# 'It makes you think anything is possible': Representing diversity in music theory pedagogy

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*This paper critiques a traditional approach to music theory pedagogy. It argues that music theory courses should draw on pedagogies that reflect the diversity and pluralism inherent in 21st century music making. It presents the findings of an action research project investigating the experiences of undergraduate students undertaking an innovative contemporary art music theory course. It describes the students' struggle in coming to terms with a course that integrated composing, performing, listening and analysing coupled with what for many was their first exposure to the diversity of contemporary art music. The paper concludes with suggesting that the approach could be adopted more widely throughout music programs.*

## Introduction

The most characteristic feature of 21st century music is its diversity. The Internet-fuelled explosion in music communication has resulted in unprecedented pluralism. Academic approaches to music have also become far more inclusive, in the context of postmodern understandings, so that the purview of 'contemporary music' in universities is now much wider than in previous generations, when large areas of music (such as the majority of popular music) would be routinely excluded from the definition of the term (Monelle, 1996). Such exclusion is difficult to maintain in the current context of pluralism, which Mellers links with democracy:

> The most distinctive characteristic of the age we live in may be its extreme pluralism, which is an indirect consequence of the triumph of democratic principle and of the sheer size of the industrialised communities we inhabit. When social groups remain relatively small, self-contained, and regional, continuing customs and codes of value may be meaningful, whereas this is virtually impossible in the multifarious congregations of races, religions, creeds, castes and classes spawned by our industrial technocracies. A global village is a contradiction in terms, though the phrase is pertinent to 'the way we live now'. (Mellers, 1998, p. 60)

Teaching contemporary music theory, then, presents new challenges. How does an educator accurately reflect the diversity of current music without overwhelming students in an ocean of complexity? This paper approaches the question through critiquing traditional music theory pedagogy and examining student experiences of a university course devoted to 'contemporary art music' theory.

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In the course, 'contemporary art music' is treated as an enormously diverse pocket of musical practice, but only one of a great number of co-existing musics that make up 'contemporary music', defined as any music being made now. Contemporary art music, then, is approached as a subset of contemporary music. Contemporary art music is notoriously difficult to define, or even name. Various terms, including postclassical, avant-garde, 'new music' and many others have been tried (Oteri, 2005). This difficulty presents a challenge for those designing and teaching music theory courses.

### Traditional and new curricula

In recent years there have been debates in conservatoires and university music departments over curriculum development and pedagogy. Some debates have been prompted by the expense of the one-to-one studio teaching model, while others have critiqued traditional curricula as been archaic and anachronistic (McKendry, 2011 a & b; Sarath, 1995; Tregear, 2014). As a consequence, some higher education music programs are currently undergoing radical shifts in pedagogy and content, characterised by a rejection of the hierarchical 'mentor-protégé' model (Tregear, 2014, p. 26) in favour of a democratic and independent learning approach aimed at developing broad skills and creativity (Sarath, 1995; Tregear, 2014).

The new curriculum approaches are underpinned by postmodernist theory (Elliott, 2001). In doing so they celebrate pluralism and reject the 'tyranny of canon' (McKendry, 2011, p. 133). They integrate performing, composing, arranging and improvising with music theory, aural training and history (Elliott, 2001; McKendry, 2011; Tregear, 2014) creating a 'conservatoire sans frontiers' (Tregear, 2014, p. 32). These new approaches have obvious implications for contemporary art music theory curriculum and pedagogy, accentuated by difficulties in diversity and definition as mentioned above.

### Music theory pedagogy

The scholarly literature dealing with music theory pedagogy has tended to bypass difficulties in defining contemporary art music in focusing on early repertoires of Western art music and on approaches using Western staff notation (Rogers, 1984). Where listening is emphasised, the focus is often directed towards particular dimensions of music salient in notation, especially patterns of pitch (Rogers, 1984). Along with privileging staff notation, the literature is strongly focused on the past. Where more recent music is included, it is often focused on a small subset of contemporary music, namely 'post-tonal' music, which appears to be selected for its focus on structures in pitch and rhythm, rather than on elements that are more resistant to representation in staff notation.

