

NEGOTIATED ASSESSMENT CRITERIA IN POPULAR MUSIC

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KEYWORDS

Assessment, feedback, individualisation, negotiation, performance

SUMMARY

A case study concerning the design and implementation of a system of negotiated assessment criteria for popular music performances.

CONTEXT

Perth College UHI has been delivering popular music performance programmes since 1985, with the degree coming on stream in 2000. The degree is a four-year honours programme, and a good proportion of graduates have gone on to successful careers in music, while many others have decided to follow other career paths.

This project sought to address two areas of concern:

- A perception that the assessment criteria in use for assessing popular music performance on the BA Hons Popular Music programme did not adequately reflect the varied nature of projects presented.
- A perceived need for students to become more involved and proactive in the assessment procedure.

WHAT WAS THE ISSUE?

Assessing creative performance has always been a contentious issue. It is essential that assessment decisions are reliable, fair and transparent, but an element of professional or aesthetic judgement has traditionally been an essential part of judging any artistic work.

Approaches to assessment vary; one approach is to design extremely detailed criteria which break a performance down into its component parts: this granular approach is mechanistic and mitigates against a holistic view of the work, but it does allow simple, criteria-referenced judgements. This micro-assessment tends to preference the technical: 'playing in tune', 'playing in time' etc. while struggling with the evidence of less obvious, and arguably more important skills such as creative thinking, management of people and resources, conceptualisation, and the bringing together of different creative skills in the creation of a performance.

The other extreme is to have virtually no specific criteria, grades being assigned on the basis of professional judgement, often depending on how 'artistically satisfying' the assessor found the performance. This approach is again unhelpful to the student, as it provides little useful feedback (feed-forward) on their work, and is difficult to defend in terms of the need to be reliable, fair and accountable.

HOW DOES NEGOTIATED ASSESSMENT WORK?

In his paper *'Negotiating Assessment: An Approach to Assessing Practical Work'*, Paul Kleiman described two main advantages to negotiated assessment:

- The opportunity for students to concentrate on elements of their project they see as most and least important and work smarter;
- Enhanced understanding and ownership of the assessment process: feedback becomes an integral part of the student's learning rather than 'bolted on' at the end.

Kleiman's paper identifies six assessment fields: his process was developed to be used across a wide range of practical applications, from dancers to designers. Our system was specifically contextualised towards music performance, so took a detailed approach to one aspect of the system; The first field, *'Presentation/production - the finished product presented to an audience'* was broken down further. We split it into two fields; Instrumental Skills and Performance Skills, each divided into five categories. Students were asked to select three from each five, and prioritise them. In individual interviews, students chose and prioritised the six criteria which were most important to their project, and were asked to discuss their choice. Those chosen were then weighted 20, 17 and 13 to make a possible total of 50 for each half of the assessment.

NEGOTIATED ASSESSMENT IN PRACTICE

Students were given a sheet with two categories of assessment; Instrumental skills and Performance skills. There are five aspects of performance in each category, and students were asked to consider the nature of their project, choose three of the five aspects then prioritise them.

Instrumental skills	Priority (1- 3)	Weighting	Mark	Feedback	Final grade
				Student has chosen priorities 1,2, &3. And weighted them according to importance	
Technical ability	2	17	16		
Feel/groove	3	13	12		
Improvisation	1	20	19	Assessor has marked each aspect to give mark out of 50	
Accompaniment					
Authenticity (sound/equipment etc.)					
		(50)	47		



After the assessment performances, each student in the sample was given a 10-15 minute interview by the assessor (although most over-ran). Video evidence and assessor's observation notes were available. The discussion was based around the priorities set by the student earlier, so the first question might be:

'You said technical ability was your first priority for this project – what mark would you give yourself out of 20?'

Responses varied from an instant '20', to a reluctance to suggest a mark. In most cases, the response was 'About 15?' Students seemed to see 15 out of 20 as an average mark, even though this would be a good A in typical degree marking schemes. The assessor then interrogated the student's response, using a variety of approaches:

'Suppose I said it was only worth 2 out of 20? – tell me why it was worth more.'

'Can you suggest how you could have done better?'

'What specific aspects of this performance do you think make it worth an A?'

This approach allows the student to justify a high mark by reflecting on their performance, by putting forward actual evidence. Some students reversed the process:

'I think that performance was perfect, and should get 100% - tell me what you're deducting marks for'

The assessor has to be ready to justify their decisions objectively based on the evidence, so not only is the student gaining a deeper understanding of the process, so is the assessor.

The final mark is always at the discretion of the assessor, and indeed the exam board, but they are under as much pressure to justify that mark as the student is to defend their performance. On reflection, the marks are probably higher than might have been expected in the previous system, but this may be appropriate in some cases: what is being assessed is not only skills which have been acquired during the course, but also high-level professional skills that students may have brought with them.

Often with music education at this level, we are placing existing skills and attributes in a contextual and critical framework, and in effect applying a form of APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning). If a musician can apply technique of a higher standard than that required at SCQF level 9, then they should be awarded 100% for that aspect of the performance. There is often reluctance among staff to award very high marks, but if the understanding of levels is clear, then high marks should be awarded where appropriate.

The assessment dialogue is an excellent way of 'feeding forward' and should give the student a sound basis for improvement. The assessment interviews could be recorded to obviate the need for further written feedback.



WAS IT WORTH IT?

On the surface this seems like an unwieldy process, however it has several advantages.

- It allows students studying widely varying styles of music to be assessed fairly and appropriately
- It encourages evidence-based reflection and develops reflective and critical skills
- It is transparent and fair
- It focuses stylistic research by making students refine their thinking
- It engages students closely with the process of learning and assessment, and makes them complicit in the assessment/feedback process, thus encouraging active learning
- It personalises learning and assessment
- Students have clear assessment goals and can make sure their performance takes account of the different weightings
- It forces assessors to be clear about the marking criteria, and encourages them to use the full range of marks available

This system was well-received by everyone involved, from students to external examiners. The students commented particularly on the transparency and honesty of the process, and the advantages of having a 'feedback conversation' rather than merely receiving a paragraph of written feedback, which can be formulaic. Obviously it is a time-consuming process, and staff will need to make time by being flexible with teaching hours etc. However this approach to assessment is actually also a powerful mode of teaching and should be factored into teaching hours.

REFERENCES

Kleiman, P. (2007) *Negotiating Assessment: An Approach to Assessing Practical Work*. York: Higher Education Academy. Available at < <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/negotiating-assessment.pdf>>

If you wish to submit your own case study, or have any questions about this resource please contact:

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