# Musing budding musos: the role of peer mentoring in learning to be a contemporary musician

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Participant in the NCVER Building Research Capacity Community of Practice Scholarship Program 2010

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NATIONAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PROGRAM

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# About the research

## *Musing budding musos: the role of peer mentoring in learning to be a contemporary musician*

Ross Stagg, TAFE NSW — Western Sydney Institute

Building the research capacity of the vocational education and training (VET) sector is a key concern for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). To assist with this objective, NCVER supports a community of practice scholarship program, whereby VET practitioners without research experience are given the opportunity to undertake their own research to address a workplace problem. Scholarship recipients are supported by a mentor, and NCVER publishes their research results.

Ross Stagg participated in the 2010 community of practice program. Ross is a music teacher at Nirimba College, which is part of TAFE NSW's Western Sydney Institute. Ross's research seeks to determine whether peer-to-peer mentoring is a popular and viable way of transferring skills and knowledge between music students at Nirimba College.

The study comprised an eight-week mentoring trial, an initial survey and final interviews with the group of current music students who participated in the mentoring program. The study aimed to elicit the students' perspectives on TAFE music teaching and learning, their attitudes towards music and their own career goals, as well as their thoughts on the mentoring trial.

Many of the students who participated in the study recognised the value of the broader and more generic music training offered by TAFE institutes and the author argues that peer-to-peer mentoring fits this context. Most students preferred peer-to-peer mentoring to teacher or staff mentoring because they felt a better understanding existed between students.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

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# Introduction

Mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction. (John C Crosby)

This study is based on the hypothesis that peer mentoring is a powerful way to enable students to systematically share skills and knowledge with each other. In this project, I examine the proposition that peer mentoring may help alleviate some of the teaching burden of the large teacher—student ratios that exist at Nirimba College in New South Wales — and potentially in other TAFE (technical and further education) institutes — by encouraging student-to-student and musician-to-musician learning. The paper concludes that mentoring, combined with TAFE flexibility principles, provides effective learning that suits the needs of an ever-changing music industry.

The study comprises an initial survey, a mid-point survey and final interviews with a group of current music students who participated in an eight-week mentoring trial. The surveys and interviews aimed to elicit the students' perspectives on TAFE music teaching and learning, their attitudes towards music and their own career goals, and their thoughts on the value of peer-to-peer mentoring.

This study set out to be responsive to all students in the Nirimba College Entertainment Section but it was only students studying the music streams who expressed an interest in being involved in the peer-to-peer mentoring trial initiated in term 4 in 2010. Accordingly, this study has relevance for the creative music subject areas in TAFE, which include lyric-writing, composition, performance and vocal technique.

A public meeting was held at Nirimba College, to which all TAFE Entertainment students were invited. Autonomy for mentors and mentees was an important feature of this study. This is because musicians, by their nature, are not particularly keen on rules and regulations. I sought to be as unobtrusive as was practical, imposing only the broadest guidelines on what was an action research project characterised by minimal progress-related feedback. I was interested in their attitudes, in part, because contemporary music is characterised by 'attitude', and attitude is the 'fuel' that propels it. 'Attitude' is a potent feature of pop music and one that distinguishes it from establishment music, such as classical and jazz, both of which have a historical home and concomitant pedagogical structures situated in the 'high art' higher education establishments.

The true identity and exact nature of the music discipline as delivered via vocational education and training (VET) can be difficult to pin down. The music industry has always been driven by technological change; tidal waves of it have lashed all sectors of the entertainment industry over the past decade. Guerrilla web marketing, as initiated by individuals, has become a potent force in the music marketplace, and the manipulation of social media in pushing music products is part and parcel of the new paradigm. The music industry is no longer owned and controlled by major record companies. The business is what and how we as practitioners, old and young, veterans and new entrants, will invent and re-invent it as, today and tomorrow.

This current situation makes it even more difficult for TAFE institutes to act with certainty in relation to its music offerings. The mantra of responsiveness characterises TAFE training and delivery and stands the organisation in good stead in these uncertain times. Being acutely responsive to the learners must distinguish our efforts as never before. Why now? Because what our 'engaged' learners perceive the modern music industry to be is every bit as valid as any business entity in these

tumultuous times. The music industry needs engaged graduates from VET to enter it as highly relevant and pragmatic 'ideas' men and women.

Training in music at TAFE is offered in this context: it is both exciting and daunting, but is always challenging and stimulating. It is characterised by students learning the skills of adaptability and of their being urged to see the big picture from moment to moment and month to month. True, there are certain elements in music-making that are timeless and remain the same, regardless of the state of the industry, but music-making for the contemporary music industry is mostly technology-bound and subject to rapid change. The 'music of our time' is made for markets. Mentoring in the VET music training situation appears to be a natural fit: all participants in this business of music production are also commentators on an evolving form with an evolving skill set. There is much to share.

Contemporary music training is a broad church. Flexibility rather than narrow mastery is the skill most needed by aspiring pop musicians. Attitude must be preserved because it is perhaps 'the', consistently saleable commodity in pop music. Much successful music has been formulated and spiced by what polite society may term bad attitudes. The maverick spirit has always been a key driver in contemporary music. Any dilution in the 'the attitude' during the training is likely to be self-defeating. Perhaps this is why many previously assumed that 'establishment' based training in universities and TAFE institutes, with their largely inflexible delivery in rock and pop, would simply never work. But flexibility and responsiveness to customer needs define TAFE nowadays.

