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Research on music composition: Issues of creativity and collaboration

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ppt
literature

In 1998, I completed a formal training in music and started lecturing composition in Scarborough. I became involved in teaching composition for dance and the problems I witnessed here formed the basis of my interest in creative collaboration. Through this, I discovered Vera John-Steiner's work: literature on the nature of creative individuals and also group collaboration, assessing creative work, theories of creativity, creative processes and even on developments of younger composers.

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literature 2

As a composer, teacher and collaborator, a great deal of this resonated with my experiences and anecdotal observations. Some of these striking areas of literature discussed: the participant's fear of risking the principles of their discipline through collaborative compromise, the limiting impact of a negative emotional experience on creativity and the impact of quantitatively assessing socially situated artistic products which are inherently subjective.

A wider perspective on creativity assessment is presented by Moran and John-Steiner where (and I quote) '*Many researchers use nominations from supervisors, colleagues or other social gatekeepers to determine who is most creative in a field and which works are most creative: who is deemed most creative is dependent on the norms of the time*'p25

An extensive hypothesis on the reasons for failure in undergraduate creative collaboration could be devised from this literature. In 2000 Vera John-Steiner said that 'While collaboration is empowering, it can be fragile.' It seems that collaboration between first year undergraduates is especially fragile and existing theories and information could be combined to help staff to facilitate sustained creative collaboration.

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Abbs

Peter Abbs summarised my aim in conducting this research.

These are the themes so far. I will explain them in more detail soon. They are arranged into categories that suggest a mix of 'more static' and evolving contexts. These areas could all be argued to create tension to a greater or lesser degree. Additionally, whilst participants are presented with clear problems, a contemporary cognitive theorist approach to understanding creativity and centralise problem solving as central to creativity. Note how I have suggested that some areas are 'more static' rather than entirely static. The context and internal dynamics of this social activity are in constant

motion. Vygotskyian theory favours process observation. To see the dialectics of creativity and development in the moment, where the internal mechanisms are expressed verbally, and perhaps also through other modes of communication. Due to collaborative communication, the researcher can access more information on the creative process in situ, as it unfolds. This approach addresses the long term evolution as much as the micro dynamics of situated creativity.

Moran and John-Steiner, connect Vygotskyian theory with collaboration, summarising the potential for understanding creativity in this context. (and I quote) '*many tensions within creativity and development are present within these long-term partnerships: the dialectics of subject and object, meaning and sense, personal and cultural, emotional and cognition. Collaborations provide a microcosm for the study of creativity and development.*' (p38)

Ppt
Summary
of
Categories

In this microcosm, these collaborative dynamics are in constant motion. I have drawn categories of influence out of the literature and contained them all within the broad category of context. Context may be historical, physical, pedagogical or created through individual perception.

ppt
cycle

The resulting collaborative tension could fuel creative momentum or force disintegration leaving the participants with a similar but evolving context or a very different context where many of the influencing factors surrounding the group dynamic are released. The participants continue to work within the more static areas and are freed from this challenging cycle. Tension could be an affordance or constraint but the continual momentum of these factors can only be assessed as they occur. Otherwise, events resulting in tension will be hidden. (Vygotsky talks of the result dazzling the content)

ppt
Summary
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Categories

Context/Climate – Ekvill and Ryhammer's study of the Creative Climate at a Swedish university presents three core areas that constitute a creative climate: The Organisational Climate including, behaviours, attitudes and feelings, The Organisational Realities, such as, Structures, policies, tasks, goals, workload, technology. This could also include learning outcomes, assignment briefs, resources and staff and finally. The And Organisational Processes, such as problem solving, decision making, planning and communication. The characteristics of a creative climate for situated collaborating undergraduates could be recorded using their model.

Another influence is **Familiarity and Friendship** – Miell and MacDonald's study of children composing in pairs concludes that friendship is an affordance to creative productivity. When observing experiments in collaboration, **John-Steiner** and **Mahn** support claims that collaborations between familiar participants are much more likely to succeed than those between strangers. There is not time for *trust* and *complementarity to emerge'* They go on to discuss *'the prototypic character of collaboration, which is long-term, voluntary, trusting, negotiated, and appropriate for the projects to be shared'* This implies that we should allow students to self select partnerships.

Emotional Environment –Negative emotions are narrowing and restrictive to creativity. Joy and play are closely associated and known to promote divergent thinking and greater experimentation. The reality of tension could provide energy and spark or limit the participants to a negative experience.