In these ways, music theory pedagogy follows its source discipline, music theory, which has long been criticised for overlooking musical dimensions that may be central to particular music genres (McClary, 1990; Middleton, 1990). Critics of the discipline of music theory have examined its foundational assumptions, including autonomy of the work, aesthetic universality, and objectivity. They argue that these assumptions are not universal, but instead suited to a limited area of music, namely 'common practice' Western art music (Green, 1988; Shaw-Miller, 1993; You Young, 2006).

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Music theory has responded by broadening its outlook, both in methodology and subject matter. It is increasingly common for the major music theory journals to include scholarly analyses of popular music genres such as heavy metal (Pieslak, 2007), electronic dance music (Butler, 2005), pop and rock (Capuzzo, 2004), and soul (Fink, 2011). However, music theory pedagogy, at least as reflected in many undergraduate music theory courses continues to follow universalising assumptions of earlier music theory.

Wason argues that music theory courses have thereby avoided contemporary music and have retreated to historical approaches:

> Given the loss of a common language of harmonic tonality in the twentieth century, and the flux of competing musical styles and languages that rushed in to fill the vacuum, it is little wonder that the music taught to students was by and large made up of a historical canon of musical artworks; no longer did music teachers convey a living, vibrant language, let alone contribute to this language themselves as composers. Perhaps the plethora of co-existing musical styles that characterizes our contemporary scene – Leonard Meyer's 'dynamic steady-state' – makes such a coupling between contemporary composition and theory instruction no longer a practical reality. If this is so, though, the status of the professional music theory instructor seems to have ironically returned at least in part to that of the speculative *musicus* of medieval lore – who is a 'knower' but not necessarily a 'doer'. To that extent, the academization of music theory may be seen to have come at a cost. (Wason, 2002, p. 73)

We are left then with a serious disconnection between higher education music programs and real-world musical practice. Current musical reality calls for a reimagining of musicianship (Hugill, 2008), which may be termed 'multicoded' (Hugill, 2008; Webb, 2008), and the challenge is to incorporate this new understanding into higher education.

The following section discusses the curriculum design of a contemporary music theory course in an Australian research-intensive university. The course has been designed with the aims of addressing the challenges described above.

### Curriculum design: course context

The course, Music Techniques 4, has long been a core course in the Bachelor of Music and Bachelor of Arts (Music) programs. It is the fourth in a sequence of music theory courses, which follow an historical progression through Western art music from Baroque music to contemporary music. The first three courses in the sequence tend towards a traditional transmission-learning model, focusing on a stable, defined corpus of musical knowledge. Before being redesigned, Music Techniques 4 followed a similar approach, focusing on analysis of twelve prescribed compositions from the canon of modernist European art music (including works such as Schoenberg's *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op. 11, Boulez's *Structures*, Webern's Op. 22 Quartet and Messiaen's *Canteyodjaya*). Learners demonstrated their understanding of a predefined set of compositional techniques, centred on music notation and the conception of compositions as autonomous, static musical objects.

As discussed in the previous section, the primary challenge in redesigning the course was to reflect current musical practice more consciously without sacrificing challenge or

rigour. Multicoded musicianship skills (Webb, 2008) and the integration of composition, performance, analysis, listening and discussion were seen as essential. There was also a goal to expand conceptions of music beyond a focus on staff notation, in line with the orientation of much contemporary music. Thus, the course was designed to achieve the learning outcomes valued by a multicoded approach, and a pluralistic music culture, rather than a traditional approach. This also meant that the learning outcomes were intentionally different from those achieved using a more traditional approach.

To address this approach, the following course objectives were developed:

- Adopt composing approaches and techniques for creating music of many genres
- Understand strategies in composing Western art music of the 20th and 21st centuries
- Work collaboratively in developing creative musical performances

Overall, the revised course used the 'comprehensive/creative' curriculum model outlined by Sarath (1995, p. 32) that develops comprehensive skills, is underpinned by 'hands-on creative based learning', 'approaches tradition as a living source of creative and expressive tools' and 'transcends chronological and geographical boundaries'.