With peer-to-peer mentoring and flexible learning regimes, those attitudes that distinguish contemporary music are most likely to remain intact. This is important in the ongoing professional quest to maintain the relevance of the training, especially in such an evolving industry.

These themes underpin what is the main argument of the paper, that as peer mentoring is a regular feature of the music industry, it is entirely appropriate for training institutions to integrate carefully, but loosely designed (and arts-appropriate), peer-mentoring schemes into the fabric of their music delivery.

# Background

This section discusses literature relevant to the key themes that underpin this study. Specific literature involving mentoring in contemporary music was not available at the time of this research. This underlines why research of this nature might be required, given the extent of educational delivery occurring in the field in Australia alone.

## Mentoring in music

Mentoring is 'an intentional pairing of an inexperienced person with an experienced partner to guide and nurture his or her development' (Pitton 2006) and, particularly within the arts, formal and informal mentoring programs are commonly used as a means of supporting the professional and creative growth of artists (Bond 1999).

Some assume that the competitive nature of the performing arts leads individuals, students included, into egocentric behaviour — the rock star syndrome — and that this precludes socially supportive collaborative structures being formed that would help mentoring or peer tuition. The literature however suggests otherwise.

> There is strong support for the view that mentoring systems have a positive effect on the learning context by creating communities which are collaborative rather than competitive. Mentoring systems can reduce the level of anxiety in students and increase intrinsic motivation. Colleges and universities are investigating the effect of collaborative approaches to learning.
>
> (Baum 1999, cited in Bond 1999)

The decision to only loosely pair mentors with mentees and to allow all learning topics to be agreed strictly via negotiation reflects how things actually are in the aspirant and mainstream music industry, as opposed to colleges of music.

> The mentor's primary functions are those of slicing through the instability and disorder that hinder the protégé's development; and mentors take care of uncertainty, protect the protégé from it, train, coach, advise, and counsel the protégé in how to navigate through it so as to maintain professional and career equilibrium. (Bokenko & Gantt 2000)

Students who feel excluded from a learning community are prime candidates for withdrawing early from courses. With the diversity of skills presenting in VET music courses it is logical that confident adept students should be paired with less confident and less experienced students as a means of reducing the likelihood of these students withdrawing. Mentoring programs have the potential to bind together student cohorts with widely diverse individual skill sets.

> There is growing conviction in Australia that mentoring models may provide a solution to high attrition and failure rates. Despite policies and various forms of financial and infrastructure support, participation of minority students is still low. (Bond 1999, p.11)

## Mentoring up and mentoring down

Students with a passion for the arts — like rock band members and musicians everywhere — have much to share with others. They can share from any point within the notional knowledge hierarchy and in any direction. What is meant by this? Simply, that, in certain instances, neophytes, perhaps in the rehearsal room, can impart useful knowledge (often of a 'stylistic' nature) in an upwards direction

to much more experienced people, their naïveté at times providing vital insights that would possibly be overlooked in different, more formal contexts. Punk music-making comes to mind as a fair example. Sophisticated players with high levels of musicianship at the beginnings of this form were at somewhat of a disadvantage by comparison with 'newbies'. Those new musicians simply went at the music hard and with just the right attitude, having the 'advantage' of hardly being able to play their instruments at all. Getting good at music involves realising and appreciating often subtle things, things of nuance, sometimes esoteric things. Learning generally takes place in definable contexts and the varying contexts inevitably flavour the learning in unique ways. Contemporary music as a learning context contains much potentially interestingly flavoured learning. Mentoring of some kind inevitably occurs in contemporary band contexts. In a band, others with different skills, not necessarily more advanced skills, may assist the learning of their fellows. And indeed it is in the nature of the creative, collaborative effort in which they are routinely involved. As Westerlund (2006, p.122) notes:

> Studies focusing on learning in garage rock bands illustrate that such specific learning contexts function in various ways as knowledge-building communities and could potentially create an expert culture.

In these groupings learning may be constructed and enabled in informal localised learning communities, and learning in this way has a strong resonance with theories advanced by Vygotsky, who argued that learning takes place when learners practise with the assistance of others more capable. Furthermore, knowledge is actively constructed by people talking, working and discovering together (in Vialle, Lysaght & Verenikina 2008).

When assigned to pop bands at the Nirimba College, music students are required to function as valid musician participants within those bands. Mentors and mentees placed in the self-regulating, self-determining context devised for the action learning project exhibited learning traits that might come under the banner of what Rogoff (1990 cited in Davis 2005) referred to as 'guided participation'. Guided participation encompasses the collaboration and shared understanding that occur when more knowledgeable and less knowledgeable individuals work together to solve problems, enabling transfer of this knowledge to new situations. Intersubjectivity is at the heart of guided participation and is defined as 'shared understanding based on a common focus of attention and some shared presuppositions that form the ground for communication' (Rogoff 1990 cited in Davis 2005).

Working and learning in bands at Nirimba College in somewhat of a 'guided participation' mode creates an atmosphere naturally conducive to peer-to-peer mentoring. Informal learning practices are seen by some as part and parcel of the genuine and valid production processes of modern music.

