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Learning Posts: A Pedagogical Experiment
with Undergraduate Music Education Majors

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Abstract

This article describes the effects of a year-long reflective writing assignment – weekly Learning Posts – designed for students in an undergraduate music education course. I created this assignment to cause students to regularly interrogate the teaching and learning they experience in their own daily lives. This study's research question emerged from critical reflection at the intersection of practice and theory. Does a weekly requirement to describe and interpret a personal learning experience encourage, over time, instances of *significant learning* (Fink, 2003). My data sources consist of regular entries in my teaching journal monitoring the assignment and post-course interviews conducted with four students. I identify the positive potential of Learning Posts, improvements to enhance their effectiveness and broader issues concerning the reflective writing we assign music education students. The concept of *self-authorship* confirms the importance of reflective writing for young adults and the notion of *threshold concepts* contributes a potential framing device.

Introduction

Music education students participate in a wide variety of courses, studio lessons and ensemble rehearsals while they are simultaneously being introduced to the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of music teaching. I believe that their daily regimen of classes and rehearsals can serve as a personal laboratory for interrogating teaching and learning and for making sense of the theories and frameworks they encounter in their music education courses.

I initiated a pedagogical tool, *Learning Posts*, to encourage this interrogation. In this article I describe the process of practitioner research I used to analyze its effect. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) assert that when one "intentionally work[s] the dialectic of inquiry and practice a hybrid genre of research emerges that braids the strands of empirical and conceptual scholarship and blurs the demarcation between research and teaching" (p. 101). This blurring of teaching and research results in a non-traditional research process: I began the study with a theoretical framework in place, but the initial data analysis led me to explore new theoretical ideas and to seek new data sources. This research process is an on-going conversation among data, interpretative frameworks and my self-reflexivity as instructor/researcher.

I describe the Learning Posts project and the theoretical framework that anchored both the project and the entire course in which the project was situated. I then explain my research process – the research question, the data sources, the methodology and the analysis. This process led to further theoretical explorations on undergraduate student learning, from which two particular concepts – self-authoring and threshold concepts – emerged as germane to my inquiry. Finally I explore implications for practice.

The Learning Posts Project

I created the *Learning Posts* assignment for students in a two-semester course, Elementary Music Education, required for music education students in their third or fourth year of a five-year B. Mus Ed. degree program. I introduced the assignment to a class (N=14) in which students (nine females and five males) ranged in age from 20 to 27. All students identified as Canadian of European heritage.

I explained a Learning Post as a short, narrative description and analysis of a personal learning episode experienced in a class or studio lesson or rehearsal. Students were required to email to me a Learning Post by Sunday of each week during the course (two 13-week semesters). I responded to each electronic communication as soon as I read it – this immediate feedback was intended to affirm the student's reflection and hopefully extend his/her thinking with questions ("*have you also thought about . . ?*" "*what might happen if . . . ?*" . . .). Students were not required to overtly answer my questions. At the end of each

semester students were asked to revisit their Posts (collected in their course portfolio) and to write a summative reflection, connecting theories about learning and teaching from the course to help make meaning from their weekly reflections on their learning.

Significant Learning

I situate the Learning Posts within a specific conceptual framework, Fink's (2003) *Taxonomy of Significant Learning*, a sophisticated tool for course design and assessment practices. Fink argues that for learning to be significant it must result in "some kind of lasting change that is important in terms of the learner's life" (p. 30). Fink explicates six synergistic categories that create significant learning. The Learning Posts project potentially addresses all six of Fink's learning categories: *foundational knowledge* (understanding key information and ideas), *application* (learning to engage in a new kind of action/ new way of thinking), the *human dimension* (discovering the personal and social implications of one's learning), *caring* (developing new interests and values), *integratio*n (understanding the connections among different things) and *learning how to learn* (learning about the process of learning itself). I designed a course rubric that suggested how various assignments might be used to demonstrate growth in each of the six categories. The Learning Posts were listed as potential sources for demonstrating growth in *integration* and *learning how to learn* in particular, and so I expand on those two dimensions of Fink's taxonomy.

