

# The learning cultures of performance: Applying a cultural theory of learning to conservatoire research

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As educational institutions that play a role in the training of many performers, conservatoires have increasingly become the focus of research. Researchers have explored the one-to-one lesson context, identified and tested means of achieving musical excellence, and worked to enhance musicians' health. There remains, though, little research that investigates the conservatoire as a learning site, characterized by a set of interactions between performer, institution, and music profession. Students learning at conservatoires, as well as teachers and researchers attempting to embed new pedagogical approaches or curricula, must negotiate an educational and musical system embedded in years of history: a system that has, in other words, a "learning culture." This paper explores the central tenets of learning culture as a theoretical approach, arguing that conservatoire research could benefit from a lens that views learning as inherently cultural. The methodological implications of learning culture are discussed, including the need for qualitative methods that seek interpretive understandings and in-depth, rich data. The paper concludes by offering implications for the application of learning culture within the field of performance science, addressing Jørgensen's (2009) call for increased research on the institutional culture of conservatoires.

*Keywords:* conservatoire; institution; learning culture; social practice; qualitative methodology

As educational institutions at the centre of the quest for "performing excellence," conservatoires have increasingly become the focus of research. Given its unique position within the higher education system, the one-to-one lesson has been the subject of plentiful enquiry, with focus given to student-teacher

relationship, pedagogical approaches, and the “master-apprentice” model of learning. Recognizing the need to look beyond the individual classroom, researchers have more recently begun to identify and test means of achieving musical excellence (Williamon 2004), including strategies for enhancing practice (Jørgensen 2004) and enhancing the health and wellbeing of music students (Kreutz *et al.* 2009). Others have focused on assessment methods within conservatoires, pioneering new approaches that include peer assessment (Lebler 2008) and group assessment (Barratt and Moore 2005).

There remains, though, little research that investigates the conservatoire as a learning site, addressing what Jørgensen (2009) terms the under-researched “institutional culture.” While Nettl (1995) and Kingsbury (2001) both consider aspects of institution and of culture in their work in the USA, their ethnomusicological stance steers them away from exploration of the interrelationships between institution, culture, and—crucially—learning. Conservatoire students, as well as teachers and researchers attempting to embed new pedagogical approaches, must negotiate an educational system embedded in years of musical, social, and institutional practices; what I will term “learning culture.” Such practices will influence both the types of learning that are promoted or inhibited within conservatoires, and also the ways in which learners become socialized during their time at a conservatoire (see James *et al.* 2007). Knowledge of these practices offers scope for identifying challenges to effective learning and barriers to institutional change.

How, though, can research access practices (or cultures) that are often hidden, tacit, or deeply embedded in day-to-day life? This paper outlines a theory of learning culture, arguing that the conceptual and methodological angles that it brings to the fore offer scope for new understandings of the cultures of institutions that train students for performing excellence.

### MAIN CONTRIBUTION

The term learning culture is not new to educational writing, yet there are relatively few attempts to conceptualize the term or to operationalize it as a theoretical tool. The exception is the work of James *et al.* (2007), who used learning culture as a means of accessing the complexity of further (post compulsory) education in the UK. At the center of their thinking is the definition of learning culture as the “social practices through which people learn” (p. 23). So defined, it is not simply the contexts within which people learn but rather the practices *through* which people learn, practices which “promote, inhibit or rule out certain kinds of learning” (p. 28). The key assumption here is that learning takes place in, and through, a cultural setting (Hodkinson and

James 2003). That is, if we are to meet the oft-posed challenge of “changing the culture,” we need to look beyond the one-to-one lesson, practice studio, or concert platform to discover the practices that belie what *can* and *is* learned at conservatoires; “how different learning cultures enable or disable different learning possibilities for the people that come into contact with them” (James *et al.* 2007, p. 28).

