, i.e. the difference between constructive critique and negative judgment. Comments are summarised and recorded, and the proformae are returned to the groups.

Enriching learning through exposure to, and valuing of, multiple perspectives (Boud, 1995; Boud et al., 2001)

Each ensemble peer reviews the recording from two others, and receives feedback from two others. This enriches the reflection which the groups can engage in during the act of peer review, and once the proformae are returned to them. This is an important point: the reflection on the reflection of others is enriched by seeing multiple perspectives. Peer review of any kind has an intrinsic benefit, but multiple peer reviews add to this.

How to adapt and use this technique yourself

For others to make use of the approach described above some key points should be taken into consideration.

You will need:

1. An authentic task which students must practice and learn throughout the semester.
2. Ideally, a task which requires teamwork.
3. To configure the learning and teaching in the course around the development of students abilities required to complete the task.
4. Criteria which characterise excellence in the performance of the task and which can be enunciated in a proforma to help guide and focus students’ thinking.
5. The ability to illustrate, display and critique different levels of performance on these criteria to and with students.
6. To require students to complete assignments and tasks which entail practice of the task, and integral ongoing critique of each others’ performance.
7. To require students to complete assignments which result in a physical product that can be exchanged with other groups of students for them to engage in a peer review.
8. To organise (administratively) the exchange and return of this work together with student peer-review feedback.
9. To engage in supporting/guiding students to progressively develop their ability to complete the task and to develop their ability to critique the performance of the task – particularly their own performance.


**Resources**

Appendix 1 provides the proforma which students use to guide their peer review. This illustrates the kind of criteria, and performance standards which students learn to understand and to apply.

In other discipline areas consideration could be given to developing a tutor guide which details these criteria in more detail, explains their role as guiding mentors, and includes a collection of samples of work from previous students which are annotated in ways which identify the features that illustrate qualitatively different levels of performance in respect of the assessment criteria.
Appendix 1 – Proforma to guide students’ peer review

Jazz Ensemble Recording  Peer review sheet
Recording of: ______________________  Reviewed by: _____________
Submission date: _________________  Review date: _____________

This peer review sheet was designed to provide feedback to students and staff members following the submission of the Jazz Ensemble recording. This sheet should represent a summary of the comments, appraising and/or constructive criticism made by the students supplying the peer review. It will be forwarded to the ensemble that made the recording for their own consideration as a developmental exercise. It is suggested that the reviewing ensemble discuss each recording verbally and as a group make written suggestions under the heading areas below.

Ensemble Skills
(e.g, Dynamics, balance, intonation, rhythmic unity, groove)
Improvisational Skills
(e.g., Stylistic awareness, appropriateness of solo order/length)

Overall Comments
(e.g., Arrangements, choice of material, energy and commitment, overall impact)
SUGGESTED GRADE (e.g, HD, D, C, P, F)

(note: these grades will not count to the overall marks for any student in this subject)

References