This constructivist, learner-centred approach (Hanley & Montgomery 2005) enabled students to experience knowledge as internal and subjective rather than objective and residing in experts. It involved independent learning to allow individual pathways through the knowledge. The resulting specialised knowledge of each student was shared with the class, and used in collaborative work.

### Design of the course

Teaching activities were designed to foster multi-coded musicianship, integrating composition, performance, analysis, listening and discussion. Lectures were used primarily to provide an overview and context of musical techniques, exposing students to a broad scope of musical ideas. For example, the technique of Hocket may be explained and illustrated with a wide range of examples including 13th century French music, Akadinda performances in Uganda, 1950s American popular songs such as *Mr Sandman*, contemporary European orchestral music by Thomas Adès, jazz by Herbie Hancock, vocal music by Meredith Monk, Peruvian *siku* ensembles, heavy metal by Meshuggah and current indie rock by The Dirty Projectors. Tutorials focused on discussion of the musical ideas and techniques, including student presentations of their research into techniques, and on workshopping of student compositions. Students worked independently on researching music techniques in a selected area of focus, and on composing and arranging music.

There were two assessment items:

1. Web page and presentation – each student selected an area of focus to investigate, summarise and share with the class through a seminar presentation and web page
2. Performances of original and collaborative compositions. Two individual compositions focused on a specific technique, and a collaborative composition focused on integration of multiple techniques. All were performed in class and received peer commentary. Assessment focused on performance, compositional use of techniques, and critical engagement with other students' work.

It was recognised that it would be particularly important to evaluate the redesigned course due to the innovations above. Thus, an action research project was initiated to investigate students' experiences in the course. This paper reports the first cycle of the research, and reports briefly on subsequent iterations. In the next section we describe the methodology for the study, followed by a report on the students' experience in the course.

### Methodology

This study took a qualitative, interpretive research approach. This approach was chosen to be consistent with the constructivist nature of the course and with our aims of investigating the lived experience from the perspective of the students. This was particularly important due to the new design of the course, which, as described above was a radical departure from the traditional curriculum.

The data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with 11 students (five male, six female). The students were volunteers from a class of 65 students. The interviews ranged in length from 30–60 minutes and were conducted shortly after the semester finished by the second author, an educational researcher who was not on the course teaching team. The interview questions were designed to explore the learning outcomes of the course:

1. What have you learned about creating music through doing the course?
2. What techniques have you learned in the course that you think have allowed you to become more expressive?
3. What ways do you think the course helped develop your musical creativity?
4. What was it like to collaborate on a composition?
5. How would you describe the course to a friend who was considering enrolling in it?

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically looking for aspects of similarity and difference. Following Norton (2009), a number of iterations were undertaken, involving: immersion, generating categories, deleting categories, merging categories into themes, checking themes and linking themes. Immersion consisted of repeated readings and summarisation of each student's reported experience. Categories were generated from each transcript describing the students' description of their learning and what they thought the course was about. The categories were then pooled, and some categories were amalgamated. Themes were created by drawing on the prominent similarities and differences described in the categories. The themes were then illustrated using quotations from the transcripts.

### Results

In this section, we present the themes illustrating the dominant ways in which the students responded to the redesigned course. It should be noted that it was apparent from the outset that students expected the Music Techniques 4 course to continue in the same manner as the previous Music Techniques courses. Furthermore, it was clear that the nature of 20th and 21st century Western art music and the emphasis on pluralism and multi-coded musicianship was a departure from students' previous musical experiences.

Accordingly, themes 1–5 reflect strong affect as students reflected upon their experience in the course. Theme 1 describes the confusion over the integration of composition, performance and music theory. Theme 2 illustrates the range of strong positive and negative feelings students experienced. Theme 3 describes the ways the students responded to independent and peer learning approaches. Theme 4 is a transformational theme, where students describe learning to become more expressive in broadening their thinking and understanding. Theme 5 describes some of the compositional skills students reported developing that led to a feeling of liberation and a sense of freedom. Finally, theme 6 does not highlight affect, rather it describes the types of compositional and theory skills and knowledge students reported learning in the course. As will be seen the themes are related. Taken together they represent the journey that students experienced in undertaking a course that challenged their assumptions through the use of innovative pedagogy and content.

