

Variation in Musicians' Experience of Creating Ensemble

Anna Reid, Macquarie University, & Peter Petocz, University of Technology, Sydney

Abstract

In this paper, we describe a research methodology phenomenography and its application in investigating the experience of an ensemble the recorder consort Fortune in negotiating a shared conception of pieces of music being prepared for recording and performance. This methodology been used previously by Reid to investigate music teachers' and students' conceptions of music and work as a musician. This resulted in the identification of a Music Entity, a tripartite hierarchy of understanding, moving from extrinsic technical, with its focus on technical proficiency and an orientation to correct, playing, through extrinsic meaning, finding the meaning in the music, to intrinsic meaning, focusing on the development and communication of personal meanings through music. Further research by Reid, Petocz and co-researchers has shown the same tripartite conceptions of learning and working in a variety of other areas design, statistics, theology, environment resulting in the inter-disciplinary concept of the Professional Entity, Here, phenomenography is used to carry out an analysis of a small number of interviews with the members of an ensemble focusing on the process of moving from individual conceptions to a group conception of pieces of music, and then ensemble music as a whole. The analysis elucidates the process of negotiation between musicians in rehearsal and shows that the Professional Entity, is apparent in ensemble as well as solo music. The results of the study have important pedagogical implications, enabling teachers to help students develop their conceptions of music, while the methodology can be a useful tool for researchers in music education.

Introduction

Research in tertiary music education has often focused on the nature of learning within instrumental or vocal studio (Persson, 1996; Olsson, 1997; Reid, 2001). An equal amount of attention has been focused on subjects related to musicology and psychology of music (Deliege, 1997; Penel & Drake, 1997) and more recently music technologies (Bennett, 1999; Airy & Parr, 2001). While much music education at tertiary level is oriented towards solo (or accompanied solo) music, traditionally in a one-to-one situation with an expert teacher, most students studying music will not achieve (or maybe even desire) a career as a soloist. However, one of the most enjoyable aspects of tertiary education in music is the experience of ensemble playing and it is in this area that many students will find immediate work and possibly a future career. Presentations of research at conferences (eg ESCOM, Lucerne, 1999; ESCOM, Uppsala, 1997) sometimes focus on the most esoteric aspects of ensemble playing, for instance Johnson (1999) who focused on the relations between good intonation and conformity of temperament. Learning the skills of ensemble music has different aims and methods, and requires different resources, as does learning to be a soloist. One such resource is the CD-ROM, *Creating Ensemble* (Blom *et al.*, 1998), which was prepared by a team including the authors of this paper. As music educators, it is important for us to understand how musicians and music students view ensemble playing, so that we can design appropriate techniques and

resources to enhance students' learning.

Moreover, as researchers in the area of music education, we need access to a range of research methodologies that can enable us to study the understandings that our students have of aspects of music, such as ensemble playing. In this paper, we discuss one such methodology — phenomenography — and describe its application to the problem of understanding musicians' conceptions of ensemble music. We show that such conceptions are consistent with previously determined conceptions of music, and that these conceptions help to illuminate the nature of professional work — as a musician or a range of other professions — and the teaching and learning that is a preparation for such professional work.

Phenomenography as a Research Method

Phenomenography is a qualitative research methodology that looks at how people experience, understand and ascribe meaning to a specific situation or phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997). Marton and Booth suggest that there is a relation between how people experience a situation and how they act in the situation. *“To make sense of how people handle problems, situations, the world, we have to understand the way in which they experience the problems, the situations, the world, that they are handling or in relation to the way they are acting. Accordingly, a capability for acting in a certain way reflects a capability of experiencing something in a certain way. The latter does not cause the former, but they are logically intertwined. You cannot act other than in relation to the world as you experience it.”* (p.111) This implies that finding out the different ways that people experience, or understand, ensemble music is crucial, as it is related to the ways in which they may then act.

The outcome of a phenomenographic study is a set of logically related categories — conceptions of the phenomenon. These categories and the relations between them provide the *outcome space* for the research. The categories are usually reported in order of their inclusivity and sophistication, and they are defined by their qualitative *difference* from the other categories. Phenomenography can be seen to richly describe the object of study through an emphasis on describing the variation in the meaning that is found in the participants' experience of the phenomenon. Phenomenography examines the experience of each participant and recognises that each person's experience is an *internal* relation between the subject and the object, in other words, between the participant and the phenomenon. However it is the structure of the variation across the *group* that emerges through individuals' descriptions of their experience. The categories, therefore, describe the range of different ways in which the particular group involved in the study experiences the phenomenon.

