

Fine Arts (Music Theatre)



Margot Fenley

Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne

E: mfenley@unimelb.edu.au

Teaching Context

The Bachelor of Fine Arts (Music Theatre) is one of seven streams of the Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne. It is a three-year degree that features an intense and student-centred approach to skills training in performance arts: dancing, singing, and acting.

Students: 20 students in each cohort, selected from auditions with over 500 hundred people around Australia, each year. Many students travel from interstate to study the degree.

Teaching team: Margot Fenley is the program convenor. She coordinates the third year of the program and Christopher Nolan coordinates the subjects in first and second year.

Mode: Students participate in dancing, acting, and singing classes in studios, lead by teaching practitioners. The training in these subjects focuses on each skill individually and in combination (classes in acting through song, song and dance classes etc). They also study historical and theoretical issues related to performance in one lecture and tutorial based subject. There is a heavy expectation of independent rehearsal and practice and a number of public performance projects in the latter stage of the course.

Issue: Impetus for change

A significant issue facing teachers in Fine Arts is the high prevalence of clinical depression, anxiety, and eating disorders among performing arts students. The concern for students' mental health is also reflected in the high rate of suicide among trained performers.

In many cases, clinical conditions are pre-existing, developed prior to undergraduate study. However, in an intense program such as the Bachelor of Fine Arts, students' anxieties can be exacerbated by continuously shifting between different cultural paradigms of the three streams: acting singing, and dancing. There is a difference in language and teaching style across the various disciplines: dance teaching traditionally offers critique by 'correction' (inferring a clear right and wrong); voice teachers use language like "safe or unsafe" vocal choices, whereas the cliché of acting teaching is that there is no 'right and wrong', with students encouraged to explore all possibilities and embrace uncertainty. Shifting between these positions can be mentally exhausting.

As students approach graduation, their anxieties are further compounded by the uncertainty of

future employment (with over 90% of performers unemployed at any given time) and lack of support networks for students upon graduation, especially for those who have travelled interstate to study at VCA.

Aim

To help students develop skills and attitudes to reduce anxieties within the degree and beyond graduation. Margot and her team are still finding ways to address this issue, continually asking the question "is there a better way to address this?" The strategies below go some way towards answering that question, however the teaching team want to acknowledge that they feel they still have a long way to go.

Subject design strategies

Creating a safe space to perform

Margot teaches students to practice "unconditional positive regard" – a therapeutic approach developed by the psychologist Karl Rogers. This approach requires the professional to put aside any personal relationships or biases, and engage with colleagues

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with curiosity and hope. This is a critical skill for the students as a means of dealing with the inevitable social issues that arise among small cohorts working under intense conditions. Removing personal biases allows students to feel safe and supported by their classmates as they learn new performance techniques together. It will continue to be a critical skill for their success working with other people in auditions, rehearsals, performances, and tours. The concept of unconditional positive regard is introduced to first year students during orientation week. Most attention to developing the skill occurs in the 1st year acting subjects, reinforced throughout the course and is critically important during pressured times, like 3rd year showcase.

The teachers reinforce the concept of a “safe space” by verbally acknowledging when something is happening between students, such as clear social tensions, tiredness, or disengagement. By acknowledging the shift in dynamics between students when they see it, the teaching staff and students can work to immediately change it.

Unconditional positive regard is modelled through staff exhibiting no personal bias towards students, giving equal attention and time to each student when working on the floor in front of the class and using supportive language whilst offering critique. Whilst it is important that students become aware of unhelpful habits (“you have a tendency before singing to lift your shoulders and tense your fingers”) it is important that they recognise that the habit is separate from their own self, and is also changeable. The teachers demonstrate unconditional regard by giving each student equal time and attention during class. In some classes, such as the presentation class, equal time giving feedback on a students’ performance is strictly monitored.

Using language to create safe ways for students to reflect

Language plays a big role in establishing a culture of growth and development in the acting classes. For instance, phrases such as “crushed it” and “nailed it” are banned from acting classes, because they infer that the student hasn’t learned anything from the exercise, and also shift the attention onto false, external thresholds of a “perfect” or “complete” performance. Instead, students are encouraged to reflect on the aspects of the exercise that worked or didn’t work for them (and why). Similarly, the

idea that there are multiple truths (i.e., multiple interpretations of a piece) is demonstrated by encouraging students to give feedback in the first person: “that piece made me feel uncomfortable” instead of as objective facts: “the piece was uncomfortable”. The former allows other students to offer other views without feeling conflicted. When a student talks in third person (“it was ...”), the teachers actively stop them and ask them to repeat their reflection in the first person (“I felt ...”).

Helping students to explore and grow from experiences of “glorious failure”

Margot and her teaching colleagues help the students to see value in failure. Performers constantly face critique of their work, their appearance, and their technique. Fear of failure in this profession can be crippling. Further, so much of what they do is internalised that they can perceive issues during a performance as their failure as a person. To reduce students’ fear of failure, Margot and her teaching colleagues teach students to embrace and articulate issues that arise, and progress through them. They contextualise failure as “the place where you often learn the most”. When students felt they failed, Margot and her team encourage students to identify what was happening to them, what they could do about it, and how they can grow from that experience.

Encouraging a love of learning

Margot thinks that fostering a love of learning is much more important than teaching objective skills. Her aim – and she says this explicitly to students – is that students arrive at the end of final year saying “I am a continuing artist in the making” – rather than saying “I am complete and ready for work”.

Encouraging autonomy and self-management

Students are encouraged to take control of their own approach to learning and studying, in terms of how they structure their practice of course-related pieces each week, and how they will structure their practice for the rest of their lives. Two examples of this encouragement include: (a) a whole-school meeting in which teachers and students discussed how students structure their practice time; and (b) helping final year students build a plan for themselves for the six months following graduation. The plan is essential for students feeling as though they are not only leaving the school, but moving on to something else – a project of their own.

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Evaluating outcomes

Although there is no systematic evaluation of the impact of these strategies, and Margot and her team feel the issues are still very prevalent in students lives, there have been some clear cultural shifts towards understanding mental health issues. For example:

- The rate of students accessing services such as Head Space is much higher than in previous years.
- In the last 12 months, students have actively campaigned the University to return a local counselling service to their campus.