> It is one thing to bring popular music into the classroom, instrumental studio and lecture theatre, but if for want of knowledge and understanding the music is then stripped of the informal learning practices by virtue of which it has always been created and passed on, such an oversight could have the effect of introducing a peculiar 'educational' sub-style, bearing little resemblance to any music that exists in the outside world. (Green 2001, p.7)

## Music training for the contemporary music market

What it actually means to be trained as a musician in a way relevant to the popular music industry defies easy definition.

> In the popular music area, performers need to be composers and composers need to be performers. All musicians need to be music technologists. They also need to understand how to market their products and services. (Hannan 2000)

The work life of many thousands of musicians attempting to find success as music artists may resemble the following trajectory: band member composers compose songs and, in ensemble mode, devise stylistically and market-relevant arrangements capable of being effectively performed utilising available and relevant technology. To attract an audience, they establish, at least in the beginning, effective (and affordable) marketing schemas.

## TAFE not university

TAFE-style contemporary music training is different from conservatorium of music training, which is delivered at universities, where players do acknowledge the skills of other performers but concentrate on becoming masters of their instrument — the fluegel horn or the tympani. So important is total mastery of the chosen instrument that, traditionally, conservatorium students could expect to receive one-to-one tuition on their instrument.

> The greatest fear is that diminishing public funding levels will cause the sacred cow of music training (one-on-one teaching) to disappear. (Hannan 2000)

In the context of music education at TAFE, one-on-one training has never been on offer: the advised teacher—student ratios stated in the 1997 curriculum documents are two teachers for 15 students at best. However, officially, there are no longer any set teacher—student ratios at TAFE NSW. The question must be asked, 'How much of a "master" of their instrument do VET students need to be to be competitive in the multi-skilled and constantly evolving entertainment industry?' Perhaps 'adaptability' rather than narrow 'mastery' is the truly required skill. Peer-to-peer mentoring, based as it is, at least in part, on interpersonal exchanges (in the music context), is uniquely placed to foster adaptability skills in participants.

Leveraging off the experience and skills of more advanced creative practitioners in the music industry is a well-used strategy, especially amongst young musicians. This research study sought to test whether peer-to-peer mentoring was as relevant in the TAFE context as it is in the world of everyday contemporary music practice.

# Methodology

The study was small, in line with the resources available and the number of interested volunteer participants, and it was by no means exhaustive; however, this does not diminish the importance of the trends as they arise for discussion from the research data. The study focused specifically on peer-to-peer mentoring in contemporary music and did not look at other forms of mentoring or mentoring in other music contexts or genres.

Music is currently offered at six venues within TAFE NSW. TAFE NSW offers three distinct yet intersecting streams — Music, Music Business and Music Technology. The Music Mentor action learning project was undertaken in term 4 in 2010 at TAFE Entertainment, Nirimba College, for around eight weeks. Nirimba College shares a site with two senior high schools and a campus of the University of Western Sydney. The university offers degrees in music at another site and a cordial relationship exists between TAFE Entertainment at Nirimba College and the Music Department of the University of Western Sydney. There is a 'mutual' recognition that both institutions offer very different approaches to music as a discipline, although both offer 'contemporary music' training and education. Nirimba College has around 200 full-time and part-time music students. A public information meeting was held at the college and was attended by 40 students. Students were asked to tender an expression of interest for the music-mentoring research project. Nineteen students submitted an expression of interest.

Nine were from students wishing to act as mentors. All but one of these students were undertaking the Advanced Diploma of Music. The remaining student, a trained teacher, was studying a Certificate IV in Music. The other ten students wished to be mentored. All were enrolled in the Certificate III in Music. Interestingly, two mentees were undecided about whether they wanted to be mentors or mentees. This is not surprising, given the great variety of different skills that students often present with in early courses.

Participating students were asked via two questionnaires about their attitudes to a range of music training issues, and those who remained in the study until the end were interviewed at length about their experiences with the mentoring trial. While 19 participants started the study, by the mid-point survey, only 13 remained. By the final interview there were only ten participants — five mentoring pairs — remaining. Pressure of work in their studies appears to be the main reason for the drop-outs. I was unable to give the participants any relief from their other TAFE work to assist their continuing involvement.

## Student mentoring subject preferences

One female student (Kerry)[1] had been informally mentoring two female students (Jean and Sylvia), who were close friends. This student asked if she could work with these two as her mentees on music theory. The researcher agreed to this.

A female certificate III student (Rachel) was very keen to be mentored by a male advanced diploma student (James) initially in the area of song-writing and this was agreed.

Another certificate III student (Susan) was very keen to be mentored by a female advanced diploma student (Joanna) on vocal technique. The researcher agreed to this.

[1] The names of students have been changed to protect identity.

## Teacher-directed mentoring subjects

The remaining six mentors were paired with the mentees, with the researcher using his existing knowledge of the potential mentee's deficit areas and the mentor's strengths. Advice was sought from other staff regarding the most effective pairings, with some input from mentors and mentees.

## Recognition of prior learning

As this project was described to the participants as an action learning experiment, there was the potential to negotiate appropriate recognised prior learning (RPL) credit for the mentors after the research project. This was contingent on their accurately recording their efforts. The process involved the mentor making a note of what was covered in each mentoring session. Whatever review and mentee follow-up was negotiated was to be noted in a record book, a copy of which was retained by the mentor as 'evidence' for use in potential RPL claims. Only two participants managed to adhere to this proposed element of the mentoring protocol.

