Music industry education: Current approaches and future directions

Kristina Kelman

Abstract

In the late 1990s, the emergence of the digital era posed enormous challenges for the music industry, but afforded the development of new business models and creative platforms on which artists can build their careers. There are implications for music industry education in the higher education sector. If what we need to know today is likely to be out of date tomorrow, what then do we teach? And if a successful music industry career requires not just domain knowledge, but experience and the development of a more implicit and entrepreneurial suite of skills, then how do we teach it? This paper aims to evaluate and propose a re-design of the music industry unit at the author's university through interviews with students who have completed the unit, and music industry educators from the USA, UK and Australia. Consistent themes included practical experience, engagement with industry, student-negotiated assessment, and the development of entrepreneurial skills. The data also revealed mixed sentiments around the role of peer-reviewed literature and academic writing in such courses. The benefits of the research highlight how collaborations raise awareness of practice, which have the potential to promote such activities in helping to reshape music industry education in higher education.

Keywords: *Music industry; Authentic assessment; Entrepreneurial skills; Industry engagement; Music industry education; Students as partners*

1. Introduction

In the late 1990s, the music industry was transformed by the emergence of technological innovations such as the MP3 and peer-to-peer networks, which "induced the digitalisation of the record industry" (Moyon & Lecocq, 2018, p. 2). Moyon and Lecocq (2013) explain that by the late 1990s, the music industry had become a very profitable business, with annual global sales over $40 billion. The main record labels (BMG, EMI, Sony, Universal and Warner) were vertically integrated, that is, from artist detection to record distribution. This business model involved the major record label being responsible for discovering talent, producing and marketing the artist, and manufacturing and packaging the tapes, records and eventually, CDs. Under this model, artists were the record industry's fundamental resources (Moyon & Lecocq, 2013). The control held by the major labels during this time meant that independent artists had very little access to opportunities, distribution avenues and promotional exposure (Hughes et al., 2013). The industry was also a copyright industry and, as such, was able to create value and make profits.

The emergence of the digital era posed enormous challenges for the prevailing music industry model. Despite these "disruptive" innovations, opportunities appeared to develop alternative distribution channels and to sell music differently (Moyon & Lecocq, 2013, p. 2). These new, democratised technologies led to the decentralisation of the major label monopoly offering artists new creative platforms on which to build a career (Huges et al., 2013).

1.1 Implications for music industry education

This multi-faceted and continually evolving landscape has implications for music industry education. On one hand by equipping students with an awareness of these industries, they will be able to make more informed career choices (Hughes et al., 2013). However, the range of platforms and opportunities challenge the traditional notions of music industry education. The music business is volatile due to "constantly changing technologies, legal frameworks, social behaviours, economic conditions and the transient tastes of the listening public" (Bruenger, 2015, p. 101) and that it is difficult to speculate what is going to happen next. In this sense, the main concern for music industry education is its ability to stay current. Bruenger (2015) explains that there is a tendency for music industry educators to teach "what we know" and "how it works" now, but that in some cases the information will be out-dated by the end of the semester (p. 102). What then do we teach and how do we teach it?

Chase and Hatschek (2010) held a meeting with industry executives to ask the question "What skills and competencies should a newly-hired employee possess in order to succeed in today's music business?" Responses included, looking for potential employees that had emotional, social, intellectual and musical competence. Other industry representatives deemed the ability to interpret the nuances of the industry as vital for success, along with personalities that can collaborate with artists at a mature and productive level. Chase and

Hatschek then questioned traditional education methods in much of American higher education, suggesting that the lecture-essay-examination model, would not equip students with the knowledge, skills and experiences required for a successful music industry career. Bruenger (2015) advocates for a curriculum that reflects the evolving complexity of the music industry, and advocates for the development of adaptive capacity in students.

Emanating from the discussion of this literature, there are potential ways forward for the holistic development of musicians in higher education. This research aims to garner international perspectives and current approaches from music industry educators in order to inform the re-design of QUT's introductory music industry unit, which has previously been delivered in a traditional lecture format.

2. Methodology

This paper uses a reflection-based approach proposed by Kreber (1999). This approach is based on her conception, 'academics who practice the scholarship of teaching engage in content, process and premise reflection on research-based and experience-based knowledge in the areas of instruction, pedagogy and curriculum, in ways that can be peer reviewed' (Kreber & Cranton, 2000, p477).

