Exploring the power of debriefing and reflective practice in music education:

an Action Research Project

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KEYWORDS

REFLECTION

ASSESSMENT

DIALOGUE

CRITICAL THOUGHT

CREATIVE ARTS

ACTION RESEARCH

ABSTRACT

In the growing divide that is, arguably, currently gripping society through a range of issues such as tribal politics, gender ideology and a series of global conflicts, reflecting on our experiences and holding meaningful dialogue is a dying, yet crucial, skill of the modern graduate. Whilst *viva voce*-style assessments have been a long-established tool throughout higher education, this action research project sought to build on the importance of these skills to help improve both the achievement and experience of my students' final project work. Aligned to recent literature, this research champions their use in assessment methodology within the creative arts to ensure graduates are empowered to cope with this ever-changing and ever-challenging world, by offering a framework for dialogue inspired by debrief methodology in use by the US Air Force.

INTRODUCTION

This action research project is an exploration into the use of critical dialogue with my final year music performance students. Robert Teschner's {2018) RAPTOR framework was designed to allow the successes and failures of Air Force missions to be comprehensively, consistently and critically understood.

TESCHNER'S 'RAPTOR' FRAMEWORK

R - Reconstruct what happened

A – Agree on the fundamental questions and focus points

P - Present the driving factors

T – Thoroughly agree on the root causes

O - Organise a plan to improve or maintain success

R - Rapidly improve

Figure 1

The RAPTOR framework offered by Teschner allowed me to explore critical reflection with my students, but it was not fully aligned to the needs of an educator. Therefore, I designed my own framework, inspired by RAPTOR and in the spirit of creating psychological safety {Edmonson, 2019) and making it acceptable to take risks {Gallo, 2023) for my students, called the AIRBAG framework. This offers educators a clear structure for integrating the approach explored in this research into their own practice.

THE 'AIRBAG' FRAMEWORK

A - Alignment, the conversation is fully aligned to any grading criteria.

I – Inquiry, the conversation should be rooted in curiosity and exploration.

R - Reflect, the student's role is one of reflective, critical practice.

B - Bargaining, the grades awarded should be a negotiated dialogue offering students the opportunity to challenge the tutor.

A – Aggregate, the final grade should be a combination of any work presented and the conversation itself.

G – Guidance, the student should leave the conversation knowing the next steps to improve. The tutor's role is to frame that guidance and ensure t is clear and actionable.

Figure 2

Like many students before me, I despised assessment throughout my secondary school years and never understood why so much importance was placed on it. In retrospect, I am immensely grateful to my time teaching in higher education, which has allowed me to offer my students more than just a number, marked behind a closed door or screen. It is these experiences, past and present, that have fuelled my passion to offer my students more from their assessments; to see them as they really are, a way to mark and celebrate progress and learning, not emphasise the gap yet to be achieved and assign their worth to a number.

In recent years, I have worked as an academic leader and have become committed to developing my leadership skills. I have spent much of my time engaging in a variety of research surrounding emerging leadership and business practices in numerous sectors. It was through one of my favourite podcasts, 'Coaching for Leaders' {www. coachingforleaders.com), that I first heard of Robert Teschner and his work on employing military debrief tactics within wider business practices in his book, *Debrief to Win*. With an emphasis on reflective practice, open and honest dialogue and accountability, Teschner's work ties directly into both my home institution's learning and teaching strategy and my own values as an educator and leader. Inspired by his work, I sought to implement some of the ideas that underpin his RAPTOR framework within the assessment methodology at my institution.

Each year, I look for new and innovative ways to align industry practices directly into assessment practice and ensure that assessment enhances both workplace and life skills {Helyer, 2004). In the creative industry, one of the most common methods of closing projects is critical discussion with stakeholders/supervisors. Alongside this goal and within this action research project, I also sought to answer these research questions:

1. How does engaging in reflective discussion enhance the assessment experience for students?
2. What benefits are there to utilising critical discussion within the creative arts and beyond?
3. Are there any disadvantages to employing negotiated assessment models?

This article will start by setting out the context in which this action research project took place, it will then move on to explain the methodology within action research itself and how it was adopted in this project. It will then describe the specifics of the intervention that was made, and finally, evaluate the outcomes drawing meaningful conclusions from the results.