The categories described are not developmental: they do not represent a staged process through which individuals pass, but are a snapshot of the experience of the group of participants at that particular time. Nor is the aim to classify or categorise any individual participant as adhering to a particular category, but rather to illuminate the full range of categories found amongst the group of participants. It is important to note that individuals experiencing the phenomenon at

the most inclusive level are able to (and do) appreciate and use characteristics of the less inclusive levels when the situation warrants it; however, it is much harder for an individual who usually experiences the narrower conception to broaden their view to the more inclusive conceptions (Reid, 1997b).

Data are typically collected through a series of in-depth, open-ended interviews that focus on allowing each person to fully describe their experience of learning (Bowden, 1996). The questions posed are designed to encourage the participants to think about why they experience the phenomenon in certain ways and how they constitute meaning of the phenomenon.

The Music Entity

The methodology of phenomenography has been used previously by Reid (1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2001) to investigate music teachers' and students' conceptions of music and work as a musician. In these investigations, she carried out interviews with 10 university lecturers and 16 of their students (studying for a Bachelor of Music Performance). The interviews focused on their conceptions of teaching and learning music, and on their experience and understanding of the world of music. This resulted in the identification of a "Music Entity" — a tripartite hierarchy of understanding, moving from "extrinsic technical", through "extrinsic meaning" to "intrinsic meaning". The phenomenographic outcome space is described and illustrated in Table 1. More extensive quotations (see Reid, 1999) demonstrate the hierarchical nature of the conceptions. For example, musicians who see music-making as expressing personal artistic truths can also focus on the meaning in the music, and the technical elements that lead to proficiency in performing it. However, musicians who usually see music-making in terms of technical proficiency — "*nauling the piece*" — are much less likely to be able to conceive of it as communication of personal meaning.

Table 1: The Music Entity (in solo music)

Category	Description and Focus	Brief Example
Extrinsic Technical	professional music-making is understood as a combination of technical elements related to either an instrument or notation where musicians focus on technical proficiency and an orientation to 'correct' playing	<i>I have to have a concept of 'conceptual packages' and what I do is turn them on... The technique of what you are doing becomes more like 90% of your thinking and the rest becomes 10% or less.</i>
Extrinsic Meaning	professional music-making is the production of meaningful musical sound for communicating by focusing on the meaning that exists in the music	<i>I like to concentrate on the music or the interpretation side. I think a lot of the time "what is a piece of music? ". It's not just enough to know the technical side, you've got to know how to perform it. I like to concentrate on both aspects.</i>
Intrinsic Meaning	professional music-making is a vehicle for expressing personal artistic truths by focusing on the development and communication of personal meanings through music	<i>I find that a lot of my learning of the flute isn't actually the practice and the playing of it. A lot is actually in the mind, and the piece is in there, it has time to, your mind actually works on the piece and it is sitting there and I have a better idea of how I want to play it.</i>

However, the interviews on which these findings were based were focused on the standard one-on-one music lesson, and there was no reason, *a priori*, for similar results to be obtained in an ensemble study. In the research reported in this paper, the study carried out was an investigation into the experience of a professional ensemble, Fortune, as they prepared an educational CD-ROM package (*Creating Ensemble*, Blom *et al.*, 1998) and a musical recording (*Frogs*, 2001). The number of musicians involved (six) is too small for the investigation to be considered an independent phenomenographic study: however, the aim was to extend the previous findings to an ensemble situation, and to note the similarities and differences with the previous work. Here, phenomenography is used to carry out an analysis of a small number of interviews with the members of an ensemble focusing on the process of moving from individual conceptions to a group conception of pieces of music, and then of ensemble music as a whole.

The Entity in Ensemble Music

The interviews confirmed the existence and dimensions of the Music Entity in the field of ensemble music. Quotes relate to the preparation of *Creating Ensemble* and *Frogs* — both using the medium of recorder quartet with Australian pieces from the late 20th century in a wide

range of styles. Table 2 gives more detail, and includes quotes from the six musicians that illustrate the levels of the Music Entity as it relates to ensemble music. These quotes indicate the significant difference perceived by musicians between solo and ensemble music. They also elucidate the different levels of negotiation between musicians in rehearsal and preparation.