### Theme 1 – The integration of composition, performance and music theory

Students described the course as being about performance and composition as well as music theory.

> A theory course based on composition. (S5)

> Theories of composition with performance aspects. (S9)

> A performance-based theory course. (S8)

> Learn to compose better, and play better . . . learn to apply in your performance and composition. (S7)

In general, the integration of composition, performance and music theory caused students confusion and anxiety. Students had expected a traditional music theory course, along the lines of their previous experience i.e. being given explanations and written exercises to demonstrate application of music theory.

> This is completely different to the previous Music Techniques courses we've done . . . With this one, we turned up or we read the course profile when it became available, and all of us just went, "What! This isn't what we signed up for!" [laughs] . . . I did learn a lot from it, as much as it was a shock at the beginning. (S11)

> The previous Techniques courses, they presented us with information, and 'You have to know this.' And 'Now you're going to demonstrate that you know this' and we'd do assignments every second week or something. And, you know, demonstrate that you can write a three-part fugue, demonstrate that you can write in two-to-one counterpoint. Demonstrate that you can write a chord progression, write in four-part harmony. This course didn't really do that. (S8)

The requirement to perform a cross-genre adaptation of a Michael Jackson song was particularly confronting for the class.

> He [the lecturer] certainly did things very differently. I was a bit sceptical at the start. Especially when he was like, 'Do a Michael Jackson cover song.' I don't know much about Michael Jackson, I never listened to much Michael Jackson at all, but it was fine, because you just listen to it a lot, and figure out how it works. (S6)

> At the beginning of the semester I thought it was really ridiculous to write a Michael Jackson song. I think a lot of us found that was really strange. As the course went on we realized that it probably fitted what was taught really well. (S5)

### Theme 2 – Musical content

The content of the course was also challenging. For many students it was their first introduction to contemporary art music.

> Half the stuff he [the lecturer] was showing us I didn't think was music. It didn't constitute music . . . Maybe it's noise. Organised noise. (S8)

> At first I was a little bit like 'Oh why are we even doing this for?' but then, once you try and get your head around it, it is actually really interesting. (S1)

Students described contemporary art music as 'wacky', 'weird', 'crazy' and 'out there'. For instance, student 8 found the 'free thinking' approach very confronting. She said:

> It was very new and so new that I couldn't really keep it in my head and use it. Because it was so much weird, crazy stuff. That it was just lots of new stuff. Because a lot of these techniques are so out there. Because of the period we live in everybody's so free thinking, it's like 'Let's try this'. If some crazy person had tried to do that in the eighteen century it would have been like, 'You can't do that. That's not how it works.' But you can do whatever you want now. Experiment with musical instruments. Let's get a saxophone mouthpiece and stick it in a carrot! (S8)

### Theme 3 – Affect

The affective impact of the course was considerable, both positive and negative. Students described being 'scared', and 'shocked' with the different approach, and also confronted at the thought of composing and performing in front of their peers.

> It was kind of scary to have other people hear something that you've composed. Just because I've never done that before, so I was very inhibited, but when you have to do it you realise that it's not such an impossible thing. It was good. (S11)

> I'm really glad we pushed out of our comfort zones with a new teacher and a new way of teaching . . . quite a significant part of the class really disliked it in the beginning. It took us quite a while to warm up to the idea that it's not a really bad idea after all. (S5)

Students also described the course as, 'fun' and 'enjoyable' (S1, S3, S4, S7, S9, S10). This positive affect was related to both the group work and the 'liberating' feeling of having the sort of 'freedom' and 'expression' that the course allowed. It was also related to the independent learning aspects of the course. By contrast, the previous theory courses and the Australian Music Examination Board syllabus (which was mentioned in many responses) were taught traditionally.

