Avoiding Praxis Shock: Optimizing Preservice Music Education and Mentoring for Early-Career Music Teacher Success

– Russ Tewelet and Derek Harris

Abstract

The shock that teachers experience as they enter the profession is well documented across all disciplines. Nothing can completely prepare new teachers for the wide variety of realities they will face. The purpose of this article is to give insight into making the difficult transition from music student to music teacher a smoother and more effective process. Specifically, the authors offer pragmatic suggestions to novice music teachers, particularly on the benefits of various types of mentoring that may aid in this transition.

Introduction

Praxis shock is described as the challenge new teachers face in coping with classroom realities for which their preservice training has not adequately prepared them (Goddard & Foster, 2001). Wilson, Bell, Galosy, & Shouse (2004) discussed that all professions face the challenge of putting ideas into practice. They asserted that doing so takes practice (p. 159). Teaching music is similar to performing music. Just as developing skill as a musician takes time and practice, developing skill as a music teacher requires a similar kind of time, effort, practice, and patience. In fact, part of what can make the music teaching profession especially rewarding is that good teachers are invested in the ongoing improvement of their teaching skills.
Undergraduate/Preservice Preparation

Many critics have called for universities to reform how they prepare teachers for the profession (Ballantyne, 2007; Ballantyne et al., 2009; Ballantyne and Packer, 2004; Conway et. al., 2004; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Feiman-Nemser wrote,

Undergraduate education is currently under siege. The survey courses that dominate these programs provide limited opportunities to develop deep understanding and critical perspectives or to experience firsthand the modes of inquiry associated with different fields. Thus it is not surprising that teachers lack conceptual and connected knowledge of the subjects they teach. (p. 1020)

Changes in teacher preparation can be justified and best practices are always worthy of further examination, but this debate about the quality of teacher preparation is not easily settled. Bartell (1995) maintains that regardless of the initial preparation received, teachers are never fully prepared for the realities and responsibilities of the classroom.

Efforts to mitigate praxis shock must include building a firm foundation of the concepts required for teaching any subject, including music. Development of these overlapping understandings and skills should be a central objective in preservice education curriculum.

Musicianship

Preservice music teachers must recognize that there is no substitute for musicianship and knowledge of the subject matter, making every effort to develop personal musicianship to the highest level possible. MacLeod and Walter (2011) found that musical
skills, unfortunately, are often deficient in preservice music teachers. Thus it behooves the preservice teacher to take responsibility for identifying and developing all the different skills needed for employment as a first year music teacher.

**Undergraduate Studies**

The nature of studying music allows preservice teachers to become actively involved in the praxis of their field, and Garnett (2014) argued that pedagogy should be considered an aspect of musicianship. For example, ensemble rehearsals, applied lessons, and other music courses provide a great many opportunities for the student to learn about pedagogy, and musicians at any level are likely to teach other musicians in some manner. Garnett identified two transitions that appear to take place in the development of a teacher's identity and states:

…in developing their identity as a teacher, music graduates not only make a transition in identity from musicians to music teachers, but … they also make a second transition in order to think of themselves as teachers within the particular context in which they are going to work. It concludes that the first of these transitions might successfully be avoided if pedagogy was to be considered as an aspect of musicianship from the outset. (p. 127)

**Teaching Experience**

In order to challenge preconceived notions of what makes proficient teaching, preservice music teachers should seek out opportunities to gain actual experience in teaching, not merely research information on theoretical approaches. While simulated peer-teaching experiences offered in undergraduate teaching methods courses may certainly be helpful (Paul et al., 2001), there appears to be no substitute for authentic teaching
experience (Ballantyne, 2007; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Hourigan & Sheib, 2009; Kelly, 2008; MacLeod & Walter, 2011; Paul et al. 2001, Schmidt, 1994; Schmidt, 1998). It is really quite simple: the best way to prepare for a career in teaching is to teach.