As yet, learning culture has not been adapted for theoretical use in higher education institutions or in music education. While space limits a full conceptualization here, there are two central tenets to the theory as we consider its application to performance-based institutions:

- Learning culture incorporates, but is not bound by, institutional culture. Rather, it is bound by the broader fields (see Bourdieu 1984) in which the institution and its students and teachers operate. That is to say, knowledge of the practices at play in a conservatoire will come from research that seeks understanding of the lived experiences of learners as they move into, within, and beyond the institution. This includes learners’ performance history, previous education, family, friends, gender, specialism, and so forth, as well as social and cultural interactions within the institutional setting. Operationally, this means taking a holistic approach to researching culture, recognizing that the institution plays a large but not exclusive part in constructing the practices through which performers learn.
- Learning culture is a complex amalgamation of agency and structure, assuming that individuals both shape and are shaped by the learning cultures of which they are part (James *et al.* 2007). Social space is not seen as an equal playing field but rather one in which people compete for resources (Bourdieu 1984). In the context of performance, for example, learners compete for recognition, the “best” teachers, performance opportunity, publicity, and so on. These sometimes obscured struggles occur within, and interact with, a complex web of power relationships and practices that both shape learning possibilities within a learning culture and that shape the way in which the learning culture itself develops. In order to uncover these interactions, researchers must embrace the complexity of culture, searching for knowledge that may be obscured or hidden in order to reach in-depth understandings that have the potential to inform institutional change.

Conceptually, then, learning culture focuses researchers on the practices through which performers learn, assuming that these practices will be both institutionally-mediated and constructed within the performer’s own experi-

ences and values. In uncovering these practices—or forms of learning—it becomes possible to (1) highlight complex enablers and barriers at play for young performers and the role that the institution plays in alleviating or consolidating these, (2) highlight institutional priorities and assumptions, and their fit with those of performance students and teachers, and (3) highlight cultural assumptions within a particular community or institution (such as a conservatoire), which can illuminate barriers to institutional change. Knowledge of what these practices are, and the roots of their construction, forms an important first step in understanding the culture of learning to perform, and the potentials for transformation of this culture.

### **Where does learning culture lead us methodologically?**

Learning culture brings with it a host of methodological assumptions, all of which work to capture the complexity needed to research culture in this manner. First, it demands an epistemology that reflects the nature of knowledge as constructed in social space, shaping and shaped by cultural factors such as gender, class, instrument type, or institution. That is to say, post-positivist paradigms that seek explanation (often through support or rejection of a hypothesis) are rejected in favor of broadly constructionist stances that seek understanding of how people interact within, and with, their surroundings. This steers the researcher towards a qualitative methodology, with its emphasis on capturing the “nuance and complexity of the social situation under study” (Janesick 2000, p. 380). In taking a qualitative approach, attention is paid to the social world as it is understood by participants, actively seeking different interpretations of the learning culture in order to capture its complexity.

In particular, learning culture commits researchers to spending time in the field, working with ethnographically-informed methods to “reassemble the parts into the wholes from which they were originally taken” (Bloomer 2001, p. 430). The process of knowledge-construction includes a range of methods, most prominently interviews, participant documentation, observation, and document analysis, all of which span across learners, teachers, and management staff. In sum, taking learning culture as a theoretical lens requires the researcher to embrace the “messiness” of social life, using qualitative methods to make the hidden visible, and thereby shedding new light on the cultures in, and through which, performance students learn.

## IMPLICATIONS

This paper has proposed learning culture as a theoretical lens for tackling the under-researched area of conservatoire culture. At the time of writing, fieldwork has been recently completed at a UK conservatoire, limiting this paper to a discussion of theoretical, rather than empirically-based, implications. However, the potential for new understandings is, I argue, two-fold. First, learning culture offers understanding of the “hidden” skills of performance; those that accompany the more frequently researched motor skills, psychological training, and physiological preparation. In assuming that learning occurs through social practice, learning culture emphasizes the skills involved in mediating the (often blurred) transition from student to professional, capturing ways of knowing and doing that are integral to the process of becoming a musician but that remain remarkably under-researched. Institutional practices such as criteria for orchestral selection, for example, or social practices such as peer networking, play a large but often sidelined part in performers’ success. Knowledge of these practices has the potential to inform both student experience and institutional curricula, as conservatoires strive to offer competitive and world-leading preparation for performance-based careers.

Second, learning culture answers Jørgensen’s (2009) call for further research focusing on conservatoires’ institutional culture. Identified as an area where research is lacking, refrains such as “we need to change the culture” are not uncommon. Yet such statements are notoriously slippery, referring to practices that are historically located, influenced by wider policy agendas, and often fraught with divided opinion and inaction. In viewing learning as occurring *through* cultural practice, learning culture provides a theoretical lens that grounds cultural discussions in the core task of educating young performers. That is, institutional culture and the learning of performers are considered as inextricably intertwined and best understood as such. The first step to transforming culture may well be to understand it; indeed, in establishing performance science and its associated curriculum development within the conservatoire landscape, knowledge of the learning culture at play may prove a valuable tool.

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