Integration

The literature on integrative learning is wide-ranging. Much of it deals with on-line (connected) learning and some of it concerns large-scale initiatives such as cross-disciplinary courses, interdisciplinary programs, service learning and capstone experiences (Huber et al., 2007; Youatt & Wilcox, 2008) or collaborative, inquiry-based or problem-based learning (Kuh, 2008; Lee & Ash, 2010). My specific notion of *integration* has two aspects. The first concerns disciplinary knowledge. The relationships among students' courses in music theory and analysis, music history, music education, performance and ensembles offer rich (and seemingly obvious) opportunities for integrating learning. The second aspect of integration involves linking theory with practice and academic with personal. I intend that the weekly Learning Posts will encourage students to make aspects of their own learning explicit and help them to embrace the complexity of the teaching/learning relationship. Research literature devoted to higher learning consistently urges a more holistic approach in which "awareness of subject is more deeply aligned with self-awareness, and self is connected outwards to awareness of others and the world" (Booth, McLean & Walker, 2009, p. 930).

Learning How to Learn

Fink confirms the complexity and confusion that characterizes the huge literature addressing *learning how to learn* and distils three sets of meanings (2003, p. 50).

1. *learning how to be a better student.* The notions of self-regulated learner and of deep learning are germane, and the importance of developing students' underlying concept of knowledge-making is central.
2. *inquiring and constructing knowledge in specific ways.* The idea here is that one must learn how to ask and answer discipline-specific questions in order to understand how new knowledge links to existing knowledge.
3. *learning how to be a self-directing learner.* The key concept is that of using *critical reflection* in order to consider multiple ways of understanding the meaning of each learning experience.

More succinctly, *metalearning* (Jackson, 2004) involves taking control of one's own learning, of being self-aware and intentional as a learner. This is central to my goals for the Leaning Posts.

Reflection

The need for reflection is implicit for each of Fink's six categories of *Significant Learning*. He notes that without reflection students may have learned but "have not made that learning fully meaningful to themselves" (p.110). Reflective practice is among the knowledges, skills and dispositions considered essential for effective teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Shulman, 2004; Turner-Bisset, 2001). Most research studies devoted to preservice teacher reflection examine reflective writing and dialogue in the context of teaching experiences, from micro-teaching with peers to teaching practica in classrooms (e.g. Chaffin & Manfredo, 2010; Conway, 2003; Davis, 2006; Lee, 2005; Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007, Stegman, 2007; Watts & Lawson, 2008).

I believe in the importance of helping preservice music education students to develop the habit of reflective practice. The often superficial reflective writing that resulted from my previous requirements of students (following peer teaching experiences or classroom discussions, for example) prompted me to create this new, more systematic reflective writing assignment. My intention with the Learning Posts is to initiate reflective practice a step earlier in their teacher preparation journey, focusing students first on their current experiences as learners.

Rodgers (2002) discusses Dewey's understanding of the function of reflection as one of meaning making from experiences. "A quality of being present to the nature of the

experience and an openness to its potential meanings" (p. 850) is requisite for reflective thinking. Mezirow (2000) confirms the importance of reflection for *learning to think like an adult* and he uses *critical reflection* to describe the work of uncovering one's underlying assumptions and recognizing the ways in which these assumptions influence or limit understanding.

I want the weekly Learning Posts to encourage the kind of reflective thinking that Dewey and Mezirow envision. I hope the assignment will lead students to scrutinize the over-familiar world of school: to probe their personal beliefs about teaching and learning, to analyze their on-going experiences as (music) learners, to gain awareness of education as complex and messy and to articulate concrete actions to improve their learning.

Practitioner Inquiry

I engage in practitioner research to investigate the effects of my pedagogical experiment. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) describe *practitioner research* as an umbrella term encompassing such research genres as self-study, teacher research, action research, and scholarship of teaching. My inquiry is a self -study: I examine a specific aspect of my teaching practice with the intent of improving it. Making public this critical examination of practice creates the possibility that I make a modest contribution to practitioner knowledge in teacher education.

