

FROM CREDIT REQUIREMENT TO MEANINGFUL LEARNING: NOVICE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN A BRASS BAND COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how a university brass band course, initially undertaken by novice students to fulfil a co-curricular credit requirement, evolved into a site of meaningful social learning and personal transformation. Drawing on written reflective narratives produced by undergraduate participants with no formal musical background, the study explores intensive brass band training as an embodied and collective social practice rather than a purely technical musical activity. Using Experiential Learning and Transformative Learning as sensitising theoretical lenses, the analysis focuses on how discipline, bodily coordination, time management, emotional regulation, and collective responsibility were gradually internalised through rehearsal routines and public performance. Students' reflections reveal a marked shift in perception: from viewing the course as an external obligation to recognising it as a demanding yet formative experience that reshaped their understanding of effort, capability, and learning itself. Rather than framing learning as the acquisition of musical skills alone, this article argues that the brass band functioned as a social formation through which novice learners encountered struggle, uncertainty, and interdependence. These experiences prompted critical self-reflection and reconfigured students' assumptions about participation, commitment, and self-worth. By situating co-curricular music training within broader anthropological discussions of experience, discipline, and transformation in contemporary higher education, the study contributes to understandings of learning as lived and socially embedded practice.

Keywords: experiential learning, transformative learning, brassband education, co-curricular, novice learner

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In contemporary higher education, universities increasingly emphasise the importance of holistic student development beyond traditional academic learning. Co-curricular programmes, including arts, sports, and community engagement activities, are widely promoted as platforms through which students can cultivate soft skills, social competencies, and personal growth (Kuh, 2008; Trowler, 2010). Despite their potential educational value, these programmes are frequently perceived by students as peripheral obligations rather than meaningful learning opportunities. In many institutional contexts, participation in co-curricular activities is primarily motivated by credit requirements or graduation regulations rather than intrinsic interest or personal engagement (Barnett, 2007; Biesta, 2013). Consequently, students often approach such programmes instrumentally, viewing them as administrative necessities rather than transformative learning experiences.

Within this landscape, university music ensembles, particularly brass band courses occupy a unique position. On the one hand, ensemble-based music activities are widely recognised as powerful environments for developing discipline, collaboration, emotional expression, and creative engagement (Hallam, 2010; Burnard & Dragovic, 2015). On the other hand, institutional brass band programmes offered within universities are frequently categorised as recreational or performative extracurricular activities rather than academically significant learning spaces. As a result, scholarly attention has traditionally focused on conservatory-level training and professional musicianship, leaving the experiences of novice participants in university co-curricular music programmes relatively underexplored (Burland & Pitts, 2014; Creech et al., 2016).

For students without prior musical training, participation in a brass band course represents a particularly demanding learning encounter. Unlike classroom-based learning environments where knowledge is primarily transmitted through lectures or texts, ensemble music performance requires embodied engagement, sustained practice, and collective coordination. Students must simultaneously develop technical control of instruments, regulate breathing and posture, interpret musical notation, and synchronise their performance with other musicians. These processes involve not only cognitive understanding but also bodily discipline, emotional resilience, and social awareness (Davidson & Jordan, 2007; McCormick & McPherson, 2018). Such characteristics suggest that ensemble music training can function as a rich site of experiential and socially embedded learning.

Theoretically, these dynamics resonate with experiential learning theory, which conceptualises learning as a cyclical process emerging through concrete experience, reflection, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Experiential learning frameworks emphasise that meaningful knowledge is constructed through participation in authentic activities rather than through passive knowledge acquisition. However, scholars have noted that many applications of experiential learning theory remain overly individualistic, focusing on learners' internal cognitive processes while overlooking the social and cultural contexts that shape learning experiences (Fenwick, 2001; Illeris, 2018). In collective practices such as ensemble

music performance, learning is inherently relational, emerging through coordination with others and through participation in shared routines.

At the same time, participation in demanding practice-based activities may also stimulate transformative learning, a process in which individuals reassess previously held assumptions about themselves and their capabilities (Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 2000). Transformative learning often occurs when learners encounter unfamiliar or challenging situations that disrupt existing expectations, prompting critical reflection and perspective change. For novice students entering a brass band programme without prior musical experience, the process of learning an instrument, performing within an ensemble, and confronting repeated mistakes may constitute such disorienting experiences. Through sustained engagement, these challenges may gradually reshape students' perceptions of effort, discipline, and personal capability.

