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# **Professional Songwriting: Creativity, the Creative Process and tensions between higher education songwriting and industry practice in the U.K.**

Matthew Clyma Gooderson and Jennie Henley

Musical creativity has been scrutinised from a variety of perspectives (See Burnard, 2012), however, research into the creation of the song itself remains limited (Bennett, 2013). This chapter presents research that explores the creative process of songwriting. Two contrasting perspectives are considered; a professional songwriting team and a student songwriting team, both working to the same real-world brief. Key findings reveal that both teams worked in a similar way in terms of the procedure of songwriting, however, there were great differences in the way that each team searched for and selected ideas, and evaluated the emerging song. We question why these differences occurred, offering a discussion of the context and role of songwriting in the curriculum in relation to the growing trend placing entrepreneurialism and creativity at the centre of Higher Education (HE) agendas (Odena & Welch, 2013).

## **The context**

Creativity forms a 'crucial element of modern economies' (Hallam & Rogers, 2010). Employment in the creative industries rose 8.6% between 2011 and 2012, a higher rate than the UK economy as a whole while Gross Value Added (GVA) and Exports of Service also rose between 2008 and 2012 (Creative Industries Economic Estimates, 2014). These rises suggest a dramatic shift away from things and towards ideas (Sawyer, 2012). As the UK transitioned from an industrial age to this new 'knowledge' or 'creative economy' (Powell & Snellman, 2004), government departments and advisory committees were established to explore and implement creativity in education (Odena & Welch, 2013). Creativity was also found to be one of the key attributes employers expected to find in university graduates (Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2004). In response to these findings, the European University Association issued the following statement:

'The complex questions of the future will not be solved 'by the book', but by creative, forward-looking individuals and groups who are not afraid to question established ideas and are able to cope with the insecurity and uncertainty that this entails.' (European University Association, 2007)

Set against a backdrop of 21st century economic and employment flux, a new learning initiative is in the process of being implemented at the university where this small-scale

study was conducted. The philosophy of this new initiative is directed (in-part) towards fostering greater student attributes in the areas of entrepreneurialism and creativity.

The student songwriting team in this study were in their final year of a degree programme entitled Commercial Music in Popular Music Performance. The programme advertises itself to students as an 'innovative course... for those entering the music industry as performers, songwriters, composers, musicologists and educators.' Two points are both interesting and relevant in the context of this chapter; the use of the word *commercial* in the title of the course, and the clear description that the course is aimed at those *entering* the music industry.

The emphasis on the word commercial in the title reflects the fact that popular music as an art form is almost predominantly market-driven (Bennett, 2011). Essentially this means that unlike other art forms such as Ballet and Opera, popular music is largely un-subsidised by the U.K government. Consequently, professional songwriters have to create original works that are 'validated' by the public by way of sales, online-plays, clicks, downloads, radio-plays, brand collaborations, synchronisations, merchandise and the sale of concert tickets. Bennett (2011) describes the difference in this economic climate as representing 'a paradox for the songwriter who is trying to create an original work in a highly evolved, market-driven and tightly constrained creative palette' (p.2).

