Evaluating First-Time Lecturing: where to start? when to stop?

Lisa Whistlecroft
Music Department
Lancaster University
Lancaster
LA1 4YW
Tel: 01524 593776 Fax: 01524 593939 Email: L.Whistlecroft@lancaster.ac.uk

Course review and evaluation
At Lancaster University, the Course Review has become an annual feature, marking the end of a period of reflection over the summer vacation and the start of the new academic year. It is, as its name suggests, a review of courses, rather than of individual teaching but it is clear that teaching must be reviewed as a part of this process.

The modular nature of courses
The course in which I was involved last year is modular in nature and sits within an already quite modular degree structure. Lancaster University's degrees comprise nine (eight from this year) 'units' taken across the second and third years of study (the first year can be regarded as a foundation, and qualifying, year). 'Approaches to Musicology' is a course taken by all second-year students majoring in music. It is unusual in that, until now, it has also been offered as a third-year option course, with second- and third-year students being taught together, though sitting different examinations at the end. The course is divided into four 5-week modules, given by different people, each offering a reasonably detailed look at a relatively isolated topic. The teaching is by weekly lecture alone and the assessment solely by examination, in which the students answer questions on only two of the four topics covered. Thus the exam answers that I marked this summer represented half of a ninth of a degree. Whilst this is only 5.5%, a poor answer can easily pull the entire unit grade down by two degree classes, which is a sobering thought.

My unconventional background
Another sobering thought, to me at least, was that this was the first humanities undergraduate teaching that I had done. To complicate matters, I did not fit the normal pattern of a new lecturer—recently appointed after gaining a doctorate in music. I came to my task with a background of work in technical support, of both students and lecturers, a long-ago, post-16 teaching certificate, and ten years at the CTI (Computers in Teaching Initiative) in which I had evaluated computer-based resources for practising music lecturers without actually sharing their experience of day-to-day teaching—which is why I had accepted this teaching opportunity in the first place.

So, long before I started to worry about evaluating my *teaching*, I was considering what I could offer to the music students at Lancaster and the ways in which I could integrate my contribution with the rest of their course. I see this as a central part of the process of evaluation—attempting to ensure that what I offered was relevant, useful, properly placed within its own discipline, and properly integrated with its host course.

My personal studies are in the sphere of electroacoustic composition and so it seemed only right that I should share this with the students. This was yet another new venture as electroacoustic work is not taught as part of the composition option at Lancaster, and the history and repertoire of electroacoustic music was not taught in the music technology course (which was, in any case, suspended that year).

Putting my bit into the academic framework
My first preparations, last summer, were therefore aimed at evaluating what it was that I wanted to teach and how I wanted to approach it, integrating my material into Lancaster's

course, and trying to ensure I had suitable support. These preparations took several forms and one of the advantages of my long and unconventional background was that I had no fear of asking for help and advice. Another was my network of friends and acquaintances in several departments.

Firstly, I requested that my HoD, who had offered me the teaching, should act as my formal mentor. This he agreed to do, though cheerfully assuring me that he had every confidence in me. He has a long lecturing career and is Chair of Lancaster's Staff Development Committee so I felt I was in good hands, if ones that would favour a light touch on the reins.

Secondly, I approached the electroacoustic music teaching community world-wide, via its most active mailing list, seeking their thoughts on my challenge without in any way wishing to poach their own teaching ideas. I would like to acknowledge here the support I received from that forum, both at that initial stage and later, throughout the course. They responded with discussions which supported my thought processes and ones which challenged my preconceived ideas, both of which were immensely valuable. It was at this stage that I determined to call my course 'Sonic Art', omitting the word 'music' altogether.

Thirdly, I chose the last 5-week teaching slot in the course, and not just to maximise my preparation time. By this stage I knew that the other modules would be 'Gender Issues and Musicology', 'Musicology and Performance' and 'Introduction to Ethnomusicology'. I asked those lecturers preceding me if I might sit in on some of their sessions in the hope that I would learn from more experienced colleagues about the appropriate level of lecture content, pacing of the course week by week, etc. I am not sure that, in the end, I did gain much appreciation of these matters but I did learn other more practical lessons—like the difference in concentration levels in a 2-hour slot that has a coffee-break and in one that does not! The significant benefit to my part of the course was the way in which so many points raised in my colleagues' lectures had direct relevance to mine. I found myself scribbling frantically to catch ideas and quotations that I wanted to refer to in my own sessions later. I became convinced, somewhat idealistically, that it is the nature of musical study that conceptual strands will emerge through *any* such modular course—and that identifying those strands and weaving them into a coherent fabric is an opportunity which offers itself increasingly as the course progresses. I enjoyed identifying the hooks I could use to connect my course into the whole.

