Conservatoire for Dance and Drama

LEARNING AND TEACHING SEMINAR

Peer to peer feedback, evaluation and assessments

Held during the May 2019 meeting of the
Conservatoire Learning, Teaching and Quality Assurance Committee

**This Learning and Teaching Seminar was delivered by Baptiste Bourgougnon,
Head of Technique and Performance, London Contemporary Dance School**

Please find below a write-up of the content of this Learning and Teaching Seminar. The online presentation that accompanied this seminar can be accessed at:

https://prezi.com/view/FW7eY9SnQ28KlJe6Oglc/

- **Introduction**

Baptiste began by explaining that in London Contemporary Dance School, both the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes include a fair amount of self-assessment by students and also student 'peer to peer' assessment.

The rationale behind this pedagogic approach came about as a result of discussions amongst staff and students in the School. Baptiste explained that both self-assessment and peer assessment has been very helpful, for the following reasons:

- Demystifying for students how assessments are marked and how markers' judgements are arrived at;
- Feedback that is received from peers occupies a different paradigm – students have a close relationship with each other;
- Feedback from peers comes from a live empathetic angle that a teacher can't have and is therefore differently delivered and received, which is very valuable;
- Students feel a lot more involved in their learning;
- Students mention that it also strengthens their friendship/relationship with their peers when their peers give them a mark or feedback.

Baptiste explained that the practice of student peer and self-assessment was particularly embedded in the MA Screendance programme, but that the School was incorporating this approach at all levels.

- **Main structure of how peer and self-assessment is carried out**

First, it starts with feedback being very informal, to enable students to get used to the idea of delivering feedback. Subsequently, it becomes a much more formal process. Baptiste explained that the pattern created itself naturally: first the students assess themselves, and then they assess their peers.

- **Feedback**

In embedding the feedback processes, the School introduces the idea to students by first having an informal discussion where any initial questions the students have, and then giving the students a framework of how to deliver feedback. The School makes sure that they talk about it first with the students to ensure there is full understanding, because otherwise the feedback will not be useful.

In the introductory discussions the School also ensures that there is a focused discussion on 'how to receive feedback'. It has emerged that where students give feedback it is often one-way, in the same or similar way to what students have received in the past – students often emulate the ways in which their former teachers have delivered feedback.

In the LCDS choreography department they do a lot of formal peer to peer feedback. They are highly focused on empowering the person receiving the feedback; there is never anything that presents either a good or bad conflict. To assist the students in developing their delivery and receipt of feedback, the department encourages them to practise by maybe using an example from a teacher, or from a video.

- **Assessment**

In introducing students to peer and self-assessment, firstly the school holds a long session where the assessment criteria, learning outcomes and grading scale are all looked at in detail, which usually results in a lengthy discussion.

Self-assessment

Students often find the University of Kent's 22 point grading scale confusing, so the School usually takes some time to explain this at length to ensure understanding. The issue of 'subjectivity' often comes up. The School endeavours to raise awareness and understanding of 'progress', making sure the students understand that they all start at different points, have different experiences which can result in big jumps in progress, even if their overall attainment does not significantly increase.

The students then need to give themselves a grade and write a report. In the 2018-19 year, these student reports have overall been very thorough. Afterwards, the students sit down with the teacher and discuss the report and grade, with the aim of demonstrating to the students that what they have written in the report needs to be justified. Eventually, the grade is then moderated.

Peer-to-peer assessment

In peer-to-peer assessment, all the same mechanisms as in self-assessment apply, with students needing to write a report and assign a grade. The difference is that they are grading peers, but because they have undertaken the process to self-assess first, they bring an understanding to it.

The School has further developed this system of assessment by having students now devise the assessment criteria in some programmes. To assist them with devising their own assessment criteria, students are asked to look at the learning outcomes in depth, and design criteria that will enable to help them achieve those learning outcomes. The issue of assessment criteria and how to achieve the learning outcomes can be debated, and the School reports this allows for very interesting discussions; where students have questioned and reworded existing assessment criteria, demonstrating good leadership.