## Data collection

### Baseline survey

The 19 volunteers filled out a baseline survey. The survey sought to determine some fundamental attitudes held by the students who had made a commitment to the mentoring project. Questions relating to favoured subjects, preferred study styles, personal goals for the future and plans to achieve them, and questions relating to the discipline required for musicianship and learning generally were put as either short answer or Likert responses. Students were asked in one question to nominate their favourite overall subject — some respondents were unable to curb their enthusiasm and ticked multiple responses where only one was requested. All questions contained in the baseline survey can be found in appendix B.

### Session satisfaction surveys

All participants — mentors and mentees — were asked to complete a simple satisfaction survey relating to each session. Only six were received, possibly due to a flaw in the research design. The instruction was simply that at the end of each session a survey should be completed. One student commented that it was embarrassing to fill out a form that could possibly be construed as criticism of a mentor or mentee, in front of the other party. Whatever the reason, an insufficient number were received to be used as research data.

### Survey questionnaire 2: mid-point survey

There were 13 mid-point surveys returned to the researcher. In this survey there were no multiple choice questions. This survey sought feedback on such issues as the methodology for selecting mentoring pairs, the advisability or otherwise of students choosing between themselves where to meet for sessions, the advisability or otherwise of students choosing what would be covered, whether there was sufficient support from staff and how the respondent judged their self-esteem relative to the process. By this point it was obvious that the session satisfaction surveys were not being completed so there was a question about this. The impact of the mentoring on individual studies was another question topic. Lastly, there were questions on whether mentoring should become a regular activity at the college, whether classroom learning and mentor learning are different and a question

regarding appropriate rewards for those doing the mentoring. All questions contained in the mid-point survey can be found in appendix B.

## Final taped interview

There were ten final interviews. In this exercise the researcher used prepared questions with room for some deviation and expansion by respondents. The interviews were digitally recorded one on one with the researcher and later transcribed. The structured questions in the interviews sought responses on issues such as the observed pre-existing skills of new students; student expectations and experiences regarding student—teacher ratios at TAFE; perceived differences between contemporary music training and other types of music training, specifically classical; the possible different benefits of peer-to-peer mentoring as opposed to staff-to-student one-on-one rostered mentoring; the social value of peer-to-peer mentoring; whether mentoring might prepare mentors to enter teaching as a profession; attitudes to giftedness; and attitudes and awareness of skills that only the learner can realise for themselves in their own time. All the questions contained in the interview can be found in appendix B.

# Findings

A sense of pride in being selected as a mentor was evident from some of the mentors. Some mentees also said that they would like to become mentors when they reached the higher-level courses. A possible cycle of mentees converting to mentors presented itself early in the project. This recognition of individual progression appears to be one possible enduring side benefit of the mentoring scheme.

## Part 1: Surveys

This section provides an overview of the preferences and attitudes of the research participants. Question 1 of the baseline questionnaire attempted to capture data on the subjects of most interest. Of the ten useable responses to question 1, six respondents indicated that their preferred subjects were those that could be characterised as 'directly creative' subjects (*composition, lyric-writing and performance*). On the other hand, aural and music theory are subjects that students traditionally find challenging in the section. Possibly the 'challenge' is why three students nominated them as the subjects which they 'enjoyed the most'. In question 3, four respondents indicated they intended to pursue music theory in the mentoring sessions. This would appear to be a small number and may simply indicate that people do not always choose to be mentored in a deficit area, possibly preferring to seek further advancement in their areas of 'passion'. See tables C1 and C3 in appendix C.

In response to question 2, looking at preferred mode of study, ten respondents indicated that their preference was for flexibility, but the mode changed according to the subject being undertaken. This underpins the diversity of subject offerings within the music courses, but it also highlights the importance of flexibility in learning for these students. See table C2 in appendix C.

Of the 17 respondents who answered question 4, relating to what they expect to be doing in five years time, 13 respondents expected to be actively involved in activities directly related to the production of music. A number of respondents indicated that they expected to be doing more than one thing in five years time. In question 5, which sought to gauge the work ethic of students with regard to their future in five years, the responses were almost as diverse as the cohort being surveyed. Significantly, only four people indicated that they would simply 'practise their music craft'. This may indicate that comprehensive discussions about 'how to proceed' towards a career in music are not taking place within TAFE Entertainment. Alternatively, it simply may be an indication of the individualistic spirit so often found in arts-oriented people. See tables C4 and C5 in appendix C.

In question 6, 12 respondents tended to agree to some degree with the proposition that those hoping to make a profession out of music must put the needs and wants of their prospective audience (the 'market') ahead of their own tastes, needs and wants. See table C6, question 6 in appendix C. In question 7, 12 respondents tended to agree with the proposition that 'every person learns in their own unique way — there is no right way'. This could indicate that the 'individualistic spirit' alluded to earlier and so beloved in the music industry is alive and well in the up-and-coming practitioners. Equally though, it could indicate a surprising maturity in the perceptions of the cohort regarding the perceived realities of effective learning in the current era. See table C6, question 7 in appendix C.

In question 8 the reluctance of the majority of respondents to completely agree with the statement 'practice makes permanent' perhaps indicates a slight confusion with the stated proposition. The original expression is 'practice makes perfect', but with maturity, musicians realise that practice doesn't always achieve perfection; it takes an experienced musician or a perceptive thinker to realise

that practising a ‘mistake’, for instance, might make the corrupted material permanent. This would have to be regarded as less than desirable but of course many know and realise that mistakes in modern music are often the best part. See table C6, question 8 in appendix C.