Preparation

Preparation started in earnest on 1 January with the total support and participation of my partner—a scientist, teacher, computer programmer, acousmatic composer and compiler of our vast electroacoustic CD collection, with the added benefit of no formal musical training. Throughout the preparation process I bounced ideas off him, argued through my course plan and lecture structure, justifying every move. I could have asked for nothing so detailed from an academic colleague; in a department where no-one else shared my specialism, this was nothing short of a life-line. I think it is fair to say that from New Year's Day until the end of my course neither of us did anything else (apart from eat, sleep and the day jobs) but work on my course. This horrified me in an abstract way as I was sure that 'real' lecturers would not need (or indeed have the luxury of) this amount of time. It was here that my completely unplanned informal mentoring system kicked in. At a concert one evening I described my experience, and my misgivings, to an experienced Physics lecturer sitting behind me. Having ascertained that this was a new course and that I had not previously taught on the topic, he assured me that that was not at all an unreasonable length of time to take, and that he had recently spent a similarly intensive few weeks preparing a totally new course of his own.

Supporting the students conceptually

Once my lectures were planned, the next stage was to try to provide the students with a supportive conceptual framework for what I knew were going to be difficult ideas. The 'hooks' into the concepts presented earlier in the course were one way to help the students approach what was, for some, frighteningly alien new material. Another was to present my topics in an order which started from a familiar base, so I devoted the first session to pieces in which

conventional instruments, and/or live performers were the starting point for music which was enhanced or extended by technological means.

Most importantly, I felt that I should be idealistic and completely honest about my intentions. I had no delusions that I was going to find, still less create, instant converts to 'my kind of music'. If one or two were to find a long-lasting interest, that would be a bonus. But my aims were not at all simply to widen their academic knowledge of the thing we (in music departments) call music. The study of the sonic environment as a whole—through the study of artworks that make use of all types of sound, and consideration of the thoughts of the people who make those works—should open the ears to such an extent that the perception of more conventional note-based music will never be the same again. I felt I owed it to the students to tell them at the start that my aim was to offer them new ways of listening that might change the way they listened to music for ever.

Supporting the students practically
It seemed to me that there was a need in addition for much more practical support and I tried to provide this in three ways.

programme notes
Because all the music we studied was new to the students, I provided programme notes for each piece. The intention was to give them the basic facts about the piece so that they could listen to it in a concentrated way without wondering about, for example, the instrumentation or the length of the extract.

course pack reading
A lecture-only course assessed by examination demands library reading of the students. I felt that a bibliography, even an annotated one, was insufficient, especially as my sessions, at the end of the course, were not long before the exam. I selected readings that I felt were appropriate, either because they followed on from one lecture or because they prepared for the next, and produced multiple copies week by week. (Getting the appropriate copyright clearances for this was less straightforward than I had imagined but is not relevant here.) I took advantage of the students' habit of photocopying recommended library reading anyway, and a quirk in Lancaster's photocopy charging systems, to work to everyone's advantage. I made the copies myself, on a staff card, and sold them to the students for a voluntary £1 per week. This was approximately what it would have cost them using a student card but saved them the time of doing it. It made me sufficient profit to pay the CLA course pack fees and left a small excess which I spent on some much-needed CDs for the library.

the Web notes
I created a set of World Wide Web pages for the course, containing a summary of the course, a set of external links to organisations, music archives, journals and articles, discussion lists, CD publishers and interesting composers. Here I also placed the bibliography, with direct links to the university library catalogue. A more unusual venture was to include a formalised version of my lecture notes. I had been reminded of the spoof definition of a lecture as 'a means of getting the lecturer's notes into the students' notebook without passing through the brains of either'. It was my experience from earlier teaching that this was in fact an ideal and in reality what was transferred to the students' notebooks was often a wildly inaccurate version of the lecturer's words! I thought that at the very least I could provide my group with a copy of the original and reduce one of the ways in which factual errors could creep in.

Evaluating my teaching
My first evaluation centred around the lectures.

personal feedback
There were a small number of students with whom I had previously become friendly. Not having been on the lecturing staff, my relationship with them was very informal and I was aware of their feelings about my colleagues' teaching to an unusual extent. They were

apparently unflustered by my sudden change of status and amused by my open acknowledgement of the novelty of the experience, and willingly agreed to tell me of any shortcomings of which I seemed to be unaware. To my relief, after the first session they declared me free of annoying mannerisms. The departmental officer also reported that the hubbub outside her door after the first session was one of interest and approval; the comment 'Lisa was brilliant' was kindly passed on to me.

