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Pulman, Mark

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Rehearsing popular music: Exploring opportunities for supporting learning in the pop/rock band

Dr Mark Pulman, Senior Lecturer in Popular Music, University Campus Barnsley, University of Huddersfield

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There seems little reported about group-based rehearsals of popular music and the peer learning opportunities that might arise from this activity. Although there are an increasing number of studies exploring approaches to the assessment of musical ensembles, these often focus on performance rather than rehearsing and, typically, do not specifically address popular music courses (Hunter, 2006). Indeed, Lebler (2008) describes popular music as being usually learned in the broader community as a self-directed activity, sometimes including interactions with peers and group activities, but rarely under the direction of an expert mentor/teacher. The role of the tutor, in facilitating learning opportunities that may be available for students working in popular music genres within a band rehearsal context, can be quite different to that required for rehearsing repertoire which might be described as being drawn from western art music traditions. If so, and given the apparent lack of literature on, and pedagogical resources for, band rehearsing of popular music (Lebler, 2007) within the HE curriculum, the aim of this project is to provide a contribution towards filling that gap.

It is possible to identify a number of starting points, arising from the context of band rehearsing, that lead to activities and opportunities for supporting peer learning. One of these may involve establishing the assessment criteria relevant to the rehearsing. Engaging individuals and their bands in the activity of formulating their own rehearsing assessment criteria also raises questions about how the tutor might best facilitate this process.

Another starting point might involve an exploration of the learning opportunities arising from the interaction between individual members of pop/rock bands as they participate in the complex 'life-world' of the rehearsal. Exley & Dennick (2004) propose that the 'optimum size' for small group teaching 'is between 5 and 8 per group' (p.2), which is also, happily, the typical size of a pop/rock band line up (vocalist, drummer, bass, keys, and two guitarists, for example). Bringing with it a variety of musical and rehearsal experiences, the pop/rock band-rehearsing context clearly suggests opportunities for supporting peer learning. Not only, for example, might band members learn from each other, but individuals, additionally, may also learn much about themselves from this participatory experience. Indeed, Bryan (2006) suggests that, within group work, students might develop and acquire important collaborative skills such as communication, negotiation, self-initiative, resourcefulness and conflict management – all highly relevant and useful qualities for working in bands. If so, how best might a tutor facilitate the support of these qualities in this peer learning popular music rehearsal context? This is the focus of the project.

Theoretical/conceptual framework

This project is situated within social constructivist pedagogy (Vygotsky, 1976; Bruner, 1986;

Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Learning and acquiring knowledge is created in the participatory social activity of band rehearsing. The learning context arises from small group activities that are characterised by social and interpersonal communication. Individuals may develop an awareness and knowledge of themselves and of their band members (involving, for example, their attributes, skills, interpersonal communication, etc) through band rehearsing. In short, band members ‘learn by doing’ through their engagement in the social learning setting that characterises pop/rock group music making. Tutors, similarly develop/create awareness and knowledge of themselves, as well as each band member, arising from their involvement and interaction in the rehearsal.

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Expected outcomes

Resource bank and booklet (PDF), video (Quicktime).

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PALATINE, The Great Hall, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YW
t: +44 (0)1524 592614 (Barbara Hargreaves) | palatine@lancaster.ac.uk