Beyond educational psychology, anthropological and sociological perspectives further deepen understanding of learning within collective practices. Scholars such as Lave and Wenger (1991) conceptualise learning as participation within communities of practice, where novices acquire skills and knowledge through gradual involvement in shared activities. Similarly, anthropological studies emphasise the embodied nature of skill acquisition, arguing that learning emerges through repeated bodily engagement with materials, tools, and environments (Ingold, 2018; Wacquant, 2004). From this perspective, musical training is not merely the transmission of technical knowledge but a process of bodily attunement and social formation.

Despite these theoretical insights, relatively little research has examined how novice university students experience learning within compulsory co-curricular music programmes, particularly when participation is initially motivated by external requirements rather than intrinsic interest. Much of the existing literature on music education focuses on professional training contexts or on learners who already possess musical backgrounds. Consequently, the ways in which students without prior musical experience negotiate the challenges, emotions, and meanings associated with ensemble participation remain insufficiently understood.

This study addresses this gap by examining the experiences of undergraduate students who enrolled in a university brass band course primarily to fulfil a co-curricular credit requirement. Drawing on reflective narratives produced by participants following an intensive training period, the study explores how students interpreted their learning journeys, the challenges they encountered, and the ways in which their perceptions of the course evolved over time. Rather than viewing the brass band solely as a technical training environment, the research conceptualises it as a social and embodied learning space in which discipline, collaboration, and identity formation unfold through collective practice.

By integrating perspectives from experiential learning, transformative learning, and anthropological theories of practice and embodiment, this study contributes to broader discussions on learning in higher education. Specifically, it seeks to demonstrate how co-curricular arts programmes—often marginalised within academic discourse—can function as powerful environments for meaningful learning

and personal transformation. In doing so, the study challenges narrow distinctions between academic and non-academic learning spaces and highlights the educational significance of embodied, collaborative practices within contemporary university contexts.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Experiential Learning in Contemporary Higher Education

Experiential learning has become an increasingly influential paradigm in higher education, emphasising active engagement, reflection, and practical participation as central mechanisms for knowledge construction. Rooted in the philosophical foundations of Dewey's experiential philosophy and later systematised through Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT), experiential learning conceptualises knowledge development as a cyclical process consisting of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Within this framework, learning occurs most effectively when students actively participate in authentic tasks that require the application of theoretical understanding to real-world situations.

Recent studies have highlighted the growing prominence of experiential learning across higher education institutions worldwide. Bibliometric analyses reveal a significant increase in experiential learning research publications in the past decade, indicating its expanding relevance in contemporary pedagogical discourse. Experiential learning approaches are widely adopted in disciplines such as business, engineering, and creative arts education, where hands-on activities and real-world simulations support the development of critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills.

Empirical research also suggests that experiential learning environments enhance student engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy by allowing learners to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts. For example, studies examining simulation-based education and project-based learning demonstrate that experiential pedagogies significantly improve students' attitudes toward learning and foster deeper conceptual understanding.

However, scholars have increasingly argued that experiential learning theory should be interpreted beyond purely cognitive frameworks. Contemporary educational research emphasises that experiential learning is shaped by social interactions, emotional engagement, and institutional structures. As a result, experiential learning should be understood not only as an individual reflective process but also as a socially embedded activity occurring within communities of practice.

In performance-based disciplines such as music education, experiential learning takes on a particularly embodied form. Musical training requires continuous physical engagement with instruments, coordination with peers, and repeated rehearsal routines. These practices illustrate how experiential learning integrates cognitive, bodily, and social dimensions, making ensemble performance a particularly rich environment for experiential educational processes.

2.2 Transformative Learning and Perspective of Transformation

Complementing experiential learning perspectives, transformative learning theory provides an important conceptual framework for understanding how challenging learning experiences can reshape learners' perceptions of themselves and their capabilities. Originally proposed by Mezirow, transformative learning theory posits that individuals revise previously held assumptions through critical reflection triggered by disorienting experiences. Through reflective dialogue and experiential engagement, learners gradually reconstruct their frames of reference and develop new interpretations of knowledge and identity (Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 2000).