CONTEXT

This project took place at a UK higher education private provider, The Institute of Contemporary Music Performance {ICMP) within the Bachelor of Music {BMus) {Hons) Popular Music Performance programme. The module in question was the Professional Identity core module within the final year of the programme. The programme aims to develop students' instrumental technique, performance craft and wider professional practice to offer varied and sustainable employment opportunities within the music industry. Students study a primary discipline {bass, guitar, drums, vocals or keyboards) but also engage in a wide range of cross-disciplinary areas such as composition, arrangement, education, business practices, marketing and promotion. This module is the students' final project that, ideally, models their plans for their future careers upon graduation. As the only currently delivering tutor, I have worked with all my students on their projects and both the students and I have previously found it disappointing that there is not a more meaningful way to capture the fantastic work that is produced on this module than just marking and providing text feedback. The reality of working in the modern creative industry is that work is constantly negotiated through collaboration, reflection and dialogue, which paves the way for creating the future of the industry {Schneider, 2023). Traditionally, I mark this work remotely by accessing any performance footage and a business plan, release the feedback and then, very likely, not see them for 4-6 months until graduation. It feels like a real missed opportunity that there is not a more significant moment of academic closure to the programme other than some of the basic social events, considering the work the students have put in over the past 30 weeks on the

module, not to mention the three years they have spent on the programme!

This research also ties into my ongoing professional practice and leadership focus relating to embedding learning partnership and community across my programme, but particularly in a student's final year of study. I have recently become a Senior Fellow in the Higher Education Academy, and my two case studies were directly related to these positions and values, my reflections on the impact they have had on student satisfaction, and the impact on my teaching team. Reflection is, for me, the single most important part of any learning journey. I truly don't believe there is any point in doing anything in life if you do not reflect upon and evaluate your choices and actions. Adaptability has, arguably, been the human race's greatest achievement and ultimately made us the dominant species on the planet. Reflection practices have been a long-standing staple within educational practice {Tight {2023) and commonly form the backbone of most assessment methodology at Levels 5 and 6. Many educators use the long-established frameworks of Gibbs and his 'Reflective Cycle' and Brookfield's 'Four Lenses' to help create 'far ranging insight into their teaching practice' {Study Prism). One viewpoint that has resonated with me is the work of Rogers {2001) and his analysis of the approaches that reflection can take. He identified seven different approaches to reflection. However, he found that there were several common elements and that reflective practice 'requires active engagement on the part of the individual.and results in integration of the new understanding into one's experience'. This aligns with Teschner's views on the importance of person engagement within the RAPTOR debrief model and highlights how it can be adopted by 'every member of the team from senior leaders and managers [...] to lower-level workers' {Teschner, 2018) This culture of democratising the process ensuring all stakeholders are active participants is a crucial element of project-based work in the creative sector.

ACTION RESEARCH

Before explaining the intervention itself, it is important to understand the context and framework in which this project took place. I share the view of Cierpiatowska {2023) who believes that action research is a 'valuable way of bringing about reflective change in the teaching-learning process' and that through action research, we can shift our roles as teachers to being seen more as facilitators who are responsible for 'creating learning conditions for a diverse group of students'. My action research will also be framed through a 'teacher inquiry' lens shared by Mertler {2021) where research is applied to 'educational problems of practice, carried out by educational practitioners'. I am fully aligned to Mertler's view that the benefit of this type of inquiry is that the research is carried out by 'insiders' who are directly involved in the problem that is being studied.

The research adopted the Action Learning Cycle framework of Tripp {1995) which is a simple but highly effective model that helps illustrate the process involved in the execution of research steps. The framework allowed me to stay focussed on the original intention of the research by seeing the process broken down into four clear foci through which I aligned my inquiry.

As previously mentioned, I believe that assessment is a critical step in the learning process, but more than that, it has historically been viewed {particularly at primary and secondary level) as a deeply secretive and 'wizard behind the curtain' process in which the judgement is passed down by a higher authority and entire lives can be changed on the results of tests that, more often than not, focus on regurgitating facts and figures to specific questions, 'neglecting the development of essential skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity' {Usman, 2023).

INTERVENTION

The intervention for the project was to create a structured dialogue with the students that allowed them to reflect on their work and look to seek improvements for the future. Whilst this is common assessment practice throughout higher education, this research sought to contextualise these conversations into repeatable practices that could be shared within the institution by building an approach inspired by Teschner's RAPTOR framework.