Research Question

When one's professional practice is the focus of study the research questions "emanate from neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the intersection of the two" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, p. 42). In this instance I had embarked on a small pedagogical experiment buttressed by a strong theoretical framework. My research question – does a weekly requirement to critically reflect upon a personal learning experience encourage instances of *significant learning* (Fink, 2003), particularly in the areas of integrating learning and learning how to learn – stemmed from my ongoing analysis of my teaching practice.

Data Sources

Initially I thought my frequent jottings in my teaching journal, recording my impressions of reading and responding to 14 weekly Posts, would constitute the data for probing the effectiveness of the Learning Posts initiative. After thirteen weeks of reading and replying to the Posts and to the first semester's summative reflections I confronted the possibility that my expectations were unclear or naive, or both: some students seemed unable or unwilling to query their own learning deeply or to search for connections between their learning

experiences and the theories and questions about teaching/learning that anchor their music education courses. To probe this reluctance I began to explore the theoretical literature on undergraduate learning. I also applied for and received ethical approval to interview several students from the course following marks' submission at the conclusion of second semester.

Methodology and Data Analysis

Practitioner research is freighted with ethical concerns. In terms of the current study, I did not seek approval to ask students' permission to use the weekly Posts in my study. I refer only to my experience of the Posts as an instructor, of how, taken collectively, the Posts exposed assumptions and blind spots in my pedagogical thinking. This study does not examine the content of individual Posts, nor does it summarize or quantify their contents in any way. As a result I believe I am conducting ethical practice, seeking to learn from a pedagogical experiment while protecting the intellectual property of students.

After the course ended I read and re-read the Posts, organized in weekly sets of 14, to help confirm or contradict the on-going observations I had been making in my teaching journal. I also re-read the summative reflections from the end of each semester, in which students were asked to make connections between the contents of various Posts and a) the integration of their musical learning and b) theories about learning and teaching. From this analysis I identified issues (enumerated below) that seemed to me to impede deep reflection and that I hoped my interview participants would help elucidate. These issues range from mundane concerns such as length and style to substantive questions about perceived usefulness. I also reviewed over 50 published studies devoted to reflective practices in undergraduate education and preservice teacher education. This literature provided instances of confirmation of my own observations and helpful ideas for improving my practice. I embed these contributions from the literature review in the following discussion.

Findings from Post-course Student Interviews

The four students I interviewed chose the pseudonyms Lily, Leslie, Marlene and Lacey. They indicated their understanding of the informed consent process, read and approved the transcript of their own interviews and were thoughtful, engaging participants. I explained that I sought their frank opinions on an aspect of my professional practice in order to improve that practice.

Organizational Details

Length. In terms of the expected length of each Post I had not provided a minimum requirement. Posts ranged from about 200 to over 3000 words. In the next iteration of the assignment I will specify a minimum length of 500 words.

> **Lily**: You often advised me to "say more" in your responses to my Posts. "Saying more" was so difficult for me. I had to really force myself to learn to write more: to not just repeat myself, but to actually dig deeper.

Style. First-person, conversational writing is, of course, the norm for reflective writing. I was amazed to learn that writing informally in an academic context was unfamiliar, even uncomfortable, for some students.

> **Lily**: I just didn't know *how* to write a Learning Post because I've never been asked to do informal writing before, not in university, and actually, not in high school either. I just had zero experience with it.

> **Marlene:** At first I felt reserved with the Posts. I wondered "how much should I say?", "how much could be personal, or should it only be academic?" I had never done informal writing before. My schooling, K-12 was so formal – clear cut-off lines as to what was proper and what you needed to do to please the teacher.

Pavlovich (2007) notes that students need to "find a new voice" (p. 289) for engaging in reflective assignments. Lily and Marlene confirm this claim.

Open-ended content. I intended that when a memorable learning experience or teaching/learning interaction happened the student would jot it down or make a mental note and later dash off an email describing the occurrence and pondering its significance. I sought vivid snapshots of personal learning, followed by reflective meaning-making.

> **Marlene**: At first the lack of specific questions to answer was scary – I had no idea what you wanted. So, initially I self-censored, but after awhile I realized you really did want my opinion! And I was starting to recognize how my academic and my personal life are so intertwined. I knew I was having important learning experiences outside of classes and I wanted to explore that, so for me the unstructured format turned out to be great.