## **Creativity and Social-Systems**

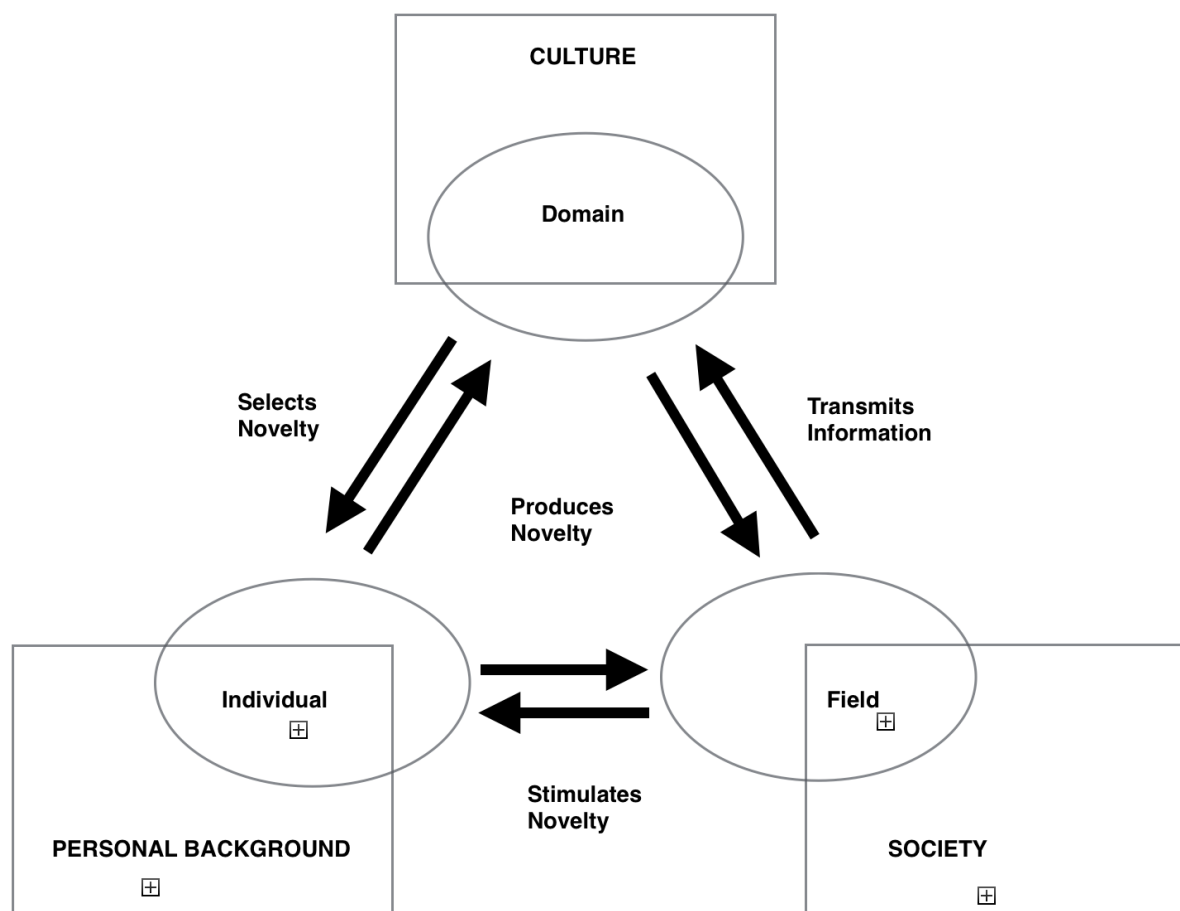
Creativity is often regarded as a 'puzzle, a paradox' or even a complete 'mystery' (Boden, 1996 p.519), therefore, before we can explore the role creativity plays in songwriting and education, we define what we mean by creativity. One of the reasons for this 'mystery' is that the music industry perpetuates the notion that inspiration – a core element of creativity – is synonymous with the moment when an artist is ingeniously struck by a moment of divine inspiration.

On examining songwriting practices though, we encounter a different understanding of creativity. Bennett (2011) reveals that many contemporary artists use 'back-room co-writers' (p.3). This is suggestive of songwriting creativity being largely collaborative in nature (Burnard, 2012). Moreover, Negus (2008), speaking of Bob Dylan, says 'Bob Dylan has been able to draw influence and find inspiration by closely following an existing tune, lyrical theme or chord sequence' (p.72). This implies that the creative process draws influence from *existing* material rather than moments of divine inspiration.

In line with this view of songwriting creativity, we can draw a parallel with Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Model of Creativity (1988). Csikszentmihalyi (1999) explains, 'ideas do not exist in a vacuum'; they must 'operate on a set of already existing objects, rules, representations, or

notions' (p.315). From this perspective, rather than ideas originating in the minds of the creator as a moment of divine inspiration, it can be argued that the idea itself existed before the creator thought of it, as if it were lying dormant within the culture. Consequently, Csikszentmihalyi clarifies creativity as any act, idea or product that changes an existing domain or that transforms an existing domain into a new one.

