

## **Submission from the Society for Music Education in Ireland (SMEI) in response to the NCCA's *Artistic Performance: Draft Specification for Junior Cycle Short Course***

*Inaugurated in 2010, the Society for Music Education in Ireland is an umbrella group representing music education and community music interests in Ireland. It is affiliated to the UNESCO founded International Society for Music Education*

As an organisation concerned with the music education and overall cultural enrichment of young people, the Society for Music Education in Ireland (SMEI) notes the publication of the *NCCA Draft Specification for the Junior Cycle Short Course: Artistic Performance* and welcomes the opportunity to respond to these specifications. We commend the work already done by the members of the NCCA committee responsible for drawing up these *Draft Specifications* and appreciate the enormous task in devising specifications which are applicable across the many disciplines within 'artistic performance'.

### **Meaningful learning in the arts: Participating in artistic performance**

It is well documented in education literature that learning in the Arts contributes to the cognitive, creative, social, and emotional development of the student, enhancing well-being and self-esteem, and is therefore fundamental to a well-rounded and holistic education. Elliott Eisner, for example, stated: 'many of the most complex and subtle forms of thinking take place when students have the opportunity to work meaningfully in the arts' (Eisner 2002, p. xii). Performing within the arts greatly fosters this 'meaningful' engagement and promotes experiential learning. However, it could be argued that all too often the Arts in general, and the Performing Arts in particular, occur at the periphery of the school curriculum. While school authorities and parents recognise and acknowledge the many benefits of engaging in the arts, the opportunity to engage meaningfully in artistic performance tends to take place within extra-curricular activities rather than within the core school curriculum. SMEI welcomes the NCCA's decision to position the performing arts as one of the short courses for which it will devise specifications. SMEI believes that this action encourages a necessary formal recognition of the importance of the place of the performing arts within the school curriculum.

Having acknowledged that, in principle, a short course in Artistic Performance is beneficial, in practice such a course could potentially run the risk of degenerating into a series of activities which are immediately enjoyable and occupy the student but are of minimum educative and artistic value. The 'pursuit of excellence' is a commonly heard phrase in contemporary educational discourse. To guard against artistic performance becoming a mindless activity lacking educative intention, the following question needs to be asked: what exactly is learned through participating in artistic performance? What is the educative intention of a teacher as he/she leads a student/group of students through an artistic performance course, and how do all participants (teacher *and* students) collaborate effectively to realise this ambition? David Elliott (1991, 1995, 2005) argues that music is something that people do and/or make. (This is applicable to all the performing arts.)

Focussing on the procedural essence of learning, he suggests that performing is both a source and form of musical knowledge. Musical knowledge and understanding as well as knowledge of self are acquired and constructed through the process of performing and are also manifest in the performance of the music (the final product). For Elliott, 'thinking-in-action' is intrinsic to these experiences. Musical knowledge includes the development of the necessary musical and technical skills which contribute to an authentic performance of the music.

The *Draft Specifications* document identifies two main areas of learning: (i) 'the development of specific skills of the art form' and (ii) 'a range of transferrable skills that may apply to other collaborative endeavours' (p. 4). Learning is fostered in and through the experiences of observing and collaboratively participating in performance. We welcome in particular the attention paid to the development of analytical thinking and critical and personal reflection. It is through these higher order activities that the student becomes aware of and takes responsibility for her/his own learning.

### **Meaningful learning in the arts: Developing artistic skills**

While SMEI recognises that engagement in the arts develops such personal and transferable skills as good communication skills, problem-solving, decision-making, flexibility, co-operation and collaboration, self-management, organising, and so forth, there is a concern at the emphasis that is placed on 'transferable skills' across the specified learning outcomes. Ultimately, SMEI believes that the value of engaging in artistic performance is strongly aligned to the artistic knowledge and skills gained from participation in discipline-specific artistic practices (in this instance, participation in music), and the layers of meaning which the students experience through such engagement in the art form. Although, (as noted above) the Specifications document identifies the development of the specific skills of the art form, we in SMEI are concerned that the content of the course as outlined focuses more on the development of the 'transferrable' and general personal skills to the neglect of the development of artistic skills themselves. This is particularly evident in the articulation of the 'Links' with 'Statements of Learning' and 'Literacy and Numeracy' (pp. 5-7) and to a certain extent the links with 'Other Key Skills' (pp. 7-9). This can result in a danger of artistic performance being employed in a more utilitarian manner and therefore demeans the intrinsic value of artistic performance.