> **Lacey:** The Posts felt like writing anecdotes for an audience. I saw them as stories, like emailing stories to a friend.

Modeling and *feedback*. I did not provide students with sample Posts because I wanted to downplay any "right-answer" mind-set or evaluative emphasis. My four interviewees were divided on this issue.

> **Leslie**: I would like to have read a couple of sample Posts, because at the beginning I was trying to guess what you wanted. I wondered what other people were writing and if I was close.

> **Marlene:** If you had written a Post as a model then I would have thought "well, that's how I should write for the entire time". So for me it was better to have to figure it out on my own.

Spalding and Wilson (2002) offer three types of written feedback in response to students' weekly journals: 1) positive comments, 2) questions to stimulate elaboration or further thought and 3) statements indicating personal connections to the content. Professor comments such as "I struggle with this idea too" were viewed as very significant by some of their participants.

I responded to each emailed Post the day I received it and my feedback mirrored the three types that Spalding and Wilson describe. I tried to extend each writer's thinking with a question or two. Rarely were these questions explicitly engaged, perhaps because I had not specifically required it and perhaps because my emailed replies were not saved and appended to the original Posts. As a result, when students re-read the semester's worth of Posts they did not have my weekly follow-up comments. This is an organizational detail I will ameliorate in the next iteration of the assignment.

> **Marlene:** You often posed questions to my Posts but I didn't realize that I could converse with you! There is something so impersonal about writing on-line, you know, so I couldn't tell if you really wanted a response. Saying this now, I don't know why I didn't just ask you!

Marlene clearly considered the Posts as separate from our class discourse. Indeed, after introducing the assignment with a fervor that was surely palpable, I rarely referred to it again because our class time was so full and because I idealistically believed that my enthusiasm and my weekly responses would encourage and sustain students' buy-in.

Several instances of substantive conversation with multiple exchanges did occur as a result of the Posts. Leslie, for example, wrote in one Post that she thought most in-person classes in university were unnecessary. She was taking an on-line course with videoed lectures that she felt was wonderfully efficient. I responded with a vigorous argument in defense of face-to-face classes, Leslie wrote a lengthy point-by-point reply, I countered and she rejoined. I found this electronic conversation lively and stimulating.

> **Leslie:** Oh, that was really something! It felt like I was talking with a sibling or a friend – I felt I could write without offending you. **JC:** How did you know I wouldn't be offended? **Leslie:** Because you argued back! I learned a lot from that argument – you really challenged me, and I would never have had the nerve to have that conversation in person. When you're face-to-face there is the potential for confrontation, but electronically it felt like some of the risk was removed.

Evaluating

Some researchers (e.g. Hatton & Smith, 1995; Spalding & Wilson, 2002; Pavlovich, 2007) address the dilemma of grading reflective work. Does evaluating student reflection rob it of its potential power? Or, do we signal to students that reflective writing is less important if we don't grade it? My own approach was to not grade the weekly Learning Posts. The end-of-semester portfolio required students to produce evidence of learning in six dimensions, and the experience of writing the Posts and reflecting on their cumulative meaning was one required piece of evidence.

I asked my interviewees whether they would have liked the Posts to be graded.

> **Marlene:** No, getting a mark on a Post would just make me re-evaluate what I said and then try to give you what I think you want – that teacher-pleasing thing. It was easier to write the Posts because I wasn't worried about how they would be evaluated. **JC:** Did it feel like I was tricking you by evaluating the final reflection on the term's worth of Posts? **Marlene**: No, I took it that you were evaluating our growth.

> **Leslie:** I liked that the Posts weren't marked. I didn't see them as less important, but they were less stressful to write. And you did give us pointers in your replies. The "no marks" thing is also a deterrent to lying.