TRIPP'S (1995) ACTION LEARNING CYCLE

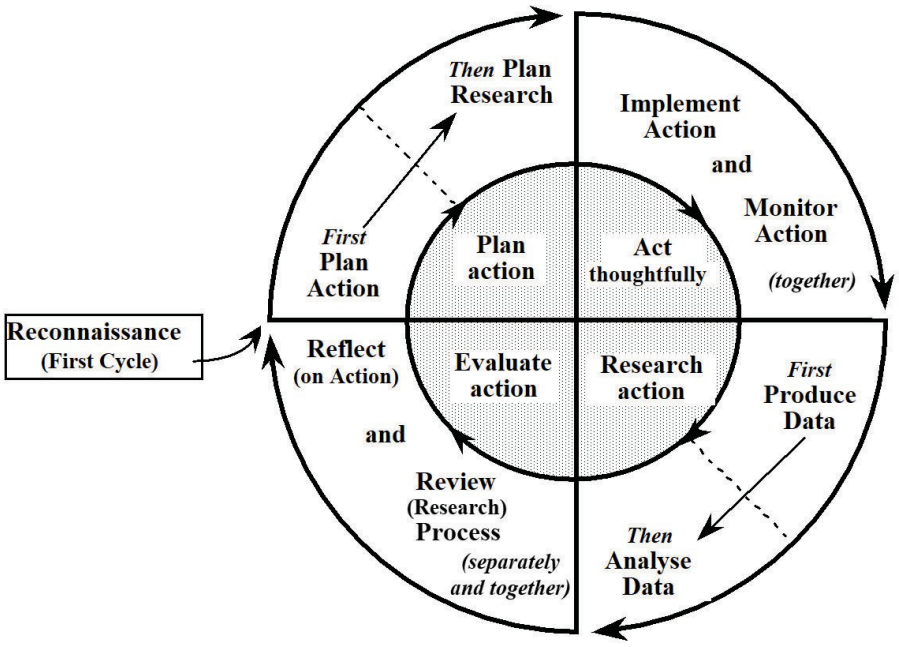

Figure 3

This framework creates a strong focus on using facts and definitive data points to explore the reasons for the success or failure of a mission and how, crucially, this can be repeated or avoided in the future. I wanted to bring this practice to my students as creatives tend to focus more on the emotional side rather than the data provided at the end of a project or performance. I wanted to explore the idea of having both, and the advantages of being able to reframe the perception of failure to help them with future work in their careers.

The conversation was scheduled to be 30-45 minutes immediately after watching their performances back together. The conversations would be recorded for the purposes of moderation and offering a more personal style of feedback. Rather than providing any written feedback, I wanted the conversation to be the feedback itself, so students could hear their own responses and mine together in a true dialogue that contained all the nuances that would be present in any other conversation. Based on the RAPTOR framework, I decided on the following questions as prompts to seek to offer the students the chance to demonstrate their criticality:

R – How well do you think you achieved the goals you set out?

A – What were the key elements that defined success or failure in your eyes?

P – What were your processes, attitude or approaches throughout the project?

T – What prevented you from achieving your goals fully? or What do you feel were the key elements that impacted the success of the project?

O - What have you learned about yourself through this project?

R – What steps will you take to improve this in the future? What resources do you need to achieve these improvements?

METHODOLOGY/DATA COLLECTION

My time in the creative industry has shown me that understanding a problem can only be achieved by reflective practice commonly rooted in dialogue, criticality, accountability and support to initiate improvements. I will be focussed on empirical research in the form of questionnaires, as a way of measuring the impact my intervention had. My sample for this research was 37 students and my process was broken down as follows:

1. Students asked to fill in questionnaire 'Assessment & Me Part 1' related to previous assessment experiences, empowerment and engagement.
2. Students continue to work on their assessment and hand in work.
3. Students attend on-hour *viva.*
4. Upon completing the *viva*, students asked to fill in questionnaire 'Assessment & Me Part 2' related to the assessment experience.
5. Analysis of the responses between the two questionnaires to see what impact the *viva*/debrief model has had on the student's experience of the assessment and module.
6. Reflections and recommendations based on the analysis.