More worryingly, the learning outcomes for each of the three strands appear to underplay the importance of the practice and development of specific artistic skills. A critical examination of these learning outcomes (pp. 11-13) reveals that attention would seem to be focussed on learning gleaned from: a critical evaluation of observed artistic performances; the sharing of and listening to the ideas of others; collaborative decision-making; the awareness of personal skills; the identification of the need to develop certain skills; following instructions; commitment to the project; communicating; critical reflection and evaluation of the final performance and of the student's personal contribution to this performance. This form of experiential learning is valuable and meaningful. However, although it is stated in Strand 2 (Planning and preparing), that 'Students learn about ... Practicing [sic] and developing specific skills' (p. 12), the actual learning outcomes appear to avoid direct mention of this. As already noted, we appreciate that devising specifications

with specific learning outcomes that are applicable across a broad spectrum of artistic disciplines is a challenging task. This may be the reason the current draft document appears to avoid reference to discipline-specific skills. However, as it follows from best practice that 'learning outcomes' be intrinsically linked to 'assessment', we are concerned that the learning outcomes of the 'Artistic Performance' course as they stand, will focus teachers' and students' attention on evidencing how learning can be applied or 'transferred' to *other* areas, rather than capturing the educative experience of the student as they engaged *within* the artistic practice itself. We believe that confidence in artistic performance will only develop if students gain competence in the unique skills to any specific discipline.

In the interest of clarity, we suggest that the document should state that 'Students learn to ... Practise and develop artistic and performance related skills'. Under the learning outcomes, the NCCA committee might consider including the following:

'Students should be able to ...

- Identify and understand the artistic, performance and other skills required to create various types of performances
- Demonstrate the development of these skills to the appropriate level for the performance

Under Strand 3 the committee might consider adding:

Students should be able to: 'demonstrate the artistic skills to perform effectively in their chosen role'. This Learning Outcome is implied in 3.1 but may need to be stated more directly.

In summary, the projected learning outcomes should reflect and foster the integrity of the art form itself.

### **Parity**

While the *Draft Specifications* do not suggest specific types of performance, reference is made to painting and the designing of an art exhibition, film-making, the mounting of a stage production or musical performance.

We feel that there is a need for further guidance here as there can be significant differences in time invested and skill level needed for different types of performing activities. It would be difficult, for example, to produce a full-scale musical within the time allotted and may require more resources than an art exhibition. It is interesting to note that in the WJEC GCSE specifications for Performing Arts,<sup>1</sup> a variety of suggestions for accepted activities are outlined. The list is not definitive and so allows for freedom of choice.

The publication of examples of student work to illustrate the standard and level of student work expected will be helpful but may not go far enough in providing guidelines for teachers. As the Junior Cycle is aligned to level 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications which is characterised by a 'moderately broad' range of knowledge, 'a limited range of practical and cognitive skills and tools' and the ability to 'act within a

limited range of contexts', it is important that teachers do not design over-ambitious short courses.

### **Participating in performance: Roles**

In many cases an artistic performance involves those who actually perform (e.g. actors, singers, instrumentalists) and those who contribute to the performance in other ways (stage management, costume design, set design etc). It is unclear from the current *Draft Specifications* if students are permitted to take up roles within this latter group. If this is the case, it has implications for the assessment of the 'performance component'. Assessment criteria need to cater for the variety of roles students take up and learn from within the performance.

We believe that the issues highlighted above arise from the fact that the *Draft Specifications* are aiming to cover all the arts and therefore need to be quite general. However, artistic practices differ widely (music, visual art, drama, dance etc) and therefore the artistic knowledge and skills gained from participation in artistic practices is specific to that practice. Therefore, we appreciate the challenges in drawing up a document where 'one size fits all'. We suggest that some of these issues might be resolved if the document also included discipline-specific guidelines and specifications.

### **Assessment: The Reflective Journal**

- **Content**

Learning in the arts is complex and interactive and so any assessment of learning needs to respect and reveal that complexity (Deasy, 2002).