> Before [in the previous theory courses], we never really had the freedom to do anything like that, because they'd always give you a line and you'd have to harmonize to that in the style, or whatever. You wouldn't ever get your own free creativity to do . . . I thought it [this course] was scary, but still at the same time fun, because you got to do your own thing. (S9)

> There was a lot more freedom in this course. (S3)

> I'm really glad we pushed out of our comfort zones with . . . a new way of teaching. (S5)

> I would say it was fun, great and different. Because, as I said before, we teach ourselves, rather than listening to [the] lecturers. (S7)

> It was fun using them [the techniques], because I had never used them before . . . [the Michael Jackson group composition] was fun, too, because we could be as expressive as we wanted. (S7)

> [Collaborating] was actually a lot of fun . . . I find that everyone has so many ideas and there are often things you haven't thought of yourself, and you just open other doors from their point of view. So that's a lot of fun and it's really interesting. (S1)

> It was, I want to say, fun . . . it's something entirely your own, and then you get a group of people together to perform it. It was a really enjoyable experience. (S10)

Part of the positive affect was the confidence students developed by composing and performing their compositions. Students were surprised that their compositions turned out so well.

> I didn't really realise I could write decent music. (S5)

> It has certainly made me realise that I'm better at this than I like to give myself credit for . . . you sometimes surprise yourself how well it works . . . the people in the group thought it sounded really cool. (S6)

> I don't have much faith in my ability to compose. Which is what was good about the subject, because it kind of opened that up. (S10)

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### Theme 4 - Independent and peer learning

Independent and peer learning were noted as distinctive features in the course, departing from expectations of having 'everything laid out' (S11), within clear boundaries. Independent learning featured in all the assessment. For instance, students needed to choose a technique, research it and present the results of their research to the class. In the Michael Jackson assignment, students also needed to choose the song, and make all the arranging decisions. Students described this as 'teaching themselves'.

> People don't realise the potential of the course just because a lot of it is left up to them. (S6)

> We were teaching ourselves really. (S7)

> His [the lecturer's] approach is very much that we teach ourselves, through doing the wikis and everything. That sort of left us to choose what we wanted to focus on really. I chose topics that I found easy, that I didn't have to do a lot of work on. Because I'm a bit lazy like that. (S8)

> We had to be creative and rely on ourselves more, rather than having everything laid out for us. I think that was good, because we had to be a little more independent with our learning styles, and also with teaching each other and helping each other. (S11)

Learning from other's presentations was in contrast to a traditional approach focused on teacher-directed transmission of information.

> You come to class and you hear someone's performance and you think 'Well, OK, I didn't think of that.' You're always sort of learning something, it's not just repeated knowledge. (S9)

> [The lecturer] gets everyone involved and asks for people's opinions, whereas previously we would sit there for two hours and someone would talk. (S10)

Students were required to work collaboratively in order to perform the two composition assignments. These consisted of 1) working with a trio to present a six-to-ten minute set of compositions illustrating the use of contemporary art music techniques, and 2) working with a quartet or quintet to present a cross-genre arrangement of a Michael Jackson song, making use of contemporary art music techniques.

Students commented on a range of aspects in relation to their group experience. As discussed above, a primary theme was one of fun, while another was the positive contribution of group members. There was very little negativity associated with the group process and outcome. Students reported learning from their peers in terms of having a range of opinion and knowledge to draw from.

> Everyone has so many ideas and there are often things you haven't thought of yourself. And you just open other doors from their point of view ... [It showed me] how it's

possible to use everyone to create something ... Just working with a really solid group towards a common goal. (S1)

Opened up more ideas – when you work on your own, you know what's going to happen. (S6)

They offer suggestions as well as they make sure that your music most likely makes sense, your technique. Because each member they offer different opinions as well as knowledge. (S2)

### Theme 5 – Becoming more expressive

Students reported that the course allowed them to think differently about performing and generally be freer in the way they approached their music making. For instance, students said that learning contemporary techniques helped them to understand contemporary music, and thus have more insights into performing contemporary works.

[Learning the techniques has] helped me think about 'what is the composer trying to do here?' [It] helps you get the character of the piece ... helps point you towards what the purpose might have been ... helps you perform with more insights. And rather than creating an arbitrary character on what you think is happening in the piece, it helps make the character possibly more what the composer's intention might have been. (S1)

If I ever get a piece like that [using serialism], I can go through and work out how it works. It'll make it easier to play, maybe. (S8)

Student 11 had previously found contemporary art music repertoire daunting. Her experience in the course has de-mystified this music for her.