In peer to peer assessment all students are asked to grade all students. The students are not summatively assessed or graded on the grades that they award. They learn so much by grading each other. They students are also informed that they are not supposed to discuss and decide their own criteria when assessing/marking, but that they must use the established criteria.

- **Challenges**

Student peer and self-assessment are very positive initiatives with many benefits but they are not without their challenges. They can be very emotional processes for the students and discussions always come back to subjectivity. The nature of what we do in our disciplines also makes it very tough to make it 100% objective.

It is also very time-consuming. It involves lots of preparation and robust discussion with them, and not all students enjoy these processes. However, this year, the student reception of the report went much more smoothly, because the system was embedded.

Occasionally, students award crazily high marks; this is more common from international students as their understanding of the scale is generally different. Additionally, you always have an occasional student who – when self-assessing – just wants to have a good mark, or can't bear to award anything they deem to be a 'bad' mark. In these instances, you need to make sure that you fully discuss their marking with them and the reasons why they have awarded the mark.

Members of LTQAC noted that the question/issue of subjectivity in marking is largely an issue of perception that used to come up a lot for NSCD, so for 2018-19 the School has put all markers' names on the assessment report, which has reduced student questions over subjectivity by about 60%.

Baptiste advised that the LCDS students' reaction to the School's exercise in peer and self-assessment has been fascinating. Informally, peer assessment has been going on forever in technique classes, where it is a well-established and common practice to pair students up together in order that they can support and help each other in the development of their practice. However, it was only last year (2017-18) that a proper discussion about formalising this process was had in the School.

The first time the School trialled the exercise was at the end of term in year one of the undergraduate programmes. In 2018-19, the School added a full session where the comprehensive discussion about learning outcomes, the grading scale and marking criteria was held.

A discussion was held with the MA Screendance students in the first ever cohort of the programme (in 2018-19) to explore their understanding of how criteria is standardised. This allowed the cohort to input into the design of assessment criteria by making a group proposal. Provisional assessment criteria were presented to the students who made a group proposal for changes, these criteria were tweaked following this student input and then agreed by the students. All students then had to follow the same criteria that they had been instrumental in designing.

However, a further challenge to peer assessment is in the assessment of group projects. Leadership in group projects can present issues, with many students initially saying they wanted to lead but then, though contributing to the required work, not actually leading. Students often mark each other more harshly with group projects particularly if there is a perception that some students are not working as hard as others in the group.

Another challenge is working out how much time should be devoted to embedding peer and self-assessment – how many sessions/hours are needed to not only start the discussion, but conclude and sum it up? This may vary within the interdisciplinary facets of the artistic discipline. For example, in LCDS, in technique classes one whole session was devoted to this, with most of the time being spent on assessment criteria and learning outcomes. However, the significantly time-consuming part of this is the one-to-one sessions with the students to discuss their assessment reports and marking. As a means of ensuring maximum value of this approach, it is suggested that this could be fed into an element of the continuous assessment.

- **Summary**

LTQAC members noted that there were common defining themes regarding feedback, but that students often don't fully realise how the criteria shift on a continuum as the levels progress.

Baptiste noted that because peer and self-assessment was informally present in so many areas of the course, in a way the School hasn't really needed to change anything and has just brought in processes that support the formalisation of these ways of assessment.

Members commented on what they felt the most valuable aspects of this seminar were, as follows:

- Having formalised peer assessment and self-assessment really helps students to understand the assessment criteria, marking scheme and learning outcomes of their programme and how these all fit together;
- A greater understanding of these should arguably equip students with the understanding they need of the framework to maximise their potential attainment;
- Having student-negotiated assessment criteria strengthens the partnership of students in their learning and provides teaching staff with an opportunity for reflection and further enhancement/development of programmes;
- It was suggested that LTQAC should have a further discussion in 2019-20 about whether or not this approach might be more widely adopted across the Conservatoire schools.