Question 9 elicited an almost equally positive and negative response to the proposition ‘the most important thing as a student at TAFE is to pick up mostly just the skills you feel you need’. This might indicate the difference between qualification levels in the students involved in the study — certificate III students, certificate IV students and advanced diploma students — and the relative experience dividing them. See table C6, question 9 in appendix C.

All those who responded to question 10, ‘would you consider taking on some teaching at some point as at least part of your working life?’, wished to teach in some capacity. These data are interesting and to some extent self-explanatory. Eight respondents failed to say why they wanted to teach. The varying responses in some way indicate the different life experience of the respondents. The response ‘Only teach if unsuccessful in music’ may be suggestive of an immature response, possibly indicating a negative attitude towards teaching. See table C7 in appendix C.

## Part 2: Discussion

Based on the written and interview data collected, three main themes were evident:

- Music students generally expressed a preference to be mentored by their student peers, rather than by staff who might be rostered to that task.
- Student mentors are capable of developing highly effective and user-responsive mentoring provision with little to no input from music staff. Participation appears to lead to an improvement in confidence and self-esteem.
- The project participants appreciate and value the fact that TAFE music training, which is designed to assist entry into the contemporary music industry (pop music training), is broad based and focused on ‘adaptability’.

Other minor themes included:

- One-on-one training with another student was a more ‘relaxed’ way to learn than the ‘standard college approach’ to training.
- Mentors should be acknowledged, perhaps via a certificate of recognition, for the work they do.
- Some things in music cannot be taught: only eventually mastered by the learner.

These themes underpin the main argument of the paper; that is, as peer mentoring is a regular feature of the music industry, it is entirely appropriate for training institutions to integrate carefully but loosely designed (and arts-appropriate) peer-mentoring schemes into the fabric of their music delivery.

### Theme 1: Preference for peer mentoring

The general preference for peer mentoring rather than staff mentoring was somewhat of a surprise finding to the researcher. It underscores the sense of shared destiny that some musicians on a cultural learning curve appear to feel. Perhaps the generation gap is at play here, with the usual suspicions that those outside the cohort ‘just don’t get it’, no matter how much of a ‘kindred spirit’ the students might think their teacher is.

> I think that it would be harder for the teacher [than a student to be a mentor]. I think that it's a good thing to have people that you know and that you're actually studying with and therefore are friends with. Friends communicate a lot better with one another and if it becomes too formalised it just becomes impractical because you can't organise [flexible] time with one another [teacher and student]. (Norton, mentee)

> I think if you swapped it to a teacher mentoring it would just feel as if it was a normal teach, like a class and if you have a student who is learning at the same time it makes the mentee feel as if you're moving along, just a bit more for some reason, and it gives the mentee a feeling, like if they're going through the same thing maybe they can help me! (Joanna, mentor)

> I actually think that doing it with someone who's like in another certificate is good, is better because you're not intimidated. You don't have the teacher just sort of going 'well you should know this by now I taught it to you this morning!' (James, mentor)

> Well I'm not too sure. It wouldn't bother me if I was mentored by a teacher or a student. I think it might be better for a student to do it because that would give them necessary skills in doing that. Like a lot of students who come here want to become teachers, want to help OTHER people! (John, mentee)

> It would depend on the teacher. There are teachers here I get on really well with and others I don't. The teachers that I don't so much like I'd be really intimidated by and would probably seem like a real retard. (Rachel, mentee)

> It would be a different relationship because when we're mentoring you're a student as well — you've been in that situation a year ago you were there or six months ago or whatever. Yeah I think it would be different, it would depend on the teacher and the student because I know that sometimes the students don't always like their teacher or don't feel they can approach them or ask them questions. (Kerry, mentor)

The unerring confidence that students had in the ability of student musician mentors to make a positive difference to their mentees was evident from the tone of the discussions with the researcher. Understanding how to be productive in the art of contemporary music appears to be a universal goal. Students, both mentors and mentees, know and accept that even the least among them may have something special to contribute in certain contexts and that changes of context can cause changes in meaning. A simple change of context within a contemporary music landscape can make the trite seem profound and the profound seem trite. Being a perceptive unblinkered individual seems to be widely appreciated as a worthy personal development goal.

## Theme 2: Mentoring had a positive impact on knowledge transition and self-confidence

Student mentors are capable of developing highly effective and user-responsive mentoring provision with little to no input from music staff. Quite a lot is expected from mentors, even when there are no learning boundaries set. All creative people benefit from parameters of some sort; these act as a focusing aid. Rather than inhibiting they can actually deliver a sense of direction, a sense of safety and, counter-intuitively, liberation. The author felt that a future study — where varying degrees of prescribed content were trialled — might illuminate the best balance between mentors and mentee self-determination and the maximum ease and efficiency of delivery for both in contemporary music training. Overall, there were very positive attitudes about peer mentoring as a tool for transferring knowledge, and both mentors and mentees had increased confidence and self-esteem:

I think this worked because you wouldn't have to cover things you already knew. I think my self-esteem was built up because the support built up my confidence and helped me grow as a guitarist. (Louise, mentee)

I think once the initial plan is sorted out it's easy to organise what to do each session but until then it can be difficult. (James, mentor)

With my mentee it became a bit broad — I don't mind choosing what we look at but it should be limited to two subject areas. It always boosts your self-esteem when you have knowledge that you can successfully pass onto someone who needs it. (Kerry, mentor)