[The course] made me try it [performing contemporary art music] ... It's given me a better understanding of the techniques that the composers have used. So when I look at it now, I don't just think 'Oh that's horrible, that does sound terrible'. I can say 'Oh, but they've used this technique, and therefore this is probably what they were aiming for'. Or do some research to really find out what they were aiming for. So that's been helpful, because that's been my general thing with 20th century music, to look at it and go 'Oh, no, not that! It looks terrible!' (S11)

Likewise, Student 5 described creating more meaning from contemporary art music that previously she had considered as 'noise'.

It used to be to me, 'this is just noise.' Like modern music is just noise. I never really understood that. And now when I listen to it, and I think of ideas to compose, I come up with understanding there's a reason behind that, say drawing on the influence of tribal rhythms. I think rhythm in modern music is a lot more common than in previous periods. I'm really interested in that. (S5)

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The theatricality of many of the student performances made some students realise that they could be more uninhibited while performing.

> In my performance it could be influential in opening up more theatricality . . . I found that a lot of it had very dramatic tendencies. (S10)

> Performance-wise I think I'd probably be more extravert . . . they're so into it, it makes you just want to watch them. (S9)

Being exposed to contemporary art music and using the techniques in composing allowed students to be freer in their approach. Students reported broadening their mind, realising that there are 'limitless' possibilities, and being given the freedom to 'think outside the square'.

> [It] opened my mind up . . . opened my eyes that there's other ways to do it . . . there's a big world out there. (S3)

> Broadening what you had previously thought and been taught about music. (S10)

> This course has given me the opportunity to be creative and to explore my own creative bounds rather than actually teaching me anything particularly material about being creative or how I should be creative . . . It's just allowed me to express myself . . . being given the freedom to do completely whacky things without being penalised for it . . . given me the chance to find out what I can do. (S6)

> [It] makes you think anything is possible. What you think is a boundary may not actually be a boundary . . . You shouldn't limit your creativity to what you think is a boundary. Try and think outside the square . . . I think it just opens your mind to things that you didn't think were possible before . . . thinking outside the box is one of the things I've learned. (S9)

Students said that not being bounded by the parameters they were used to in previous courses 'liberated' them. This included not being required to notate their compositions.

> I felt really liberated in writing that because I did not have to notate it. (S5)

> I'd say from my secondary school to now, when I compose everything is very harmonious, and it has to follow all the rules, mostly from Baroque. But modernism compels you to think outside that Baroque era . . . modernism puts me outside and lets me do other sorts of techniques, try to test them out. In the end they sound wonderful. They do . . . It just offers me a lot of options to write a song. It doesn't have to be very stiff. It's freestyle. (S2)

> Before, we never really had the freedom to do anything like that, because [in previous courses] they'd always give you a line and you'd have to harmonise to that in the style, or whatever. You wouldn't ever get your own free creativity. (S9)

### *Theme 6 – Learning through composing*

For many students, the course enabled them to develop their composition skills beyond those required by a traditional theory course where compositions typically take the form of short exercises to practice using a particular technique such as fugue, voice leading, modulation etc. In those more traditional approaches, students would be given a range of parameters such as the length of the exercise. As student 11 comments:

> They'd set us a task. We'd be working on impressionism, for example, and then they'd say, 'OK, with these characteristics, compose a 20-bar piece in an impressionist style.' (S11)

Student 11 also explained that she approached composing differently in the course, using trial and error. Her usual approach was to start with an idea of how she wanted the piece to sound. But in this course, she wasn't familiar with the sounds that were possible so she had to start with experimentation.

> I think I did it backwards to what I normally do in that I was just experimenting. Then if something worked, then I'd keep that and then experiment again till I found something that worked and keep that . . . rather than starting with what I wanted it to sound like. (S11)

Another point of difference was that the performance aspect of the course allowed students to actually hear their compositions.