Spalding and Wilson (2002, p. 1402) define growth in reflective writing as

1. the increasing ability to distinguish between narration and reflection
2. the increasing ability to write all four types of reflections (*reflection in/on action*, *personalistic, deliberative* and *critical*.[1]

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[1] Spalding and Wilson's (2002) four categories (developed by Valli, 1997) are 1) reflection in/on action, which focuses on pedagogical activity in context; 2) deliberative reflection, which involves considering competing

3. the increasing ability to link course reading and discussion to observation and experience

I find this description helpful for clarifying and refining my expectations of students' reflective writing and will share it with students in the next iteration of Learning Posts.

Indications of Usefulness

I asked each interviewee her opinion on the usefulness of the weekly Posts.

Lacey: I found the weekly Posts cathartic in a way. Because they were short and informal I didn't feel obligated to make things up. They did cause me to be more critical of myself as a learner and more aware of professors' different teaching techniques and of what worked and didn't work for me. The way I learn is to write down what sticks out, so I explore an idea in my own words and that makes me think about it more. So the Posts were valuable.

Leslie: I definitely felt that I got better at writing the Posts. At first it was so hard to find something to write about, but gradually I became more aware of thinking about my own learning. Once I got into the habit of keeping the Learning Post in mind throughout the week it became easier – I had to be thinking about it while the experience was happening.

Marlene: No one ever asked me how I felt about teaching and learning before. I got really good feedback from you for thinking for myself and that was a big deal for me.

End-of-Semester Analysis

While it is impossible to discount teacher pleasing, over half of the students in the course articulated, in their summative reflections, examples of growth in metalearning and in appreciation for the complexity of teaching/learning relationships. I asked the interviewees their opinions about the summative reflection.

Marlene: Going back and re-reading the Posts – in some of them it was "Wow, I can't believe I was worried about *that!*" It was amazing how much personal growth I could see. With some Posts I had new information and new experiences so I could explore things further. . . In my experience school has always been academic, not personal. Like sex education for example: they

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viewpoints, 3) personalistic reflection, which features a narrative or developmental approach to teaching, and 4) critical reflection, which considers the social and political implications of teaching and schooling.

gave us the facts but they never told us the emotional effects, the personal effects. It's taboo to talk about the emotional, it seems. So when I thought "teacher" I kind of mentally displaced myself from students: I just thought that was the way it was: provide the information and it's up to the student to figure it out. If I hadn't had to reflect on things I wouldn't have stopped to consider how I actually *felt* about teaching or to formulate my own opinions.

Lily: Because a Learning Post, or any reflective writing, is not concrete it just seems like it's – um, "light", like it's not important. But at the very end I realized it *was* important. Where I really learned from the Posts was when I put my Portfolio together – that's when I really asked myself "what did I learn?" and "how did I learn?" That was the day I remember clicking with reflective writing!

I required students to consider instances of integration of learning as part of their final course portfolio. I wanted students to explore connections among their studio professor's pedagogy, their learning in techniques courses, their participation in ensembles, their acquisition of new music knowledge and insights from various courses, their exposure to learning theories and their experiences with peer teaching and with designing music learning opportunities. My interviewees shared their views on integrated learning.

Marlene: Oh, I've definitely been seeing each music course as separate. I'm so focused on getting the work done and getting the mark that I'm not stopping to think how something from another course connects. I'm only starting to realize that I haven't been clueing-in. Also, I don't think we're told to listen a lot, to *really* listen, as weird as that sounds in a music program: I really woke up to genuinely listening this year.

Leslie: Well, I don't think I really understood what you meant by *integrated leaning*. But I realized that I was connecting a lot of things from my music courses when I wrote Posts about teaching my private students. I understood a lot of concepts better once I experienced them myself with a student, so I guess I *was* integrating!

Lacey: I think of integrating as learning these different skills and theories and concepts and making your own web of them and then using it in your everyday life. Like Dalcroze: we learned about his ideas and experienced some of his movement games and since then I've paid much more attention to the physical side of performing – so I've integrated that knowledge.

Looking for Epiphanies

I was surprised by repeated references in the weekly Posts to epiphanies, specifically to not having them. Many students had the idea that I was expecting enormous, life-changing

discoveries, and some version of "nothing really happened this week" was a frequent Post opener. Brookfield (1995) confirms this tendency for students to view logs or journals as "mandated confessionals" (p. 13), intuiting that the professor is expecting transformative insights. I emphasized that the goal was to interrogate every-day learning occurrences, but this notion of momentous experience persisted.