Table 2: The Music Entity in Ensemble

Category	Examples
Extrinsic Technical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I actually found it a very naked peace to play because it is so simple, it makes it quite difficult to play and I don't think I actually played it particularly well and I think that I went back and did it again I would probably approach it far more seriously than I did initially and I think that it needed a lot more use of alternate fingering to create a great sense of dynamic and I think perhaps the whole group didn't actually work enough on the dynamic effect with that particular piece.</i> • <i>I think in this piece, especially in the second movement, a lot of the time we had to go back and actually consciously make eye contact with a particular person at specific points, because it was so hard and because the first and second line just had no frame of reference — sometimes they are just playing against everything else. There was nothing that you could slot it into, so you just had to know who to actually look to, so you could actually nod, so that you are the first beat of the bar or whatever. I think this piece you've just got to play it over and over again until you know exactly what is happening, so you can actually use oral cues all the time.</i>
Extrinsic Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Say for instance Frogs, where obviously it's got a title, so we know what to do with it: we want it to sound like frogs, so we have to try and achieve the sound of frogs. So obviously we've got three crotchets to the bar and we've got to play exactly the same time, and so we have to work out how we make it sound like frogs. So therefore, we have to talk about how long each note's going to be to achieve that sound of frogs croaking.</i> • <i>Well, I'd say everyone is individually planning to get a cohesive whole as a group, with a piece. So rather than with your own interpretation only, you've all got to come up with a unanimous idea for a piece, and you have to discuss various elements about the piece to achieve that. Maybe articulation or note endings or style, that sort of thing, so you're hoping to achieve something that you all agree on, and you're hoping to put across the ideas of the composer and all the markings on the music, that kind of thing.</i>
Intrinsic Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I think the music is a vehicle for something. The music isn't necessarily always the aim. I think, because music is a fundamental expression of the human psyche, that it is a vehicle for something fundamentally human. The music is almost one of the things, not the thing, necessarily, of the experience.</i> • <i>I'm always wanting to find a common goal amongst all the individuals, to make it a collective thing rather than having a lot of individuals all trying to be soloists. I don't think that works at all; I think that misses the point. So that's what I got out of playing with Fortune, which is that we were all working towards a common goal, still being able to explore individual ideas but to try and achieve a common understanding of a piece.</i>

Some of the musicians indicated strongly that they perceived a distinction between ensemble and solo music-making, as the following exchange shows:

Question: *How does playing in an ensemble differ from playing solo music?*

Answer: *Oh, it's vastly different, and vastly more enjoyable, from my point of view. I don't particularly like ... I like the solo repertoire, but I don't particularly like the solo experience. I much prefer music as a shared experience, and I prefer the collective enjoyment and the passing of ideas, and that to me is a lot more fulfilling. And it's a totally different ball game as far as exploring the music, and in solo stuff you can satisfy yourself with whatever you choose to think about it, regardless of how far off the mark you are, but I much prefer that collective experience.* Of course, this reinforces the need for investigation of the ensemble situation, rather than the automatic assumption that the previous research on the 'solo experience' applied *a priori*.

The Professional Entity

Research in other academic disciplines suggests that there is a strong relation between students' (and teachers'!) perception of work and their conceptions of their discipline and learning within that discipline. Reid (1997a) first articulated this relation in her work with musicians and their students, describing the Music Entity. Reid (1999) wrote that "*The identification of the Music Entity as an experience of the professional world that is related to teaching and learning suggests that the constitution of categories of description of phenomenon in future studies needs to be reconsidered. This reconsideration would reflect the relation of the group's experience of the professional world and the relation an awareness of this world may have with teaching and learning in associated disciplines.*"

The significance of the experienced world as expressed through the Music Entity is that conceptions of teaching and learning exist within a rich multi-dimensional framework. Further research in theology (Morgan, 1999), design (Davies and Reid, 2000) and environmental studies (Loughland, Reid and Petocz, 2002) lends support to the idea that the Music Entity is a manifestation of a "Professional Entity", as the same three qualitatively different ways of understanding the nature of work seem evident in a variety of fields.