> I never knew how my compositions sound like. [In the previous courses] we were made to write fugues or four-part harmony . . . you don't really have an idea of how it sounds like. (S5)

Several students mentioned that the course enabled them to learn to write for a range of instruments, and to learn about the characteristics of instruments, for example range and timbre. One student mentioned asking her group members to be careful when writing for clarinet across the break (S11), while others said:

> I learned about their range. And certainly that the tenor saxophone is very loud and hard to play softly. You have to write their dynamics down a little. Otherwise they bury everything else. (S8)

> I learned a lot from them [my group]. Like the violin, viola range. The sounds, you hear the sounds from the other compositions. (S4)

> You learn to write things people can play because there was one piece that I wrote that was for voice in soprano and I had alternating quavers throughout the piece to imitate a tape loop and I think she almost died singing it. (S5)

For some it was the first time they had written an extended composition beyond short exercises.

> I think I might have learned to respect compositions more. I know that sounds kind of silly, but before [in previous courses] I was like 'Oh no, I have to actually write my sixth grade AMEB [Australian Music Examinations Board]. I'll just do some nice harmonies here.' And now I have to actually put that thought process in. You have to think of an idea and make it go long enough to actually be counted as a full-length performance. It just made me really sit down and think 'Wow, it really takes a lot to compose something yourself. (S9)

### Discussion

The findings illustrate the change from a 'conventional' to a 'comprehensive/creative' model (Sarath, 2010, p. 32) at a single course level presented opportunities and barriers. The opportunities included the freedom of creative expression through a pluralist, multicoded approach, whereas the barriers included student resistance due to the non-traditional and unfamiliar approach.

The strong affect that characterised students' experiences indicated that there were opportunities to engage with their emotions and that more needed to be managed than simply musical techniques. When moving outside expected teaching directions, it is crucial to take account of how this is likely to be confronting and stressful. However, this does not mean we should avoid confrontation. Students who experienced the course as transformative reported feelings of liberation and freedom, while students who reported more negative responses (a much smaller number) nevertheless recognised it as a powerful learning experience.

The course was redesigned in subsequent iterations to promote clearer communication of the goals and objectives. This included discussions of how the course differed from previous theory courses, clarification of the schedule and expectations, and more frequent feedback and guidance, particularly in the early weeks. Brief analytical tasks were also introduced in conjunction with more musical examples discussed in class, so that techniques could be seen in diverse settings before being used creatively. Before composing was attempted, students were guided in improvisation exercises as a way to reduce creative inhibitions and demonstrate to themselves that they were able to invent music much as they invent spoken utterances. The first analysis and discussion activities were centred on recordings of class improvisations, convincing the students that they had creative ability that simply needed releasing and refining in the subsequent compositional activities.

The effectiveness of these changes is suggested by increasingly positive feedback from students. However, there is perhaps an unnecessarily large burden of challenge placed on this course, as students are required to negotiate not only new musical techniques, but also unfamiliar ways of learning. This could be avoided by a more widespread use throughout the music program of learning methods focused on independence, pluralism and peer learning. Notably, after taking this course, students have frequently requested more opportunities for similar learning approaches in other courses. There is no reason why such approaches cannot be more thoroughly integrated into more traditional music learning.

### Conclusion

The experience of students in this course illustrates the risks and opportunities in taking a postmodern approach. As Elliott (p. 33) argues 'on one hand, today's plurality

of perspectives holds enormous potential for individual growth, collaborative research and democratic development; on the other hand, the pluralism and ambiguity of our postmodern situation means bewilderment, frustration and conflict for many.' As the design of this course shows, music theory can be taught with a focus on present-day music making without shying away from its pluralistic complexity. It can be taught by integrating composing, performing, listening and analysing. This approach to teaching can be applied beyond music theory into other areas of music education. The diversities in music history, for example, can be teased out by independent explorations of compositional activities led by students. And teaching of music theory from earlier periods need not exclude autonomy and pluralism as students explore diverse emphases. By these means, a whole program of music education can be developed focused on pluralistic learning, preparing students for the musical reality that awaits them on graduation.

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