> **Lily:** I was always looking for the big ideas and not paying attention to the little things.

> **Marlene:** Sometimes it was hard to think of what to write because I hadn't had an *a-ha* moment that week. **JC:** Why were you waiting for those *big* moments, do you think? **Marlene:** Maybe we just don't focus on little things. People don't pay attention, we don't open ourselves up. I gradually realized that small accomplishments *were* important because they were moving me forward.

> **Leslie:** At the beginning of term I thought you were looking for big epiphanies but I soon realized that I couldn't come up with them every week and it would be crazy to expect that I could.

Doing School [2]

Embedded in the interview transcripts are comments like *I wasn't sure what you wanted* or *sometimes you're forced to lie* – phrases that hint at performing the rituals of schooling.

> **Lily:** Sometimes a post would be really beneficial to me but other times it would be complete fluff.

> **JC:** I thought there would always be compelling things to write about because you are in learning situations – for hours each day – that are either working or not working. **Lily:** Yes, but we've been students for so long that we just do it without thinking about it.

> **Marlene:** We are passive about our learning, I think. It's always "Oh, I've got all this work to do" – we associate "work" as not enjoyable, as labor-intensive. We're so caught up with getting things done that we don't even think about what we learn or how we learn. And sometimes I'd have an experience and not clue in that I was having a learning experience – maybe it's the mindset we put

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[2] Pope's participants in her ethnographic study of five high school students coin the term "doing school" Pope, D. (2001). *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press.

ourselves into. School, before university, was black and white. We still think that way – perhaps we're afraid of the grey areas!

There is such irony in these future music teachers' honest admissions of playing the game of school. My extended electronic conversations with Leslie brought this theme to the surface. One of her arguments in favor of on-line courses was that they reduce inefficiency caused by student game-playing. In our interview I asked Leslie to revisit this idea.

> **Leslie:** Well, often students lie or over-exaggerate their opinions in class because they want to appear interested or motivated. I've witnessed people trying really hard to sound interested and then in private I hear them admit the opposite. They almost turn into someone else in order to get the Prof to like them more. **JC:** Hmmm – very tricky for a teacher to address. Do you have any thoughts on dishonesty in reflective writing? **Leslie:** I think when we're asked to reflect on our learning it is really easy to fall back and make something up and make it sound more impressive than it really is or that we are more into it than we really are.

Perhaps we overuse the term *reflection*, applying it when we assign students to examine their beliefs about teaching, evaluate their micro-teaching, critique their field observations and teaching experiences, deconstruct professional readings, interrogate ethical dilemmas of practice and interpret and integrate their course work. If we generalize all of this work as "reflection" it is understandable that some students see it as "overkill", as Lacey suggests below. This fatigue can cause students to gloss all reflective writing assignments as undifferentiated "tell me how you feel" exercises and to be cynical and dismissive.

> **Lacey:** The thing about reflective writing is the overkill. When you have it assigned in two or three different courses it can feel like you're repeating yourself or that you're writing nonsense. **JC:** Can you think of any solutions? **Lacey:** Well, I'd say make reflective writing specific to the course content. If you're asked to write about your personal growth you are sometimes forced to lie. But if it's more task-based, you know, reflecting on a specific experience, that's helpful. I liked writing up anecdotes and critiquing what I learned from them, and I liked that they were informal and personal. People can say anything in reflective writing assignments, right? I'd say if the assignment is well thought-out then it will be worthwhile.

The student participants' candid insights help confirm both that the Learning Posts assignment is useful and that I must frame it more effectively. I discuss two theories – self-authorship and threshold concepts – that assist me with this framing.

Theoretical Explorations of Undergraduate Student Learning

The longitudinal research of Baxter Magolda (2000, 2001; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009) is one line of research that I find particularly helpful in making my tacit knowledge about young adults' learning development more explicit.