I think this worked as I got to cover material outside of the subject I was placed in, in the mentor/mentee program to work on that [which] I also needed help with. Yes I have learned more and become more confident with music theory. I actually feel I understand the basics of music. (Norton, mentee)

I think it did work; mentors specialise in a certain area and that really helps people in need of certain areas. I felt great to be mentoring. There is a lot of satisfaction taken whenever you help others in need. The sessions have given me confidence to take forward in the future. (Graham, mentor)

## Theme 3: Participants appreciate TAFE music training

The project participants appreciate and value the fact that their TAFE music training, which is designed to assist entry into the contemporary music industry (pop music training), is broad based and focused on 'adaptability'. Of the ten project participants who were interviewed, six expressed the view that contemporary music training at Nirimba College valued their creativity. However, a number of the students simply felt the need to acquire skills, rather than an actual qualification. Trying to get them concerned about achieving an actual qualification is often frustrating for teachers. However, VET organisations like TAFE should not claim that they value flexibility and then criticise the efforts of those trying to experience it in their own way.

The participating students often contrasted their pop music training with classical music training. Their attitudes and perceptions infer that the cultural gap between contemporary music and classical music requires a different mind set in both teaching and learning for pop musicians. Peer mentoring, from others more or differently experienced, appears to be a natural facet of a potentially optimal 'pop music' learning experience, which echoes Vygotsky's (in Vialle, Lysaght & Verenikina 2008) views on effective learning with others.

I think there's more of an emphasis on creativity [in pop]. I think classical musicians are taught to 'interpret' where pop musicians are taught to write music because there's very little market out there for 'cover bands' and I think their skills just reflect that. So pop musicians might have a lesser understanding of the technical aspects of music but that lesser understanding isn't necessarily a bad thing because it means they can be more creative. (Norton, mentee)

I dunno it seems like [there's] more freedom here and [you] just like learn kind of more on your own or with like your band I think. Yeah like see how you cooperate with others and see how you learn I think. Yeah well I like it because everyone like teaches everyone else I think! I think classical musicians are more like taught. It's like been drilled into them kind of. In pop music they just come up with whatever and they release it I think. (Louise, mentee)

Pop musicians aren't as well trained. Pop musicians are more like, kind of like if you've 'got it' a little bit and you've got kind of an image and a personality that'll sell, whereas classically trained

> people are more all about the skills. Pop music is all about the commercial, the 'entertaining' side of it do you know what I mean? It's not so much about the music and stuff it's about like how entertaining you are. (Rachel, mentee)

> I dunno classical musicians or students seem very structured. It's very like 'you roll this way kind of thing!' but normal pop students, or whatever you want to call it, like us, we just go with the flow. (Susan, mentee)

While this paper has not focused on music pedagogy, there is debate about where contemporary music pedagogy sits in relation to established classical and jazz music pedagogy. The notion of 'adaptability' being more pertinent than 'mastery' in regards to contemporary music is perhaps worthy of a study in itself. This is particularly so given that, in the world of music sales, classical music accounts for about 5% of the market. It stands to reason that music that so dominates world sales as pop music does is worthy of greater pedagogical scrutiny than has so far been achieved.

# Conclusions

The research question for this project asked about a system that might be established to enable skills sharing from advanced music students to new music students. Implicit in the question is the idea of a hierarchy based on knowledge. The context of working with a mentor or mentee has been demonstrated in this research to be potentially valuable for musicians, irrespective of the actual detail of the knowledge exchanged. In discussions recorded with participants there was a great deal of enthusiasm for working in a mentoring situation with a peer. Conversely, there was little enthusiasm for working with teacher mentors for a variety of reasons, as noted in the data.

The research has revealed that passionately engaged people are more than able to cobble together efficient and meaningful learning agendas without formal directives on what must be covered in an agreed mentoring context. This point of course is in the context of mentor-based learning being an adjunct to formal curriculum-based study. Mentoring after all is a small part of any institutional learning. The only implied expectation for the mentoring couple was that the activities and the learning coming from them should be of value. Who better to be the judge of that than the participants themselves? In all cases, real training value was deemed to have been achieved by all of the participants. A side product of these activities was a subtle expansion of the collegiate atmosphere within the section. Non-participants made regular enquiries about whether the program would run again, while some hoped for late inclusion in the scheme. And still others, not understanding that the mentoring regime was simply a trial, wanted to know if they could be included next year. Mentoring obviously caught the popular imagination of the music student cohort.

There appears to be a ready interest and willingness on the part of many students in Entertainment at Nirimba College to share their knowledge. Mentees readily accepted help from mentors, but in some cases this appears to have been on a somewhat ‘occasional basis’. Undoubtedly the management of rather ‘casual’ student attitudes towards learning is a general problem in some VET training, and of course things are no different when the learning is taking place in a mentor assistance scheme. Perhaps defining what a career really might be for a musician could more fully motivate TAFE students with casual attitudes to study. As noted in the introduction, however, what currently constitutes a career in the music industry is up for almost monthly redefinition. A discrete unit covering research in the industry and responding to change might be appropriate for an upgraded Music Training Package.