The model consists of three components: A domain of knowledge, a field where the knowledge is understood, and an individual who creates work in order to change the domain and culture. The process is cyclical in nature. If the work is accepted into the culture, it then influences further individuals in their creations.



Csikszentmihalyi's (1999) Systems Model of Creativity

**Figure 1: Csikszentmihalyi's Systems View of Creativity**

Perhaps a clearer way to comprehend the creative practices behind songwriting is to view songwriters as complex weavers of 'multiple languages' (Toynbee, 2000 p.43). In this sense, songwriters resemble craftspeople, selecting and combining existing materials into new forms. It is in this way that the songwriter can be understood as an 'editor and parodist'

rather than a 'transcendental spirit' (Bakhtin, 1981 pp.314-315 in Toynbee, 2000), whose materials are 'located in the field of the social' (Toynbee, 2000 p.xv) rather than divine.

Commensurate with Negus's (2008) understanding of Dylan's songwriting creativity we can surmise that songwriters produce variation in the set of conventions, rules and ideas that exist in the structured knowledge of songs that the songwriter has access to (McIntyre, 2008). To be able to work well within the system, individuals must 'internalise the rules of the domain and opinions of the field' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999 p.332). This allows informed decisions to be made about which ideas are 'good' and 'bad'. Therefore, if a person wants to become a 'good' songwriter, they must acquire the ways of thinking, of being, and codes of knowledge necessary to make informed decisions. In other words, they must acquire cultural capital:

'Cultural capital is a form of knowledge, an internalised code for cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation or competence in deciphering cultural relation and cultural artefacts.' (Bourdieu, 1993 p.7)

Turning our attention to the actual creative process of songwriting Sawyer (2012) elaborates that the work is actually a product of smaller steps or phases:

'Instead of the mystical view of creativity that places a moment of insight in a wondrous moment of divine inspiration, creators experience small insights throughout a day's work, each of these insights is accompanied with micro evaluations and further perspiration. These mini-insights only gradually accumulate to result in a finished work, as a result of a process of hard work and intellectual labour of the creator.' (Sawyer, 2012 p.139)

### **The Creative Process**

Wallace (1926) was one of the first thinkers to consider creativity as a process involving separate stages or steps. Wallace disseminated creativity into four key stages:

**Preparation** - definition of issue, observation, and study.

**Incubation** - laying the issue aside for a time.

**Illumination** - the moment when a new idea finally emerges.

**Verification** - testing it out.

This model forms the foundations of many models used today (see Lubart, 2010). While these models favour a view of creativity that moves from inception to completion via

sequential stages, educationalist Petty (1997) perceives the creative process to involve a chain of different, interlinked phases. These phases are revisited any number of times and can occur in a variety of combinations and sequences:

**Inspiration** - uncritical search for new ideas.

**Clarification** - planning, discussing and agreeing aims.

**Evaluation** - critical analysis of the music, identifying strengths and weaknesses based on aims agreed during the clarification stage.

**Distillation** - sifting through the ideas generated in the inspiration phase.

**Incubation** - maturation of ideas.

**Perspiration** - working on a chosen part or idea.

Due to the inclusion of the inspiration, perspiration and evaluation stage, Petty's model of the creative process offers a good analytical framework for us to examine the creative process of songwriting in a more detailed, or phase-by-phase manner.

## Researching Songwriting Teams

In order to gain an insight into how musical creativity occurs within songwriting teams, a small-scale qualitative study was carried out. Working to the same professional brief, two teams were asked to create a new piece of music for a TV commercial that was due for broadcast in August 2014.

### The Songwriting Teams

One professional team and one student team were selected. The reason for choosing these particular teams was to provide an extreme instance case study. This would allow the work of the two teams to be contrasted (Denscombe, 2007), thus enabling an examination of the creative process through exploration of how the participants interacted as they composed and what kinds of knowledge were key to their songwriting. The teams used computer cameras to video themselves during the process of generating and developing music for the commercial, and then were interviewed afterwards about their work.