**Student Teaching**

Preservice programs are intended to be a four to five year preparation for the profession. The student teaching experience provides a sheltered environment where a preservice teacher can have actual teaching experiences. This is a preservice program’s built-in mechanism to ensure that a student receives some practicum time. The task for the new teacher, then, is to strive to connect the dots between courses and field experience. Feiman-Nemser (2001) explains: “Separate courses taught by individual faculty in different departments rarely build on or connect to one another, nor do they add up as a coherent preparation for teaching.” (p. 1019) Therefore, it is essential that in the areas where a preservice program is deficient, the new teacher, in order to succeed, must be reflective enough to make those connections.

**Avoiding Praxis Shock – The First Years of Teaching**

New teachers have two jobs – they have to teach and they have to learn to teach. No matter how good a preservice program may be, there are some things that can only be learned on the job. The preservice experience lays a foundation and offers practice in teaching. The first encounter with real teaching occurs when teachers step into their own classroom. Then learning to teach begins in earnest (Feiman-Messer, 2001 p. 1026).

This transition from preservice training to the actual practice of teaching is a critical time period. It is estimated that a full 20 to 30 percent of teachers leave the profession within the
first three years (Bullough, Knowles, & Crowe, 1992; Kaufman et al., 2002; Olson 2000; Watkins 2005). Ingersoll (2002) found an even higher dropout rate, with 39 percent of all novice teachers leaving the profession within five years. During this critical period there is an urgent need for the more experienced educators in proximity to provide support for the fledgling teacher, and often before the new teacher realizes help is needed.

According to several different studies, one of the most common factors contributing to praxis shock for music teachers is isolation (Ballantyne 2007; McCormack & Thomas, 2003; Spruce, 2002). For music teachers, the isolation can be both physical and professional. Physical isolation may develop when music classrooms are separated from the rest of the school. Professional isolation may occur when schools have few if any other music teachers on campus. The high workload and additional responsibilities associated with teaching music has also been described as an underlying factor to praxis shock (Ballantyne, 2007).

**Mentoring**

One of the best ways for a new music teacher to prevent feeling isolated is mentoring. Unfortunately, music teachers are often paired with mentors that are not adequately equipped to assist a music teacher (Ballantyne, 2007). Mentors are often assigned within a campus or school system, but there can often be a great disparity between the mentee’s needs and the mentor’s background. On the other hand, some effective mentoring relationships occur naturally and spontaneously. Although the causal determinants of naturally occurring mentoring relationships are difficult to establish (Dubois & Karcher, 2006), anecdotes about the benefits of these relationships are plentiful.

Mullen (2005) describes two categories of mentoring: technical and alternative. She
defines the more traditional, technical mentoring, as “hierarchically transmitting authoritative knowledge within organizational and relational systems” (p. 24). In contrast, alternative mentoring is described as “engaging in shared learning, inquiry, and power across status, racial, gender, and other differences with a vision of empowerment and equality” (Mullen, p. 26). Alternative mentoring methods are non-hierarchal in nature and focus on best practices (Draves & Koops, 2010). Mullen and others tout the benefits of alternative mentoring methods and advocate for a shift of emphasis from technical mentoring to alternative mentoring methods (Darwin, 2004; Driscoll, Parkes, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill, & Pitts Banister, 2009; Maher, Lindsay, Peel, & Twomey, 2006).

Mentorship programs, according to Servage & Beck (2012)

“are more likely to be successful if they are voluntary, if both parties teach the same grade or subject(s), and if the mentor and the mentee have regular embedded professional development time to work together. Mentorship programs that do not embody these elements and are poorly run are, at best, neutral. At their worst, they create negative feelings and perpetuate substandard practices” (p. 8).

Unfortunately, music teachers often find themselves assigned to a mentor that does not teach the same subject or grade level. When this is the case, new teachers should seek out more appropriate mentor relationships on their own. Identifying appropriate, willing mentors can sometimes be accomplished through existing mentor networking programs offered by state or local music organizations.

