

**versus : Frameworks and Flexibility in Assessment
on an Edexcel BTEC Level 3 Diploma Popular Music Performance Program**

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Abstract

Assessment in music education is a perennial problem; while assessment is generally regarded as necessary, practices are widely accepted as imperfect. This philosophical study reports on research tackling axiological questions stemming from the author's perception of flaws in the application of grading rubrics to the assessment of students' work on a popular music performance program at a U.K. college. The author is a musician, a kit drummer, and administrator of this program. The study explains the context of the program and of the award to which it leads. The assessment system used is presented and discussed with reference to relevant literature. The qualitative judgments required for assessment in music may conflict with the constraints imposed by assessment rubrics. Music educators are often also musicians, whose depth of understanding could be more effectively deployed in more holistic systems of assessment. The question facing the music education community is how best to ensure consistency and rigor in appraising students' achievements. This paper concludes by calling for music educators to continue evaluating assessment procedures, and to ensure that assessments are designed and conducted in ways that are relevant and sensitive to learning contexts and practices.

Introduction

In their article on assessment and performance, Papageorgi and Hallam (2010) highlighted the pervasive perception of assessment of creative endeavors, such as musical performance, as less than ideal. As a part of this wider debate, the present paper reports on a piece of philosophical research from a “teacher research perspective” (

2009a, pp. 19-

learning outcomes. For instance, if in the Music Project unit below a student achieves “distinctions” on three learning outcomes but a “merit” on the fourth, the overall grade for that unit will be a “merit”

(Edexcel, 2009a, p. 25). This rule seems questionable, even in the context of the rubric, for three qua

It is apparent from the assessment and grading criteria that, despite being compartmentalized, assessment of learning outcomes still requires distinctly qualitative judgments on the part of the assessor, as noted above by Sadler (2009, p. 161). Lamont and Maton (2008, pp. 274-275) draw attention to this issue when they explore Edexcel GCSE (Level Two, QCF) music provision in the U.K. A degree of creativity is necessary to decide (Table 3) what counts as “artistic flair” in “the planning and preparation of a music event,” as these characteristics are inevitably subjectively displayed and appraised. It could also be awkward to arbitrate between where students “competently and positively” or merely “competently” contribute to the planning of an event (Edexcel, 2010c, p. 4), despite guidance provided by Edexcel for each BTEC learning outcome (Edexcel, 2010c, p. 7). To earn a distinction on the fourth learning outcome above, learners must “evaluate” by “analysing and evaluating.” This latter term seems somewhat superfluous, rendering little difference from the requirements for earning a merit where learners must simply “evaluate” by “analyzing.” After all, how could a student not “evaluate” by “evaluating”?

Since a degree of interpretation and artistry on the part of an assessor is inevitably required for him or her to engage meaningfully with BTEC

Developing as a Musical Ensemble” (Edexcel, 2009c). Students are assessed against these grading criteria in a class called Creative Ensemble in which they write and perform music in bands whose membership changes every few weeks. The distinction criterion requires that students “perform as (part of) a musical ensemble with flair and interpretation” (Edexcel, 2009c). Fulfilling this criterion assumes that students also achieve the Merit criterion—

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