Team A: The Professional Songwriters

Participants A1 and A2 are professional in the sense that the majority of their income stream is generated from selling songs. Participant A1 is an award winning songwriter,

singer, guitarist, pianist, drummer and top-line writer. She has toured internationally, written music for other artists, adverts, computer games and corporate brands. Participant A2 is a founding member of a successful band and has worked as a songwriter, remixer and producer for Sony/ATV, Wall of Sound and P.I.A.S. He plays the electric guitar, piano and synthesiser and has received some formal music tuition. The pair have collaborated on a variety of projects since meeting on a commercial music degree in 1996.

#### Team B: The Student Songwriters

Participants B3 and B4 were both in their final term of a degree in Commercial Music Performance at the time of the study. Both have learnt to play their instruments informally, but, as part of the course, have also received additional tuition. They have collaborated regularly since 2011 as songwriters in their band and are highly competent producers able to finish songs to a very high standard. While B3 specialises in guitar and production, B4 sings and plays keyboards. They have performed live in London as part of their final year show but have not written music specifically to a brief before.

#### **The Brief**

The brief, set by an agency, contained, images and text detailing the brand, advert concept, story and perhaps most importantly, two pre-existing musical works. These reference tracks take the form of original works that, for a variety of reasons, the agency cannot legally acquire. Despite the fact that the license is unavailable, it is not uncommon for the client to still *desire* to use the music of the reference track. Consequently, it is also not uncommon for the agency's client to want music that closely resembles the reference track in a number of ways: namely, instrumentation, tempo, melody, harmony, rhythm, dynamics and form. This could be considered in Bennett's terms as being required to produce original work in a 'constrained creative palette'. (Bennett, 2011 p.2)

#### **Validity**

Representing a valid form of professional songwriting remained a crucial aspect of the research. Consequently, it was important to conduct the case study in a setting that was natural. The research was designed so that the participants were pre-established songwriting teams and worked in their own chosen and familiar environments. Their computer cameras, rather than a stand-alone camera or camera held by a third person were used to retain the naturalistic setting, and to eliminate observer effect as far as possible.

The purpose of this research was to attempt to reveal what actually happened during the creative process of songwriting rather than rely on the songwriters perception of events. Participant observation made it possible to gain an insider's perspective, rather than the

more mythologised perspective that tends to be perpetuated via press and media (Bennett, 2011). In other words, it was important to use participant observation as a way of looking at what *actually* happened alongside the songwriters' perception of events afterwards, giving the researcher both experience *within* and *of* the field (Labaree, 2002; Henley, 2015).

## **Data Mapping**

Attempting to map the data to the models of the creative process presented a variety of challenges. Wallace's four stage model did not enable us to view how the writers searched for new ideas or worked on improving the ideas, it merely provided an overview of the procedure. However, this procedural information provides an insight into how each group sequenced their work.

Petty's model did not enable us to view processes that often occur outside of the studio environment (incubation). Nevertheless, this model did provide a useful framework for analysis, allowing us to compare the way the teams engaged in-the-moment of creation. Interview questions were designed to investigate the cultural capital that participants drew upon within the studio.

## **Findings**

### **The Procedure of Creation**

The procedure of creation viewed through Wallace's model (Figure 2) shows that each team sequenced their work in a similar way. Following the process of working out the piano riff from the reference track, both groups began to experiment, morphing it into their own version. In both cases, one member began jamming on the piano while the other listened. In this sense, while one musician was acting as the creator, the other was appropriating the role of the audience (Hennion, 1983).

Unlike classical composition where it is reported that composers often 'hear' the music in their heads before writing it (Younker & Smith, 1996), the composition process undertaken was closer to Toynbee's (2000) definition that described popular musicians as re-arrangers of material that is already located in the social domain. Moreover, there is a similarity between the creative processes found in these cases and that found in the creative processes of professional songwriters Stock, Aitken and Waterman, and Xenomania (Waterman, 2009; Higgins, 2012). This would indicate that the student team were in fact able to work in a way that reflected industry practice.