Recent research in higher education suggests that transformative learning is particularly likely to occur in environments where students encounter unfamiliar tasks that challenge their existing beliefs about competence and knowledge. Educational contexts involving collaborative projects, creative performance, or experiential engagement frequently expose learners to uncertainty and failure, which can serve as catalysts for reflective transformation. Such experiences encourage students to reassess their assumptions and develop greater confidence in their abilities.

Within music education, transformative learning is often associated with the emotional and psychological dimensions of performance. Participation in ensemble activities may initially provoke anxiety and self-doubt among novice learners, particularly those with limited musical experience. However, through sustained rehearsal and collective performance, students often experience gradual increases in confidence, resilience, and self-efficacy. These outcomes illustrate how musical participation can function as a transformative learning process that reshapes learners' identities and perceptions of capability.

2.3 Learning as Social Participation

While experiential and transformative learning theories highlight reflection and personal transformation, sociocultural learning theories emphasise the fundamentally social nature of knowledge construction. According to Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning, learning occurs through participation in communities of practice, where novices gradually move from peripheral participation toward full engagement within a shared activity system (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

From this perspective, knowledge is not transmitted from instructor to learner in a linear manner but emerges through interaction, observation, and collaborative practice. Learners acquire both technical skills and the social norms associated with a particular practice by participating in collective activities. This approach has been widely applied in studies of professional education, apprenticeship models, and creative arts training.

In ensemble music contexts, collaborative learning plays a particularly central role. Musical ensembles require musicians to coordinate rhythm, tempo, and expression collectively, meaning that individual performance is inseparable from group

synchronisation. Research on collaborative music learning demonstrates that ensemble participation fosters communication skills, peer learning, and shared responsibility for collective outcomes.

Such findings suggest that ensemble-based music programmes provide a powerful environment for social learning, as participants must continuously negotiate timing, coordination, and mutual responsiveness during rehearsal and performance.

2.4 Embodied Learning in Musical Practice

Anthropological perspectives further enrich understanding of learning within performance-based environments by emphasising the concept of embodied knowledge. From this perspective, skill acquisition is not merely a cognitive process but also a bodily one, emerging through repeated interaction between individuals, tools, and environments. Scholars such as Ingold and Csordas argue that learning occurs through bodily attunement, where perception, movement, and sensory engagement become integrated within practice.

In musical contexts, embodiment is particularly evident in the physical demands of instrument playing, breath control, posture, and rhythmic coordination. These bodily practices are gradually internalised through repetition and guided participation, allowing learners to develop intuitive forms of knowledge that cannot be easily articulated through verbal instruction alone.

Recent technological developments further highlight the importance of embodied engagement in music learning. Studies exploring immersive and digital music learning environments demonstrate that technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality can enhance engagement by providing real-time feedback on gesture, rhythm, and performance accuracy.

These developments indicate that contemporary music education increasingly integrates experiential, technological, and embodied approaches to learning.

2.5 Stronger Research Gap

Despite extensive scholarship on experiential learning, transformative learning, and collaborative learning, several important gaps remain in the literature. First, much of the existing research has focused on formal academic courses or professional training environments, such as business education, engineering education, and teacher training programmes. Comparatively little attention has been given to co-curricular learning spaces, particularly those involving artistic and performance-based activities.

Second, studies of music education have traditionally concentrated on conservatory settings or students with established musical backgrounds. As a result, the experiences of novice learners who participate in university music ensembles without prior musical training remain underexplored. These learners often encounter unique challenges related to technical skill development, emotional confidence, and collaborative coordination.

Third, although experiential learning theory highlights the importance of authentic engagement, relatively few studies have examined how externally motivated participation—such as participation driven by institutional credit requirements—may evolve into meaningful learning experiences. Understanding how students reinterpret such initially instrumental participation is essential for expanding theoretical perspectives on motivation and learning in higher education.

Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates how novice university students experience and interpret their participation in a brass band course that they initially joined to fulfil co-curricular credit requirements. By analysing reflective narratives produced by participants, this study explores how experiential engagement, collaborative practice, and embodied learning intersect to shape students' perceptions of discipline, capability, and meaningful learning.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study integrates three theoretical perspectives: Experiential Learning Theory, Transformative Learning Theory, and Situated Learning Theory.