If we look at these different disciplines and the Professional Entity, we can see that the descriptor is constant but the meaningfulness of each is defined by the discipline and is an overarching framework that relates students' and teachers' understanding of their subject and their perceptions of professional work in their area. The identification of the Professional Entity enables an interdisciplinary approach to the learning and teaching that is a preparation for professional work, in music or other areas.

Table 3: The Professional Entity in various fields

	Extrinsic Technical	Extrinsic Meaning	Intrinsic Meaning
Environment	environmental scientists focus on acquiring knowledge about specific ecosystems	environmental scientists focus on a recognition of what the environment can do for people	environmental scientists focus on the mutually sustaining relation between humans and the world environment
Theology	theologians memorise Biblical commands and custom	theologians discuss and search for the overall meaning of religious books	theologians integrate Biblical truth with their own interpretations to assist other members of their community
Statistics	statisticians see statistics as a collection of individual statistical techniques	statisticians examine and analyse a set of data to determine the meaning found therein	statisticians create and develop their understanding of the world using statistical evidence in the form of data
Design	designers use a 'palette' of spatial and visual techniques	designers look at the inherent meaning found in the created artefact	designers communicate personal meaning through a visual artefact
Music	musicians acquire a group of instrumental techniques and musical elements	musicians indicate that musical manuscript is full of historical and stylistic meaning that needs to be discovered and accurately reproduced	musicians see the instrument, the manuscript and the performance as a means of communicating their own story or feeling to an audience

Implications for Music Education

In previous studies, Reid (1997a and b, 2001) has already shown that there are strong relations between teachers' conceptions of their discipline and the way that they go about teaching. Importantly, she also showed that the way that teachers carry out their teaching, and the sort of learning environment that they set up in their classes, can encourage those students who identify with the lower, fragmented levels to engage with their learning at a higher level: however, this can also work the other way, if a teacher sets students tasks that are best carried out using the more fragmented conceptions of learning (Reid, 2000b). This highlights the crucial role of the teacher's conceptions in the learning process.

We often assume that teachers share an understanding of at least the subject material. The research by Reid (1997a and 1997b) on musicians' conceptions of teaching and learning music would suggest otherwise. Reid's research indicates that professional musicians who also teach have a wide range of ways that they understand music as part of a work environment. It shows how their experience becomes part of their teaching profile and their expectations for their students' learning. Not surprisingly, the musician/teacher's experience of work was expressed to their students through the activities that they worked on together.

One example of the use of these phenomenographic research outcomes was the development of the learning package *Creating Ensemble* (Blom *et al.*, 1998). This package was developed with the Music Entity in mind, and learning approaches were integrated to reflect the identified variation, whilst encouraging students to adopt the more integrated and expansive conceptions. The main objectives of *Creating Ensemble* were to provide students with an alternative way of learning how to develop and build ensemble skills, while learning about the technical requirements of the compositions being performed, at their own learning speed. The reasons for choice of repertoire, the rehearsal techniques, the discipline of accurate note reading, the discussion and analysis of the composer's score markings, and the social psychology of the ensemble were all an integral part of this multimedia music learning package. The package aimed to challenge ideas that students of music and performers might have about what music really is by presenting a variety of viewpoints about music and its performance through the comments of the performers and the composers. More details (and a brief demonstration) are given in Reid and Petocz (2001), or at the website address: <http://www.inhouse.com.au/2001/ensemble/ensemble.html>

Another example of the use of these research outcomes was in the preparation and recording of the audio CD *Frogs*. In this instance, some of the members of Fortune were well aware of the Music Entity. New members of the group (who had not been involved in *Creating Ensemble*) were interviewed about their experience of ensemble rehearsal and performance, and these interviews also showed evidence of the Music Entity. These two examples show how the findings of a research study can be used to develop learning materials, and to interpret experiences of music making.

The most important aspect of the phenomenographic research is the definition of the essential aspects of *variation* found within a group experiencing the same situation — the phenomenographic outcome space. Understanding the nature of this variation, and being aware that such variation exists within a group, is critical for the development of learning environments, learning materials and activities, for example, the development of coherent and inclusive practice in ensemble rehearsal. The analysis elucidates the process of negotiation between musicians in rehearsal and shows that the Music Entity or Professional Entity is apparent in ensemble as well as solo music. The results of the study have important pedagogical implications, enabling teachers to help students develop their conceptions of music. At the same time, the methodology can be a useful tool for researchers in music education.

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