# Four Stages of the Creative Process (Wallace, 1926)

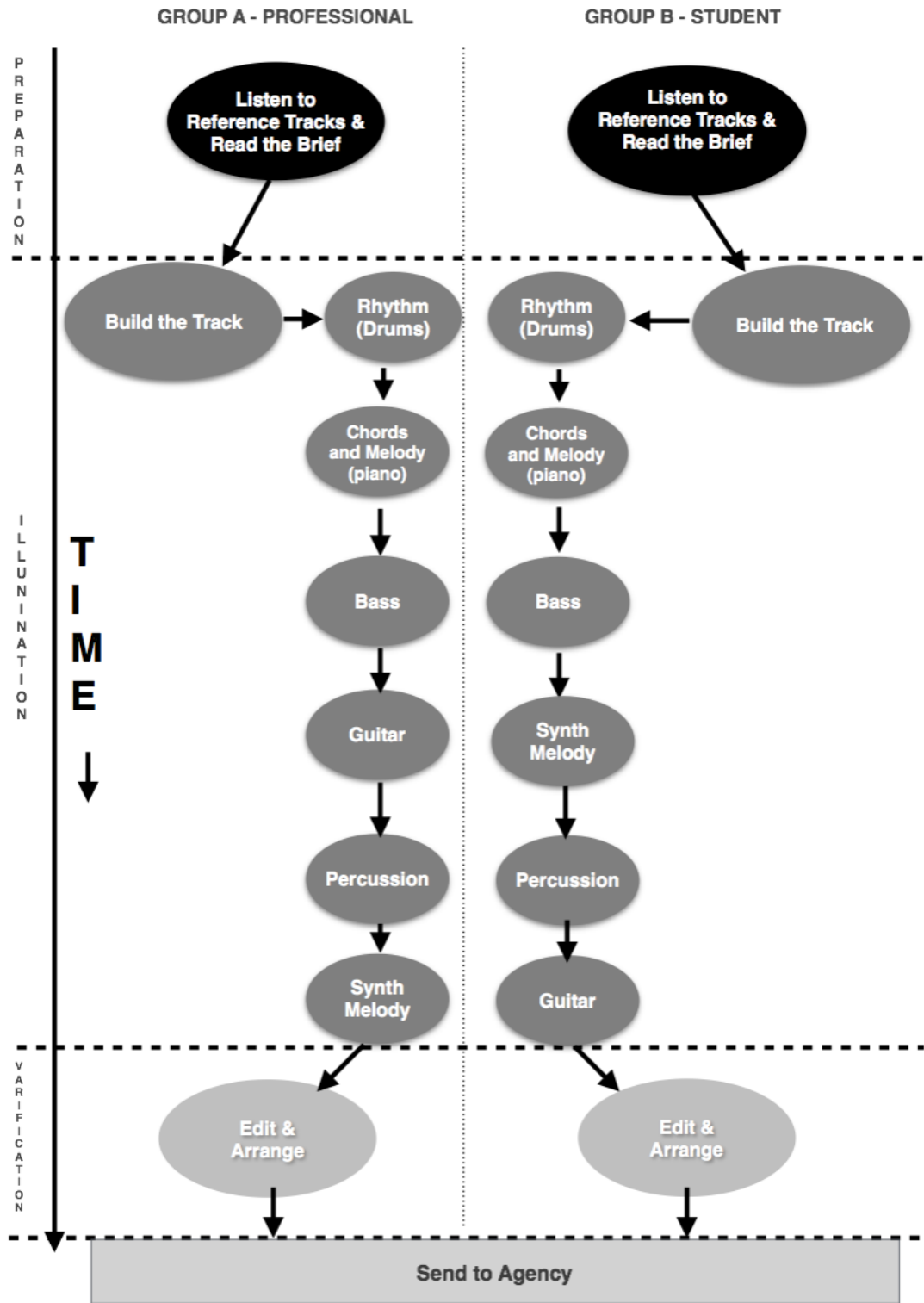
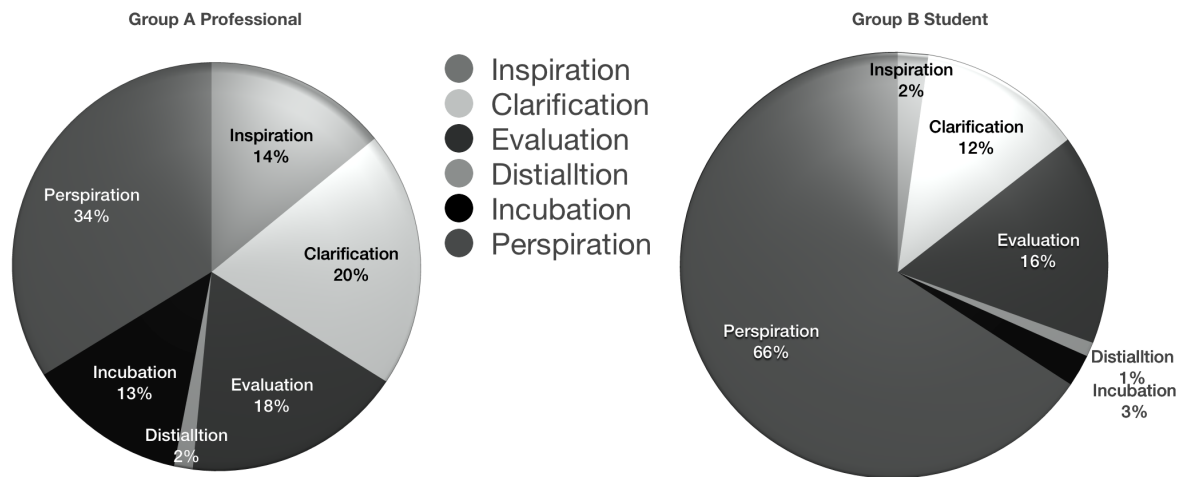