Trigwell and Shale (2004) acknowledge that universities have been moving towards a more learner-centered approach, but they point out that students still do not appear as "partners in learning" but rather objects of concern, objects of analysis or passive consumers (p. 534). They advocate for teaching as an activity that emerges in collaboration with students as partners in learning. McKinney (2015, para 4) also believes that students can implicitly and explicitly be a source of ideas for SoTL projects. She strongly recommends obtaining student voice using focus groups.

Schulman (1993) describes the life of scholars who are members of active communities in which we gather to exchange our findings, our methods and our excuses (p. 6). He goes onto explain that the scholarship of learning and teaching should be a form of community property that can be shared, discussed, critiqued, exchanged and built on (p. 7). McKinney (2015, para 7) recommends that our colleagues be 'sounding boards' for our ideas, and that we should listen and talk with them about our disciplines.

In keeping with this approach, I aim to describe current approaches to music industry education through collaboration and exchange with students and music industry educators. Data was collected through a focus group with QUT students who have previously taken the unit, and semi-structured interviews with nine music industry educators and colleagues across the USA, UK and Australia. For the purposes of anonymity, I will refer to individuals using references such as 'student 1' or 'educator 3'.

This paper does not aim to evaluate or rate individual programs, but rather opens up a communal space for conversation, reflection and a shared evaluation of the current landscape.

3. Findings and discussion

Students and teachers openly shared both positive and negative critiques of their programs. Thematic analysis of transcripted data revealed consistent themes across both groups, which included the importance of practical experience, engagement with the industry, and authentic assessment.

3.1 Practical experience

There was discussion around how music industry education is delivered through practical activities, which ensure currency and provide experiential opportunities for students to develop intangible skills.

Unanimously, all the QUT students enjoyed the lectures and were "happy with the variety of topics covered" (Student 3). However, students recommended that the tutorials become "more project-based" (Student 2) and not just about "going over the readings, which was super infuriating" (Student 3) with student 5 pointing out, "I can do that myself".

Educator 5's approach resonates with the students' ideas.

> I basically did away from the idea that students do one reading a week before a tutorial, and then come prepared to answer questions on one reading, I just don't think that's how students learn. (Interview, 14 Sept, 2016)

He recommended, "if you can convince timetabling to let go of the lectures, and just do two hour workshops, then that's the way to go".

Students enthusiastically brainstormed ideas for tutorial activities including: "well you could create an electronic press kit for your artist, write up a bio, make sure press shots are in order, all that stuff" (student 3), and "writing grant applications and festival applications" (student 5). Student 1 made reference to the importance of developing intangible skills:

> I get really scared doing a lot of things for the first time, whether that is sending an email or calling someone, if you do it once, its so much easier next time…my motto is make mistakes in uni, so I'm trying to make as many as I can now! (Focus group, student 1)

Interestingly this same concern came up in my interview with music educator 4 where he reflected on a recent scenario:

> A past student managing an artist for a couple of years skyped me during the Summer, he said 'I know everything about it, but how do I actually talk to a record label and an

> A&R person' which is interesting, something that hadn't occurred to me. (Interview, Sept 15, 2016)

He described role-playing as a strategy they introduced into the curriculum last year:

> Everyone had a different role and we gave them genuine music industry cases with the names changed, and they had to react to whatever situation we gave them. I think we could find other ways of doing that, that'd be great.

Role-playing and games were also mentioned by three of the other educators as valuable learning activities, which Brindisi and Sinkovich (2016) believe equips students with skills such as "critical thinking, creativity and teamwork" (para 37). Educator 8 refers to a weeklong music industry simulation game that students take as a course for credit in their Winter break:

> The faculty controls the game and take on different roles each day. Each team has their own office, and the deal is that they form a record company and sign artists to record deals and they kind of play against each other, and try to earn as much money in this game world as possible. (Interview, Sept 30, 2016)

Educator 1 has also shared her music industry game at international conferences, and has recently sent me the resources to trial the game with my future classes. In the spirit of acknowledging teaching and learning as community property, music educator 1 has asked other educators to film their classes trialling her game, and provide feedback in order to refine and improve the game's properties.