Meaning Making

Baxter Magolda (2009) synthesizes key literature on young adult development in search of "a holistic theoretical perspective to promote the learning and development of the whole student" (p. 621), one that respects the complexity and variability of the emerging adult's self-evolution. She credits the influence of many theorists – especially Bruner's notion of learning as construction of meaning about the world and about the self, Mezirow's idea of transformative learning, Kegan's concept of the growth of the mind and Wenger's theory of learning and identity-formation within communities of practice – in shaping her own holistic theory of college student/young adult development. Baxter Magolda conceptualizes this development as a gradual growth from external to internal definition and authority in one's approach to meaning-making. She describes *meaning-making* as an intertwining of three dimensions:

- epistemological (how we come to know)
- intrapersonal (how we see ourselves)
- interpersonal (how we see ourselves in relation to others)

Baxter Magolda describes three phases of college student/young adult development: following external formulas, crossroads, and self-authorship. The majority of undergraduate students, she documents, rely on external authority for their beliefs, identity and relations with others. Epistemologically, this external focus "is characterized by viewing knowledge as certain or partially certain and held by authorities" (Baxter Magolda, Abes & Torres, 2009, p. 188). Intrapersonally there is a corresponding "lack of awareness of one's own values and social identity" and a "lack of coordination of multiple components of identity".

The crossroads phase emerges when tensions between external authority and a growing internal voice are experienced. There is "an evolving awareness and acceptance of uncertainty and multiple perspectives" in terms of knowledge claims. Intrapersonally "the awareness of one's own values and sense of identity, distinct from external others' perceptions evolves". *Self-authorship*, a term coined by Kegan (1994) is "the internal capacity to define one's belief system, identity and relationships" (Baxter Magolda, 2007, p. 69). Baxter Magolda emphasizes that this development from external to internal authority is cyclical, complex, highly individual and often uncomfortable.

Because the cognitive maturity we expect undergraduates to achieve is intimately tied to intrapersonal and interpersonal development it is clear that these students need repeated experiences with "developing their internal voices and foundations" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 282). Young adult students need complex learning experiences followed by intentional reflection, experiences that enable them to "consider knowledge as complex and their own role in constructing it as critical" (Baxter Magolda, 2006, p. 53). This description elegantly captures what I am trying to accomplish with the weekly Learning Posts.

The participant narratives anchoring Baxter Magolda's theory of young adult development (Baxter Magolda, 2000; 2001; 2002; 2008; 2009; King et al., 2009) convince me of the credibility of this work. Reading this literature in tandem with the second semester Learning Posts, I found that Baxter Magolda's research participants' comments frequently paralleled observations my own students were making. Re-reading the Posts and this research literature six months later confirms this resonance.

Threshold Concepts

The second big idea that emerged from my literature search concerning the meaning-making journey of undergraduate students is that of *threshold concepts*. Meyer and Land (2003) describe a *threshold concept* as

> akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view. This transformation may be sudden or it may be protracted over a considerable period of time, with the transition to understanding proving troublesome. Such a transformed view or landscape may represent how people 'think' in a particular discipline, or how they perceive, apprehend, or experience particular phenomena within that discipline (or more generally). (p. 1).

There is much in this description that delineates my specific quest to better assist students to integrate their own experiences as learners with their formal music education.

While Meyer and Land (2003; 2005) offer specific concepts like *complex numbers*, *opportunity cost*, *signification* and even *equal temperament* as examples of threshold concepts, they acknowledge that threshold concepts are not necessarily bounded. In an area like music education, which draws on several bodies of knowledge, I propose that we have some messy threshold concepts. Indeed Meyer and Land suggest that *the ways of thinking and practising* within a subject area might constitute "a crucial threshold function in leading

to transformed understanding" (p. 9). Threshold concepts can be *transformative,* potentially provoking "a significant shift in the perception of a subject or part thereof" (p. 4); they are *probably irreversible*, *integrative* ("expos[ing] the previously hidden interrelatedness of something") and *troublesome*, which means they "assume significant pedagogical importance" (p. 5).