Alternative mentoring is a concept that is gaining acceptance through recent studies that have shown its benefits. One of the most common forms of alternative mentoring is
peer mentoring or peer coaching. Draves and Koops (2010) described peer mentoring/coaching as being non-hierarchal in nature and focused on best practices. A peer mentoring situation may even deviate from the standard dyadic model of mentoring, counteracting the isolation felt by music teachers (Driscoll et al., 2009). In the Draves and Koops (2010) study, the non-hierarchical, informal structure allowed those involved a sense of safety in speaking freely, yet still encouraged a reflective attitude (p. 69).

A broader example of alternative mentoring is the Music Teachers Oz Online project, discussed at length by Ballantyne et al. (2009). This project, designed to better prepare preservice teachers for their professional responsibilities, paired case studies with educational theory to “bridge gaps between research, teaching, and academic development in music teacher education” (p. 1-2). Student discussion of the case studies helped them contextualize actual situations, providing a framework for applying knowledge in the future. The Oz Online project was a massive undertaking, yet the discussion model facilitated such a free exchange of ideas that 90% of the participants reported “working on real-life problems helped them to feel connected with other students” and 87% reported “the online discussions broke down communication barriers between students” (p. 11).

Technical mentoring can be very helpful especially in regard to explaining administrative and routine information (McCormack & Thomas, 2003), but Draves & Koops (2010) warn that technical mentoring can often feel evaluative to the mentee. Because technical mentoring is likely to be readily available for new teachers, we suggest that new music teachers should not only take advantage of those mentoring opportunities made available to them but also proactively seek out additional mentoring relationships.

Basically, when it comes to accepting a mentoring opportunity, the answer for the
new teacher is simply “yes.” More importantly, the new teacher should accept without delay since much of what the mentor has to offer may pertain to classroom management rather than content or instruction. New teachers may want to wait until they feel ready for a mentor to observe their teaching, but we believe the mentor and mentee should work together as soon as possible.

**Reflection/Journaling**

Research points to journaling as another resource that can be easily adapted for any preservice or first-year induction program. Journaling, alternately called reflecting or reflective journaling, allows for a more concrete form of reflective thinking for the new teacher. Contich (2006) stated, “Journaling is an integral part of staff development because it allows individuals to consider their own learning thoughtfully. Journaling helps participants analyze their own and other’s [sic] thought processes and think about how one thinks and learns” (p. 43).

Journaling can also be a strong evaluative tool for reviewing growth over time although it can often feel forced or unnatural (Hobbs, 2007; Conway et al. 2012), which should be avoided.

**Conclusion**

Teaching involves a set of skills that can be learned. If the new music teacher approaches learning to teach music in a manner similar to the approach of learning to play music, there is much to gain. The new teacher must acknowledge that it will take years to fully develop teaching skills just as it took years to fully develop performing skills, recognizing that consistent effort over a sustained period pays big dividends for both
performance and teaching skills. In facing the challenges ahead, the new music teacher should be prepared to minimize assumptions and seize every opportunity to develop requisite teaching skills.

For music education majors, praxis shock can be mitigated by striving to excel in all aspects of musicianship studies, succeeding in the preservice program, and taking advantage of both technical and alternative mentor formats. Praxis shock need not be the norm.
References


**Russ Tewelet** is an associate professor of music at West Texas A&M University in Canyon Texas.
Derek Harris is a graduate student at West Texas A&M University in Canyon Texas.

Russ Teweleit – FULL BIOGRAPHY
http://www.wtamu.edu/academics/russell-teweleit-bio.aspx

Derek Harris – FULL BIOGRAPHY
http://www.derekharrismusic.com/biography/

Keywords: praxis shock, music teacher education, mentoring, musicianship

Summary/Introduction
The shock that teachers experience as they enter the profession is well documented across all disciplines. The purpose of this article is to give insight into how best to make the difficult transition from music student to music teacher. Specifically, the authors wish to offer pragmatic suggestions to novice music teachers and provide insight into how mentoring of various types may aid in this transition.