Responses from the participants to the trial program were almost uniformly positive. There appears to be a need for the kind of personalised attention that peer mentoring can provide but which standard TAFE classroom delivery cannot deliver. The idea of providing recognition of prior learning to mentoring participants was of interest but would require discipline that may have been beyond the scope of this early research. Further studies would be required to develop a set of culturally authentic music-mentoring schemes and procedures that would be consistent with training in this technologically and aesthetically evolving field. One fact that is evident from the literature and from the research data is that contemporary music is a very different discipline from jazz and classical music and as such requires training specifically developed for it. It is evident that any specially developed training would need to include mentoring as a core component. Among adherents of art movements ‘like mindedness’ presents as a key driver to success. Mentoring as a process seems to naturally support and enhance like-mindedness. The best learning regimes are those that reflect the natural imagination, desires, vision and drive of all involved and of course are what the discipline cohort really desires.

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# Appendix A: Mentor/mentee pairings

The initial pairings were:

(*In line with standard research practice the names of students have been changed*)

| Mentor | Mentee | Initial agreed skill exchange area |
|---|---|---|
| Joanna | Susan | Singing |
| Gwen | Carla | Piano |
| Jemima | Kartchia | Music general/tech/midi |
| Phil | Louise | Theory and guitar |
| Graham | John | Aural and music theory |
| Kerry | Norton | Aural and music theory |
| Lucinda | Jane | Theory/midi lab/general |
| James | Rachel | Song-writing |
| Lesley | Jean & Sylvia | Theory |

# Appendix B: Surveys

## MUSIC MENTOR: ACTION LEARNING PROJECT 2010

### Baseline Questionnaire

1. Which ONE of the following subjects do you/or have you enjoyed the most from your time studying as a student at TAFE Entertainment?

   L. Music Business
   M. Composition
   N. Lyric Writing
   O. PA Set-up
   P. Aural
   Q. Music Theory
   R. Midi
   S. Digital Recording (computer based)
   T. Digital Recording (hardware / group based)
   U. Performance
   V. A subject not listed above

   ……

2. Which of the following types of study do you enjoy most?

   A. Working in groups
   D. Working alone
   E. It varies according to the subject

   ……

3. What areas of study do you plan to concentrate on with your mentor/mentee partner over the 8 sessions?

   ……

4. What do you expect to be doing in five years time?

   ……

5. What do you think you should do between now and five years to achieve what your goals?

   ……
   ……

6. "Some people make music for others and some people make music for themselves — each gets the audience they deserve"

   Mark the response that is closest to your view

   - Completely Agree
   - Mostly Agree
   - Slightly Agree
   - Slightly Disagree
   - Mostly Disagree
   - Completely Disagree

7. "Every person learns in their own unique way — there is no right way"

Mark the response that is closest to your view

- Completely Agree
- Mostly Agree
- Slightly Agree
- Slightly Disagree
- Mostly Disagree
- Completely Disagree

8. "Practise makes permanent"

Mark the response that is closest to your view

- Completely Agree
- Mostly Agree
- Slightly Agree
- Slightly Disagree
- Mostly Disagree
- Completely Disagree

9. “The most important thing as a student at TAFE is to pick up mostly just the skills you feel you need”

Mark the response that is closest to your view

- Completely Agree
- Mostly Agree
- Slightly Agree
- Slightly Disagree
- Mostly Disagree
- Completely Disagree

10. Would you consider taking on some teaching at some point as at least a part of your working life/profession?
    Explain your thinking briefly either way please!

.....
.....
.....
.....

## Mid-point survey

1. In the current mentoring research program mentors and mentees were selected and paired by the researcher. If the program were to continue can you say briefly what you think the best selection/pairing method would be for the future?

.....
.....
.....

2. In the current mentoring research program mentors and mentees chose between themselves when and where to meet. If the program were to continue can you say briefly if you think this worked or would there be a better way for the future?

.....
.....
.....

3. In the current mentoring research program mentors and mentees chose between themselves what material would be covered through mentor/mentee negotiation. If the program were to continue can you say briefly if you think this worked or would there be a better way for the future?

   .....
   .....
   .....

4. Did you think the level of support that you received from the researcher during this mentor/mentee program was sufficient? And if not could please you specify any sort of additional assistance you would have found helpful?

   .....
   .....
   .....

5. Regarding your involvement in the program can you make any comment regarding your learning related self esteem? (Self esteem relates in this instance to how good or bad people feel about themselves in the mentoring context).

   .....
   .....
   .....

6. Participants were asked to fill out satisfaction survey sheets for each session. Completion of these sheets was sporadic. Can you think of any reasons as to why participants may have avoided filling these in and giving them to the researcher as requested?

   .....
   .....
   .....

Other questions that arose include:

- What inducements might be used to ensure the participation of mentors?
- Do students need an inducement (a 'carrot'), such as a consistent, staff informed/reviewed method for 'casually' compiling (potential) RPL evidence, as a necessary enticement to assist a less experienced student on agreed regular basis?
- Should peer-to-peer mentoring become an integral part of educational delivery within TAFE Entertainment Nirimba College?

## Final Taped Interview

Q: I just want to talk to you about your observations on the skills that you've noticed with the different beginning students at Nirimba? Can you comment generally about the variety of skills people seem to arrive with in your experience?

Q2: With regard to the students with the higher levels skills some people already have when they come to the college do you think those skills are evidence of their personal hard work OR are they just gifted?

Q3: Traditionally at Conservatoriums of Music 'one to one' teacher to student tuition has been offered to young players. What do you think of that as a normal feature of a music training system?

Q4: Do you have any thoughts as to why we don't have that system in TAFE?