These frameworks collectively explain how participation in a brass band ensemble may facilitate meaningful learning experiences.

- Experiential Learning Theory explains how students acquire knowledge through active engagement in musical practice and reflection on their experiences.
- Transformative Learning Theory explains how challenging learning situations may prompt students to reconsider their assumptions about their abilities and identities.
- Situated Learning Theory highlights the importance of social interaction and collaborative practice within ensemble environments.

Together, these theoretical perspectives conceptualise the brass band programme as a social and experiential learning ecosystem in which students develop technical skills, emotional resilience, and collaborative competence through sustained participation.

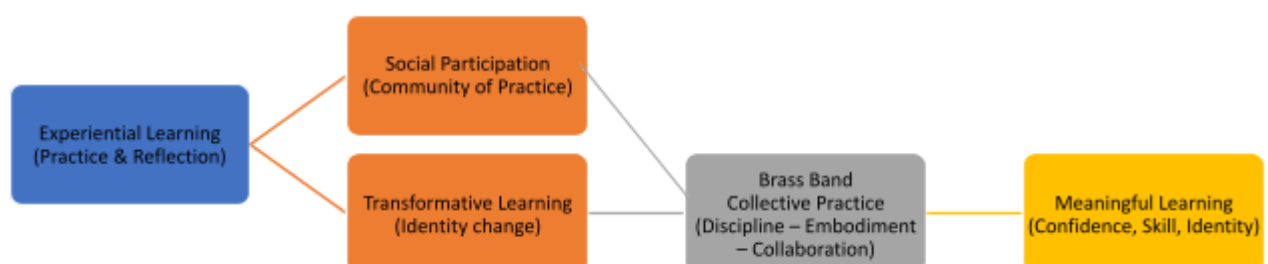


Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating the relationship between experiential

learning, transformative learning, and social participation in shaping students' learning experiences within the brass band programme.

3.0 METHOD AND MATERIALS

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive research design to explore how novice university students experienced and interpreted their participation in a brass band co-curricular course. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining complex learning experiences because it enables researchers to capture participants' perspectives, meanings, and reflections in rich descriptive detail (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than focusing on measurable learning outcomes, the present study seeks to understand how students construct meaning from their engagement with ensemble practice, discipline, and collective musical performance.

The study was guided by an interpretivist epistemological perspective, which views learning as a socially constructed process shaped by individuals' interactions with their environments and with others. Within this framework, students' reflective narratives were treated as meaningful accounts through which participants articulated their learning journeys, challenges, and evolving perceptions of the brass band course. This approach aligns with qualitative traditions that emphasise narrative reflection as an important source of insight into educational experiences (Bruner, 1991).

3.2 Research Context

The research was conducted at a public university in Malaysia where participation in co-curricular activities forms part of the institutional graduation requirement. Students are required to enrol in a co-curricular course as part of their academic programme, and the brass band course examined in this study represents one such offering.

The course was open to undergraduate students from various academic disciplines, many of whom had no prior experience in musical performance. Participation involved weekly rehearsals and an intensive training period culminating in a public performance. Throughout the programme, students engaged in a variety of learning activities including instrument practice, sectional rehearsals, ensemble coordination, and performance preparation. These activities required sustained engagement, physical coordination, and collaborative interaction, making the brass band environment a particularly rich context for examining experiential and social learning processes.

3.3 Participants

Participants in this study consisted of undergraduate students who enrolled in the brass band course during the academic semester in which the study was conducted. Most participants had no formal musical background, and their initial motivation for joining the course was primarily related to fulfilling co-curricular credit requirements rather than pursuing musical interests.

A total of 38 student reflections were collected and included in the analysis. The participants represented diverse academic programmes and backgrounds within the university. Participation in the reflective activity was voluntary, and all identifying information was removed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

3.4 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through written reflective narratives submitted by students at the conclusion of the brass band programme. Reflective narratives are widely used in qualitative educational research as they allow participants to articulate personal experiences, emotions, and interpretations in their own words (Moon, 2006).