3.2 Engagement with industry and teachers as practitioners

In my focus group with QUT students, several themes emerged in regards to why they felt industry engagement is a crucial component of the unit. Student 1 reflected on his favourite lecture - an industry panel, with all the students agreeing that there should have been more. Student 1 also spoke passionately about how these types of learning experiences inspire him, "it generates a really good energy when you see people up there talking about things, and you feel like, I wanna fucking do that!". Student 3 agreed and compared those sentiments in relation to the tutor, "it's great that he has industry experience, but it doesn't come across as a passion rooting for the music industry, but 'ah fuck, I have to turn up to this class' instead". In my interviews with the educators, we all agreed that industry panels are useful, but that sometimes getting the right industry professionals in front of our classes can be challenging. Music educator 4 reflects on previous situations, "they don't always relate well, they tell students that 'learning about it is useless, you just got to do it'. Putting those people in front, it sends everyone backwards" (Interview, Sept 15, 2016). Music educator 3 errs on the side of caution believing that it is important to "keep the industry at arms length" and give the students "an opportunity to develop their voice" (Interview, Sept 12, 2016). All of the music

educators I interviewed have come from the music industry and believe that being active is a way of having credibility with the students, "I've been able to get permission to continue my outside work as a manager, whilst working in academia, I think that has really enhanced my teaching (Music educator 5, Interview, Sept 14, 2016).

Currency through connection with industry was valued highly by students. Student 1 reflected on a guest lecture about streaming models that he rated as one of the best parts of the unit, "there's a culture here of 'Spotify is so bad', but we need to know more about streaming, adapt or die!". In my conversations with the educators around maintaining currency, I found that all of their programs involved students visiting live music venues, watching live shows and talking with musicians and the various industry personnel – managers, sound engineers, venue owners etc. Music educator 7 explained, "I make that a requirement especially in the record label class, I mean how are they going to find music if they're not going out and being a part of the fabric of the community?" (Interview, Sept 15, 2016). Music educator 8 added, "as well as seeing 3 live performances, you also have to identify a mentor and reach out to them, and do an interview with them" (Interview, Sept 30, 2016). Music educator 2 stresses the importance of networking skills:

> you know the expression, it's not what you know, it's who you know, but I tell them it's both, what and who, and it's about building life long friendships and relationships, it's about engagement with other people, about community. (Interview, Sept 8, 2016)

Common across the data is the importance of connecting with the industry. The students have shown a desire for more of this interaction, and the educators are encouraging students to take initiative and an active role in the community. I have also observed how most of the educators are weaving this idea of community engagement into their assessment items. For example, Educator 1 uses a community grant to give students an opportunity to put on concerts in public spaces. The students are assessed on the success of the events, and their reflections on event management.

3.3 Authentic assessment

It was interesting to note that while the students wanted a more real-world approach to assessment, they also wanted more rigour, "we don't do enough academic writing in this course…it could easily be a first year unit" (Student 3). Educator 5 adopts a "more is more approach where I make the students do a literature review of quality peer-reviewed research…you're basically treating undergrad students like HDR" (Interview, Sept 14, 2016). However, educator 6 opposes this view stating, "it's not about academic writing and rigor, this is a moment where they can plan their career and think about how they're going to make money…and they need to know how to write an invoice" (Interview, Sept 14, 2016). Most of the educators I interviewed incorporate some peer-reviewed research, but in general agreed that news articles and case studies are more relevant. All of the educators require some sort

of critical review of literature, whether it is peer-reviewed or news, and this can take the form of written reports, journals, online blogs or presentations. In most cases, a final research paper allowing students to explore, in more depth, an area of personal interest is incorporated. The students unanimously agreed that having "options would be more useful and relevant" (student 7). Educator 4 started a student conference last year, where undergraduate students present their research. He explained, "they started to understand the academic side of it" (Interview, Sept 15, 2016).

Other assessment items giving students more independence and choice included a portfolio of tasks ranging from live music reviews, music industry service, a career plan, analysing recording contracts, doing a press kit, and working on the student record label.

4. Conclusion

Conducting research in a collaborative manner with both students and colleagues has been a useful and productive exercise. Authentic, practical, industry-connected, relevant and entrepreneurial are themes that resonate with my own educational philosophy, one that I have embraced as a practitioner, and a teacher in both secondary and higher education for over twenty years.

As a result of the research, I have made significant changes to the music industry unit. Having an experience-based, research-based and peer reviewed grounding provides an excellent justification for such changes:

Delivery of the unit:

One day intensive involving industry speakers on a range of topics

Weekly two-hour workshops involving both individual and group activities which may include games, role-playing, case studies, debates, research and discussions.

Assessment:

Portfolio of 5 tasks, which may be chosen from a variety of tasks, which may include, but not limited to, live performance reviews, industry service, career plans, contract interpretations, literature reviews, album reviews, interviews with industry, electronic press kit creation, marketing strategies for an artist, and poster/album artwork.

Research paper based on a question negotiated with the tutor. The best papers will be invited to present their paper in a Ted talk-style event called the QUT Music Biz Forum.

The benefits of this research highlight how collaborations raise awareness of practice, which have the potential to promote such activities in helping to reshape music industry education in higher education.

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