Q5: In what ways are pop musicians different from classical musicians?

Q6: You've been involved in a peer to peer student mentoring trial. If TAFE teachers could be rostered on to do some teacher to student mentoring what different value would that offer to the mentored person in your view?

Q7: Does learning from, or teaching a peer, have any social value to young music students that makes this type of learning unique?

Q8: Regardless of whether you have been the mentor or the mentee do you think that mentors might be better prepared to be teachers at some point OR do you see these things as too different?

Q9: Regardless of whether you have been the mentor or the mentee is being in the presence of an obviously gifted person inspiring or intimidating to you?

Q10: In things musical, or related to music skills, what is the difference between knowledge and wisdom?

Q11: It is often said that there are some things musical that can't be taught — only eventually realised — can you think of anything that might fit that description?

## Quantitative Mentoring Response

10 Very satisfied with today's session — good progress made

5 Quite Satisfied with today's session — some progress made

1 Dissatisfied with today's session — no progress made

Mentors and mentees please respond to today's session by circling a response or devising a number that fits between the above. Please indicate whether you are a mentor or mentee — the subject and today's date. Make sure NOT to show this completed sheet to your partner in this research. THANK YOU.

Other questions that arose include:

- What can a student learn by sharing their music experience/skills with a less experienced student?
- Which Mentor devised method/s of skills sharing tend to be used?
- Is it best that content be planned or simply delivered on a needs to know basis to mentees?
- Does a student mentor need a plan or is helping a beginner on a perceived he or she 'must know/wants to know' basis the best plan — What is the right balance?
- Should mentors attempt to develop an individualised rudimentary student learning plan ahead of time?
- Should mentoring be generally aligned to subjects currently being studied by mentees?
- Are the best choices likely, in reality, to be entirely/partially subject-centric?
- What are the skills acquired by the Mentors?
- Is it possible for this sort of scheme to run seamlessly in tandem/as an adjunct to standard delivery?

# Appendix C: Findings

**Table 1 Favoured subject**

| 1. Which ONE of the following subjects do you/or have you enjoyed the most from your time studying as a student at TAFE Entertainment? | Responses |
|---|---|
| Music business | 1 |
| Composition | 2 |
| Lyric-writing | 1 |
| PA set-up | 0 |
| Aural | 1 |
| Music theory | 1 |
| Midi | 0 |
| Digital recording (computer based) | 0 |
| Digital recording (hardware/group based) | 0 |
| Performance | 3 |
| A subject not listed above (Vocal tech) | 1 |

Notes: There were four discarded question 1 responses.

**Table 2 Favoured learning mode**

| 2. Which of the following types of study do you enjoy most? | Responses |
|---|---|
| Working in groups | 2 |
| Working alone | 1 |
| It varies according to the subject | 10 |

Notes: There was one discarded question to responses.

**Table 3 Initial intended mentoring study areas**

| 3. What areas of study do you plan to concentrate on with your mentor/ mentee partner over the 8 sessions? | Responses |
|---|---|
| Music theory | 4 |
| Song-writing skills | 4 |
| Performance | 3 |
| Recording | 1 |
| Singing | 1 |
| Instrument technique | 1 |

**Table 4 Professional expectations among volunteer participants**

| 4. What do you expect to be doing in five years time? | Responses |
|---|---|
| Teaching music | 6 |
| Working in a recording band | 5 |
| Pursue university level qualifications | 3 |
| Studying music | 1 |
| Playing music (part -time) | 1 |
| Working in sound | 1 |

**Table 5 Work ethics to achieve goals**

| 5. What do you think you should do between now and five years to achieve your goals? | Responses |
|---|---|
| Practise music craft | 4 |
| Attend university | 2 |
| Gain appropriate qualifications | 1 |
| Study music as TAFE at a higher level | 1 |
| Study effectively | 1 |
| Work and save to fund higher qualifications | 1 |
| Teach music in primary schools | 1 |
| Improve English | 1 |
| Develop song-writing skills | 1 |
| Compose songs for others | 1 |
| Write songs with others | 1 |
| Build contacts/social networks | 1 |
| Learn time/life management skills | 1 |

**Table 6 Questions 6–9: Attitudes**

| Questions 6–9 | Completely agree | Mostly agree | Slightly agree | Slightly disagree | Mostly disagree | Completely disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6. 'Some people make music for others and some people make music for themselves – each gets the audience they deserve' | 6 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 7. 'Every person learns in their own unique way – there is no right way' | 6 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 8. 'Practice makes permanent' | 2 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| 9. 'The most important thing as a student at TAFE is to pick up mostly just the skills you feel you need' | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 |

**Table 7 Attitude about self as teacher**

| 10. Would you consider taking on some teaching at some point as at least a part of your working life/profession? Explain your thinking briefly either way please! | Responses |
|---|---|
| Like to teach instrumental technique | 1 |
| Like to teach music theory | 2 |
| Would like to teach music-based subjects | 1 |
| Like to be a substitute teacher only | 1 |
| Would like to teach at TAFE | 1 |
| Part time between gigs only | 1 |
| Only teach if unsuccessful in music | 1 |
| Already a qualified primary teacher – likes the flexibility | 1 |
| Would like to teach those 'hungry to learn' | 1 |
| Has long existent plans to teach music | 1 |
| Already teachers AMEB privately desires FT job in a high school | 1 |
| Yes – teach as a helper to people | 1 |




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