Figure 2: The procedure of creation

### 'In-the-moment' of creation

The similarities between the two teams' procedures as viewed through Wallace's model are striking. However, viewing the actions of each team through Petty's model shows a different picture (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Time spent in phases of creation**

As phases do not occur in a linear fashion, and they interact with each other, each code was given a time allocation. This allowed a comparison of how much time each team spent in each phase.

Although going through the same procedure, there were differences in how the two teams used their time. Team A distributed their time fairly evenly across the different phases but Team B awarded radically different amounts of time to each phases. Furthermore, mapping the different phases onto a timeline shows an intricate web of interactions, some phases only being entered momentarily before moving to a different phase, demonstrating the complex nature of how both teams worked. Even where there were equal amounts of time spent in a phase, there were clear differences in the way the teams were working, as highlighted by work in the inspiration and evaluation phases.

Petty (2009) suggests 'uncreative people will tend to latch on to the first idea that comes to them, and quickly and uncritically bring it to completion without serious thought about what they are trying to achieve.' (p.326) What is interesting here is that, through reflection, participant B3 also appeared to reach the same conclusion.

(B3): We don't change the initial idea very often. I don't know why we don't do that, because I think it would actually be a good idea sometimes.  
(interview transcript)

The analyses seem to suggest that the professional team were more able to locate their work in the social domain, draw on cultural capital, evaluate their work in both a micro and macro way, and allow different phases to interact more easily (Gooderson, 2014). In other words, they applied more criticality to their work. The student team seemed to focus more on the task of completing the composition (working on ideas), whereas the professional team seemed to focus more on the transaction between the social domain (drawing ideas), the creative work (creating ideas) and then back to the social domain (evaluating how these ideas might be received). These differences lead to an important question, why did the students spend more time working on ideas but less time creating new ideas? In other words, why did the student team appear to be less *creative* than the professional team? In the context of Higher Education this then raises the question, could an understanding of the creative process help the students learn to be more creative and consequently, develop their critical thinking?