To increase the validity of the research, I applied the principles of triangulation by looking at three specific data sets: the grades awarded, the qualitative and quantitative responses from my questionnaire and the audio recordings of the conversations themselves. This will allow for further scrutiny and to 'illustrate different aspects of the same question or problem' {Waters-Adams, 2006). Below is an example of this triangulation in action:

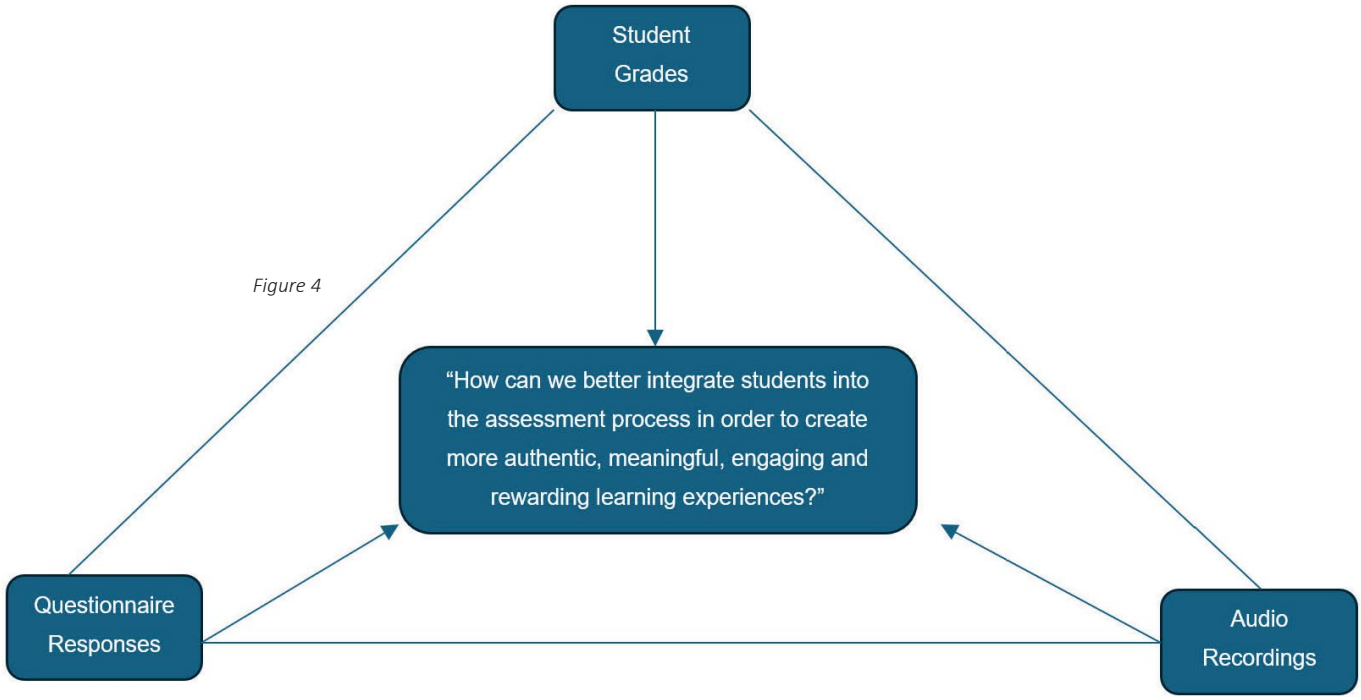

Figure 4

I chose to focus on questionnaires as it offered the chance to collect both qualitative and quantitative data sets and adopt a 'mixed method approach in data collection and analysis' {Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). As I was primarily concerned with my students' feelings and how this assessment engaged them, questionnaires that involve a combination of longer and shorter form answers felt the most appropriate and authentic. Therefore, I split questions into two parts {see right).

In my opinion, Part 2, Q2 was going to be one of the most important questions to really understand the impact this intervention had and how I might find answers to my research questions. In recent years, I have applied a range of different coaching approaches to my teaching and leadership practice. The one that has easily had the greatest impact is the Michael Bungay Stanier {2016) 'learning question' from *The Coaching Habit*. By getting students to define what has been most important to them, I have been able to uncover issues, revelations and innovations that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

PART 1 - PRE VIVA/DEBRIEF QUESTIONNAIRE 'ASSESSMENT & ME'

How would you rate your experiences with assessments and feedback in your educational life so far? {1-5 rating)

1. What has been the most meaningful educational assessment you have experienced and why? {long form answer)
2. How would you rate the following statements? {Likert scale)

	Not at all	To some extent	Mostly	Nearly always
I have felt empowered and engaged during my assessments	○	○	○	○
I have felt that the grades and feedback I received were fair and aligned to what I expected to get.	○	○	○	○
Assessments have felt an integral part of my learning journey	○	○	○	○

3. What would you change about your assessments to make them more engaging and meaningful to you? {long form answer).

PART 2 - POST VIVA/DEBRIEF QUESTIONNAIRE 'ASSESSMENT & ME'

1. How would you rate today's assessment and the feedback process? {1-5 rating)
2. What has been most meaningful about today's assessment practices and why? {long form answer)
3. How would you rate the following statements in relation to today's assessment practices? {Likert scale)

	Not at all	To some extent	Mostly	Nearly always
I have felt empowered and engaged during my assessments	○	○	○	○
I have felt that the grades and feedback I received were fair and aligned to what I expected to get.	○	○	○	○
Assessments have felt an integral part of my learning journey	○	○	○	○

4. What would you change about this assessment to make it more engaging and meaningful to you? {long form answer)
5. Do you think we should employ more of this type of assessment practice in the BMus programme in the future? If so, where, and why? {long form answer.)