Students were invited to submit their reflections through an online form, where they responded to open-ended prompts designed to encourage thoughtful reflection on their learning experiences. The prompts invited students to describe:

- their initial expectations when joining the brass band course,
- challenges encountered during the training process,
- memorable learning experiences during rehearsals or performances, and
- how their perceptions of the course evolved over time.

These reflections provided insight into the students' emotional responses, learning strategies, and perceived personal growth throughout the programme.

3.5 Data Analysis

The reflective narratives were analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative analytical method used to identify recurring patterns and themes within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was conducted through several iterative stages.

First, all reflections were read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. During this stage, preliminary notes were recorded to capture emerging ideas and patterns.

Second, meaningful segments of text were coded to identify recurring concepts related to learning experiences, challenges, emotional responses, and perception changes. These initial codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories.

Third, related codes were organised into overarching themes that captured the central dimensions of students' learning experiences. These themes were refined through repeated comparison across the dataset to ensure consistency and representativeness.

The analysis ultimately resulted in five major themes, which collectively illustrate how students navigated technical challenges, developed discipline and collaboration

skills, experienced emotional transformation, and reinterpreted the value of the brass band course.

Throughout the analytical process, sensitising concepts drawn from experiential learning theory, transformative learning theory, and situated learning theory were used to interpret the data. These theoretical frameworks helped contextualise the findings while allowing themes to emerge inductively from the participants' narratives.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Research Rigour

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. First, prolonged engagement with the data allowed the researcher to identify nuanced patterns across participants' reflections. Second, thick description was used to provide detailed interpretations of participants' experiences, ensuring that findings accurately represented the complexity of the learning context.

Third, the analysis considered both convergent and divergent perspectives among participants, avoiding overly uniform interpretations. By acknowledging variations in students' experiences, the study provides a more balanced and nuanced understanding of learning within the brass band programme.

Finally, the researcher engaged in reflexive practice throughout the research process, recognising that personal experiences in music education could influence interpretation of the data. Maintaining awareness of this positionality helped ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' perspectives rather than researcher assumptions.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study. Participation in the reflective activity was voluntary, and students were informed that their reflections would be used for research purposes. To protect participants' identities, all personal information was removed from the dataset, and excerpts used in the analysis were anonymised.

The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, ensuring that students' participation did not affect their academic assessment or standing within the course.

4.0 RESULTS

Analysis of the 38 students' reflective narratives revealed a set of recurring patterns that illuminate how novice participants experienced the brass band programme. Although most students initially enrolled in the course primarily to fulfil co-curricular credit requirements, their reflections indicate that sustained engagement with ensemble training generated significant learning experiences across cognitive, behavioural, social, and emotional domains

Through thematic analysis, five interrelated themes emerged from the data:

- (1) Learning from zero and confronting technical challenges,
- (2) Development of discipline and responsibility,
- (3) Collaborative learning and ensemble coordination,
- (4) Emotional growth and confidence building, and
- (5) Reframing co-curricular learning as meaningful education.

These themes illustrate the gradual transformation in how students interpreted their participation in the brass band programme.

4.1 Theme 1: Learning from Zero – Encountering Technical and Cognitive Challenges

A dominant theme across the reflections concerned the experience of learning an unfamiliar musical instrument from the beginning. Most participants reported having no prior experience in music performance, and the initial stages of training were described as challenging and sometimes overwhelming. Students encountered difficulties related to breath control, tone production, reading musical notation, and synchronising their performance with others.

Despite these initial challenges, many participants described the learning process as rewarding, particularly when they gradually began to produce stable tones or perform short musical passages successfully. The process of overcoming technical difficulties encouraged repeated practice and experimentation, which contributed to the development of persistence and problem-solving strategies.

One student reflected:

“At first I could not produce any proper sound from the instrument. It felt frustrating, but after practising many times I finally managed to control my breathing and play a simple melody.”

Such experiences illustrate how technical struggle functioned as an entry point into experiential learning, where knowledge was constructed through trial, practice, and reflection rather than through theoretical instruction alone.

4.2 Theme 2: Discipline, Commitment, and Responsibility

Beyond technical skill development, many students emphasised the importance of discipline and responsibility in their learning experience. The structured nature of brass band rehearsals required students to attend practice sessions regularly, manage their time effectively, and maintain responsibility for their assigned instruments.