My mentor attended the first lecture and after giving me the general 'all clear' made several practical suggestions which I incorporated into my subsequent sessions.

My partner and my co-worker at CTI also attended throughout and I jokingly referred to them as my 'support team'. They were wonderful—giving me unconditional approval in the agonising few seconds after it was all over and then gently suggesting improvements after I had had time to unwind.

electronic discussion

Lancaster provides its students with access to a computer-based bulletin board specifically for discussing departmental matters in an informal and semi-anonymous format. After the second lecture a student mailed to the group with marked enthusiasm for the Sonic Art module and hoping that others were finding it as interesting. This sparked a short debate which generated no adverse comment—though this could be misleading, as the students know that I read the bulletin board and are sensitive enough to keep quiet rather than offend. The salient points of the discussion were generally approving remarks on the course itself, compliments on my presentation and on the increased interest level of the course during that module. Much more exciting, though, was the way the debate moved, albeit briefly, into discussing the *music* and its performance over multiple loudspeakers.

One vital piece of feedback was obtained only via the bulletin board. It transpired that it was difficult to hear me over the general background noise of 40 paper-turning, February-coughing people, but the students were blaming their colleagues rather than me. After a throat infection forced me to use an amplification system in the third week, their approval was so marked that I used it for the rest of the course.

questionnaire

At the end of the module I requested that the students fill in the department's standard questionnaire from which I had a 70% return. The outcome was that I scored rather well, both on presentation and maintaining their interest, but the music did not! In fact the overall tenor of the answers to the two questions 'What did you find easiest?' and 'What did you find most difficult?' were 'Understanding Lisa' and 'Listening to the "music"'.

There was general approval of my handouts—both the course pack and the programme notes— and marked delight at the lecture notes on the Web.

The space for additional comments was used by two thirds of the respondents and generally reinforced the multi-choice answers. Several students felt that the course had increased their interest and understanding sufficiently to give the music a further chance. There were three negative responses and these were particularly interesting. One student felt that the treatment throughout had been too trivial and one had been overwhelmed by the alien nature of the whole concept. One, who had listened intently throughout and made intelligent comments on several occasions, had hated every moment of the music, which felt a dreadful shame.

As far as I know, only one of the other modules' lecturers made use of the questionnaire. This was Dr Deborah Mawer, who had started the year off with her gender studies module and was the person whose advice and opinions I had sought most frequently through the year, though I had missed her sessions. Her questionnaire responses, like mine, were favourable and we both seem to have struck a reasonable balance between stretching the students and trying to cover too much material. My handouts scored better, but it was here that I realised I had not

differentiated between my own pages and the photocopied articles. What was striking was that for Deborah two thirds answered the question 'What was the most useful book or article you used?' whereas only 5 (of 27) of mine admitted to reading anything at all—and, of those, two cited my handouts and two my Web pages; only one named an article. Deborah's presentation was rated better than mine and a higher proportion felt she had inspired a higher level of interest in her topic (in that her 'excellent' to 'good' ratio was higher than mine for both questions). It is my intention to sit in on Deborah's lectures next year!

The examination

Eight weeks after the end of the course, the students sat their exam. Reading my first set of exam scripts was something of a shock. Was this anonymised gobbledygook really all that I, and they, had to show for all that work? Once again my physicist colleague unexpectedly came to the rescue. Discussing life on an AUT picket line, he assured me that this was a common reaction and that I should not despair. I devised a qualitative marking scheme (though even after ten years in Humanities I find it hard to understand this discipline's insistence on marking out of 100 but refusing to use the outer two quarters of that range) and found that apart from two frightening fails I had a spread of marks comprising five pass, seven III, seven II(ii) and three II(i) grades. I discussed spreads of marks with my colleagues and found that my marks seemed generally rather lower than the norm. I re-checked my criteria and re-read some papers, but in the end I stuck with what I had.

There were several characteristics of the examination answers that caused me alarm. The spread in quality was to be expected but beyond this there was much to consider. Some features were common to many of the answers. Most striking, though probably least significant, was the way that a throwaway comment I had made in one lecture appeared as a factual statement over and over again through the pile of scripts. What was it about that one comment that had caught their attention? Similarly, of all the music I had played and discussed over five weeks, there was one performance piece which must have had a profound effect. Detailed descriptions of this piece appeared in many essays, even in those supposedly answering a question to which that piece had no relevance whatsoever. What was it about that piece that so captured their imagination? Or was it just that I had given them a photocopy of an interview with the composer? More worryingly, the students showed an almost complete inability to separate out concepts from examples. I think I can trace this to the way I presented the musical extracts as I went along, which may inadvertently have given equal weight to an example of a technique as to an archetype of the genre. In future, I think I shall provide the students with a handout at the end of each lecture which summarises the concepts and lists the major works which they should know.