## **Tensions Between HE and Professional Practice**

A close inspection of the songwriting module undertaken by the students' reveals that the module does not draw students attention to their creative process, but rather focuses on identity, promotion and industry feedback. The purpose of this chapter is not to critique this existing module, as it offers extremely valid learning outcomes. Moreover, it is important to note that these learning outcomes clearly fit within the qualifications framework within which the degree programme operates (QAA, 2014). However, if a clearer understanding of the creative process is central to success as a songwriter in the 'creative economy', and the degree programme specifically aims to prepare students for entry into the commercial music industry, then should greater provision be made for this essential component in creative modules?

The constantly changing landscape of our personal, social and economic worlds require us to be creative. As a result of this change, 'education systems are faced with the challenge of equipping individuals with skills that will enable them to fulfil their potential in a world where change is rapid and relentless' (Hallam & Rogers, 2010 p.105). Ultimately,

'We are trying to prepare students for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that have not yet been invented, in order to solve problems that we don't know are problems yet.' (Jackson, 2010 p.xi)

Despite the growing realisation that creativity is seen as a key ingredient in sustained personal and economic growth (Sawyer, 2006), educational establishments (schools, colleges and universities) are still teaching students how to answer, rather than how to think (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006 in Jackson, 2006). This is supported to some extent by the level description of a UK bachelors degree with honors. According to the UK Higher Education Qualifications Framework, degree students should demonstrate:

‘a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline.’ (QAA, 2014)

Interestingly, the difference between a bachelors degree with honors and a masters degree within the framework is criticality; masters students being required to demonstrate critical awareness and critical thinking. It is therefore significant that the differences between the professional and student teams in this study appeared to be related to the use of criticality. If criticality is key to engaging in the creative process, yet criticality is a feature of postgraduate rather than undergraduate degree programmes, what opportunities are there to foster creativity in undergraduate commercial music degree programmes?

The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency identified five key attributes of creativity; connecting, questioning, imagining, exploring and reflecting (QCDA, 2010). Creativity in education also requires teachers to ‘judge carefully when to intervene and when to take a “hands-off” approach and to balance planning with improvisation’ (SEED, 2006).

If creativity is about recognising the problem, finding a fresh perspective, making unusual links and developing original solutions (Cropley & Cropley, 2008), then we can rule out a simple empirical division between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ answers. Consequently, as teachers, we risk eliminating the ‘divergent’ thinking deemed necessary for creativity. However, if we do not scaffold learning we risk not developing students’ ‘convergent thinking’ – another necessary component of creativity. Here lies the problem; ‘creativity is mutually contradictory’ (p.355) and paradoxical in nature.

Assessment is also problematic. Higher education has rarely made creativity ‘an explicit objective of the learning and assessment process’ (Jackson, 2006 p.4). The reason for this is that the current education system revolves around the idea of the student meeting a learning outcome (a tangible product of the process). Creativity, on the other hand, can require a lack of structure and direction. In a musical context, Kleiman (2008) describes this as ‘playing for the sake of playing’. Tangible outcomes suit technical development; it is far easier to prove that a student has a greater technical grasp of the subject through performance testing (Garnett, 2013). Conversely, it is much tougher to assess whether

creative capacity has increased as a direct result of study (McWilliam & Dawson, 2008). Fautley (2010) clarifies:

‘Since creative thinking by definition goes beyond knowledge, there is explicitly or implicitly assumed to be a tension between knowledge and creativity (Weisberg, 1999:26) In music education, this tension can be readily seen in assessment.’ (p. 72)

This leads to a further tension concerning the knowledge that students are expected to demonstrate a systematic understanding of in their degree programme. In arguing that arts are simultaneously objective and subjective, Aspin (1990) describes art knowledge in terms of aesthetic meanings that can be underpinned by a benchmark of what is aesthetically acceptable. The argument he makes is based on the non-instrumental nature of art and in a similar way to Hennion (1983), the role of the artist as spectator/audience is crucial. The creator needs to adopt the spectator role in order to take a critical stance in developing the work. Moreover, this stance must be underpinned by some benchmark of what is aesthetically acceptable:

‘Someone wishing to make such judgements of works of art will be one who has learned somehow to appreciate the different kinds of meaning in the world of aesthetics and the arts.’ (Aspin, 1990 p.38)

Therefore a difficulty arises when the nature of art itself requires the artist to take a critical, socially located stance, yet demonstrations of critical awareness are not regarded as a feature of undergraduate programmes. This highlights a tension between the challenges in HE in terms of the ways that criticality and creativity can be fostered in undergraduate programmes, and the central role of criticality and reflection in practice of the professional team in this study.

## **Learning through reflection**

The notion of socially located aesthetic meanings suggests that the more aware songwriters are of the field and the domain of the creative work, the more successful they are likely to be. This was apparent in the professional team’s data; not only were the team able to reflect throughout the process, they were able to locate their work in the social domain through cultural reference points. Viewing this from the perspective of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1988) systems model of creativity would suggest that reflection both during and after the songwriting process is crucial to the cyclic nature of creativity. Therefore time and space is needed for this reflection on the part of the learner.

Working without traditional lecturer feedback and assessment appeared to allow the students greater space to develop their own critical evaluation skills and facilitated an

environment where they decided for themselves what worked in a given situation (Berkley, 2001). Perhaps the most interesting outcome of the study came from the students reflecting on their own creative process. In interview the students were able to reflect upon their work at a meta-level, and with the help of the pie charts to visually demonstrate how their time was distributed across the different creative phases, this reflection continued long after the study had ended. Shortly after the study ended, Participant B4 sent the following reflection by email:

(B4) I feel that doing that [songwriting] exercise was something where I actually learnt the most about MYSELF and how I work, creating music. The course does give you a good grounding in popular music culture and touches on necessary areas, but I believe not enough focus is really given to the students themselves, and how they work.

While the student believed that the course provided a 'good grounding in popular music culture', he clearly felt that completing the songwriting task provided a greater emphasis on students' own working practices. So whereas educators might say that in the context of this task the student appeared to receive *less* focus, that is to say no formal teaching or feedback, the student felt that there was *more* focus on him. Furthermore, the reflective process was still taking place some time after the study. Upon discovering a book published by music software manufactures Ableton on improving creativity ten months after completing his degree, B4 sent an email relating his experience of the songwriting task to the book:

(B4) [this book contains] a well designed article explaining the creative process for budding producers. Especially the blue section - reminded me of when [B3 & B4] were recording a project [for the authors] and [the authors] noticed that we spent 5% of our time generating the idea and 95% on polishing it.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to gain insights into the epistemology of the practice of songwriting, for us to develop 'new understandings, new practices and new pedagogies' (Burnard, 2012:237). Through volunteering to participate in this task, the students clearly created an opportunity to develop their own creativity. Motivation drove the pair to complete a difficult task. They overcame setbacks and frustrations, and, in doing so, anecdotally participant B4 believed he had learnt more about himself and the way he works than he had in other areas of his studies.

It would be difficult to measure whether partaking in this small-scale research has helped foster greater entrepreneurialism in the students. However, the students have asked to

work on more songwriting briefs. This shows us that they have gained the confidence to try, and are learning through the experience of trying. The students are developing their confidence, knowledge and capabilities to be creative. In other words, we could say that they have developed the ability to see and fully understand the complexity of songwriting creativity, or that they have learned to *look* at achieving success as songwriters in a more entrepreneurial and creative way.

The research highlighted that the differences in the way that the student team and professional team worked lay in the ability to engage in critical reflection and to locate their work in the social domain. However, the research would also suggest that in the absence of any teacher feedback, the students developed their own self-reflective critical evaluation skills. Although based on just two cases, this study demonstrates the potential for songwriting processes to be analysed and described. By allowing students to analyse and describe their own songwriting processes, teachers within higher education can develop pedagogy that enables students to gain a more developed sense of reflection and criticality. Ultimately leading to clearer insight into how to produce more creative work.

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