Participants reported that the training demanded a level of commitment that exceeded their initial expectations of a co-curricular course. Rehearsals often required sustained concentration and physical endurance, particularly during extended practice sessions leading up to performances.

One participant noted:

"I thought this course would be relaxed, but it actually required a lot of discipline. We had to practise regularly and be responsible for our part in the performance."

These reflections indicate that participation in the brass band programme facilitated behavioural learning outcomes related to responsibility, punctuality, and perseverance. Such experiences suggest that ensemble-based learning environments can foster valuable professional attributes often associated with workplace readiness.

4.3 Theme 3: Collaborative Learning and Ensemble Coordination

Another prominent theme concerned the importance of teamwork and collective coordination. Students frequently described how their learning depended on collaboration with peers, particularly during ensemble rehearsals where individual performance had to align with the group.

Participants reported that successful performance required careful listening, communication, and responsiveness to the conductor and other musicians. Several students noted that even minor errors by a single participant could affect the overall harmony of the ensemble.

As one reflection explained:

"When one person plays the wrong tempo, the whole group can lose the rhythm. That made me realise how important it is to listen to others while playing."

These observations highlight the social dimension of learning within the brass band environment. Ensemble participation encouraged students to recognise their interdependence and to develop collaborative skills necessary for group performance.

4.4 Theme 4: Emotional Growth and Confidence Development

Students' reflections also revealed significant emotional development throughout the programme. Many participants described feelings of anxiety or uncertainty during the early stages of learning, particularly when performing unfamiliar tasks such as playing an instrument in front of others.

However, as students became more familiar with their instruments and rehearsal routines, these feelings gradually shifted toward confidence and satisfaction. Public performances were frequently described as meaningful milestones that allowed students to demonstrate their progress and overcome stage anxiety.

One participant wrote:

"Before the performance I felt very nervous because I had never played music in front of an audience. But after finishing the performance, I felt proud that I managed to do it."

These reflections suggest that participation in the brass band programme contributed to emotional resilience and increased self-confidence, particularly among students who initially doubted their musical abilities.

4.5 Theme 5: Reframing Co-Curricular Participation as Meaningful Learning

Perhaps the most significant transformation observed in the data was the shift in students' perceptions of the brass band course itself. While many participants initially joined the programme primarily to fulfil credit requirements, their reflections indicate that they gradually began to recognise the broader educational value of the experience.

Students frequently described the course as an opportunity to learn life skills such as teamwork, discipline, and perseverance. Some participants explicitly stated that the experience changed their understanding of learning beyond the traditional classroom environment.

A student summarised this transformation:

"At first I only joined to complete the credit requirement, but in the end I realised that the experience taught me many important skills that I did not expect."

This shift in perception illustrates how co-curricular activities can evolve from administrative requirements into meaningful educational experiences when students engage deeply with the learning process.

4.6 Summary of Findings

The table below summarises the key themes identified through thematic analysis.

Theme	Focus of Learning	Evidence from Student Reflections	Educational Implication
Learning from Zero	Technical and cognitive challenges	Learning instruments, breath control, reading notation	Experiential learning through practice
Discipline and Commitment	Behavioural development	Punctuality, responsibility, consistent practice	Development of professional attitudes
Collaborative Learning	Social interaction and teamwork	Ensemble coordination, listening to peers	Socially situated learning
Emotional Growth	Confidence and resilience	Overcoming anxiety and performing publicly	Identity and confidence development
Reframing Learning	Meaning-making	Recognising value beyond credit requirement	Transformative learning experience

4.7 Overall Interpretation

Overall, the findings suggest that participation in the brass band programme provided students with a multi-dimensional learning experience that extended beyond technical musical skills. Through sustained engagement with rehearsal routines, ensemble coordination, and public performance, students developed discipline, collaborative competence, and emotional resilience.

Importantly, the findings also demonstrate a significant shift in students' perceptions of the course—from viewing it as a compulsory credit requirement to recognising it as a meaningful educational experience. This transformation highlights the potential of co-curricular music programmes to serve as powerful environments for experiential and socially embedded learning within higher education.

5.0 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how novice university students interpreted their participation in a brass band co-curricular programme that they initially joined primarily to fulfil institutional credit requirements. The findings reveal that although students entered the course with largely instrumental motivations, their experiences during ensemble training gradually transformed their perceptions of the programme into a meaningful learning process. This transformation can be understood through the theoretical lenses of experiential learning, transformative learning, and socially situated practice discussed in the literature review.