Identity - Group identity could promote unity though a struggle with individual identity which may impact on each participant's type and level of participation. John-Steiner draws collaboration into four types: Distributed (where there is a more casual exchange of information), Complementary (defined by clear divisions of labour), Family (where roles are fluid and may include personal friendship) and Integrated (strong ideologies are shared and participation is transformative of participants and the discipline)**.**

The type of collaboration may influence and be influenced by **Individual Motivation** – A composer's motivation could be for external appreciation such as that of an audience, academic tutor or even their collaborative partner. External motivations introduce risk to perceived success as standards are introduced so perhaps the product orientated assessment will increase pressure for achievement. Process orientated schemes must however rely on the student's intrinsic motivation. As students appear to be more extrinsically motivated, perhaps an intrinsic motivation should be nurtured? It would be interesting to find out what students feel motivated by.

Boundaries can be a huge affordance to creativity in that they define parameters. Barriers such as access to facilities, education, communities or resources could be creatively limiting whereas, boundaries such as assignment requirements and constraints, may however spark creative

solutions. Also, the boundaries between disciplines may be where the most interesting work is devised.

So we are presented with a detailed range of possible affordances and constraints to collaboration. Kinney, Lysaught and Bennett are amongst those who have already summarised a range of affordances for musical creativity most specifically with composers. As creative production is an evolving situation the creative process should be observed in the instant but also through time. An understanding of the creative process is therefore important to identifying enabling conditions. The creative process has been documented in various studies and Wallas' model of the creative process can be seen within this model of Webser's. This model shows enabling conditions and skills though interestingly not problem solving though this is implicit within this model. Conditions are stated in general terms. A particularly powerful enabling skills might be the ability to influence enabling conditions. Development within and mastery of a new domain such as this takes time but staff could create enabling conditions then help students to control them.

It is possible to draw up a recipe for enabling creative collaboration between students but much of the literature is based on research conducted with younger people in a different context. It calls for a much more situated study observing natural practices as they evolve over time.

Vygotsky considered creativity and individual development to be a life long process where personal transformation is the real product of creative processes. Sociocultural theory is a dialectical methodology. It considers a temporally evolving dialogue between context, histories, individual developments, meaning making and cultural mediation. This theoretical perspective states that human mental functioning is situated within culture, with individual history and within an immediate environment, It is characterised into three themes by William Penuel and James Wertsch:

Firstly by the use of genetic or developmental analysis where there is a focus on participants working in the instant. On process and not the resulting products. To understand individual development on micro and macro levels.

Secondly through the claim that individual mental functioning is socioculturally situated.

And **thirdly** through a claim that human action is mediated by signs, though this emphasis moved towards one of meaning making as a socially agreed understandings.

To understand the affordances and constraints on collaboratively devised creative work, it is not appropriate to conduct an experiment; removing participants from their normal working context. A survey could perhaps provide useful statistics on types of courses and activities which characterise the nature of higher education in this area. This sort of data may be of interest to HE staff, instead, my own research entails a detailed analysis of a few collaborative partnerships over their long term evolution in their own natural contexts. Following a Sociocultural theory perspective, this research will also include a multi-modal analysis of data taken from a realistic and consequently more relevant environment. With the collaborative group as the unit of analysis, categories emerging from within the context and from existing research will be analysed. This will create a situated profile of some affordances and constraints over creative collaboration, as it evolves and changes through time. This data could inform further research. It could also be used to inform practice through further action research.

| ppt Research Slide |
Video footage will be recorded and provide conversation, music composition and also movement data. A multi-modal analysis approach can access greater meaning of each participant's contribution. Information on each participant's training and backgrounds and the institutional profile will be gathered to gain deeper understanding of the collaboration context. And finally, participants will be interviewed for their reflections on and perceptions of the devising process on a micro and macro level. Participants will also be involved in the analysis of recorded data for their perceptions of creative instances as they evolve.

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Final point

I am not trying to reduce and simplify an exciting and dynamic activity to some sort of utopian ideal. The inherent struggle within creative collaboration crucially fires up innovation. Moments of conflict play an important and complex part that should also be observed. This research aims to increase the possibility of students persisting and managing their way

through multiple collaborations however. To give students the skills necessary to work through difficulties and sustain more and many creative collaborations in their professional lives. This work ultimately aims to increase the students' chances of exercising their individual and combined potential as their creativity and knowledge develops through experience and practice. Creative collaboration can be fragile, but it can also be a deeply rewarding and empowering experience that needs to be given a greater chance of success.