Comparing examination performance

Once the final marks were published, the papers could be de-anonymised and I was allowed access to the scripts. My first temptation was to compare marks with attendance at my lectures, but there was no correlation. Both of my terrible failures had in fact attended dutifully so I could not blame their ignorance on that. Indeed, one of the solid II(ii)s had only attended two lectures–though she had made a point of collecting all the handouts and, it would appear, not only reading them but synthesising some knowledge from them too.

One immediately interesting feature was that almost every student had done a Gender question. Sonic Art and Ethnomusicology had about equal numbers and a few had done Performance questions. So almost all of 'my' students had also answered a Gender question, with a just couple doing an Ethnomusicology question.

I investigated my 'lower than desirable' marks profile by reading some of these scripts, comparing answers from particular students and answers which had been awarded similar marks. All of this was clearly subjective and further clouded by my not having specialist knowledge in these areas, but my conclusions were that compared to Gender, my scripts were of a slightly lower quality, and that compared to ethnomusicology, my colleague might have

marked slightly more generously than I did, though his marks were on the whole also lower than the Gender ones.

It seems to me that two tentative conclusions can be drawn from these observations. One is that the Gender course was better taught than Sonic Art, a thesis that is supported by the questionnaire feedback. Another is that my topic was considerably more removed from the students' prior experience and that they may retain less from a totally new subject than from one which they can link conceptually to previous studies. This would tie in with the perception that the Ethnomusicology questions were also of a slightly lower quality, as Ethnomusicology was also an entirely new and isolated course.

Finally, it was noticeable that for third-year students the exam marks were either the same as the final degree result or lower (in roughly equal proportions). In only one case was the Approaches to Musicology mark higher than the final degree class. This may cast a faintly worrying warning about exam-only courses.

Conclusions

At this stage I should like to draw together some of the strands of this self-centred narrative. The question which prompted this paper was 'How can a newcomer to university humanities lecturing start to assess their effectiveness and their contribution to a course, or even a degree scheme?' This is the 'Where to start?' part of my title. What *I* tried to do was compare my work with that of my colleagues, both in my department and in my specialism, right from the start, and to continue this comparative process throughout the year. I would welcome comment on whether this is felt to be a sensible, or effective, approach. All my efforts were entirely home-spun. I must confess that I do not even know whether there is an established literature on self-evaluation. I do know that I needed all the time at my disposal just to do the necessary reading for my teaching. I would have found it extremely hard to start a new study at the same time and I suspect that other first-time lecturers would have the same problem. As to the 'When to stop?' part of my title, well, I am really not sure, though I suspect that for me it will not be until my course runs again and I find that I am evaluating second-time teaching. And if I make the changes I am proposing, it will be partly first-time again, which is entirely as it should be.

I have considered my own peculiar academic background and found that although my inexperience in humanities teaching was a handicap, my self-evaluation was able to draw on previous experience and, while age may not have brought me wisdom, it has at least given me a lack of fear and a great deal of persistence in pursuing enquiries and requests for help and support. A newly appointed lecturer may be more reluctant to profess ignorance, or to impose on their colleagues, than I was.

I benefited greatly from my formal mentoring. I also relied heavily on the goodwill of friends, family and colleagues in as widely disparate departments as music, physics and staff development. It seems to me that in addition to offering a departmental mentor to new lecturers, universities should pursue the cross-disciplinary support networks facilitated by induction courses and the new market in internal ILT accreditation courses.

Finally, I want to return to my idealistic aims for my course. I assumed, especially after the exam experience, that I had failed in my efforts to tie the history, repertoire, analysis and performance of sonic art into conventional musicology. I had completely given up on my hope of opening my students' ears to the wonders around them. At the department's post-results party, a relaxed conversation developed in one group containing half a dozen finalists and some colleagues—a conversation which I missed entirely. The Sonic Art course came up and a couple of students commented on how they had appreciated my attending the earlier lectures, and particularly the way that I had integrated concepts from previous sessions into my module, drawing the four parts of the course together at the end. But the best was yet to come. Over their umpteenth glass of wine, the students laughed about how the Sonic Art course had changed their lives. One student described how at a recent party she had sat by the barbecue

listening to the sound of the charcoal crackling. This prompted another to describe the wonderful resonances that came out of her piano every time the people upstairs slammed the door to their flat. So maybe I succeeded after all!