5.1 Experiential Learning Through Practice and Reflection

One of the most prominent findings of this study concerns students' experiences of learning musical instruments from the beginning. Most participants reported having no prior musical training, and their reflections described initial difficulties in producing sound, controlling breathing, and interpreting musical notation. These challenges align closely with the principles of **experiential learning theory**, which emphasises learning through active engagement with concrete tasks and reflective experimentation (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

In the context of the brass band programme, learning did not occur primarily through theoretical instruction but through repeated cycles of practice, feedback, and improvement. Students learned to adjust their technique, breathing, and rhythm through continuous experimentation during rehearsals. This process reflects the experiential learning cycle in which concrete experience and reflective observation gradually lead to improved performance and deeper understanding.

However, the findings also extend existing experiential learning frameworks by highlighting the **collective nature of experiential learning within ensemble environments**. While Kolb's model focuses primarily on individual learning processes, the brass band context demonstrated that experiential learning is deeply embedded within social interaction and collaborative practice. Similar arguments have been raised by contemporary scholars who emphasise that experiential learning must be understood within broader social and cultural contexts (Illeris, 2018; Fenwick, 2001). In this study, students' learning experiences were shaped not only

by their individual practice but also by their interactions with peers and the ensemble as a whole.

5.2 Discipline and Embodied Learning

Another significant theme emerging from the findings relates to the development of discipline, commitment, and responsibility. Many students initially underestimated the demands of the brass band programme, assuming that the course would be relatively relaxed compared with academic subjects. However, the rehearsal process required sustained concentration, physical endurance, and consistent practice.

These observations resonate with anthropological perspectives on **embodied learning**, which conceptualise skill development as a process of bodily attunement rather than purely cognitive acquisition (Ingold, 2018; Wacquant, 2004). Musical performance requires learners to coordinate breath control, posture, finger movement, and rhythmic timing simultaneously. Such skills cannot be acquired solely through theoretical explanation but must be cultivated through repeated bodily practice.

The findings therefore support the argument that learning within performance-based disciplines involves the integration of cognitive, physical, and emotional dimensions. As students gradually developed control over their instruments and performance techniques, they also internalised routines of discipline and perseverance. This process illustrates how embodied practice can contribute to broader forms of personal development, including self-regulation and resilience.

5.3 Collaborative Learning and Communities of Practice

The importance of teamwork and ensemble coordination identified in the findings further reflects the sociocultural perspective on learning discussed in the literature review. According to **situated learning theory**, knowledge is constructed through participation within communities of practice where learners gradually acquire the norms and skills associated with a particular activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Within the brass band environment, students' success depended on their ability to coordinate their performance with other musicians. Participants frequently described the need to listen carefully to their peers and adjust their timing and rhythm to maintain group synchronisation. These interactions illustrate how learning occurred not in isolation but through collaborative participation in the ensemble.

This finding aligns with research in music education that emphasises the value of ensemble participation for developing communication skills, mutual responsibility, and cooperative learning (Hallam, 2010; Creech et al., 2016). By participating in collective rehearsal routines, students gradually developed an understanding of how individual contributions influence group outcomes. In this sense, the brass band programme functioned as a **community of practice** where novices learned through shared activity and guided participation.

5.4 Emotional Transformation and Confidence Development

Beyond technical and social learning outcomes, the findings also reveal important emotional transformations among participants. Many students reported feelings of anxiety and self-doubt during the early stages of the programme, particularly when attempting to perform unfamiliar musical tasks in front of others. However, these emotions gradually shifted toward confidence and pride as students gained experience and participated in public performances.

This pattern reflects the dynamics of **transformative learning theory**, which suggests that challenging experiences can trigger reflection and perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 2000). For many participants, the process of learning an instrument without prior musical experience represented a “disorienting dilemma” that challenged their assumptions about their abilities.

Through sustained engagement with rehearsal routines and ensemble practice, students began to reinterpret their initial struggles as part of a normal learning process rather than as evidence of personal inadequacy. This shift in perspective contributed to the development of greater confidence and resilience. Such findings support previous research suggesting that arts-based educational experiences can foster emotional growth and self-efficacy among learners (Burnard & Dragovic, 2015).