RESULTS/EVALUATION

The results of the research are separated into two sections that represent the separate questionnaires that I presented to my students. The focus of the first questionnaire was to ascertain the students' current views on assessment and its relationship to their learning. The second was to measure the impact of my intervention and how their relationship to assessment might have changed.

PART 1

The sample rate for this first round was 65%, which was encouraging as this was the first time these sorts of questions had been posed to the students on the programme. Only 60% of students found assessments to be a meaningful part of their educational journey and only 50% of students felt that they were empowered and engaged by their previous assessments, which added further weight to my own experiences of education. Considering the emphasis that we as educators place on assessment, it potentially reveals a worrying gap between our perception and that of our students. There was a strong emphasis on assessments that focussed on distance travelled, goal setting and reflection methodologies being the most meaningful and that more personalised feedback would help improve their learning experiences.

PART 2

Even though students were encouraged to complete the questionnaire immediately after the debrief conversation, the sample rate was lower for the second round of questions, at around 50%. However, the results showed an overwhelmingly positive experience with the intervention practices experiencing a 97% satisfaction rating and all students agreeing that the debrief model allowed them to feel empowered and engaged within the assessment process. In recent years, I have employed a range of different coaching approaches to my teaching and leadership practice. One of the practices I employed aligned to the 'R – Reconstruct' element of the RAPTOR methodology, was to get the students to grade themselves based on the work they had produced before we had the debrief conversation. I wanted them to bring their own 'truth' to their work and then explore that through the debrief model. It was fascinating to see how many students undervalued their work initially and, through the debrief conversation, improved their grade through the evidence and depth of criticality even when the work was of a very high quality to begin with. It was extremely encouraging to then see that all participating students agreed that the grades and feedback received in the assessment were fair. The most meaningful takeaways from the conversations were cited as the safety, validation, personal expression and openness that the debrief model afforded them. This notion of creating a 'safe space' within education is crucial to maintaining an environment where students can honestly express their views {Holley and Steiner, 2005). In the world of ever more demanding metrics and regulatory pressures within education, alongside financial and structural support, these practices could help address these challenges and help drive the crucial need to improve both student engagement and satisfaction {Cooper, 2024). It was then very encouraging to see all students agree that these kinds of assessment practices should be employed across all other modules on the programme. Therefore, pursuing and implementing more of this type of assessment/feedback methodology can only have a positive impact in helping to support, empower and, crucially, retain more students.

CONCLUSION

The intervention taught me that we need to meet our students head-on and demystify assessment practices. In our creative industry, work and projects are a dialogue, an iterative process that requires a learning partnership and accountability on both sides. By employing more of this practice, we offer a more authentic experience and better prepare our students for the working world. I now know that this simple intervention has had a profound impact on my students' experience of their final year of study. The conversations I had with them were real, raw and authentic. Had I have kept the same approach I previously used, I would have missed out on these important moments. I also can see the power of employing coaching practice to *viva voce*-style conversations. I was able to delve deeper, to respond in real time to their insights and offer them psychological safety to tackle their development needs head on and open the door to true transformative learning. If this isn't what our sector is about, then I don't see a place in it. This was personified by one comment from a student surrounding the value this type of assessment practice had on them, stating:

> *'It is much more useful, and people cannot get away from the feedback. As some of us don't even read it because of the stress.'*

This is the heart of the issue; our students are so stressed by their assessments that some are not even reading the feedback for fear of what it might say. How can we help them learn if they don't feel in a position to hear the feedback? I don't have all the answers to this, but I now believe that this intervention has highlighted that we can do more and, quite frankly, we can do better.

I am now committed to bringing this practice into our institution and continuing to explore more ways to make assessment practices more authentic, meaningful and engaging. As I believe that 'assessment does not stand outside teaching and learning but stands in dynamic interaction with it' {Gipps, 1994). ■

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