On-going teacher formative assessment, peer-assessment and in particular self-assessment are vital to the success of this short course. There is no question that the fostering of self-evaluative skills (critical self-evaluation) is an extremely valuable key skill for all students and integral to education in general but it is a higher-order cognitive function and takes time to develop. To this end, we view the writing of a reflective journal as an essential part of the assessment process. However, as Moon (2004) highlights there is a tendency to confuse 'description' with 'reflection'. In order to help young teenagers to develop this essential lifelong skill, we suggest that students need very clear guidelines in writing a reflective journal. The guidelines given on page 14 are very useful in this regard, and rather than stating that the 'journal entries might include: ...', it could read: 'The journal entries *should* include ...'.

In light of our concerns about the development of artistic-specific skills, we suggest that bullet point three ('reflection on skills they have developed ...') should read 'reflection on artistic, personal and other skills they have developed...').

In addition, the journal could also include:

- a short description of the project
- a record of rehearsals or diary of working on designs etc (if applicable)

- the opportunity to add any other information the student feels as relevant

- Presentation of reflective journal

It is commendable that students will have the opportunity to present their reflective journal in a variety of ways. However, we are unsure as to what is meant by a 'digital' format, and we feel could be open to interpretation. Clearer specifications would be helpful here. We understand permitting student to present their reflective journals in an aural or a visual form both encourages creativity and caters for a range of learning styles and educational needs. However, this has implications for teachers assessing students' work. In addition, in light of the current emphasis on the development of literacy skills, it would seem that students should, wherever possible, be required to accompany 'digital', aural and visual presentations with a written report.

### **Assessment of performance**

The assessment of performance has generated much contentious debate in the educational discourse. Even in the case of an external 'objective' assessor, assessment of performance is subjective and may be influenced by the assessor's personal preference and level of expertise (Hickey, 2001). The move from external assessment to internal assessment is one of the greatest changes being brought about by new Junior Cycle curriculum and is giving rise to much debate and fear among teachers. These fears are not unfounded. Regardless of the arguments, it is possible for teachers to internally assess the reflective journal. They will be able to support the students in their on-going writing of the journal (formative assessment). In addition, the students' journals are available for external moderation.

However, the assessment of the culminating performance is much more problematic for a number of reasons outlined below.

- The document states: 'The individual's contribution to the **Performance** is captured in the assessment of the performance'. This statement is unclear and gives rise to some confusion. What is being assessed: the overall performance or the individual's role within the performance? If it is the overall performance, are all participants rewarded the same grade? We would suggest that each student is assessed on their individual contribution to the overall performance and on their growth and development over the course of the project.
- Assessing students individually within a performance also gives rise to a number of issues.
  - How does the teacher pay equal attention to all performers within a performance involving a large group of students, for example a drama or music production? This becomes more problematic if the teacher is also participating in the performance (such as conducting a choir or an orchestra). It is interesting to note that the WJEC Performing Arts Specifications stipulates that any performing group will be no less than two and no more than five candidates.

- As noted earlier, how are students who opt to take a ‘backstage’ role assessed?

As already noted, assessing performance is never a totally objective process. The fact that the teacher has worked with the students over the short course increase the level of subjectivity and may influence her/his assessment of a particular student regardless of the student’s role in the culminating performance. We strongly urge the NCCA to lobby the DES to re-instate external assessment and moderation of final performances. As teachers and schools will have the freedom to organise the final performance at any point throughout the year, we suggest that the State Examinations Commission designate two or three specific times within the academic year when an external assessors would be available to visit schools. At the very least, schools should be requested to record the final performance for the purpose of external moderation.

### **Other concerns**

As stated previously, the SMEI welcomes the opportunity to engage students in performance across all the arts. However, we would be concerned that a potential outcome of a short course such as this might be to replace the position of Music as a subject within the Junior Cycle curriculum. We would be concerned that due to the overall reduction in the number of subjects studied by Junior Cycle students, together with the pressure from parents and industry to focus on more scientific and technology subjects, and the increasing emphasis being placed on the development of literacy and numeracy skills that schools will decide to offer a short course in music performance instead of Music as a subject. While congratulating the NCCA on these developments, we would appreciate if the NCCA would address these concerns and demonstrate how, within the proposed diverse landscape of short courses, that the position of Music as a subject will be promoted and supported.

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<sup>1</sup> WJEC, formerly known as Welsh Joint Education Committee, provides examinations, assessment, teacher training and educational resources in Wales, England and Northern Ireland

*National Committee of the Society for Music Education in Ireland (SMEI)*

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