5.5 Reframing Co-Curricular Participation as Meaningful Learning

Perhaps the most significant outcome of this study is the transformation in how students perceived the brass band programme itself. Initially, many participants viewed the course primarily as an administrative requirement necessary for graduation. However, by the end of the programme, students increasingly described the experience as valuable and meaningful.

This shift highlights the potential of co-curricular learning environments to provide forms of educational development that may not occur within traditional classroom settings. While academic courses often prioritise theoretical knowledge acquisition, ensemble-based learning emphasises experiential engagement, social interaction, and emotional investment.

The findings therefore support arguments that co-curricular activities should not be viewed merely as supplementary elements of university education but rather as important contexts for holistic learning (Kuh, 2008; Trowler, 2010). Through participation in demanding collective practices such as brass band performance, students can develop skills related to discipline, collaboration, confidence, and identity formation.

5.6 Implications for Higher Education Learning

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the brass band programme functioned as a **multi-dimensional learning environment** in which technical skill development, social collaboration, and emotional transformation occurred simultaneously. By integrating experiential learning, transformative learning, and situated learning

perspectives, this study highlights how co-curricular arts programmes can contribute to meaningful student development.

These results suggest that universities should reconsider the educational value of co-curricular activities and recognise their potential to complement formal academic learning. Rather than viewing such programmes as peripheral to the curriculum, institutions may benefit from integrating experiential and collaborative learning opportunities more intentionally into higher education structures.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how novice university students, most of whom enrolled in a brass band course primarily to fulfil a co-curricular credit requirement, experienced, negotiated, and ultimately redefined their participation through intensive, collective musical training. Drawing on students' reflective narratives, the findings demonstrate that brass band training functioned not merely as a skills-based activity but as a socially and bodily transformative process.

Initially, participants approached the course with instrumental expectations that were largely instrumentalist in nature: to earn credits, to comply with institutional requirements, or to follow peer influence. However, sustained exposure to disciplined rehearsal routines, embodied musical practice, and collective responsibility gradually altered how students understood both learning and themselves. What emerged was not simply improved musical competence, but a reconfiguration of attitudes toward effort, discipline, collaboration, and personal accountability.

The findings support the argument that experiential learning within structured collective practices generates forms of knowledge that cannot be fully captured through conventional classroom-based pedagogies. Learning in this context unfolded through bodily strain, emotional regulation, repeated failure, and gradual synchronisation with others. These processes resonate with anthropological accounts of skill acquisition as an embodied and relational practice rather than an individual cognitive achievement. Students learned not only *how* to play an instrument, but *how to be* within a disciplined collective.

Transformative learning, as evidenced in the reflective data, did not occur as sudden moments of insight but as an accumulative process shaped by repetition, feedback, and social interaction. The disorientation experienced by novice learners particularly those with no prior musical background acted as a catalyst for self-reflection and adaptation. Over time, these challenges fostered resilience, confidence, and a deeper appreciation of interdependence within the ensemble. Importantly, this transformation was inseparable from affective experiences such as frustration, pride, embarrassment, and belonging.

This study contributes to existing literature by foregrounding the lived experiences of students within a university-based co-curricular music programme, an area often marginalised in discussions of higher education learning. By situating brass band training within broader theoretical discussions of experiential and transformative

learning, this research demonstrates that co-curricular programmes can serve as powerful sites of identity formation, socialisation, and embodied learning.

At a practical level, the findings suggest that institutions should reconsider how co-curricular courses are conceptualised and valued. When designed with sufficient structure, guidance, and reflective space, such programmes can move beyond compliance-oriented participation and foster meaningful, long-term learning outcomes. This has implications for curriculum design, assessment practices, and the allocation of instructional resources, particularly for programmes involving novice learners.

In conclusion, the brass band course examined in this study illustrates how a programme initially perceived as a mere requirement can become a transformative educational experience. Through disciplined collective practice, students came to reframe learning as a shared, embodied, and emotionally charged process, one that extends beyond music and into broader aspects of personal and social development. Such findings invite further ethnographic attention to co-curricular spaces as critical yet underexplored arenas of learning within contemporary universities.

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