I have come to believe that understanding the learning process as complex, personalized, social and integrative, requiring individual responsibility, reflective analysis and interpretive judgments is a huge, interdisciplinary threshold concept. The undergraduate student, in working to come to grips with a seismic shift in her/his conception of learning, may enter into "the transformational state of liminality" (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 380), undergoing "a shift in learner subjectivity" (p. 374). "Threshold concepts are inherently problematic for learners because they demand an integration of ideas and this requires the student to accept a transformation of their own understanding".

I do not wish to overdraw the congruence between *self-authoring* and *threshold concepts* – theoretical frameworks that emerge from different academic orientations. Yet, I find the idea of a relationship compelling. A threshold concept can involve both a cognitive shift and "a repositioning of self in relation to the subject" (Land, Cousin & Meyer, 2005, p. 58). This linking of subject and self makes the instructor's role in promoting significant learning more tangible.

Implications for Practice

The Learning Posts assignment is one specific pedagogical move that has the potential to contribute significantly to music education students' learning development. I indicated above specific structural changes I will make to the assignment as a result of insights gained from post-course interviews with four students, together with my own observations and self-reflections.

More broadly, research into young adults' learning development (Baxter Magolda, Abes & Torres, 2009) confirms the importance of repeatedly providing guided opportunities for students to confront the intimate connections among their cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences. Students often find this uncomfortable. By concretizing complex learning goals (e.g. integrative learning; metalearning) as threshold concepts students (and instructors) may find these concepts more graspable and the work toward them more purposeful. Formally labeled and explained, Lily might have been less inclined to label her learning explorations as "fluff". In my own practice I intend to

- Introduce Baxter Magolda's theory of young adult learning development and revisit it regularly. Naming this developmental journey is, I have come to believe, essential. Clarifying to undergraduate students that they must actively work towards acquiring more complex ways of making meaning – that it does not just happen eventually – has the potential to transform students' learning in ways that no amount of course content can.

- Explain the importance of reflective practices to that learning development and overtly and regularly model (and name) my own reflective thinking. One important indicator of growth toward self-authoring is the ability to evaluate multiple sources of information (King et al., 2009). Modeling this skill within the context of a music education course is easy. Explicitly calling attention to and labelling the thinking process involved is a less instinctive pedagogical move.

- Provide various frameworks for approaching reflective writing. Some students will benefit from Pavlovich's (2007) four steps: *describing the experience, analyzing it, creating new meanings from the experience and establishing action for change based on what was learned*. Others might find Spalding and Wilson's (2002) definition of growth in reflective writing useful, or may be helped by Ward and McCotter's [3] (2004) rubric describing levels of reflective writing.

- Continue to provide authority-sharing opportunities in my teaching. Pedagogy that encourages students to dialogue about complex topics, defend a position, tolerate ambiguity, say what they really think and explore what that reveals about their beliefs, consider multiple perspectives and translate learning to personal life is proving to help move young adults toward self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2000; 2001; 2006; 2007; 2007; 2008; King et al., 2009).

- Experiment with approaching big ideas like integration and metalearning as threshold concepts to see if this framing is helpful to students.

The purpose of self-reflexive research is to create deeper understandings and resultant changes in practice. In seeking to improve the ways I support students' reflective thinking I discovered that I needed a more comprehensive framework for understanding undergraduate

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[3] Ward and McCotter's (2004) rubric uses *routine, technical, dialogic* and *transformative* levels of reflection, applied to categories of *focus, inquiry* and *change*. It is designed specifically for reflecting on one's teaching.

students' learning development. The theory of self-authorship offers that grounding. Treating integrative learning and metalearning as threshold concepts contributes the possibility of making these complex ideas real and consequential for young adult students. With these new insights I am affirmed in my belief that weekly Learning Posts can provide an important vehicle for undergraduate music students' growth toward self-authoring.

A few weeks after the completion of the music education course in which I introduced Learning Posts I received an email from one of the students. Alicia gave me permission to quote her in the context of her year-long experience with writing Posts and summative reflections.

> **Alicia:** I've started to realize that the information and skills I'm learning are pieces of a puzzle that I have to put together on my own, and that understanding my own learning is a major piece of that puzzle. I've never come across this kind of shift in my thinking before and I wanted to say that it has enriched my learning experience exponentially.

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